



# When Gods Drown in Plastic

## Vietnamese Whale Worship, Environmental Crises, and the Problem of Animism

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**Abstract** Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the category animism has seen a remarkable resurgence in Western scholarship, capturing the interest of many anthropologists, scholars of religion, and philosophers. Some authors have argued that animism can provide a model for a new environmental ethics that acknowledges more-than-human agencies and interdependencies. However, the question remains as to how so-called animist ontologies can transform not only individual moralities, but also the extractivist economic-political structures underlying the current crisis. In this article, we assess some of these claims by examining an Asian ritual tradition that is arguably animistic, while also containing elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and ancestor worship: the worship of whales, widespread along the coast of South and Central Vietnam. Fishing communities here believe that whales are divine beings, incarnations of the maritime god Ông Nam Hải (Lord of the South Sea)—also known as Cá Ông (Lord Fish)—who rescue people in distress at sea. When fishers find beached whales, they offer them elaborate funeral ceremonies and enshrine their bones in local temples. Whale worship constitutes a way of relating to the physical environment, and rituals help people respond to problems such as coastal erosion and overfishing. However, there is no evidence suggesting that this particular animistic belief system has given way to environmentalist action, let alone induced systemic change. Animistic ontologies certainly have ethical dimensions, and they may provide ways for people to make sense of and cope with Anthropocenic crises, but that does not mean they teach people how to act sustainably. At the very least, that would require an active process of translation and adaptation.

**Keywords** environmental ethics, maritime religion, new animism, Vietnam, whale worship

### Introduction: Ritual Waste in Tam Hải

Tam Hải is a small island off the coast of Chu Lai, in the south of Quảng Nam Province in central Vietnam. The island is known for its beautiful reefs, attractive beaches, shrimp aquaculture, and fishing industry. It hosts a cetacean cemetery, listed as a provincial heritage site, with a few dozen whale graves and a brand-new temple building.

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Tam Hài has a turbulent modern history. Local people took active roles in supporting and resisting revolutionary movements during the colonial period. During the Second Indochina War, the island was home to a small helicopter base (linked to the American airbase in Chu Lai), the remnants of which are still visible on top of the hill where a prewar temple for the popular mother goddess Bà Chúa Ngọc (Lady of the Pearl) is located.<sup>1</sup> There was some severe fighting, not only among humans but also, according to local stories, among marine animals: at the time, we were told, many whales washed ashore because they were fighting among each other, or killed by sharks.

Since the end of the war, the number of cetacean strandings has decreased. Today, instead, large amounts of plastic wash ashore, penetrating coral reefs, beaches, and cemeteries. Residents have little choice but to burn it, regularly releasing toxic fumes into the air. Meanwhile, shrimp aquaculture and, to a lesser extent, tourism have developed as new livelihoods, causing mangrove deforestation<sup>2</sup> and increasing income inequality on the island, further exacerbated by real estate speculation and looming development plans by the provincial authorities. In addition to plastic pollution and deforestation, climate change is of imminent concern, leading to more and more severe tropical storms, floods, and landslides, which regularly claim human and nonhuman lives.

The island has a full ritual calendar. As in other Vietnamese communities, the islanders worship a variety of divine beings. These include the buddha Amithābha (V. A Di Đà); the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (C. Guanyin; V. Quán Thế Âm or Quan Âm); Jesus Christ and his mother, Mary; various local ancestral spirits and deities, including the island's mythical village founders; Bà Chúa Ngọc; and the whale god Ông Nam Hải (Lord of the South Sea), also known as Cá Ông (Lord Fish). Residents pray regularly to the various spirits and deities that dwell in the local temples, trees, rocks, wells, and sea. The festival at the beginning of the fishing season, Lễ hội Cầu Ngư, is an important annual social event that takes place in the first month of the Lunar New Year. It consists of a number of ritual ceremonies at different sacred places on the island, including the temple for Bà Chúa Ngọc, the shrine for the wandering spirits (Cô Bác), and the whale cemetery. It also includes a ritual prayer aboard a fishing boat, in front of a portable altar into which the whale deity is invited by a community elder, who serves as ritual specialist (*chủ tế*), and his ritual assistants (see fig. 1). These ceremonies all consist of the reciting of prayers (*văn tế*) accompanied by drums, as well as ritual offerings such as incense, flowers, fruit, rice wine, and various dishes. This also involves burning spirit money—a common ritual practice in Asia, including Vietnam. In addition, each ritual includes the offering of small sweets, wrapped in colorful cellophane. After the ceremony, food and alcohol are usually consumed collectively by festival participants, but the small

1. Bà Chúa Ngọc is an alternative name for the goddess Thiên Y A Na, the Vietnamized version of the Cham deity Po Nagar. In some places the two are venerated as distinct goddesses, or as different incarnations of the same goddess. See Salemink, "Embodying the Nation," 271; Schweyer, "Potent Places," 412.

2. Nehren et al., "Sand Dunes."

*Figure 1.* Altar for Cá Ông on a fishing boat near Tam Hải. Photograph by Aike P. Rots, 2020.



sweets are left scattered around temples. They are also thrown into the sea by ritual practitioners, as are empty PET bottles and other items no longer deemed necessary. Practitioners who discard plastic waste into the sea do not appear to consider the fact that this is the deity's dwelling place and that plastic causes significant harm to his physical (i.e., cetacean) body.

