Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Reflections on the Anthropologist and the Anthropology of Vietnam – An Interview with Kirsten W. Endres

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Kirsten W. Endres has been a senior researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology since 2009, a Head of Research Group there since 2010, and an adjunct professor of anthropology at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, since 2019. Ahead of her upcoming retirement, Lale Yalçın-Heckmann spoke with her about her engagement with the anthropology of Vietnam, her research themes, and the research environment in the country. This interview complements her reflections on the beginnings of her anthropological career in Vietnam, her role, methods, and the possibilities of conducting research there. (See also: https://www.eth.mpg.de/endres.)

LYH: To begin with, many thanks for agreeing to talk to me about your research. While your focus is on Vietnam, your work also extends to broader regional contexts. Reflecting on your early research in the 1990s, what are your key memories from that time? Why did you choose Vietnam?

KE: During my master's studies at the University of Munich, I was already focused on Southeast Asia, particularly on Indonesia. My initial plan was to conduct further research there. However, after completing my master's, I worked as a German instructor in Thailand for several years. In 1993, before returning to Germany, I visited Vietnam as a tourist and found it fascinating. I thought,

'Wow, it would be great to spend more time here, maybe even do research.' So, when I was offered a position in a research group working in Vietnam, I seized the opportunity. And then, well, Vietnam became the focus of my work – until it almost felt like a second home country to me!

LYH: In your article, you describe the research group setting, which focused on craft villages. Did you have a personal interest in crafts?

KE: Not particularly. The research project was about the development of Vietnamese craft villages since the reform policies. It was an interdisciplinary project with an economist, a historian, and me as the anthropologist. My role was to examine the cultural aspects of village life – their traditions, beliefs, and rituals – and how these were revitalised during the reform era. My main interest as an anthropologist had long been in religious and spiritual matters, and this project provided an ideal avenue for me to explore that further.

LYH: What sparked your interest in religious matters?

KE: (*Laughs*) I don't know! I suppose I've always been intrigued by practices that seemed unfamiliar to our own culture. I was fascinated by ghost stories, spirit beliefs, magic – all these spiritual elements. Even though I wouldn't call myself a spiritual person, I found these themes deeply compelling.

LYH: Village research was quite common at the time, fitting into the broader trend of anthropological village studies, including in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. You mention in your article the sensitivity around research topics – what themes would be acceptable to authorities and to local communities? You say that 'tradition' was a safe topic. Why was tradition so significant to both the authorities and the people?

KE: It was primarily important to the people themselves. They were extremely proud of their traditions and history. Every village had a group of local historians – usually elderly men – who documented village history. They sought official recognition for historical sites, like communal houses and temples. There was a state programme encouraging this, as the government aimed to strengthen national identity amidst economic reforms. The communist party feared that opening up the country would lead to external influences that might 'corrupt' traditional values. So, in a way, both the villagers and the state had a shared interest in preserving and revitalising traditions. Villagers invested heavily in restoring temples and organising festivals, which created a real fervour around cultural heritage.

LYH: That's fascinating. You mentioned local historians – were they formally trained, or more self-taught?

KE: Mostly self-taught villagers or retired teachers. Scholars from the social sciences also contributed to changing the state's perspective on traditions. Academics argued that traditions fostered a sense of community, which helped gain official recognition for many practices.

LYH: In other socialist contexts, there was often an effort to educate villagers about their own culture while simultaneously rejecting aspects considered 'superstitious'.

KE: Yes, exactly! In Vietnam, it is always about fostering the 'positive' and eliminating the 'negative' elements of tradition, such as superstition and perceived wastefulness.

LYH: Your postdoctoral work on spirit possession is particularly interesting in that context.[1] How did you manage to research such a sensitive topic? Were people open to discussing it with you?

KE: During my first research in the mid-1990s, *hầu đồng* possession rituals – that is, possession rituals honouring the Vietnamese mother goddesses and their pantheon – were still held secretly. People told me they had to bribe local officials to be able to perform their ceremonies. At that time, a Vietnamese social scientist, Professor Ngo Duc Thinh, had already started working on this topic and advocated for the recognition of *hầu đồng* ritual practices, paving the way for their eventual acknowledgement as cultural heritage. By the early 2000s, when I was living in Hanoi and working for the German Academic Exchange Service, things had already changed a lot. Spirit possession had become widespread in urban areas. Mediums were keen on gaining official recognition for their practices, and they welcomed foreign researchers. They saw our interest as a potential way to legitimise their traditions.

