

Exuberance and Resistance by the Dead: Sacred Landscapes of Thua Thien Hue Province, Vietnam

By Bruno De Meulder and Kelly Shannon

"The landscape around the tombs blends together all the colors of the firmament and the myriad shades of water. It is a place where high mountains merge into dense forest, where the sound of the wind whispering in the trees mingles with that of a brook babbling through crevices in the rock. Both natural and man-made beauty combines to create a stunning spectacle. The tombs themselves are the patient work of an inspired artist, whose aim was to bejewel the landscape and rouse the gentle spirit, which glides through the silence around these mournful palaces and murmurs in the tops of the solitary firs. Words cannot express the strange sensation, born of calmness and mild intoxication, which possesses any sensitive soul wandering through this landscape steeped in mystery. Nowhere else can such a marriage between the genius of Man and the magic of Nature be found. The mausoleums and temples assume the same muted shades as the mountains and vegetation, making it appear as if the latter

have been created especially for the tombs. By some strange enchantment, the tombs refer back in turn to the hills and plants and create Harmony" [Pham Quynh as cited in Bao-Dai 1995:109].

Earth Gods, Ancestors and Royalty

In Vietnam, as throughout most rural communities of Asia, earth gods have the role to secure the livelihood of humans by ordering their connections with the natural world. There is a great deal of attention devoted to spirits (*than thanh*). Ancestors (*to tien*) improve the fecundity, prosperity, morality and cohesion of their descendants. Earth gods and ancestors are at the center of daily practices and cultic activities and symbolize unity of the groups with which they are identified (Formoso 1996, Taylor 2002). The Thua Thien Hue Province of the Vietnamese Central Highlands is simultaneously a *pars pro toto* for the region and an exception due to its specific socio-cultural history and geography.



Cities of the Dead

The exuberant constellation of tombs defies hierarchy, regularity and order. It can be considered proto-anarchistic.
Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

It has a magnificent ritual complex of various ethnic groups as well as a historically-revered collection of royal tombs embedded in the landscape. The province is renowned for its stunning diversity and beauty—bound geographically by the Truong Son Mountain Range on its western boundary with Laos and the East Sea. A regular rhythm of rivers links the two through rich and interdependent foothills, alluvial plain and lagoon and dune ecologies. Its extraordinary setting hosts an astonishing array of built structures for past and present living beings—including the UNESCO protected imperial city of Hue (with a particular combination of military and agricultural water-based urbanism)—as well as an extensive tomb landscape.

Its extensive and audacious tomb landscape is comprised of two complementary manifestations, each unique in scale and nature. Firstly, is a vast vernacular ancestral tomb landscape, that, while complementing the settlement structures in the territory, largely surpasses them in size, variation, colors, detailing and investment made (as if it is kept in mind, while investing, that death is forever while life is fleeting). As David Biggs has commented, civic life was

originally concentrated on the narrow alluvial plain with hamlets in the mountains and estuaries supplying essential goods that the variety of ecological settings offered (Biggs 2018:4). The steep-sloped forested mountains and the lagoons have historically been occupied by various ethnic groups other than the nation's dominant (and privileged) Kinh. The importance of earth gods and ancestor worship are evident from a wide-variety of shrines, piles of stones, trees and caverns ornamented with offerings and scores of tombs that nestle into—or in some cases, create—the landscape.

Secondly, is the constellation of seven royal tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1954) that are nested in the foothills (which together are also under UNESCO protection). Whereas the vernacular tombs are immersed in the landscape, the royal tombs create impressive landscape figures in themselves on the foothills between plain and mountains and all in the vicinity of the Perfume River. Making use of the locational assets such as small tributaries, terraces and small plateaus, phenomenal pleasure garden complexes are sculptured according to *feng shui* (phong thủy, in Vietnamese) principles. The walled roy-



Intertwinement of Living and Dead

Settlement and tombs are inseparable complements in the dune landscape. There is a potential to accentuate the vegetal structure as tomb park, which simultaneously offers resilience to consequences of climate change.

Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

al pleasure gardens (with lakes, water channels, gardens, forested park pockets, etc.) complement the imperial citadel of Hue in the plain as reception space and retreat. At the same time, by their multiplication, they seem to extend the claim on and control over the territory by the invading Kinh from the plain to the foothills (where for example artisanal mining developed and where craft villages were established to provide the court with specialized goods and anchor the royal presence throughout the territory). At the time of an emperor's death, the garden becomes a royal tomb, marking forever the royal territory, and the heir to the throne develops his own pleasure garden.

The footprint of the vernacular tomb landscape is larger than areas occupied by settlements. Approximately 20% of the territory is taken in-covered and colored-by the omnipresent and rather exuberant landscape of tombs, that apparently defies any hierarchy, regularity or order. It seems to bring *proof absurdum* that heterarchy goes perfectly hand-in-hand with an astonishing variety. As a landscape it could be considered proto-anarchistic. Both landscape occupations-accommodating the living and the dead, houses and tombs-are anyhow intertwined and define the dispersed territory as inseparable complements. Like salt and pepper, scattered over a plate, they flavor the cultural landscape.

Ritual Revival

Throughout Vietnam's long and contested history, its indigenous and ritual practices (particularly funerary rites which support transition

to the other world) have been repeatedly sidelined. Early royal decrees as well as colonial policies placed issues of racial hierarchy and economy in direct confrontation with traditions, including the denuding of hills where ancestral tombs were carefully located (Biggs 2018). More recently (since 1954 in the north and 1975 in the south), Communist Party policies reformed rituals in order to support its secular and egalitarian ideology while celebrating the revolutionary State and "new society." All superstitious, "traditional," "feudal" and "backward" practices were banned-including the existence of spirits and notions of astrologically auspicious days and places (geomancy). However, in contrast with the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution, the Vietnamese Communists never destroyed the cult of ancestors, they merely reformed its rituals. Many restrictions were made to reduce reflections of social (and economic status), conspicuous consumption and "waste." Various codes were developed to not only develop a uniformity of tombs, but also more communal, state-sanctioned practices rather than individual ones (Malarney 1996, Szymanska-Matusiewicz 2013).

A number of anthropological and ethnological studies have commented on Vietnam's *doi moi* period of economic renovation (since 1986) and the growing political tolerance for the selective resurgence of religion and ritual (Taylor 2002, Jellema 2007, Hüwelmeier 2016). Throughout Vietnam, there has been an exponential growth in the construction of new communal houses (*dinh*, dedicated to the founding ancestors of villages), family ancestral temples (*nha tho toc*) and lineage



Vast Vernacular Ancestral Tomb Landscapes

Settlement structures in the Tam Giang-Cau Hai Lagoon territory are largely surpassed by the tomb landscape in size, variation, colors, detailing and investment.

Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

halls (*nha tho ho*), all which reinforce a patriarchal, patrilineal kinship system. The domestic ancestral shrines include interior alters for family ancestors (called *ong ba*, "grandfathers and grandmothers") and external shrines (*khom*) for unsettled, wandering and placeless ghosts (referred to as *co bac*, "aunts and uncles"). There are also communal ghost shrines—"usually located outside of the communal ancestral temple or domestic ancestral shrine, although they include other isolated shrines that are scattered around the village without a clear pattern, mainly according to the histories of apparition specific to a place" (Kwon 2008:27). Family tombs of "founding ancestors" (*thuy to*) complement family shrines (*lang ho*). Alters are decorated with flowers, fruit and spirit money. Tombs are the site of votive paper offerings, particularly during Tet (Lunar New Year) and on death anniversaries; the paper offerings are intended for living in the "other world" and today include mobile phones, cars and mansions (Hüwelmeier 2016). Significant amounts of replica paper money (with incense or candles) are also burned on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month. Ancestor worship relies upon the concept of debt (*on*), whereby individuals are indebted to their ancestors and obliged to show gratitude and a desire to repay the debt (Szymanska-Matusiewicz 2013). The notion of intergenerational moral debt is widespread throughout the Sinic world (Jellema 2007).