To us academics observing these rituals the discordance is striking—but perhaps that is because we would assume that nature worship translates into environmentally friendly action, which does not appear to be the case here. We realize that these islanders may not have the same concept as us of the environment as a differentiated realm, fragile and threatened by human action.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we do wonder how it is possible

3. Cf. Harvey, "Animism and Ecology," 82.

that residents of an island that is choking in plastic engage in ritualized littering. Why do animists who worship deities residing in nature pollute the very environment that they—according to the academic theory, at least—should perceive as sacred? This is the paradox we address in this article. Some may argue that, in a sea of plastic, a few PET bottles or pieces of cellophane more or less do not make a large difference. However, the fact that people who worship immanent deities residing in that very sea contribute to its pollution, albeit on a small scale, raises questions about the relationship between animist ontology and environmentalist action. If anything, it shows that the latter does not follow directly from the former and that animist worship practices can coexist with environmentally harmful behavior.

This article is based on collaborative ethnographic research, conducted by both of us together, between late 2017 and early 2020 in several coastal regions of South and Central Vietnam (Quảng Nam, Đà Nẵng, Bình Định, Bình Thuận, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, and Tiền Giang provinces), in addition to literature research. It consists of three parts. We start by discussing some of the recent new animism scholarship, in particular in relation to contemporary environmental problems. This will be followed by a general overview of whale worship in South and Central Vietnam: its historical development, ritual practices, and common beliefs. In the third part, we discuss some of the environmental issues that affect Vietnamese coastal communities and their ritual traditions today. Finally, in the conclusion, we discuss the significance of the Cá Ông tradition in the light of scholarship on animism, challenging the claim, made by some scholars, that animist ontologies provide an antidote to destructive Western epistemological traditions and corresponding extractivist structures.

### **New Animism and Environmental Ethics**

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the category animism has seen a remarkable resurgence in Western scholarship. Several anthropologists have used the category to refer to Indigenous ontologies—especially but not exclusively from the Amazon and the Arctic—that assume that different physical bodies (including humans, nonhuman animals, plants, and stones) share a “similarity of interiorities.”<sup>4</sup> Other authors use the term not merely as a descriptive, anthropological category but more broadly and prescriptively, as an alternative epistemology that can help us rethink more-than-human relationships and responsibilities in the Anthropocene.<sup>5</sup> According to Bron Taylor, for instance, it refers to any kind of perception that “natural entities, forces, and non-human life-forms have one or more of the following: a soul or vital life-force or spirit, personhood

4. “Similarity of interiorities” is the formulation used in Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 129. Other influential works include Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited”; Ingold, “Rethinking the Animate”; Kohn, *How Forests Think*; and Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis.” For a comprehensive overview of recent anthropological literature on the topic, see Swancutt, “Animism.”

5. See, e.g., Harvey, *Animism*; B. Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*; Vetlesen, *Cosmologies*.

(an affective life and personal intentions), and consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> These authors all dissociate themselves from the old, social-evolutionist scholarship of Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) and his followers, who used the term to refer to primitive or underdeveloped religion. As Graham Harvey puts it, “The old usage constructed animists as people who did not or could not distinguish correctly between objects and subjects, or between things and persons. The new animism names worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectfully and properly engage with other persons.”<sup>7</sup> Persons, according to him, are “volitional, relational, cultural and social beings”<sup>8</sup> taking the shape of humans, animals, plants, rocks, spirits, gods, machines, or anything else in the physical world.

Neither old nor new uses of the term are value-free. In classical anthropological scholarship, *animism* was used pejoratively, to refer to underdeveloped societies with supposedly naive, childlike belief systems. In much recent scholarship, the opposite is the case: animism becomes a model for reconceiving the world in a holistic and respectful manner, overcoming the epistemic violence caused by the Cartesian separation of body and mind. New animism, then, is not merely a theoretical trend; it is also an ethical and, as such, ideological project. This point is exemplified by Harvey when he states that “animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. . . . [Animism is] concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons.”<sup>9</sup> Here animism is not primarily a belief system or set of ritual practices; it is a moral attitude.

Not all recent scholarship on animism shares this explicit ethical orientation. Some anthropologists and philosophers use it as a descriptive category to refer to particular Indigenous ways of conceptualizing and relating to nonhuman beings, and refrain from attaching value judgments to it, either negative or positive. Others may find the new animism discourse conceptually and theoretically interesting because it challenges established category formations and academic epistemologies, but they do not perceive it as an ethical project.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the body of literature suggesting that animism does have a particular moral significance in the present age, also for developing alternative ethics in modern societies, is rapidly growing.<sup>11</sup> These authors display a profound dissatisfaction with the dominant positivist models of knowledge production—and with the colonial and capitalist ideologies in which these are embedded—and turn to animism not merely as a different epistemology, nor as an alternative ontology

6. B. Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 15.

7. Harvey, *Animism*, xiv.

8. Harvey, *Animism*, xvii.

9. Harvey, *Animism*, xi.

10. See, e.g., Laack, “*New Animism*”; Swancutt and Mazard, *Animism beyond the Soul*.

11. Examples include Appfel-Marglin, *Subversive Spiritualities*; Harvey, *Animism*; Harvey, “Animism and Ecology”; Stacey, “Toying with Animism”; B. Taylor, *Dark Green Religion* and “Animism, Tree-Consciousness”; Vetlesen, *Cosmologies*; Weston, *Animate Planet*; Yoneyama, *Animism in Contemporary Japan*.

(although that is the term most commonly used), but, ultimately, as a radically different kind of ethics. And this ethics, they suggest, has the power to make us fundamentally rethink our relationship with the natural environment, which is so urgently needed in this time of widespread ecological loss, the so-called Anthropocene.

