

# RITUAL EFFICACY, SPIRITUAL SECURITY AND HUMAN SECURITY: SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM<sup>(1)</sup>

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## Introduction

After a period of suppression of all things religious by Vietnam's Communist Party-State, a remarkable revival of a wide variety of ritual and religious practices is taking place in contemporary Vietnam. In the words of Australian anthropologist, Philip Taylor:

An upsurge in fortune-telling, mediumship, spirit worship, and pilgrimages occurred in Vietnam as government policies were pushing the country into unprecedented integration with the capitalist world and as market relations were transforming the face of society. (Taylor 2004: 83)

Recent discussions about religious developments speak about the *revival* of religious practices in Vietnam. The assumption implied in such words is that traditional religious beliefs and ritual practices have been absent or hidden from view and have re-emerged during the *Đổi mới* period of economic reforms since 1986. In such accounts, this phenomenon is explained in terms of a return to 'tradition' during Vietnam's comprehensive socio-economic reform process, after a period of religious suppression during socialist collectivization. In my experience the form and scale of activities do not constitute a return to the past, but take place on a much grander scale, assuming novel forms, prompted by old or novel motivations, and in a transnational context. Philip Taylor contextualizes this localized insight by referring to the

enhanced religious sensibilities in other countries in Asia (Keyes, Kendall & Hardacre 1994) and to "new forms of religiosity" in connection with the proliferation of capitalism around the world (Roberts 1995). However, such a crude connection between religiosity and economic system cannot account for the specificities of local practices and the motivations of religious figures and their clients.

In this paper I take a look at spirit mediumship in Vietnam, which assumes varying forms depending on ethnicity, region, and religion. By applying a human security lens, I hope to do justice to the diverse motivations and projects by situating mediumship practices squarely in the present, in connection with contemporary anxieties, uncertainties and insecurities, linking physical and existential dimensions of human security. Provisionally,

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I distinguish between four forms of insecurity that require spiritual mending: 1) mental and physical health problems (requiring healing); 2) economic insecurity and market risk (seeking good fortune); 3) existential uncertainties related to the dead, e.g. relatives missing during the war (e.g. locating and ritually burying remains); 4) running deliberate risks and their management. Although this list is far from conclusive, I shall argue that the human security lens allows for a comprehensive, holistic approach which seeks to connect action to motivation in various domains or dimensions of life, without resorting to the simplistic notions that everything can be explained with reference to a quest for security. I shall explore some of these issues in sections on the connections between human security, religious certainty and spiritual security; on healing and security; on economic security; on existential security; and on freedom, risk and security. This will be done in four ethnographic vignettes, designed to illustrate attempts at creating health security, economic security, existential security – or certainty –, and risk and security. In the last section I shall draw some tentative conclusions about the usefulness of applying a human security lens when analyzing these phenomena.

#### **Human security, religious certainty, social safety?**

Human security is a relatively new concept that usually defines security along economic dimensions ('Freedom from want'), physical and political dimensions ('Freedom from fear') and ecological dimensions ('Freedom for future generations to inherit a sound natural environment'). As a 'people-centered' security concern it constitutes a

shift away from the focus on the state as the locus and subject of (military, political) security, towards the individual as the locus and subject of (the right to) 'human' security. In its report *Human security now*, the UN Commission on Human Security (chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen) speaks of "security centered on people – not states" whereby 'people' is operationalized as "individuals and communities" to be protected against threats (2003: 2). It is not only an analytical but a political concept as well, with a largely rhetorical flavor of mobilising political actors into action, i.e. of protecting against threats to security.

An obvious historical analogy can be discerned in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century history of human rights. With the establishment of the League of Nations after WW I the emphasis was on the right to self-determination embodied in nations as the proper locus and subject of such rights (US President Wilson's 'Fourteen Points'). After WW II it became clear how this right to self-determination (e.g. of the *Sudetendeutschen* in Czechoslovakia) could easily be manipulated and abused for war-mongering, while the Holocaust served as a reminder how individual people were victimized in such grand, nationalistic schemes. This prompted the attempt to safeguard individual rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), strongly promoted by US President Roosevelt's wife Eleanor. Interestingly, this individualistic notion of universal human rights was not uncontested at the time of their inception. In 1947 the *American Anthropologist* published a Statement on Human Rights that the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (1947) had submitted to the UN Commission

on Human Rights. The AAA protested against the individualist and absolutist focus, claiming instead that cultures and hence values differ and that individuals realize their human-ness through culture. Since then, human rights discourse has become a truly global ideology, seemingly becoming more and more 'universal' despite the continued prevalence of 'the national order of things' (Malkki 1995; Wilson 1997; Eriksen 2001).

Just as the discourse of universal human rights is predicated on the historically contingent construct of the 'individual' as historical agent, so does the discourse of human security constitute an individualization of the notion of security. Not only does this mirror the capitalist notion of the 'individual' as the primary subject of history (as opposed to, say, Marxist notions about the 'working class'); but this shift also requires methodological individualism if human security is to be operationalized as an analytical concept.<sup>(2)</sup> Having said that, it would not make sense to strip the 'methodological individual' of her or his human-ness by limiting human security to the economic (material) and political (physical) domains (which is what happens in the late capitalist market economy, where 'individuals' are reduced to producers and consumers). In other words, if the concept of human security is to be meaningful, then those (social, cultural, psychological, existential) dimensions of life that make individuals truly human can only be left out of the equation at great cost. The simplistic example of the July 7, 2005 suicide bombings in London shows that any attempt to analyze this assault on the human security of Londoners without looking at the religious motives of the perpetrators would be misguided.

A research group at VU University Amsterdam expanded the concept of human security to encompass both physical/ material dimensions of "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear" and existential/cultural dimensions:

[This] research programme stretches the meaning of human security to include cultural, cognitive, emotional, religious and symbolic dimensions as well, which are here glossed in the concept of 'existential' and which are bound to processes of signification. [...] The quest for existential security can be linked with and expressed through issues of national, ethnic, gender and religious identity as ways in which people create collective meanings, traditionally within the purview of cultural anthropology. (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology 2004: 2)

In this manner, the research group (which I was part of) sought to re-connect with the way human security was initially defined in the *Human Development Report 1994*, namely along the dimensions of economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. Under the rubric of 'community security', group membership and processes of identification are singled out:

Most people derive security from their membership in a group – a family, a community, an organization, a racial or ethnic group that can provide a cultural

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<sup>(2)</sup> 'Methodological individualism' is a Weberian notion that society is the result of the actions of individuals, and that the understanding of individual actions and motivations is important for the understanding of social and historical processes.

identity and a reassuring set of values. Such groups also offer practical support. (UNDP 1994: 31)

The report goes on to warn that communities do not necessarily or always foster human security as “traditional communities can also perpetuate oppressive practices”.