The relaxed political control on rituals (or simply the incapacity to systematically enforce regulations that so strongly interfere with

deeply rooted rituals) has been accompanied by a tremendous repatriation of political and war ghosts. The American-Vietnam War (1960-75), was simultaneously a "revolutionary struggle against foreign aggressors and a vicious civil war" (Kwon 2008:30), and witness to tremendous violent deaths. Memory of the dead (fallen soldiers and civilians alike) from those siding with the Americans was banned and thus became politically engendered ghosts. At the same time, postwar state politics celebrated heroic death of "revolutionary heroes and martyrs" (*anh hung liet si*), hijacking in a certain sense the ancestors of the fallen as emanations of the revolutionary state. Collectivization of tombs in state monuments further instrumentalized the political recuperation of death. By the 1990s however, there was the forceful emergence of ancestors and ghosts into the public arena through the dramatic proliferation of alters, shrines and tombs. As Kwon commented, the contemporary ritual landscape in communities of Central Vietnam represent a transition from the politicized, centralized, State-sanctioned monuments of heroic war death to a decentralized, localized composition anchored in the cult of ancestors and crystallize the decisive shift in power relations between the state and the society (Kwon 2008:34-35). "Changes in the social life of the dead, in this context, echo the changes in the political life of the living" (Kwon 2008:34).

Exuberant Everyday Urbanism of the Dead

As overwhelming and extraordinary the omnipresent tomb landscape is for visitors, the presence of ancestors is very ordinary for the Vietnamese.



Everyday Landscapes

Care for and major investment in the formal constructions of the tombs does not restrain a casual attitude towards the tomb landscape. Its omnipresence makes it part of everyday life and all the implied mundaneness. Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

According to Jellema, ancestors are “a near-constant presence: part of the everyday domestic routine, a considerable household expense, the guests of honor at family gatherings, a frequent subject of conversation and stories, a vehicle for making social connections, moral exemplars for children and a focus for prayers” (Jellema 2007:468). Ancestral tombs are an obvious, self-evident part of the spaces of ordinary daily life and the everyday landscape. Spatially, life and death, the ordinary and extraordinary are naturally co-present. Despite Vietnam’s drastic modernization processes and radical policy attempts to tame, contain, and simply regulate the tombs, the culture of ancestors rearticulates itself through the tomb landscape as never before.

Clearly, the rise of Vietnam’s socio-economic situation is reflected in the increasing comfort of contemporary living. At the same time, in Thua Thien Hue’s mountain and lagoon landscapes, the relative modesty of homes—attesting to both an adherence to a traditional life of selfless and filiality as well as a certain degree of poverty—contrasts with an exaggerated exuberance of the tombs. Such a reality confirms the importance relegated to the enormous gratitude paid to ancestors as part of a local “moral economy.” Such an economy is tied to spirit money and spirit economies through the notion of life as a type of bank loan, where every birth to the world is based on an allowance from “The treasury of the Other World” or the “Bank of Hell,” with the more modesty of someone’s life, the longer (s)he can enjoy the loan. The money burning is an act of debt repayment (Kwon 2007). Since ances-

tral tombs are monuments which mutually benefit a deep-rooted exchange that sustain the living and the dead, the tombs are progressively becoming larger and more sumptuously decorated. There is an indisputable relation of death and luxury: “the luxury of the dead (is) the wealth of the family” (Kwon 2007:77). The opulence on full display in the ancestor tomb landscape honors historic burdens, where it is evident that the present-day peaceful and prosperous times are built on the blood and tears of previous generations. Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) are also consisting of a substantially larger and larger percentage of tomb builders, honoring their homeland ancestors and symbolically correcting previous hardships.