In this body of literature, animism becomes a model for a new environmental ethics that acknowledges more-than-human agencies and interdependencies. Arne Johan Vetlesen, for instance, argues that Indigenous animism constitutes a type of “panpsychism in practice” that may teach Westerners how to overcome the Cartesian dualism and anthropocentrism underlying the Anthropocene.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Harvey suggests that Indigenous animism has important lessons for the Anthropocene: “The animist relationships of many Indigenous traditions not only offer vital exemplars of ways to make, maintain and/or restore inter-species respect, but also embody powerful critiques of the ideologies and practices that have got us into this mess.”<sup>13</sup> Taylor makes a similar argument, applying the term *animism* not only to Indigenous worldviews but also to American popular culture texts such as *Avatar* and Richard Powers’s *Overstory*. According to him, these are all “spiritualities” that contribute to the “emergence of a new, global nature religion,” which will provide an antidote to the global environmental crisis.<sup>14</sup> These authors all suggest that animism has global soteriological potential, providing alternative blueprints for living sustainably in the Anthropocene.

Despite such far-reaching claims, however, the question remains as to how so-called animist ontologies can transform not only individual moralities but also the extractivist economic-political structures that are destroying our planet. As several scholars have observed, nature conservation agendas can come in conflict with Indigenous livelihoods and cosmologies, even leading to their dispossession or displacement.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Bird-David and Naveh have stated explicitly that the Nayaka—an animistic society from southern India—“are not committed to conserve their environment. Their concern lies mainly with keeping good relations with specific co-dwellers in the shared environment.”<sup>16</sup> Despite such realities, however, the expectation that animistic more-than-human relationalities provide important lessons for the Anthropocene is widespread in the academic literature.

Darryl Wilkinson has criticized new animism for exactly this reason: the tendency by usually non-Indigenous academics to project their own hopes and agendas onto Indigenous notions and practices. As he states, “Although much new animist scholarship claims to be an engagement with indigenous ontological frameworks, it is perhaps better seen as a selective commitment to indigeneity only insofar as it speaks to the twenty-first-century environmental crisis.”<sup>17</sup> We agree with Wilkinson that much of the new

12. Vetlesen, *Cosmologies*.

13. Harvey, “Animism and Ecology,” 83.

14. B. Taylor, “Animism, Tree-Consciousness.”

15. See, e.g., Bird-David and Naveh, “Relational Epistemology”; West, *Dispossession and the Environment*.

16. Bird-David and Naveh, “Relational Epistemology,” 55.

17. Wilkinson, “Is There Such a Thing as Animism?,” 297–98.

animism scholarship is an expression of contemporary academic and political concerns in the global North at least as much as it discusses Indigenous or other non-Western lifeworlds and cultural practices. This is not to deny the fact that Indigenous ecological knowledge can be relevant for environmental advocacy and nature conservation. There are several recent examples of Indigenous authors and scientists who insist, rightly, that Indigenous epistemologies should be taken more seriously in science and policymaking—often without using the term *animism*.<sup>18</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that animism is not synonymous with Indigenous knowledge. Not all Indigenous knowledge is animistic, and not all animism is Indigenous. For instance, Vietnamese whale worship can be classified as animistic, but the fishers who worship the whale deity mostly belong to the majority Việt population, not to an Indigenous minority.<sup>19</sup>

In any case, our point in this article is not to question the potential significance of Indigenous knowledge for twenty-first-century conservation practices, but to scrutinize claims that animism itself propels people to act in environmentally friendly ways. Animistic ontologies certainly have ethical dimensions, but that does not mean they teach people how to act sustainably in the Anthropocene. At the very least, that would require an active process of translation and adaptation. Like Wilkinson, we are not convinced that animism—as a practice, as an imaginary, or as an academic theory—has the potential to bring about the paradigm shift that is so urgently needed to cut carbon emissions and prevent biodiversity loss at a global scale. Much of the new animism scholarship is theoretically rich, but lacks concrete empirical observations that substantiate claims about the potential significance of these ontologies for solving environmental problems. If we take the claim that animism can teach us how to live more sustainably in the Anthropocene seriously, not just as an academic trope but as an ethical practice with real-world implications, we must ask the inevitable question: How? How can animism help us?

In sum, we argue that there is a need for more empirical research on the ways in which purportedly animist ontologies relate to ecological knowledge and translate into ethical and political action. The current article constitutes a modest attempt to meet that need. It focuses on the ritual practices and relational epistemologies of one particular animistic worship tradition that is relatively widespread but has received little academic attention: whale worship in Vietnam.

18. See, e.g., Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves*; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*; Vierros et al., “Considering Indigenous Peoples.”

19. The whale god Ông Nam Hải was incorporated into the pantheon of the Vietnamese Nguyễn dynasty in the early nineteenth century, but he is also identified with the pre-Vietnamese Cham deity Po Riyak, who is still worshipped by some members of the Indigenous Cham community in Ninh Thuận province. See Nguyen, *Le culte de la baleine*, 29–35. They are a small minority, however. Most whale god worshippers today are ethnic Việt (Kinh), not Indigenous.