Outside the economic (‘Freedom from want’), physical (‘Freedom from fear’) and ecological (‘Freedom for future generations to inherit a sound natural environment’) realms, Human Security is not yet well-theorized (Chen et al. 2003; Burgess 2004; but see Eriksen 2004). For one, because human security is more often defined negatively in terms of threats, risks or violations (cf. Fukuda-Parr 2003) than for what it is supposed to mean in positive terms. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2004) points to the other possible opposite of (human) security, namely freedom, but freedom and risk are often two sides of the same coin. In his book *Community* Zygmunt Bauman (2001) discerns a tension between the movement toward freedom and the quest for security, against the backdrop of globalization and ‘liquid modernity’ which undermine the traditional ‘ethical communities’ of people with durable face-to-face commitments to each other. Again, a simplistic example will illustrate this tension. Following the US example, more and more collective retirement pension schemes in Europe become individualized in the sense that participants are offered choices how and where their contributions should be invested. This freedom of choice often creates new anxieties at individual levels: putting the money ‘safely’ in the bank might mean that the returns would be so low as to be outstripped by inflation; but

investing in stock with potentially higher returns implies that there is a flipside of higher risks at the same time. This new-found neoliberal ‘freedom’ creates a dilemma involving potentially serious consequences for post-retirement incomes.

So how to conceptualize human security comprehensively and positively (rather than in negative terms, as ‘threats’)? This requires us to think about the types of social and cultural needs, anxieties, desires, ambitions and projects to which ‘physical security’ and ‘existential security’ would correspond, and what other notions could be used in the same context. For the English language I am thinking about the notions of ‘certainty’ and ‘safety’ as bearing a strong family resemblance to security. However, as the meanings and uses of these terms are as much a matter of style and context as of definition, I am not venturing into an abstract discourse on these three related concepts, separate from the specific cultural meanings for people involved. At the same time, given the methodological individualism implied in the concept of human security we shall have to theorize how to relate individual experiences and projects with social and cultural phenomena. Fortunately for us, we do not have to invent the conceptual wheel anew as already in 1991 Anthony Giddens enriched our sociological thinking in this regard with the concept of ‘ontological security’ (1991: 183) which he related to ‘identity’ conceived not as a ‘thing’ but as a – largely routine – process of identification linking the person with a group or category (Giddens 1991; see also Jenkins 1996).

In anthropology and sociology, a common

association of identity is with ethnic and national categories (cf. Giddens 1991; Jenkins 1997; Jenkins 2001), linking the self and personal experience with collective categories through processes of (self)identification and attribution. In the words of Eriksen, “people’s personal experiences are the very raw material of such [ethnic or nationalist] ideologies” (2001b: 68). There is little doubt that ‘ethnicity’ can have important consequences for human security, as is brought out by its frequent discursive association with ‘conflict’ (Giddens 1991; Jenkins 1997, 2001). This has raised the question, already implied in the *Human Development Report 1994*, why individuals can become so entangled in ethnic projects that they are willing to risk their own or other people’s life, health or assets to achieve their aims. Many scholars refer to some form of existential security or certainty in their explanations. Richard Jenkins (1997) borrows Giddens’ notion of ‘ontological security’ as part of people’s need for a stable ‘self-identity’. In his comparative treatise on the role of culture and ethnicity in contemporary political conflicts, Jack Eller (1999) looks at the way in which the notion of ethnicity creates a ‘common past’ as a memory that is worthwhile to fight for. In his book on ethnicity and the state in Southeast Asia, political scientist David Brown (1994) builds on the Weberian notion of ethnicity as the imagining of shared descent – again through narratives about the past – in order to develop a notion of ethnicity as a metaphor for family, and draws on psychoanalytical theories to explain the extraordinary strength of ethnic identifications. In such theories, the assumed security of ethnic belonging would explain the strength

of identity politics in that domain. Arjun Appadurai (1999) goes one step further by asserting that violent conflict can be a way for young men to create ‘dead certainty’ about their identity – both ethnic and gender. Oskar Verkaaik, on the other hand, stresses the ‘fun’ element in collective violence along ethnic lines (2003). Both Appadurai and Verkaaik seem to imply that young men take risks in order to create ontological security, thereby challenging the physical security of others.

In spite of the anthropological fascination with ethnicity over the past two decades, other forms of identification matter just as much. Whereas nation, region, locality, community and ‘race’ are often seen as “variations on the basic ethnic theme of collective identification stressing perceived cultural differentiation” (Jenkins 2001: 8), other identifications may follow class, gender or religious lines. There, too, the distinctions and connections between security, certainty and safety are not always relevant, but it is often assumed that people seek some degree of certainty in their (class, gender, religious) identity, while simultaneously striving to create some measure of security through their notion of belonging to a particular collective (social category, group, ‘community’). This is perhaps brought out best in Zygmunt Bauman’s connection of security with his nostalgic notion of the “ethical community” (*contra* “aesthetic community”) consisting of a “warm circle” of people having durable responsibilities and commitments to one another against the backdrop of “liquid modernity” (2001).

The relations of identification between the individual and collective levels, as well

as between the various dimensions of identification usually are extremely complex and entangled. This often results in the paradoxical situation that the striving for or creation of certainty can come at the expense of security in another domain, and vice versa. In the next sections I shall explore how particular religious identifications and practices in Vietnam can be interpreted through a human security lens. I shall offer four vignettes, designed to illustrate attempts at creating health security, economic security, existential security – or certainty –, and gender and/or sexual security. In the last section I shall draw some tentative conclusions about the usefulness of applying a human security lens when analyzing these phenomena.

