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Original Research Article

The Cầu Phết Festival of Sơn Vi Village, Phùng Nguyên Commune, Phú Thọ Province: Cultural Heritage Values and Orientations for their Promotion

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Abstract: The Cầu Phết Festival of Sơn Vi village, Phùng Nguyên commune, Phú Thọ province, is a folk cultural practice bound up with the worship of the Tutelary Deity (Thành Hoàng), with legends of the Hùng Kings era, and with hopes for a peaceful new year and a favourable harvest. Drawing on descriptive sources concerning the village's sacred sites, local legends, ritual offerings and the ball-snatching game, this article systematises the principal components of the festival and analyses its historical and communal-memory value, its religious and belief value, its role in social cohesion, and its significance as a folk cultural practice. The article also identifies several issues that warrant attention in safeguarding and promoting this heritage: documenting folk knowledge, sustaining the community's role as the bearer of the heritage, ensuring safety in staging the game, and linking the festival with heritage education and responsible cultural tourism.

Keywords: Cầu Phết Festival, Sơn Vi Village, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Folk Beliefs, Cultural Tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional festival is a space of cultural practice in which a community re-enacts its memory of the past, expresses its spiritual beliefs and strengthens social relations through rituals, performances, games and other forms of collective activity. In Phú Thọ, a land associated with the legends of the Hùng Kings era and with the worship of the Hùng Kings, many village festivals both sustain spiritual life and help transmit local knowledge, customs and identity.

The Cầu Phết Festival of Sơn Vi village is a representative case for examining the relationship among local legend, the worship of the Tutelary Deity, and a competitive folk game. According to the recorded sources, the festival takes place in early spring, centred on the third day of the first lunar month; the processions, sacrificial rites and the ball-snatching game are held at the village communal house (đình) and in the Lò Cầu field. Beyond its meaning as a prayer for a good harvest and for peace, the festival gives villagers an occasion to meet, to reaffirm communal ties and to carry on the customs of the village. In recent years, however, the Cầu Phết Festival has ceased to be held in full for a number of practical reasons. Research on the safeguarding and promotion of the Cầu Phết Festival is therefore both meaningful and timely.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

2.1. Research Objectives

The article pursues three basic objectives:
First, to outline the historical and cultural context and the system of sacred sites associated with the festival;
Second, to describe the ritual structure and the Cầu Phết game;
Third, to identify the festival's outstanding values and to propose orientations for safeguarding and promotion appropriate to the present period.

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2.2. RESEARCH METHODS

The author employs the following research methods:

1. Document Collection and Processing:

This method is used to systematise information on the history, cultural space, ritual structure and values of the Cầu Phết Festival of Sơn Vi village. The sources examined include materials on Phú Thọ folk culture, legends of the Hùng Kings era, scholarly works on heritage theory and ritual, legal instruments on cultural heritage, and records relating to communal houses, shrines and festival practices.

2. Descriptive Method:

This method is used to reconstruct the structure and sequence of festival practice. The description focuses on the system of communal house and shrines; the timing of the festival; preparations; the sacrificial and procession rites; ritual implements; the space of the Lò Cầu field; and the course of the ball-snatching game.

The description is intended not merely to list activities but to clarify the links among the festival's components. Accordingly, the ball-snatching game is examined in relation to the worship of the Tutelary Deity, local legend, and folk conceptions of good fortune, health, fertility and prosperity.

3. Fieldwork:

The author visited the Sơn Vi communal house, the Lò Cầu field and the shrines associated with the festival in order to conduct surveys and to meet and interview the temple keeper who looks after the communal house, village elders, people knowledgeable about the village's history, those who had taken part in organising the festival, and the officiant who presides over rituals at the communal house.

4. Analysis and Synthesis:

This method is used to clarify the links among the festival's components, to identify its outstanding cultural values, and to define the issues facing heritage safeguarding and promotion. Combining historical sources, descriptions of practice and information from the community, the study analyses the festival's values along the following dimensions: belief and communal memory; social cohesion and the transmission of knowledge; folk games and cultural space; and heritage education and the potential for cultural tourism.

With regard to the interruption in the festival's organisation, the study adopts a causal analysis that groups contributing factors as follows: bearers of the practice and transmission; organisational resources; spatial conditions; management and coordination; and social change and the level of community interest.

From the results of this analysis, the study synthesises groups of solutions in order of priority, beginning with verifying the current situation and documentation, followed by community consultation, the development of a controlled restoration plan and the organisation of knowledge transmission, and only then considering links with heritage education and cultural tourism. This approach is intended to ensure that the solutions rest on evidence, feasibility and the consent of the bearers of the heritage.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Theoretical Basis

According to the 2003 UNESCO Convention, the festival is a form of communal cultural activity comprising ritual practices and folk cultural pursuits carried out in particular spaces and at particular times, and bound up with the community's beliefs, customs, history and spiritual life. Festivals not only meet spiritual, recreational and social needs but also help sustain communal memory, reinforce cultural identity and transmit traditional values between generations.

Cultural heritage consists of material and spiritual products of historical, cultural and scientific value that have been formed and handed down through generations and that carry significance for community life. Under the Law on Cultural Heritage No. 45/2024/QH15, cultural heritage is considered in three basic categories: intangible cultural heritage, tangible cultural heritage and documentary heritage. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses practices, expressions, knowledge, skills and cultural forms that are recognised, sustained and transmitted by communities. The traditional festival is accordingly a type of intangible cultural heritage, combining ritual, custom, folk knowledge and forms of communal activity.