### The Lord of the South Sea

Throughout East, South, and Southeast Asia, people worship gods and spirits that dwell in, are mediated by, or manifest themselves as animals, trees, rocks, mountains, or rivers. These beings are immanent, ubiquitous, and have the power to affect humans, even though they are not omnipotent. They are morally ambivalent, and can be protectors, tricksters, or guides; they can be benevolent, caring, angry, or indifferent. These are not transcendent, otherworldly powers; they are part of this world, though they may be invisible at times. Although most of the scholarship on animism in East and Southeast Asia has focused on Indigenous and ethnic minorities,<sup>20</sup> the belief in spirits immanent in nature is not only found among minority cultures but also widespread among nominally Buddhist or nonreligious ethnic majority populations. In Vietnam, for instance, sacred trees are found throughout the country, and various animals are worshipped as deities, by ethnic majority Vietnamese (Việt / Kinh) as well as minority communities: tigers, crocodiles, turtles, and cetaceans.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of whether they call themselves Buddhist, nonreligious, or animist, few people here would deny that spirits live in trees, gods live in the ocean, and animals can embody divine power. Accordingly, several scholars have characterized Vietnamese popular religion as a type of animism combined with ancestor worship.<sup>22</sup>

Despite concerns about the scholarly application of the term *animism* in Asian contexts,<sup>23</sup> in this article we have chosen to classify Vietnamese whale worship as a type of animism, because it fits the broad definitions by Harvey and Taylor provided above. Accordingly, Harvey's and Taylor's arguments about the moral significance of animistic relationalities should also, ipso facto, apply to this particular tradition. Vietnamese popular religion is a relational ontology that takes for granted that certain elements of the physical environment, such as trees and nonhuman animals, are the embodiment of gods or spirits. They are persons with agency, morality, and needs. Actions have consequences: humans who keep good relations with these immanent divine beings are rewarded; those who commit violence to them may be punished. In the case of whale worship, the animistic aspect is obvious: the animal body is the god. It is a divine, moral agent. Moreover, there is, in the formulation of Descola, a "similarity of interiorities" even when physical bodies are different: living whales become protective ancestral spirits

20. See, e.g., Århem and Sprenger, *Animism in Southeast Asia*.

21. For a classic introduction to Vietnamese popular spirit beliefs, see Cadière, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses*, 1:6–23. For a more elaborate discussion of beliefs pertaining to sacred trees, rocks, animals (including whales), and plants, see vol. 2. It should be noted that Cadière referred to Vietnamese whale worship as totemism rather than animism (1:22). In present-day scholarship, *totemism* receives considerably less attention than *animism*—with the notable exception of Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*—and the category has not seen a similar revival.

22. See, e.g., Lantz, *Whale Worship*, 28; Nguyen, *Le culte de la baleine*, 59; P. Taylor, "Modernity and Re-enchantment," 16.

23. For an insightful critique on nonreflexive uses of the term *animism*, see Kendall, *Mediums and Magical Things*, 33–36, 183.



after their animal death, embodied by sacred bones.<sup>24</sup> And, like the tiger deity, the whale god can temporarily enter a human body and possess it, for instance during spirit medium rituals.<sup>25</sup>

In Vietnam, whale worship has taken its own distinct shape, due to a history of state patronage (in the nineteenth century), a unique interaction with popular Buddhism, and strong local devotional traditions.<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that this is not a nationwide tradition, even though it is increasingly framed as such in the domestic scholarship for geopolitical reasons.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it is a translocal one, practiced primarily in fishing communities (*vạn*) along the central and southern coast, from Huế to Hà Tiên. As several historians have argued, it originates in a pre-Vietnamese, Cham worship tradition, which was Vietnamized and incorporated into the national pantheon after the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty, during the reign of Gia Long (1762–1820; r. 1802–20).<sup>28</sup>

For most whale worshippers in Vietnam, academic debates about the origins and uniqueness of the whale worship tradition are of little importance. Some whale temples go back to the eighteenth century, while others were constructed only in the twenty-first century. Most Vietnamese fishers insist that their ancestors have been praying to Cá Ông for many centuries, and the caretakers of historic temples are usually happy to show visitors copies of the precolonial nineteenth-century imperial certificates (*sắc phong*) confirming that their temples and gods were government-approved.<sup>29</sup> Whether old or new, many coastal villages and towns in South and Central Vietnam today have a whale god temple, in addition to other temples (a community hall enshrining village founders, mother goddess temples, Buddhist pagodas, ancestral family temples, shrines for forest gods, and more). Vietnamese fishing communities believe that whales are divine beings and do not consume their meat, which would be sacrilegious and might provoke divine wrath.

24. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 129.

25. This was the case prior to 1975, at least. Afterward, many popular spirit medium rituals (*lên đồng*) were classified as “superstition” (*mê tín dị đoan*) and banned by the state. Whale temple caretakers usually insist that no spirit medium rituals take place at their temples, but we suspect they are still carried out at some places. They were certainly more common in the South prior to reunification, as documented by Lê Quang Nghiêm, *Tục thờ cúng*.

26. See Macdonald, “Le culte de la baleine”; Parnwell, “Regional Resonances.” Macdonald and Parnwell both address the question of the uniqueness of Vietnamese whale worship. Macdonald argues that it is “a Vietnamese exception.” Parnwell, by contrast, stresses the similarities between Vietnamese whale worship and ritual traditions elsewhere.

27. In recent years, authorities and academics have reinvented Vietnam as a maritime nation and supported material and intangible cultural heritage with a maritime focus, including whale temples and festivals. See Nguyễn Xuân Hương, *Tín ngưỡng cư dân*; Roszko, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres*, 51.