LYH: Were your publications translated into Vietnamese?

KE: Yes, several of them – about six or so.[2]

LYH: Did your research participants ever express concern about being studied?

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1 Kirsten W. Endres. (2011). *Performing the divine. Mediums, markets and modernity in urban Vietnam*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) Press.

2 See, for example, Endres, Kirsten W. & Nguyễn, Thị Thanh Bình. (2007). Những khía cạnh tiêu cực và tích cực của Hầu Bóng qua cái nhìn của báo chí và nhân học [Different Aspects of *Hau Bong* Spirit Possession as seen from the Perspectives of Anthropology and the Press]. *Dân Tộc Học* 6: 23–31, 70; Endres, Kirsten W. (2010). Với linh hồn người đã mất: Lễ gọi hồn và tạo dựng tính hiệu nghiệm qua lực ngôn hành [Soul-calling rites: Creating efficacy through ritual performance] In Lương, Văn Hy, Ngô, Văn Lệ, Nguyễn, Văn Tiệp, & Phan, Thị Yến Tuyết (Eds.), *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở Việt Nam: Những cách tiếp cận nhân học* [Modernity and Dynamics of Tradition in Vietnam: Anthropological Approaches], Vol. 2. Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Đại Học Quốc gia TP Hồ Chí Minh: 52-72; Endres, Kirsten W. (2012). Tôn giáo dân gian và Tính hiện đại: Những cơ chế động của Hầu đồng Tứ phủ ở đô thị Việt Nam [Popular Religion and Modernity: The Dynamics of Four Palace Mediumship in Urban Vietnam]. In *Tính diện đại và đời sống tôn giáo hiện nay ở Việt Nam / Modernity and Religious Life in Vietnam Today*. Hanoi, NXB Tôn Giáo (Religion Publishing House): 481–526.

KE: Not at all. Spirit mediums primarily saw possession as their fate, but they also recognised its artistic aspects. The rituals include music, dance, elaborate costumes – they are very theatrical in a way. Spirit mediums viewed these rituals as part of their cultural identity, something uniquely Vietnamese that deserved recognition. People argued that unlike Buddhism, which came from India via China, spirit possession was uniquely Vietnamese and needed state recognition. However, there were also elements considered problematic by some. Even among spirit mediums, discussions arose about whether possession was real or staged. For many Vietnamese unfamiliar with the practice, it remained a mystery, often dismissed as superstition. When I told them about my research, they were curious and would frequently ask, 'But is spirit possession real?' (Laughs) I would respond, 'It's not my task to prove whether spirits or deities truly possess them; what matters is what the participants believe and experience'. In essence, there was no problem for me as a foreign researcher, and I was not the only one studying this topic. Other researchers were also interested, and I found that, in general, Vietnamese people were very open to discussing these practices. I don't know if that has changed, but at that time, they were incredibly receptive.

LYH: This was so in the early 2000s?

KE: Yes, just like during my village research, asking questions would often lead them to talk extensively, and there was no animosity against Westerners. Vietnamese people had experienced French colonial rule and the American war, but as Germans, we had the advantage of the historical friendship and solidarity between the GDR and Vietnam. That relationship was frequently emphasised, and many people I met had worked in the GDR as contract workers, or they had relatives who had worked there.

LYH: Let's come back to that later. But what remains from the socialist critique of superstition and bad traditions in research? How did local academia address these issues? And to what degree was there a critical view that these traditions were becoming commercialised, catering to tourists or driven by economic gain?

KE: Well, the critique of commercialisation wasn't prominent in discussions about spirit mediumship, since these rituals usually took place in private temples. However, commercialisation was a major issue in state media discussions on festivals during the 1990s. I collected many newspaper articles, particularly about large festivals like the Bac Ninh Quan Ho Festival, a significant music

tradition in Vietnam. Critics argued that festivals like these were becoming overly commercialised. With spirit mediumship, concerns about wastefulness remained, since people spent large sums on offerings, costumes, and rituals. Also, the issue of superstition was always present in official discourse.[3]

LYH: But you didn't receive any critique from local scientists, suggesting that by researching these traditions, you were encouraging participation in superstitious practices?