#### **Human security and healing**

There is a burgeoning literature on the revival of ritual and religious practices during the *Đổi mới* period, after a period of suppression of ‘superstitions’ (*mê tín dị đoan*) in the campaign toward secularization and socialist construction. There is a variety of interpretations for the “new forms of religiosity” (cf. Roberts 1995) in post-socialist Vietnam. Hy Van Luong (1993) points at more political space for religious and ritual action, at increased wealth, and at a need for spiritual compensation for the economic insecurity inherent in the market. In their village studies in northern Vietnam, both John Kleinen (1999) and Shaun Malarney (2002) draw attention to prestige as a function of economic position through ‘conspicuous consumption’. But while these authors speak about religious practice in general, what is striking about spirit mediumship is its highly transactional nature, leading many observers to comment on the ‘commercial’ character of spirit

mediumship. Philip Taylor (2002; 2004) draws attention to new forms of devotion and massive pilgrimage in a modern market context in southern Vietnam. In his book *Goddess on the Rise* (2004) about religious beliefs and ritual practices centered on goddesses in southern Vietnam, Taylor offers the quasi-Marxist interpretation that the transactional nature of people’s dealings with deities and spirits is way of “embodying market relations” (2004: 83-110).

When it comes to the revival of spirit mediumship, most of the contemporary sources draw attention to the practice of *Đạo Mẫu* or Mother Goddess worship which is currently seeing a huge revival in Vietnam. In the course of the last couple of years many temples have been restored and put to renewed use. Spirit mediums and their clients host sessions in their ‘own’ temples or organize pilgrimages to temple festivals. Some spirit mediums themselves choose to speak of *Đạo Thánh* [Worship of saints or spirits, including historical heroes like Trần Hưng Đạo] rather than *Đạo Mẫu* which may be correct because the Mother Goddess is just one of the many spirits. The *thánh*, then, include the various personas of celestial mandarins, ladies and pages in the pantheon overseen by the Mother Goddess in the ‘four palaces’ (*tứ phủ*), as well as the various legendary or historical figures who have been immortalized as saints and who possess special faculties that they may use for the benefit of their devout followers. Followers are themselves investing heavily in the possession rituals, with either the master or themselves in the role of medium. One *chầu văn* musician in his 70s told me that he had been traveling around in the Red

River Delta as a musician since he was a child, but that at no point in his life had he witnessed so many spirit possession rituals. *Lên đồng* has become a widely-accepted, widespread and very popular practice.

In 2002 I visited the Lư Phái temple complex together with my friend Ngô Đức Thịnh. In a rural area just south of Hanoi, the complex consists of a ‘Buddhist’ pagoda (*chùa*), a ‘Taoist’ temple (*đền*) and a ‘Confucian’ tutelary village shrine (*đình*) next to each other, and all three buildings had been rebuilt or restored in the 1990s following destructions wrought by the wars and the Revolution.<sup>(3)</sup> We went there in order to attend the initiation ritual as spirit medium of Ms. Hà, a mother of two and a garment and shoe trader in Hanoi’s best-known market, Đồng Xuân, who sought healing for her ailments. For her first, initiative possession [*ra đồng*], Ms. Hà was assisted by Mr. Hùng, a professional medium based at a temple in the old quarter of Hanoi, and his own assistants; by the temple master, *thầy Nghĩa*; by an old lady; and by the *chầu văn* ceremonial music band; in the presence of some relatives and friends. Hà had invested a considerable amount of money in the clothes, in the sacrificial objects offered to the deities (and to be returned as heavenly, auspicious gifts – *lộc*), and in the organization of the ceremony itself. As a first time medium, she did not know the ritually prescribed acts, and her dancing performance was often quite hesitant and clumsy, to the point that the audience even showed the right moves and finger positions to her. Eventually she grew into her performance as she approached the two final – and most cheerful and exciting – incarnations, of *Cô Chín* [the

ninth damsel] and *Cậu Bé* [the youngest page]. Suddenly the ritual ended, when the heavenly gifts were distributed among the assistants and the audience. “Is it over now?”, asked Ms. Hà. She was exhausted.

I asked Ms. Hà why she would want to be possessed by deities and invest so much money and effort to do so. She told me that she had been feeling ill for some time now, but did not get better. Regular doctors could not find the cause of her predicament. The last half year things had taken a turn for the worse, and she “lost everything”, meaning that now not only her health but her livelihood and her family happiness were at stake. Because the cause was allegedly not biomedical, regular physicians could not diagnose her properly. Instead, she was diagnosed by a soothsayer as having *căn* – the spirit root, which means that she is destined [*duyên*] to be entered by spirits and deities [*nhập hồn thánh*]. There is no choice, for failing to submit one’s body as vessel for spirits to ride means bad luck, first and foremost in the form of bad physical or mental health. In other words, Ms. Hà wanted to be initiated as medium in order to placate the spirits that try to enter her body and rid herself of the plagues affecting her. In that sense she engaged in an act of healing, thus creating physical and psychological security for herself and her family.

Ms. Hà is an ‘amateur’ spirit medium, but ‘professional’ mediums often go through near-death experiences. *Thầy đồng* Nam is

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<sup>(3)</sup> I place the qualifications Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist between apostrophes in order to indicate that these distinctions are etic rather than emic distinctions, and do hardly justice to the many syncretistic cross-overs.

a professional master medium who practices at various temples in Hanoi and surrounding villages, while also having his own temple and his group of (young male) ritual attendants living with him. Coming from a poor family, Nam showed talent for dance, which is why he was admitted to the *tuồng* traditional opera school in Hanoi. After graduation he worked as artist but got seriously ill, to the point that he almost died. His mother then secretly called for a medium (which was strictly forbidden at the time) who diagnosed Nam as having *căn* – the spirit root. After Nam was initiated into trance possession [*ra đồng*] for the first time, his ailments subsided and he made a career as professional medium. His opera training helped him perfect his performance in this spiritual field characterized by competition between mediums in both ritual efficacy and in aesthetics.<sup>(4)</sup> The fame for efficacy is important because many clients come to spirit mediums with prayers for good health.

In other mediumship traditions outside *lên đồng*, sickness and healing are common motivations for people to become a spirit medium. Ms. Thi is an idiosyncratic medium who is possessed by the spirits of deceased relatives of clients. Ms. Thi was born in a mountainous district in 1956, in a poor, ethnic Dao family. At the age of nine she became very ill. The local health authorities diagnosed with leprosy. Then her parents let her go to the provincial ethnic minority school but after two years she became too ill to study. In 1973 she got married but she was still continuously ill until 1982 when the sickness abated. In 1988 the illness seemed to return in the form of a skin

disease which crept up from the feet and arms to cover the head and which caused to have visions of people and creatures wanting to enter her head.<sup>(5)</sup> One time she saw a snake and a tiger speaking, telling her that she was chosen by the ancestors (*cha cấ mẹ cữ*) to have a ‘public/meritorious duty’ (*việc công*).<sup>(6)</sup> When she accepted the calling by opening herself to the spirits, she healed and recovered from her illness. In spite of her own wishes, the spirits will not allow her to do any other work. If she goes to the market she sells nothing, and if she works in the field she becomes crippled. She now lives in Hòa Bình province with her husband and children, with two brothers, their children and their families living in the vicinity. Even though she lives now in a new, concrete house that she built recently, the spirits have not allowed her to move the site of the trance sessions from the old wooden house-temple to the new house closer to the road (see Salemink & Phan Đăng Nhật n.d.).