Viet Kieu US dollars (translated Do La in the local language) fuel an extensive construction and decoration economy, that is welcomed in one of the poorest rural areas of Vietnam. It is also building an ever-more monumental and implicitly largest ever war memorial in the world. The “other world” (spirit world of the hereafter) and “other side” (the losing, American-side collaborators) together constitute an ever-expanding omnipresence of ancestral tomb landscape that counters, if not simply overwhelms the state-supported war cemeteries (for the “winning side”) and has become a unique war memorial of a defeated party. At the end of the day, this ever-more proliferating, always more luxurious and increasingly omnipresent ‘Do La’ ancestral tomb landscape has transgressed beyond the expression of pain, regret and nostalgia to become a manifestation of resistance, simultaneously open and hidden.



Exuberant Spectacle

Ever-increasing investments of the last decades in the tomb landscape result in ever larger and more decorated tombs, turning serenity into an over-stimulated spectacle.
Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

While de Certeau demonstrated how subversion of imposed norms and rules is routinely built into everyday practices (de Certeau 1984), Thua Thien Hue Province demonstrates a (self)subversion of its ancestral culture as a silent, nonviolent manifestation of resistance. Although it might not distort the region's successive waves of dominant power—which have actually proven to be inherently unstable during the last two centuries—the tissue of tombs engraves into the landscape a persistent and parallel world that unperturbedly contests the ruling of the territory. During French colonial times, local communities preserved access to shrines and ancestral tombs during Tet (Lunar New Year), despite conflicts over landownership. In this way, tombs, shrines and pagodas not only became places of worship, but simultaneously articulated an unalienable right of the use of land, often contradicting property rights that the colonizer gave to plantations, foresters and other 'investors'. The ancestor tombs instantly became very convenient instruments (of common-law rights-of-passage and use) for local communities to claim their land. It is hard, even for diehard regimes, to persistently deny communities their most profound rituals of life and death. Hence, it is tempting to attribute the prolific dissemination of tombs over the territory to this eternal contestation of control and ownership of land—and one can only wonder how much cultural masquerading local communities asserted to manifest their presence and control. French colonial amateur scholars (followed their Vietnamese counterparts) developed a fascination around the landscape of the dead (Cadière 1923 and 1928). Today, six to seven gen-

erations later, it is hardly impossible not have a similar enchantment.

Ultimately, the ancestral tombs landscape phenomenally expands to manifestly signal an unbreakable resistance to occupation, colonization, indoctrination and modernization. In fact, the persistent and exuberant vitality of the irreversible ancestral tomb culture has literally everything to do with resistance to radical change in this region that historically underwent a horrendous and fast sequence of radical changes: the catastrophic destructions and reconstructions that went hand-in-hand with the conquest by the Kinh majority over other ethnic groups (leading to the constellation of seven imperial tombs), internal power struggles within the Vietnamese monarchy and rebellion of South Vietnam (1833-1836), French colonization, American war, national reunification, and the recent opening to global market forces that induces its own turbulences, accompanied by its own forms of violence. It goes without saying that all these previous regime changes went hand-in-hand with the enormous loss of life, not the least in Thua Thien Hue Province that hosted the 'imperial capital'. Understanding the unique re-articulation of the cult of ancestors through tombs in the contemporary postcolonial era, is key to an interpretation of its spatial impact and the structuring role that the landscape of the dead could have for the territory of the living in the future. One can easily imagine how the royal tombs tradition was adopted by local traditions (would Herbert Marcuse label this as a clever form of repressive tolerance?). Conversely, to a



Dispersed Tombs in Forested Foothills

Scattered clusters of tombs are dispersed in the forested foothills. The tombs are embedded within the forest that remains the dominating landscape feature. Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

certain degree, the vernacular mimics the royal compulsion to eternally multiply tombs and spare no means for their construction. There is no stronger instrument of subversion in colonial situations than mimicking (Ashcroft 2013). Mimicking catalyzes iterations of hybridization and the outsider sooner or later is enveloped within the local. One can easily understand that the more the colonial powers (internal or external) seize land, the more local communities have to retreat to marginal lands within the territory. It is not accidental that nowadays minorities (such as the Bru-Van Kieu, Co-tu, Ta Oi and Pa Koh) only live in the mountains and the dunes. It is probably not a coincidence that the dunes and foothills are exactly where the occupation of the territory with tombs took explosive dimensions, as to mark anxiously over and over, until the last square meter whose territory it is.