KE: No, absolutely not. Actually, social scientists like Ngo Duc Thinh even sought official recognition for these practices as a legitimate religion. He introduced the term Đạo Mẫu (Mother Goddess Religion) in an attempt to gain state acknowledgment. However, this effort was unsuccessful. Instead, social scientists succeeded in securing UNESCO recognition, and since December 2016 'Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms' have been officially listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

LYH: Interesting, Kirsten. Since joining the Max Planck Institute, you have worked on a variety of other themes. How did you transition from studying spirit possession to researching markets and electricity infrastructure?

KE: I've always enjoyed visiting markets – their vibrant atmosphere, their role in daily life, and the social interactions they foster. Markets are central to Vietnamese people, serving as not just economic hubs but also spaces where people gather, exchange news, and maintain community ties. When I joined the Max Planck Institute in 2009, Chris Hann encouraged research in economic anthropology. Many spirit mediums I had studied were also traders, so I became interested in their economic networks, their relationships with each other and with state officials, and how policies towards small trade were evolving. At the time, traditional markets were being demolished and replaced with more modern structures, which added another layer to the research.

LYH: This became your first group research then?

[3] E.g. Endres, Kirsten W. (2011). From 'Wasteful Superstition' to 'Beautiful Tradition': Changing Assessments of Popular Ritual in Late Socialist Vietnam. In Christiane Brosius & Karin Polit (Eds.): *Ritual, Heritage and Identity. The Politics of Culture and Performance in a Globalised World*: 246–280. London, New York, New Delhi: Routledge.

KE: Yes, the project started off in a very basic form but later developed into a larger group project involving two PhD students and two post-docs. We explored different aspects of markets: Lisa Barthelmes focused on street vending,[4] Esther Horat examined a trading village in the Red River Delta,[5] my own research was on border markets at the Vietnam-China border,[6] Christine Bonnin studied ethnic minority markets, and Caroline Grillot researched cross-border trade between Mong Cai and Dongxing. These various perspectives added depth to our understanding of the complexities of small-scale market trade in Vietnam.

LYH: Were research permissions difficult to obtain?

KE: The key was presenting our research in a way that appeared non-controversial. We collaborated with the Institute of Anthropology (Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences), which helped navigate bureaucratic hurdles. Permissions at the local (province or district) level were more challenging, sometimes requiring us to take on assigned 'assistants' we didn't really need. And later, during my follow-up visits to the market, tighter state control meant we were sometimes followed around by secret police, which complicated interactions with traders.

LYH: Could you talk about the difficulties of the research situation for local social scientists? Were they open to discussing the challenges of navigating cooperation with party officials? Did they sympathise with your difficulties, or did they view this as standard procedure?

KE: Of course, they sympathised with me, and they also didn't want these constraints, but there was little they could do to change it. We simply had to accept it. At times, when certain officials were monitoring us too closely, we would find excuses to leave, saying we had other tasks to attend to. If this had happened during my long-term research at the market, it would have been highly disruptive.

LYH: So, it was fortunate that you didn't face such tight restrictions during your primary research phase?

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4 Barthelmes, Lisa (2016). Peddlers and Peasants: Itinerant Street Vendors in Hanoi, Vietnam. [Doctoral dissertation] Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg.

5 Horat, Esther (2017). *Trading in Uncertainty: Entrepreneurship, Morality and Trust in a Vietnamese Textile-handling Village*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

6 Endres, Kirsten W. (2019). *Market Frictions. Trade and Urbanization at the Vietnam-China Border*. London, New York: Berghahn Books.

KE: Yes, exactly.

LYH: How did you work with your PhD students and postdocs? I know you had two PhD students and two postdocs – how did you coordinate the group?

KE: This was my first experience supervising PhD students. Besides regular meetings, we organised three workshops – one before fieldwork, one in Vietnam during fieldwork, and a concluding conference. The workshop in Vietnam led to a special issue in Vietnamese,[7] and the final conference resulted in an edited volume.[8] These were challenging new responsibilities for me, but they were exciting, and I learned a great deal. I visited all my PhD students in the field, and they managed well – luckily, there were no major crises that required intervention.

LYH: Let us talk a bit about your following theme. Tell us about your research on infrastructure.