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<sup>(4)</sup> Stanley Tambiah (1985: 2) uses the word ‘efficacy’ in relation to ritual in order to be able to understand ritual from an actor’s perspective and to avoid becoming entangled in fruitless discussions about rational causality or in positivist statements about truth or falseness of ritual claims.

<sup>(5)</sup> Judging from the description this disease may have been psoriasis, which is known to provoke profound and disturbing hallucinations in some people. This is beautifully represented in Dennis Potter’s television series *The Singing Detective* (1986) which has recently (2003) been turned into a Hollywood film by Keith Gordon (see <http://www.psoriasis.org/publications/advance/singingdetective.php>).

<sup>(6)</sup> Lord Tiger and Lord Snake are mythical animals in the Taoist pantheon. The tiger and snake are venerated as part of the Mother Goddess worship, and in many religious traditions in Vietnam usually have their own small altar on the ground below the main altar.



This observation is confirmed by other scholars. In her analysis of spirit mediums, Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002) draws attention to the therapeutic function of the initiation and the rituals. If asked what the compelling aspects of *hầu đồng* are in the eyes of the adherents, we can point at two important factors: efficacy and aesthetic pleasure. In her dissertation on northern *lên đồng*, Nguyễn Thị Hiền mentions both, by focusing on the ritual as drama and performance (2002: 19-20, 73); and as therapeutic practice (99-124). In terms of therapy or healing, many followers have wishes relating to good fortune and to good health; they hope that their sacrifices and prayers will be rewarded by the Mother Goddess or the spirits. Similarly, in interviews about their life stories, spirit mediums claimed that they had a physical or psychological need to act as medium, and that the occasion for *ra đồng* [mediumship initiation] often was a serious disease. Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002: 80-91) provides a much more detailed account of such physical and psychological states, and the various strategies of seeking healing – either through the institutional biomedical or psychiatric health services, or through the informal ritual channels, but usually combining both ways. But how does this observation relate to human security, we may ask?

In their contributions to the Harvard volume *Human Insecurity in a Global World*, Chen and Narasimhan in a chapter entitled ‘Global health and human security’ (2003) and Heymann (2003) in his ‘Infectious disease threats to national and global security’, pitch their analyses on national, regional and international levels. In aiming at international levels of analysis and intervention, they

lack specificity and lose sight of the ‘people-centered’ focus of human security. Their pleas for better coordination between global and national health policies are important, but they lose sight of people as the *subjects* of human security rather than objects (‘targets’) of policy; and as full human beings rather than bodies without minds and without culture. In this way they deny people’s agency as subjects who construe discursively and construct practically their own health security, in connection with other human security dimensions. By keeping their analysis pitched at national and international policy levels, they miss out on the possibilities of universalization offered by the methodological individualism of the ‘human security’ concept compared with the narrow definition of security as an exclusively national – and military or police – affair.

In contrast, I would suggest that the vignette above shows us that people employ a variety of culturally specific strategies to ensure their health and well-being. Many mediums and their clients have found ways to cope with and overcome (physical and mental) health problems and other misfortune through mediumship practices. It is easy to speculate that many of the people who found healing this way would have ended up populating hospitals and occasionally mental clinics – as actually happened during the years that spirit mediumship was actively suppressed by the Vietnamese Party - State. Suppressing or ignoring such individual strategies – as the large-scale biomedical approach routinely does – will make us lose sight of the ways such strategies are combined with myriad other strategies that people employ to enhance

their human security. After all, in real life, people's health and well-being is entangled with questions of physical safety, livelihood, empowerment, and cultural/religious fulfillment.

### **Livelihood security and the spirits of capitalism**

Freedom from want is one of the core elements in the 'classic' definition of human security. What is meant here is, of course, the absence of poverty (which has both absolute and relative dimensions), because an actual 'absence of want' would make the entire world economy come to grinding halt. After all, the globalized consumerism characteristic of late capitalism and postmodern culture can only make the economy roll if new desires are constantly wetted, if new wants are imagined and if a new economic demand is continuously created. So what links freedom from want, consumerism and poverty alleviation to each other? According to statistics offered by the Vietnamese government, by UNDP and by the World Bank, Vietnam is the latest success story of liberal reforms, with high GDP growth rates and a percentage-wise decline of poor households by 20 per cent from 1993 (55 per cent nationwide) to 1998 (36 per cent nationwide), according to the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys. However, since then economic differentiation has widened and hardened, creating a bottom stratum of inveterately poor people (that include most of Vietnam's ethnic minority people) facing rising expenses for services (health, education) that were once at least nominally free (Jorgensen 2006). Recently the statistics worsened again when the Government decided to raise Vietnam's poverty line to bring it slightly more in line with an internationally

applied measure of \$1 per day (which again is not so far below the average per capita GDP of \$550).<sup>(7)</sup> Simultaneously, however, poor post-war, post-socialist Vietnam has become a consumer society in its own right, in which entrepreneurs and corrupt cadres can make fortunes and cities witness the rise of a middle class willing and able to spend their wealth on houses and amenities, motorbikes, cars, videos, domestic and foreign tourism, and sumptuous lifestyles. Even for poor people in 'remote areas' it is impossible not to be aware of the lure and promise of consumption and to be immune for the desire for consumer objects.

Behind the average figures hides a world in which most households are dependent on self-employed livelihoods – as farmers, as trader, in the informal sector – and hence on the caprice of the market. A natural disaster, illness in the household, official corruption, too few or too many children, broken machinery, and many other eventualities could make a household lose its land or other assets and push it below the poverty line. But what really contributes to a sense of profound vulnerability and economic insecurity is that volatile market forces or inexplicably wrong business decisions can have the same effect, but without comprehension or predictability. In the words of Philip Taylor:

Exposure to the market has transformed their lives, causing dislocations, a sense of powerlessness, and a feeling of being controlled by invisible, remote and powerful forces. (Taylor 2004: 87)

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<sup>(7)</sup> These are figures available during the time of writing this paper, i.e. 2007. As I choose to not update this paper for re-publication it is not necessary to update these statistical data.