28. On the history of this worship tradition, see Đinh Văn Hạnh, “Sự phát triển”; Nguyễn Duy Thiệu, “Tín ngưỡng Cá Ông”; Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, “Về tục thờ Cá Ông”; Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, *Tín ngưỡng dân gian*; and Trần Đình Hằng, “Hệ thống thần linh biển.”

29. Nguyen, *Le culte de la baleine*, 75–86.

When a whale approaches a beach, the people who discover it will first try to bring it back into the sea. If this effort is unsuccessful and the animal dies, the nearest fishing village will bury the whale and organize an elaborate funeral ceremony. The family of the person who first spotted the whale is responsible for purchasing the ritual offerings, which can be a significant financial burden; in return, they believe, the whale will protect them and give them material blessings in subsequent years. The fishing community will then introduce a ritual mourning period of usually three years that includes memorial rites and other ceremonies. At the end of this period, the body of the whale has normally decomposed, but the bones remain. People then dig up the bones and enshrine them in local temples, where they are venerated as embodiments of divine power.

In addition to funeral rites devoted to individual dead whales, villagers organize annual or biannual festivals dedicated to Cá Ông. These festivals can be small, local events, but in some places (e.g., coastal cities like Đà Nẵng, Gò Công, Vũng Tàu, and Phan Thiết), they have become spectacular large-scale, multiday events that attract thousands of visitors. These festivals are characterized by public parades accompanied by drums, lengthy prayer rituals, elaborate food offerings followed by communal feasts, and traditional Vietnamese opera performances (*hát bội* or *hát bả trạo*).<sup>30</sup> In addition, fishing villages organize Lễ hội Cầu Ngư festivals every year soon after the Lunar New Year holidays in order to pray for a good fishing season, which are also centered around Cá Ông.

Fishers pray to the god and make ritual offerings not only during communal events, but also individually. They believe that whales save people when they are in distress at sea. Whales enact the will of the bodhisattva Quan Âm: they are embodied, alive, and capable of saving humans and bringing them back to shore after shipwrecks. Stories about people who were saved by cetaceans are widespread throughout the region; during our research, we have met several people who told us how they themselves or their relatives were saved by Ông (living cetaceans). Some of these stories even make it to the national news—for instance in 2019, when a pod of dolphins guided a boat with forty-one fishermen from Tam Hải that was lost at sea after a storm back to their island.<sup>31</sup> Cetaceans save not only fishermen but also other people; some overseas Vietnamese who left Vietnam as refugees on small boats in the 1970s or 1980s believe that they were protected by Cá Ông and worship the whale god from the United States, Australia, or Europe. They make financial donations to temples in their ancestral hometowns, which, considering prevailing exchange rates, is an important source of income for some of these temples.<sup>32</sup>

These practices of whale veneration all reveal a close relation between fishers and cetaceans, alive and dead. Fishers and whales inhabit a shared multispecies world,

30. For a detailed description of a typical Vietnamese whale festival, see Nguyen, *Le culte de la baleine*, 43–74. For an elaborate description and analysis of a *hát bội* performance at a Vietnamese festival, see P. Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise*, 173–79.

31. *Người Lao Động*, “Ly kỳ chuyện cá heo.”

32. Small, *Currencies of Imagination*, 87–88.

together with various other actors that have the power to bring material blessings or create problems. Some of these actors are animal, such as the fish, crustaceans, squid, and other marine creatures on whom both humans and cetaceans depend for their livelihoods. Others are human, such as the hotel owners and tourists who encroach on coastal environments, the state officials who may support, ban, or silently tolerate certain ritual practices, or the Chinese coast guards who arrest Vietnamese fishermen when they get too close to islands deemed Chinese by the PRC.<sup>33</sup> Others are environmental: the sea and its currents, which may bring fish or cause erosion, and the weather, which is increasingly unpredictable. And yet others are spiritual: the goddesses of the sea (Bà Thủy and Mazu) who bless fishers and traders if treated respectfully, the wandering spirits that may cause havoc if not given adequate care, and the bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin (or her local maritime incarnation, Quan Âm Nam Hải), who sends whales to people in danger. The world is full of actors, diverse and difficult to control.<sup>34</sup> As fishers depend on them for their livelihoods, maintaining good relations with all these different actors (or, in some cases, staying away from them) is of existential importance.

In sum, in coastal Vietnam, values and attitudes toward nature are mediated, shaped, and expressed through local ritual practices and religious storytelling. An awareness of multispecies relations and dependencies is essential for the construction and preservation of livelihoods. The question remains, however, how this more-than-human ontology translates into environmental practices and ethics. In the next section, we will have a closer look at some of the challenges that Vietnamese fishing communities are facing today.

### **Environmental Issues, Social Change, and Mass Tourism**

In 1986, Vietnam implemented a number of economic reforms, referred to collectively by the term *đổi mới*. The government is proud that its economic reforms and development policies have lifted millions of people out of severe poverty. However, the economic trade-off is characterized by social tensions and serious environmental problems. As we have seen, people worship spirits residing in nature, and therefore, as one would expect, want to preserve the nature that is sacred to them. In reality, however, such religious attitudes do not help protect fishing villages from environmental degradation, urbanization, or climate change. Fishers who worship the whale god do not live in a pre-modern, traditional, enchanted world. They are experiencing dramatic social and environmental changes, which pose a threat to their livelihoods while challenging ritual practices and beliefs.

33. Roszko, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres*.

34. Bùi Xuân Đính and Nguyễn Thị Thanh Bình, *Đời sống xã hội*; Do, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism*; Lê Quang Nghiêm, *Tục thờ cúng*; Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, *Tín ngưỡng dân gian*; Nguyễn Xuân Hương, *Tín ngưỡng cư dân*; Trần Đình Hằng, "Hệ thống thần linh biển."