Manifestation upon counter-manifestation of the living unfolds through death in Thua Thien Hue Province. It is worthwhile to notice that in this equation, the landscape of the dead safeguards the exploitation of land-use by market forces that nowadays mercilessly invades the landscape of the living. In essence, the landscape of the dead escapes any utilitarian land use. In this sense, the landscape of the tombs has become a forceful agent of subversive resistance against the market (while, in fact, being the latest neo-colonial wave raging through the territory). Its exuberance demonstrates a continuously rearticulated resistance against the equalization that the Communist Party, or the state for that mat-

ter, vainly tries to impose. However, regardless of the exuberant and intense investment into the tomb landscape, it is not an intensively maintained landscape. This gives chances for a particular type of ruderal vegetation to develop and an idiosyncratic habitat to emerge. In this sense, the landscape of the dead inevitably becomes a strange, but necessary, ally for the region's ecology—one which is increasingly under stress from rapid urbanization and intensification of aqua- and aquaculture. Until today, infrastructure in the tomb landscape is almost absent, and rightly so. In fact, there are no functional movements that require an efficient infrastructure. The movements are as dispersed as the loose constellation of tombs themselves. Movement entails walking through the forest or within the dunes, with only that what matters: tombs and nature, a construction that anchors presence of people in the world. The tomb landscape defies functionality and utility.

The dispersed city of the dead that the ancestral tomb landscape accommodates not only defies utility and market forces, but as well government or any other hierarchical authority. As a heterarchical rhizome-like fabric that is continuously and tactically adapted, resists strategic structuring. Unsurprisingly, the tomb landscape resonates with a form of pure anarchism. A zero degree of reciprocity—evident in the respectful distance of tombs to one another—geomancy and equality structure the tomb layout. Although at first sight the tomb landscape exemplifies difference and status, in hindsight, the over-



A Landscape of Signs

Infrastructure, signs, houses, tombs, washing lines are juxtaposed into an intense ecosystem of signs that intertwines with ruderal vegetation that softens the overdose of colors, forms and sizes.
Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019

abundance of signs resulting from the abundant variety of tombs in scale, decoration and maintenance, erases individual meaning and creates a collective landscape of signs. The city of the dead is a space of tolerance where differences evident in the city of the living are leveled.

Still a number of other important lessons for spatially structuring the territory can be derived from the Thua Thien Hue's ancestral tomb landscape. First is the pervasive mingling of the public / private, sacred / profane, living / dead, recreation / ritual. The region's social history, complexity and density is mirrored in the tomb areas, where a seemingly chaotic layout exudes an internal logic and cultural familiarity. The sandy dunes of the lagoons and forested foothills of the mountains are animated with colorful and decorated clusters of tombs and convey a sensation of mutual belonging and coherent social whole. Children play amongst the masses of tombs as individuals or families make offerings. The nature / culture dichotomy is as well interestingly addressed, whereby individual tombs are precisely set within the natural world and there is a precarious balance of letting nature go and taming (manicuring) it. The mundaneness of everyday practices is embedded within meaningful cosmologies (DiGregario and Salemink 2007). In some instances, the front of houses is adorned by a tomb and roadside tomb clusters intermingle with commercial and construction supplies. The sacred is enveloped into the everyday and simultaneously gives a spark of colorful vibrancy and calm to the city of the living.

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Dune Tombs and Landscapes

Old and new tombs are juxtaposed in the dune grasses of the lagoon.
Photo by Kelly Shannon, 2019