It is this sense of powerlessness that many people seek to overcome in the religious practice that Taylor alludes to, in particular in spirit mediumship.

To a major degree, the efficacy attributed to spirit mediums and related rituals can be connected with wealth. According to Philip Taylor (2002; 2004) this expectation of material wealth can primarily be found in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, which – with the metropolis of Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City – would be the country's most commercialized region. But in my research of various forms of spirit mediumship in the northern and central part of the country I did not notice any significant difference in terms of wishes or prayers (*cầu*). Many of the wishes of the followers and many of the practices in mediumship rituals revolve around the hope or expectation of gaining material wealth through the intervention of particular spirits, and their blessing of objects or (new, unused) money traveling back and forth to the other world and circulating between spirit medium, attendants, and worshippers. Taylor claims that a good proportion of the millions of pilgrims that annually visit the shrine of Bà Chúa Xứ [Lady of the Realm] in Châu Đốc are market women or people who are otherwise involved in trade. But Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002: 91-4) found a similar background of spirit mediums and their followers in the northern variant of the ritual. In the area of the former imperial capital of Huế I found a mixed situation in that many of the elderly participants in the pilgrimage on the river were former aristocrats, but many younger participants were urban market traders – usually women (see Saleminck 2007). During ceremonies – and

especially toward the end – the excitement in the audience usually grows as the amount of 'auspicious' (*lộc*) objects and banknotes distributed by sponsors increases. In an unpublished paper on the rapidly growing popularity of the 'Granary/Treasury Queen' (*Bà Chúa Kho*) near Bắc Ninh town, Ngô Đức Thịnh relates this phenomenon to Vietnam's transition to a market economy:

Pilgrims come especially in the beginning of the year to borrow her 'money' so as to make a living or to ask 'her presents', then at the end of the year they will come back to show their gratitude and repay their debt. (Ngô Đức Thịnh n.d.: 5; see also Lê Hồng Lý 2007)

The closure of the ritual engenders enhanced well-being and confidence in the future on the part of participants. In the eyes of the followers, then, the efficacy of the ritual lies in the effects in response to the wishes – whether they be well-being, health or wealth.

It would seem then that the ritual upsurge in Vietnam is not just a compensation for economic insecurity (Luong 1993) or a public expression of new-found cultural liberties (Luong 1993; Malarney 2003) or of new-found wealth (Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2003), but actually takes on the form of a commercial transaction between the deity or spirit in the 'other world' [*thế giới khác*] or 'yin world' [*thế giới âm*] and the client in 'this world' or 'yang world' [*thế giới dương*]. The influential cultural commentator Tồn Ánh invokes the following saying in order to understand the relationship of the living with the underworld:

We believe that *dương sao âm vậy* [however the yang world, so is the yin

world]: whatever the living need, the dead need the same and however the living lead their lives, the dead do the same. The dead have a 'life' in the underworld, just like the life of people on earth. To put it differently, dead people also need to eat and drink, they need to spend and they need a place to live, just like living people. (Toàn Ánh 1991: 20).

The market becomes a direct metaphor to articulate the transactional relationship between human beings and deities in the other world:

The intensification of market relations [...] since the mid-1980s has given rise to religious subjectivities that relate to the assertion of personal agency, the quest for predictability, and the management of anxiety. (Taylor 2004: 87)

This assessment of the transactional nature of ritual practice seems to be quite common in Asia, as one is reminded of Asian-style prosperity cults in Thailand, Taiwan, China, Japan. In her essay 'Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism' Laurel Kendall (1996) offers a view of the quite similar Korean shamans that is very much comparable to the Vietnam case, in that shamans make a massive 'come-back' in present-day Korea, in connection with the unfolding of capitalism in that country.

Returning to the question of human security as 'freedom from want', it seems clear now that spirit mediumship does play a role in creating economic security in the eye of the beholder – i.e. the clients of the mediums. The clients build up the necessary confidence and trust in order to be successful in their business, and effectively create social capital based on the belief in the auspicious effects of spirit mediums. Clients will use

the ritually auspicious goods and money that they 'borrow' from the spirit – or sometimes the Goddess – in order to invest it in their business. If the business is successful, the clients have to pay the spirit back with interest, or else the spirit will get angry and cause harm. This is why so many temples are so rich these days that they are restored, re-built, expanded, refurbished and/or embellished. One famous example is the temple of Bà Chúa Xứ in Châu Đốc which is stuffed with expensive presents for the Lady (beautiful clothes, gold-engraved plaques, 'meritorious' financial contributions [*công đức*], etc). But less well-known mediums, like the ethnic Dao medium Ms. Thi in Hoà Bình province, routinely receive presents ranging from clothes to cell phones from satisfied clients as well (but only after the efficacy is 'proven'). I would like to stress that the keyword here is ritual efficacy, but that is also the catch here. Informants tend to stress that the auspicious effects can only be realized if one believes: "You just have to believe!" [*Mình cần phải tin tưởng thôi*]. Without belief in the deity and her efficacy, the 'exchange' or transaction cannot work, because the goddess is jealous and will consider this an insult, causing harm rather than good. This often means that if the outcome is not as positive as expected or hoped for, it is the client herself who is to blame for lack of faith.

This reduces the answer to the question whether spirit mediumship might play a role in creating economic security (i.e. freedom from want – but not freedom from desire for consumer goods or from economic demand) quite literally to a matter of faith. The belief that spirits can help via mediums

is important in a situation where people feel disoriented, at the mercy of invisible, remote and powerful market forces, and thus have no signposts to make out whether their business decisions may be right or not. We know from the – often erratic – behavior of investors and traders in the international stock markets how important rumor, belief and ‘intuition’ can be in influencing investment decisions and in determining market values of company shares in an economic domain that is supposed to be ruled by rational considerations of profit maximization by *homines oeconomici*. Groundless optimism can be a reason for soaring stocks while pessimism is often the cause for disinvestments and hence economic downturns. In Vietnam, the spiritual security sought via mediums does not only compensate for the insecurity of the unpredictable market but creates the social capital necessary for investing confidently in new (or old) enterprises, thus enhancing economic security of the traders, their dependents, business partners and clients. This seems a confirmation of Robert Barro’s recent thesis of ‘spiritual capital’ regarding the (positive) correlation between religiosity and economic growth (Barro 2004: 64).