Economic development can be a double-edged sword: it can help people get out of poverty, but also cause environmental degradation that leads to livelihood loss and suffering. This became tragically clear in 2016, when tons of dead fish washed ashore in north-central Vietnam. A Taiwanese steel factory based in Hà Tĩnh province had leaked toxic waste into the sea, causing the death of innumerable fish and other marine animals and sudden livelihood loss for thousands of fishers in the region, who could no longer sell their products because of domestic food anxieties.<sup>35</sup> The disaster in Hà Tĩnh was exceptionally dramatic and therefore received international media attention. Other environmental issues remain relatively unnoticed. Throughout the country, coastal communities face problems such as resource depletion, soil erosion, water and air pollution, and land-grabbing. In addition, the establishment of new industries (often driven by foreign corporations operating in Special Economic Zones), urbanization, and mass tourism have driven young people out of fishing villages to work in the cities, disconnecting them from their family's occupation and ritual practices. In Hội An, for example, young people rather work in tourism, or move to big cities, than take the risk to go fishing in the South China Sea. The number of fishers is decreasing in many villages, as is the number of young worshippers in whale festivals and rituals. Most of today's whale temples were built or reconstructed in the late 1990s or early 2000s, after the *đổi mới* reforms.<sup>36</sup> But now, two to three decades later, many ritual specialists who were involved in these processes of ritual reconstruction have reached a high age. They are worried about the lack of successors who know how to conduct rituals and about the perceived lack of engagement of younger community members.

In addition to human labor and financial capital for festivals and ritual offerings, fishing communities need land to build temples and bury beached whales. In the nineteenth century, the Nguyễn regime issued royal edicts to formally recognize temples and allocated land to fishing villages with enshrined whales. Nowadays, villages have to find other means to protect their beaches from land-grabbing, especially at places that are subject to rapid tourist development.<sup>37</sup> The town of Mũi Né, close to Phan Thiết, offers a striking example. In the last two decades, this has become a popular international tourist destination, and the coast has transformed beyond recognition. Between 2017 and 2021, several whales and other sacred marine animals beached in Mũi Né and Phan Thiết; they were buried and their bones are now worshipped in temples in the area. One of these temples, Binh An (see fig. 2), was the burial site of several whales during this

35. Lu Rots, "Aftermath of a Marine Disaster."

36. Several scholars have discussed the so-called resurgence of religion in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam and analyzed the implications of the state's new patronage and appropriation of some religious practices and institutions, which coexists with its ongoing rejection of others. See for instance Roszko, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres*; Rots, "Re-enchantment Restricted"; Saleminck, "Embodying the Nation"; P. Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise* and "Modernity and Re-enchantment."

37. Parnwell, "Whale Worship and Tourism Development."



Figure 2. Binh An temple in Mũi Né, flanked by whale graves. Photograph by Aike P. Rots, 2019.

period.<sup>38</sup> The temple is managed by the fishing community (*vạn*) and occupies a land area of approximately three thousand square meters of coastal land, surrounded by high-end tourist resorts. The local community also manages the Miếu Bà Vàng temple, devoted to the Lady of Gold, who is the Vietnamized version of a local Cham goddess. It is located on a spectacularly scenic spot, several kilometers further along the coast. Here, too, are some tombs of sacred marine animals (whales and turtles). Local authorities and corporate actors are eager to build resorts, hotels, and entertainment complexes in the area. Such plans, however, clash with local beliefs, and thus far these temples—and, accordingly, the surrounding dune environments and their nonhuman inhabitants—have been preserved. In 2019, we were told that there were plans to preserve the Bình An temple by turning it into a tourist destination in its own right: local residents were planning on building an exhibition hall for whale skeletons, similar to the temple Vạn Thủy Tú near the fishing port of nearby Phan Thiết. It remains to be seen, however, if such an initiative will be sufficient to save this temple from demolition.

This example clearly shows that in former fishing towns, beliefs and taboos related to whales and other sacred animals are still very much alive, but they can come in conflict with other interests, especially when it comes to the profitable business of mass tourism. It would be tempting to interpret this case as an instance of animism

38. Local media reported that on May 14, 2017, a twelve-meter-long, eight-ton whale beached here. On May 29, 2019, an even larger whale stranded, measuring fourteen meters and weighing fifteen tons. When we visited the site in July 2019, both graves were clearly visible on the beach next to the temple.

that has led to environmental action. However, the residents' attempts to preserve temple land are not necessarily motivated by an environmentalist agenda; they appear more concerned with the power of the whales and deities buried and enshrined at these sites. Desires to preserve temples in order to ensure the ongoing patronage of powerful protective deities, and corresponding concerns for divine retaliation in case of temple destruction, may well support conservationist agendas in particular cases, but they do not necessarily lead to other types of environmental action. Moreover, if proper ritual action is taken, deities and spirits can be pacified or transformed, and temples and tombs can be moved elsewhere. In fact, this is one of the defining features of animistic ontologies: the notion that natural elements can not only be animated but also deanimated through proper ritual action.<sup>39</sup> In Vietnam, as elsewhere in Asia,<sup>40</sup> people regularly employ ritual techniques that allow for the extraction and consumption of animals, trees, and other natural elements, pacifying spirits and preventing divine retaliation. Thus, while animistic notions of enchanted space may serve to prevent construction projects in some cases (such as Bình An), they also provide opportunities for negotiating such concerns (through proper ritual action). And while animism can align with environmentalist agendas in some instances, arguably it is concerned not with environmental protection as such but with maintaining good relations with the spirits and deities. Such attitudes are not easily transformed into environmental ethics for the Anthropocene—not, at least, without deliberate acts of translation and reinvention.