KE: Infrastructure was already part of the market research, as state policies aimed to modernise markets. But then the anthropology of infrastructure was gaining traction, and I wanted to explore something new. If you look at this painting (see Figure 1), you can see how the electricity lines in Vietnam are often entangled like this, reflecting layers of history, informal adaptation, and the tensions of modernisation. So, my next research group, 'Electric Statemaking', looked at currents of power – both literally and figuratively – in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Two PhD candidates joined the team: Thao Vu, who focused on rural electrification in northern Vietnam,[9] and Floramante S. J. Ponce, who studied hydropower development in northwestern Laos.[10] Postdoctoral researcher Bada Choi came on board to explore the use of solar water heaters in Kunming, China. My own research in this group focused on the electrification of Vietnam during the French colonial period.

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7 Tạp Chí Đan Tộc Học 3 (186), 2014.

8 Endres, Kirsten W. & Leshkowich, Ann Marie. (Eds.). (2018). *Traders in Motion. Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace*. Ithaca and London: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University Press.

9 Vu, Thao. (2023). Electrification and Energy Transition in Rural Vietnam: The Making of a 'For-the-People' State, [Doctoral dissertation] Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg.

10 Ponce, Floramante S. J. (2021). Hydroelectric Development in 'China's Backyard'? Modernity, Market Integration, and (Im)mobilities in Northwestern Laos [Doctoral dissertation] Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg.

Figure 1. **Painting depicting a tangle of loudspeakers and electrical wires in front of St. Joseph's Cathedral in Hanoi** (photo by the author).

LYH: Was this research also interesting for local anthropologists?

KE: Interestingly, when I first presented this research project at the Institute of Culture (Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences), some anthropologists there were actually surprised because they hadn't considered such topics as potential subjects of anthropological study. They said, 'We usually focus on cultural issues, religious traditions, and so on. We never thought of electricity infrastructure as being relevant to anthropology.'

LYH: Tell us a bit about what you found in this project, where you took a more historical approach. What did you learn through your research on electrification?

KE: Well, first of all, archival research wasn't entirely new to me – I had already worked with Vietnamese archives during my village research. But for this electricity project, I went to the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence and in Hanoi. I was truly amazed by the sheer volume of paperwork produced on the topic of electricity – it was incredible how much bureaucracy was involved. I found it overwhelming to see just how much attention to detail was given to things like concession contracts – letters going back and forth debating minor clauses. But what struck me most was the lack of information about how local people reacted to these developments. There was almost nothing on how they experienced electrification – just purely bureaucratic records. Even contemporary newspapers barely mentioned how electricity was received by the Vietnamese population.

LYH: This was during the French colonial period?

KE: Yes, at that time, very few Vietnamese actually had electricity. It was mainly installed for the colonialists – to light their homes, streets, and workplaces. Later, electrification expanded to the countryside, but the overland lines rarely reached villages. Instead, they connected small towns and Hanoi, serving only a fraction of the population. So, in a way, working with these materials felt like dealing with very dry content – I had to work hard to make something meaningful out of it.[11]

LYH: The anthropology of bureaucracy and colonialism, perhaps?

[11] E.g. Endres, Kirsten W. (2023). City of Lights, City of Pylons: Infrastructures of Illumination in Colonial Hanoi, 1880s–1920s. *Modern Asian Studies 57*(6): 1772–1797.

KE: Well, yes, although I didn't focus so much on bureaucracy itself in my writing. I had previously touched on that topic in my work on market reports, analysing them as bureaucratic documents.[12] But colonial archives are fascinating places – you find these hidden gems buried in dusty boxes. It was an intriguing process to go through them and see what stories they could tell.

LYH: What comes next for you?

KE: I won't continue in academia, but I have some ideas. Maybe I'll write fictionalised stories inspired by my research. Anthropological perspectives stay with you, after all. Let's see what comes of it.

LYH: There's already a rich tradition of anthropologists writing fiction! But looking back, you have an impressive body of work to be proud of.

KE: Thank you. It is satisfying to know that my work has contributed to the anthropology of Vietnam, even in small ways. I still see my research on spirit mediumship being cited, which is gratifying.

LYH: Too modest! Kirsten, many thanks for this conversation.

KE: My pleasure.

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[12] Endres, Kirsten W. (2018). Making the Marketplace: Traders, Cadres, and Bureaucratic Documents in Lao Cai City. Kirsten W. Endres & Ann Marie Leshkowich (Eds.), *Traders in Motion. Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace*: 27–40. New York: Cornell University Press, Southeast Asia Program Publications.