**In search of existential security in afterlife – and this life**

The ritualized *lên đồng* form of spirit mediumship is certainly not the only form of mediumship, spirit possession, trance and shamanism in Vietnam.<sup>(8)</sup> There are more individualized forms of mediumship that have also become more popular in the present time. These forms involve special faculties attributed to individual mediums, and their clients usually seek to get in contact with a dead person, with a living

person who is missing, or both at the same time. One wide-spread but contested practice in contemporary Vietnam is the search for remains of people ‘missing in action’ (MIA’s) since the war years. Overseas, MIA’s are usually associated with American soldiers missing in action; with the politicized myth of American soldiers still held prisoner in ‘North-Vietnamese’ camps; with Rambo films, and with the political lobbying of right-wing pressure groups opposing normalization of US relations with present-day, Communist-led Vietnam. But apart from the continuing search for remains of American MIA’s, there are also around 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers and militia still missing after the three ‘Indochina Wars’ (with France, 1945-1954; with the US, 1960-1975; with Cambodia and China, 1979-1989), which is a painful issue for family members of those who are unaccounted for, whose remains have not been located and who have not been buried properly.

In the dominant cosmology in Vietnam, death is a journey rather than a radical departure, which means that the souls of the dead continue to be with us for some time. Across the main religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, ancestor worship and spirit worship), death is a transition of the soul from this world to the other world [*thế giới khác*] where the soul lives on as a spirit until s/he is born again. All rituals having to do with ancestor worship both seek to venerate the ancestors out of thankfulness and indebtedness (*nhớ ơn*). Simultaneously, people seek to placate the

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<sup>(8)</sup> In spirit mediumship, a spirit take possession of the mind of a living person acting as medium, while in shamanism the spirit or soul of the shaman leaves her or his body in order to commune with the spirits.

spirits of ancestors because the spirits can be beneficial as well as potentially harmful, as spirits exert an influence in the affairs of this world as well. Funerary rituals aim to guide the deceased person safely on the voyage to the other world – safely out of reach of humans – while pleasing her/him by showing appropriate grief. (see Malarney 1996a; 2002). But failing to comply with the ritual prescriptions turns the soul of the dead person into a hungry, revengeful wandering soul (Malarney 2002; Luu Hung, Nguyen Trung Dung, Tran Thi Thu Thuy, Vi Van An, and Vo Thi Thuong 2003). The soul of such a dead person who is not buried with the proper rituals will wander between the two worlds and can exert a harmful influence on the situation of the living. For their relatives or descendants who are getting older, having a family member who has not been buried properly is literally ‘unfinished business’.<sup>(9)</sup>

In order to put the wandering souls of lost loved ones to rest, many Vietnamese are presently looking for remains of lost loved ones in a variety of ways, first of all by consulting the army records. If these offer no clue, many people nowadays resort to the services of a medium, shaman or clairvoyant because they believe that these people have special, supernatural gifts that may help them locate the remains of the MIA’s. This belief received a boost since a scientist and former leader in the Communist regime, Mr. Trần Phương, circulated a paper narrating his own experiences which forced him to abandon his skepticism. Many Vietnamese believe in such supernatural phenomena, or at least like to try this avenue when all other avenues have been exhausted, while many

others, however, remain skeptical. Yet, over the past five years there has been a remarkable upsurge in the numbers of people seeking the support of mediums, clairvoyants or people with special faculties, as well as in public interest in the phenomenon. According to Prof. Phan Đăng Nhật who has been studying this phenomenon for some years and who has interviewed hundreds of clients, this upsurge can be attributed to greater wealth among Vietnam’s population; better communication and transportation systems; more freedom to travel and more religious liberties than during the era of ‘High Socialism’; and the aging of the clients themselves, who do not wish to leave ‘unfinished business’ behind that could potentially harm their living descendents or themselves in their afterlives (Phan Đăng Nhật 2003 – personal communication). In an unpublished paper on this topic, Phan Đăng Nhật (2003) distinguishes between five different ‘special faculties’ employed by famous mediums.<sup>(10)</sup> While some mediums specialize in finding dead bodies, other mediums have a more varied repertoire. What is clear in all these cases, though, is that the special faculty is highly individual, located within such an individual or in a special relationship of the medium with a

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<sup>(9)</sup> Vietnamese people often use the word *việc* [lit. ‘work’] in connection with ‘family affairs’, including care and rituals.

<sup>(10)</sup> These methods are 1) complete spirit possession (whereby the medium is no longer conscious); 2) partial possession (whereby the medium is conscious of the spirit possession); 3) translation (of the meaning expressed by spirits); 4) prophesying (whereby the medium is making announcements); and 5) being prophesied. According to Prof. Nhật’s respondents, many people have been able to locate graves or dead bodies in these manners.

spirit, saint or deity. Because of this individual character, rituals around such forms of spirit possession or shamanism are individual, too, and are usually not as scripted as the *lên đồng* rituals which go through a prescribed number of stages, each with fixed attributes.

The ethnic Dao medium Ms. Thi is such a person who is reputed to be able to help find the remains of people who have been lost, being a spirit medium whose body is completely possessed by spirits during the sessions, and whose mind is 'empty' – without consciousness – and who therefore has no recollection afterwards of what goes on during the possession. Take one ordinary day in 2003, when Ms. Thi enters the old wooden house which functions as ritual space, and which is already packed with people – some coming from far away – seeking her services. Dressed in normal, everyday clothes, she prays before the altar to ask for permission from the (unnamed) spirits to begin the ceremony. These prayers last for about an hour, while clients continue to prepare the altars and the sacrifices, and burn effigies and votive paper money in the yard outside. All the while, people walk in and out of the room through one of the three doors. After Ms. Thi eats a bit, and rests on the mat, she sits down on an upright chair with eyes closed. From there she orders that paper waste be removed from under the altar, and asks whether everybody is ready with their requests. When there is positive response, somebody starts a tape player with music and Buddhist chants. Prayer books from the little table in front of the altar are distributed, and people seated on the mats

will chant along with the better-known chants. Prayers are chanted in unison, then Ms. Thi ask permission to continue the ceremony from the saints of a multi-ethnic Taoist pantheon.