In any case, as the Mũi Né example illustrates, mass tourism and forced displacement pose a big challenge to the continuation of whale worship traditions in many villages. Nowhere do we see this trend more clearly than in the neighboring cities of Đà Nẵng and Hội An in central Vietnam. Until the early 2000s, this coastal region—from the Hải Vân mountains to the Thu Bồn river mouth, approximately fifty kilometers—was full of fishing villages, each with their own whale god, sea goddess, and village founder temples. This also happened to be one of the most beautiful stretches of beach in the country, which captured the attention of the construction and tourism industries. From the early 2000s onward, the coast was transformed beyond recognition. Today, many of the displaced inhabitants of former fishing villages live in apartment blocks in Đà Nẵng. Their villages have been demolished in order to make way for large tourist resorts, casinos, and golf courses, and several temples have disappeared or, in some cases, have been moved elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

Around Hội An, some fishing villages still exist, but the people who used to make a living from fishing now run hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops. Within a single generation, these communities have become completely dependent on tourism for their livelihoods. Some people have earned large sums by investing in real estate or exploiting

39. On ritual deanimation, see Kendall, *Mediums and Magical Things*.

40. Kalland, "Holism and Sustainability."

41. Parnwell, "Whale Worship and Tourism Development."



Figure 3. Erosion at Cửa Đại: sandbags on the beach and a collapsing whale temple. Photograph by Aike P. Rots, 2019.

successful tourist businesses, but today they are facing new challenges. They hardly had income during the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps even more dramatic in the long run is the fact that the beaches around Hội An—especially Cửa Đại but also, increasingly, An Bàng—are quite literally washing away, to the point that some coastal restaurants, houses, hotels, and whale temples are collapsing. Whenever new sand is shipped in by local authorities or tourism corporations, it does not stay very long. Elderly residents say that beach erosion is not a new phenomenon—they have had to rebuild temples before, because of changing coastlines—but they have never seen the sand disappear as quickly as today, and they have never experienced this many typhoons. The extreme erosion thus threatens tourist resorts, fishing villages, and whale god temples alike (see fig. 3).<sup>42</sup>

Facing this disaster, whale worshippers are praying for the return of the sand. Among the three whale temples along the coast of Hội An, the one in Cửa Đại is the

42. Coastal deforestation appears to be one cause of the erosion. Others may include mining and river flow reduction measures in the Thu Bồn river estuary, an increasing number of typhoons due to climate change, and, according to some local residents, a lack of divine protection due to a decline in worship activity. See Nehren et al., “Sand Dunes”; Nguyen et al., “Cause Analysis.”



Figure 4. Plastic on the beach, Tam Hải. Photograph by Aike P. Rots, 2019.

most at risk. The head of the temple told us stories of how local deities had closed the river mouth nearby and brought sand to the beach in the early 1990s. A severe storm opened the river mouth in Cửa Đại, and some local residents drowned as a result. A community elder then set up an altar nearby and mobilized people to join in prayer to the whale god. After an intensive praying period, the river mouth closed again, bringing golden sand to the village, which helped to attract a lot of tourists after the old town of Hội An was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. However, in 2017, another severe storm destroyed the beach, turning five-star hotels into ghost resorts. A new temple for the whale god was built soon afterward, and local worshippers have been praying for the sand to return ever since. They believe that the merciful whale god, who has been protecting the community from high waves and storms, will bring back the sand and, eventually, the tourists. The forever-changing coastline landscape has thus shaped the temples at Cửa Đại as well as the local belief in sea deities.

Fishing communities in Vietnam face a number of challenges: toxic waste, resource depletion, urbanization, mass tourism, coastal erosion, and an increasing number of typhoons and floods. They are also suffering from severe plastic pollution. In our introduction, we discussed the whale festival in Tam Hải, a small island in central Vietnam, one hour by car south of Hội An. As mentioned, whale strandings have reduced in number; instead, beaches these days are packed with plastic that washes ashore. One seafood restaurant owner said that the waste comes directly from the hotels and businesses of Hội An, dumped into the Trường Giang river. She tries to clean her local



beach every day, she assured us, but there is too much waste, and she cannot cope. The municipality does not have a well-functioning waste disposal system. Local residents appear to have given up: when they go swimming, on late summer afternoons, they are literally bathing in plastic, their children playing with the Styrofoam boxes that have washed ashore. When they are swimming through the plastic, it almost seems as if they do not notice. In reality, however, the amount of plastic causes significant anxiety locally. Although the region is known for delicious seafood, several people told us that they have reduced their seafood consumption, because they are afraid that the food is contaminated with microplastics and toxins.

Although ecological anxiety is increasing, especially in relation to food safety, Vietnamese coastal dwellers do not necessarily act sustainably in their daily lives. Some fishers engage in unsustainable practices such as dynamite fishing and electrical shock fishing, even though they know the detrimental effects.<sup>43</sup> They also use large amounts of plastic—not just for rituals but also, more importantly, for fishing gear and nets—and, as many regions lack a functioning waste management system, often throw used items into the sea.<sup>44</sup> They worship cetaceans as divine incarnations, and, consequently, consider the consumption of cetacean meat inappropriate; but we have not met anyone who considered the fact that plastic waste can lead to the death of whales. Significantly, the fact that they perceive their surrounding environment as enchanted and full of sacred actors does not seem to translate into sustainable behavior, let alone a self-conscious animist environmental ethics. This does not mean, of course, that small-scale fishers who engage in unsustainable practices for economic or other reasons are the main culprits, solely responsible for maritime pollution. Much of the plastic that washes ashore comes from elsewhere. These fishers live precarious lives, and their space to resist the extractivist structures of our time is very limited. Our point, therefore, is not to blame them; our point is to ask if, and how, an animistic worship system—in this case, one that is centered around whales as the physical embodiments of divine power—gives way to a local environmental ethics and, consequently, mobilizes people around environmental concerns. In Vietnam, we have not observed such a development. This brings us back to the question raised in the introduction: Do animist ontologies actually help people act differently? Do they offer viable alternatives for living sustainably in the Anthropocene? Or are they ways of making sense and coping with crisis and change, without providing tools (conceptually or practically) for tackling and overcoming those crises?

Based on the Vietnamese case, we suggest that there is little evidence for the first two: animism does not necessarily lead to environmentalist action, and it does not offer ready-made solutions for solving present-day crises. However, our ethnographic research does suggest that a worship tradition such as this one can help people give meaning to the problems they are facing, and that rituals change in response to changing environmental circumstances, as illustrated by the case of people in Cửa Đại asking the whale god

43. Bruun, "Environmental Protection," 185.

44. Nguyen and Chu, "Plastic Marine Debris."

to stop beach erosion. It is therefore important to study transformations in these worship traditions—not in order to idealize them or use them as a foundation for environmental ethics, but in order to gain a better understanding of the role of rituals in responding to and coping with environmental change, especially in the case of marginalized communities in the global South.

### Conclusion

As several leading academics have argued, anthropocentrism and Cartesian dualism are foundational paradigms underlying the capitalist-extractivist economic model that has brought about climate change and widespread biodiversity loss, and we are in need of alternative stories—philosophical, ethical, and not least religious.<sup>45</sup> The recent abundance of academic texts on religious environmentalism,<sup>46</sup> ecotheology,<sup>47</sup> environmental attitudes in Asian traditions,<sup>48</sup> and Indigenous ecological knowledge<sup>49</sup> is indicative of this paradigm shift in academia. There is a growing awareness of the fact that the positivistic episteme underlying modern Western science and ideology is one of the root causes of the current crisis and will not help us get out of it. We need different stories.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that scholars have turned to animism. Yet the question remains: How exactly does re-enchanting nature lead to its salvation? Believing that a tree is sacred does not prevent people from felling it; all it means is that the tree spirit needs proper ritual care prior to it being felled.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, animism does not prevent the construction of polluting factories on enchanted land, as long as the spirits and deities of the place are ritually pacified or relocated. Therefore, as we have argued, there is a need for more empirical research on the ways in which purportedly animist ontologies relate to ecological knowledge and translate into ethical and political action. The present article constitutes one attempt to meet that need, investigating ritual responses to social and environmental change within one particular worship tradition.

Vietnamese fishers live in enchanted, more-than-human worlds. Depending on the definition, this ontology may be referred to as animistic. As we have argued in this article, the study of cetacean veneration in Vietnam provides some important insights into the ways in which nature is perceived in the region, showing how ritual practices and beliefs are shaped by, and interact with, local environments. Prayers today are not the same as they were in the early nineteenth century, when the whale god was incorporated into the national pantheon, or in the mid-twentieth century, when the first descriptions of Vietnamese whale worship appeared in the anthropological literature.<sup>51</sup>

45. Appfel-Marglin, *Subversive Spiritualities*; Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*; Vetlesen, *Cosmologies*.

46. B. Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*.

47. Gottlieb, *Greener Faith*.

48. Duara, *Crisis of Global Modernity*; Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology*.

49. Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves*; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

50. Kalland, "Holism and Sustainability."

51. Cadière, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses*.

Coastal communities still pray for a good catch, a safe voyage, and material blessings, just as they did at the time. But today, they also pray to the whale god to bring back sand to the beach, so that the tourists will return; to protect them from typhoons and floods, which are increasing in number; and to protect them from Chinese coast guards in the South China Sea.

As a maritime popular religion, Vietnamese whale worship is profoundly shaped by the culture-natural environment of coastal communities—and, as such, provides important insights into the concerns and priorities of these communities. However, it does not, in and of itself, give way to environmental ethics. Like coastal populations elsewhere, fishers in Vietnam are concerned about food safety, climate change, and the decline of fish populations. These concerns, however, have not translated into more sustainable fishing practices or into environmental activism. Cá Ông worship is a dynamic and diverse ritual tradition, which responds to social and environmental change; it may help people to make sense of and cope with those changes, but it does not offer solutions for overcoming them, and it certainly does not offer lessons for living sustainably in the Anthropocene that are easily applicable in other contexts.

Of course, this article has only discussed one case, and no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn about animism in general based on ethnographic research on one particular Vietnamese ritual tradition. We therefore encourage others to explore expressions to environmental change within other contexts, and assess the validity of claims about the soteriological potential of animism in the Anthropocene in those places. Based on the Vietnamese case, we argue that studying non-Western and Indigenous ontologies is important because it helps us understand how people in the global South make sense of today's crises. However, the fact that these traditions are based on principles of relationality and reciprocity does not mean they automatically translate into twenty-first-century environmental ethics, let alone provide the blueprints for an alternative political and economic system.

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