After sitting upright on the chair for 15 minutes, Ms. Thi's head and body start to sway in circular motion, and the audience becomes excited, murmurs chants that ask for 'their' spirit to appear. At 11:45 am Thi suddenly speaks with a clear voice and asks for Hạnh. Ms. Hạnh, an elderly lady, comes running in through the main entrance which is the entrance used by the spirits and hence forbidden for the living to use. The spell is broken and Thi opens her eyes, while Ms. Hạnh is distraught that she cannot meet her dead child now. She apologizes profusely and attempts to mend the relationship with the spirit by renewed praying and offering at the altar. The procedure starts again with chanting to Buddha from the book. Thi begins to sway again but now it is Hạnh herself who gets into a trance while seated on the mat. She shakes her head and entire body, stands up, and speaks, dances and cries. When Ms. Hạnh collapses after a few minutes, she does not remember what happened but the commentary offered by the public holds that she was possessed by the spirit of her paternal grandfather (*ông nội*). After Ms. Hạnh recovers, Thi starts to shake her head quickly now. She spreads her hands with palms up, indicating that the spirit is male. Incarnated in the body of Ms. Thi, the low voice of her husband calls Ms. Nga, and he mentions the names of family members, criticising one family member who has two wives. The spirit laments his fate – why was he alone when he died

during the war? Why did she come only now for the first time, after 45 years? Why is fate so hard that he has to wander on the ground of his forefathers? Ms. Nga and her daughter Liễu come forward and respectfully offer rice wine, which the spirit (through the body of the medium) accepts and drinks. Why did the other family members not come? Nga whispers that the other children and grandchildren could not come for they are in the south. After some time the spirit leaves Ms. Thi's body, and Thi opens her eyes, looks around her as if awaking from a deep sleep.

After a number of other clients have met their dead relatives, the medium does not 'wake up' from her trance and again begins to sway her head and body as the crowd chants the Vietnamese name of the Amitabha Buddha – A di đà Phật. With the palms of her hand stretched out she calls Mô from far away Nghệ An province, but the crowd answers that Mô went home already. Mô's family had been around for the past couple of days but they went home after waiting for some days without success in meeting with a spirit. Many people do wait, even for days or weeks if necessary, especially those who come from far away. During the next trance the medium puts both hands akimbo, indicating that the body is possessed by an old male spirit, Ông Tạo, who calls his wife Ms. Thu, an elderly woman of about 70. From the conversation it becomes clear that she has three brothers killed during the war (*liệt sỹ*), and that she is looking for their graves in Quảng Ngãi province in central Vietnam, below the old demarcation line along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The spirit is offered a glass of beer and cigarettes (three at a

time), his conversation is very lively as he is alternately joking and crying with Ms. Thu. He encourages her to go look for the graves but his information is not very precise, as far as I can ascertain.

According to some northern Vietnamese, locating graves in this manner would only work with those who had fought on the 'politically correct' revolutionary side of the war, thus becoming war martyrs [*liệt sỹ*] and hence considered to have sacrificed themselves [*hy sinh*] for the nation (see Malarney 2001). However, I have witnessed that locating graves via spirit mediums is not the exclusive prerogative of politically correct war martyrs. One day at the shrine of Ms. Thi, Mr. Minh, a middle-aged man, meets the spirit of his younger brother who had died as a child, and whose grave had been removed in the course of a construction project development. This created great agony for Mr. Minh, who did not know where the remains were now and was anxious that his brother might do harm to him or his family for not paying sufficient attention to the grave. When Ms. Thi's body is possessed by the spirit of the younger brother, the spirit speaks, moves, laughs and cries like an agitated child, and the conversation ranges over people and topics that are familiar to both brothers, thus visibly moving the audience. Shifting the conversation to the reason for the meeting, the younger brother can put Mr. Minh at ease by giving very precise and detailed information as to where to look for the remains. Sometimes information is checked – five steps from this or from that tree? – but in the end, when the brothers bid goodbye to each other, Mr. Minh is satisfied that he will find the remains of



his brother, giving him the opportunity to re-bury the bones in a new grave.

For living relatives or descendants who cannot meet the ritual requirements of a proper burial, the continued presence of a family member wandering as a restless, hungry soul between two worlds is not just a source of existential anxiety in terms of not being able to pay the filial debt. It is a source of profound insecurity and uncertainty regarding the present situation. Health, wealth and good fortune are transient, ephemeral and at constant risk of losing – a risk which will loom large if posed by a malevolent spirit and which undermine confidence in the present and the future and hence self-confidence and decisiveness. On the other hand, bad fortune will be attributed to the hungry souls. The successful search and ritually correct burial of lost remains using the services of a spirit medium will enhance the family well-being and self-confidence, which are indispensable components of their sense of human security.

#### **Engaging risk, adventure, and insecurity**

If human security is conceptualised as a 'perennial quest' (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology 2004), then any analysis that wants to do justice to the richness of human endeavors must come to terms with risk-seeking behavior, often associated with notions of freedom, adventure, individualism, gambling, risk-taking, etc. In some social practices, such behavior is more or less institutionalised, e.g. in adventure sports, lotteries, some forms of sexual behavior, criminal behavior, hooliganism, etc. In Zygmunt Bauman's work (2001: 20), 'security' is nostalgically equated with 'community' (or better: the 'ethical community' which he

thinks of as a 'warm circle' of contacts) and seen as opposed to the kind of freedom connected with globalization and 'liquid modernity'. Needless to say, this is not the freedom of 'freedom *from* want' and 'freedom *from* fear' which defines freedom by the absence of negative phenomena, like 'want' or 'fear'. Rather, this is the positive but inherently risky freedom *to* choose – or to withdraw from the constraints of the community circle if it is not so warm as some cultural critics would claim. Yet, also this freedom to choose – positively valued in Western culture – can cause anxieties, even when it comes to deciding what to buy when shopping, as Barry Schwartz argues in 'The tyranny of choice' (2004).

Whether positively or negatively values, in many countries and many domains in life, risk-seeking behavior is very common, albeit pursued differently by different social categories – as Gerben Nooteboom (2003: 221-45) showed for Java. This is no different for Vietnam. Spend one day in Vietnam's crazy traffic, and the meaning of risk will seem very graphic to the outsider, although it is fair to add that the emic assessment must be different from an etic assessment of risk by outsiders, and is often balanced against a notion of 'fate'. But fate is to some extent determined in the other world, and can therefore be influenced through ritual and propitiation of the relevant spirits, saints or deities; or it can be navigated through the services of a Tao horoscopist, geomancer [*feng shui* or *phong thủy*], soothsayer, or *I ching* sticks interpreters. When having to make decisions, when embarking on a risky journey – either real in traffic, or metaphorical – many Vietnamese will seek the services of such mediators.

In March 2005, an informant of anthropologist Malte Stokhof took us to a temple complex just outside of Ho Chi Minh City's Chinese district Chợ Lớn. The man, an ethnic Cham Muslim, owns a café and a long tail boat with which he maintains a ferry service to the temples which from the city can only be reached by water.<sup>(11)</sup> The temple complex had the usual strangely syncretic array of different religious traditions, including a temple dedicated to the tutelary genie of the village [*đình*], a Buddhist pagoda [*chùa*], a temple dedicated to the five incarnations of the Mother Goddess [*đền*], and an official, political shrine venerating Communist Vietnam's second president after Hồ Chí Minh, president Tôn Đức Thắng. But a bit further away, amid commercial fish ponds alongside the canal, is an inconspicuous site which constitutes a destination of secret nightly pilgrimages. By the river one finds small altars dedicated to the five incarnations of the Mother Goddess, the Lord Tiger, and other deities, and which are the site of spirit medium practices found elsewhere. A few steps further along a dike one can find two graves – one made of cement, the other a lowly dirt grave – which belong to an orphaned boy and his sister, respectively. The story is that some years ago the boy committed suicide there by hanging himself from a tree, and that some time afterward, the girl did the same thing at the same place. Then somebody came to pray there one day, and she won the big price in the lottery after having communicated with the spirits of the boy and girl. The story about this good fortune, attributed to the spiritual intervention of the souls of both children, quickly spread, attracting many aspiring

lottery winners. Now the place is extremely popular with those who seek spiritual intervention or advice regarding lottery games. Clients come secretly by night because the authorities have forbidden the practices as superstitious. Yet, the place is slowly converted to a shrine, with an altar, with one upgraded grave and one grave waiting to be upgraded by a thankful client.

As playing in the lottery is tantamount to taking risks, the argument about seeking spiritual security does not seem to hold here. People do not always seek security, and certainly not by avoiding risk. For many people, playing in the lottery constitutes an obvious gamble and entails consciously running risk in the hope or expectation of making the big hit. But is it not always gambling that involves risk-seeking behavior. We might think of playing in the market, with equally unpredictable outcomes, and with similar inexplicable inequality, thus resembling what Richard Sennett (1997) called a “winner-takes-all market”. Or we might think of risky sexual behavior in the age of AIDS (Andersson 2002), engaging in crime (running the risk of being killed or jailed) or extreme sports or extreme adventures (Ortner 1997). Yet, when running risk, people often seek compensation for that risk, for instance by seeking spiritual intervention. This can then be interpreted as a form of compensating for insecurity and reducing anxiety – if not seeking more security – when engaging in risky adventures.

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(11) The Cham are an Austronesian-speaking ethnic group living in pockets in Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and scattered around the US and France. They form the remnants of an old Hindu trading kingdom on the coast of present-day Vietnam, but most of the present-day Cham are Muslims.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have offered a number of ethnographic vignettes in order to show how spirit mediumship practices in contemporary Vietnam are situated within a field characterized by insecurity and risk, but that encompass myriad individual or family projects aimed at seeking either security or freedom. Regarding *healing*, I have argued that people employ a variety of culturally specific strategies to ensure their health and well-being. Many mediums and their clients have found ways to cope with and overcome (physical and mental) health problems and other misfortune through mediumship practices. However, in the lives of real people, their health and well-being is entangled with questions of physical safety, livelihood, empowerment, and cultural/religious fulfillment. Regarding *economic security*, the belief that spirits can help via mediums is important in a situation where people feel disoriented, at the mercy of invisible, remote and powerful market forces, and thus have no signposts to make out whether their business decisions may be right or not. In Vietnam, the spiritual security sought via mediums does not only compensate for the insecurity of the unpredictable market but creates the social capital necessary for investing confidently in new (or old) enterprises, thus enhancing economic security of the traders, their dependents, business partners and clients. Regarding *existential security*, spirit mediums cannot, of course, guarantee a life free of anxiety, simply because people get sick and die; fuss and fight; and love and hate. In fact, coming to grips with the inescapable limitations of life seems the stuff of many religious creeds and rituals. But spirit mediumship practices can assuage culturally and historically specific anxieties,

for instance concerning the continued presence of a family member wandering as a restless, hungry soul between two worlds which is not just a source of existential anxiety but of profound insecurity and uncertainty regarding the present material situation of the living relatives.

But even if we assume that the construction of human security is a socially important motivation – regardless of whether the U.N. adopts the concept of human security as a political instrument – we cannot presuppose that it is a universal goal. In the fourth vignette, I have described the reverse practice of engaging *risk* in connection with security, as playing in the lottery is tantamount to taking risks. Therefore, the argument about seeking spiritual security does not seem to hold here, implying that spirit mediumship can guide people seeking security as well as those engaging risk. Yet, even then we should be aware of *emic* constructions of the market as similarly volatile, unpredictable and opaque as the lottery. Seeking spiritual intervention can then be interpreted as a form of compensating for insecurity and reducing anxiety – if not seeking more security – when engaging in by definition risky adventures. So where does this discussion of human security as an *emic* construction leave us?

As opposed to the universalising concept of human rights, human security and risk can only make sense if properly contextualised – locally, culturally and historically. In the vignettes presented above, the meaning of security was construed in *emic* rather than *etic* terms. This meaning had a profound local aspect to it in the sense that certain cultural constructions of security – and the attending strategies and projects to pursue

them (cf. Ortner 1997) – would make sense in particular local, cultural and historical contexts, against the backdrop of globalising and transnationalising tendencies, and in connection with *emic* constructions of insecurity, risk and freedom. The anxiety about MIA's, for instance, has to do with the impact of the consecutive Indochina Wars in Vietnam, and the culturally specific meaning attributed to the souls' continued roaming in between this world and the netherworld, turning existential anxiety into a sense of profound (kin-bound social, economic, and health-related) insecurity. While similar forms of spirit mediumship can be found in other countries in East and Southeast Asia, the strategies for assuaging these anxieties and fears – spirit mediumship – are culturally specific for certain parts of Vietnam. Applying a human security lens allows us to not only see where *emic* constructions of and strategies towards security converge with or diverge from *etic* constructions; more importantly, it allows us as social scientists to understand where and how different dimensions of human security – health, economic, political, ecological, gender, religious – are interconnected, and thus how specific projects of attaining human security make sense for people living these insecurities and anxieties.

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