The safeguarding of cultural heritage is the process of implementing measures to protect the existence, authenticity, value and continued viability of heritage against adverse natural and social impacts. For intangible cultural heritage, safeguarding goes beyond recording and archiving documentation: it also includes sustaining the practice, teaching knowledge and skills, and creating conditions for communities to remain engaged in the process of maintaining

their heritage. The 2003 UNESCO Convention emphasises activities of identification, documentation, research, protection, promotion, transmission and revitalisation of heritage.

The promotion of cultural heritage values is the process of drawing upon and disseminating the historical, cultural, scientific and social values of heritage, thereby raising public awareness, fostering cultural transmission and generating resources for socio-economic development. For traditional festivals, promotion may be carried out through heritage education, the teaching of cultural practices, activities that present the heritage to the public, and appropriate cultural tourism. Promotion, however, must remain tied to safeguarding, respect the cultural bearers, suit the community's circumstances, and avoid commercialisation that distorts the meaning of the heritage. This view is consistent with the orientation toward protecting the vitality of intangible cultural heritage set out in the 2003 UNESCO Convention and in the provisions of the 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage.

3.2. Sơn VI Village and the Heritage Space of the Festival

Sơn Vi village (Phùng Nguyên commune, Phú Thọ province) is an ancient village at the foot of a mountain, whose Sino-Vietnamese name is Vây Núi ("Encircling the Mountain"), whose Nôm name is Kẻ Vây, and which is commonly called Kẻ Vầy by the people. With a long historical and cultural tradition, the village is where, in 1968, archaeologists discovered traces of ancient Vietnamese people of the Palaeolithic period at two sites, Gò Vườn Sậu and Rừng Sóc Lọi, which were excavated in 1969. Because this was the first site of this period to be excavated, archaeologists named it the Sơn Vi archaeological site, belonging to the Sơn Vi Culture. The name derives from the place name of Sơn Vi village, where the important archaeological sites of this culture were first found, with their characteristic chipped pebble tools, marking the late Palaeolithic stage in Vietnam, approximately 16,000 to 9,000 years before the present. This information shows that the village's name has a place in the history of archaeological research in Vietnam.

The Sơn Vi communal house, referred to in local documents as "Điền Lạc Palace", was built in 1571 and is dedicated to six deities: Cao Sơn Đại Vương, Toát Tấu Đại Vương, Tam Lang Quý Ất Đại Vương, Bạch Minh Đại Vương, Quý Minh Đại Vương, and Trương Công Mộc Sanh Linh Ứng Đại Thần. It was ranked a national monument in 1991.



Figure 1: The Sơn Vi communal house (Photo: Nguyễn Thị Hà)

The related system of worship comprises the Rừng Cấm Shrine (Đại Thành Shrine), the Phường Shrine (Tiền Doanh Shrine) and the Tam Quan Shrine. Together these sites form a sacred space to which the festival's rites are connected.

According to legends handed down among the people, and to Nguyễn Khắc Xương's book Legends of the Hùng Kings (Truyền thuyết Hùng Vương, 2009), the deities were generals who helped Saint Tản Viên (Tản Viên Sơn Thánh) resist the Thục invaders and afterwards helped the people clear land, found settlements and develop production. The figure of Mộc Sanh is said to have been born from an ancient banyan tree in the Vầy forest; the ancient banyan still stands today, together with a shrine established by the villagers to worship him. These stories explain the sacred origins of the deities and link the village's history to a larger story of nation-building and national defence.



Figure 2: The shrine of Mộc Sanh (Cấm forest) (Photo: Nguyễn Thị Hà)

3.3. Structure and Practice of the Cầu Phết Festival

On Toponymic Context and Archaeological Memory:

According to local folk sources, the village festival was formerly held from the third to the fifth day of the first lunar month, but is now concentrated on the third day. The festival is dedicated to commemorating the deities worshipped at the communal house and to praying for national peace and prosperity, favourable weather, a bountiful harvest, family happiness and a healthy community. It thus serves both a spiritual function and as an important moment of communal life in the annual cycle.

On the Structure of the Cầu Phết Festival:

Preparations are described as beginning about two months before Tết. The villagers are divided into 18 giáp (traditional neighbourhood or age-based groups), which combine into two sides, the inner village (nội thôn) and the outer village (ngoại thôn); each side fields a team of nine players. The teams train and prepare the deities' banners and the offerings.

The festival sequence begins with the sacrifice to the Tutelary Deity at the communal house on the morning of the third day of Tết. The Bát Cống palanquin, the Long Đình palanquin and the Bốn Tuổi palanquin are then carried in procession past the relevant sacred sites, namely the Phường Shrine, the Rừng Cấm Shrine and the Tam Quan Shrine, before returning to the communal house. After the rites at the communal house, the palanquins and the ball are carried in procession to the Lò Cầu field, where the game takes place.

The sacrificial and procession rites create a sacred route linking the communal house, the shrines and the space where the game is held. Offerings such as chicken, sticky rice, oản (moulded rice-flour offerings), bananas, betel and areca, and other items are presented according to village custom. Performing the rites in sequence not only expresses reverence toward the deities but also enables the community to re-create the traditional space and to teach the rules of practice to later generations.

On The Ball-Snatching Game and Ritual Implements:

According to local legend, the ball-snatching game originated when the aide-de-camp Mộc Sanh organised a game to entertain Saint Tản Viên and to keep him in the village during the early spring. The legend also explains the game as a means of training the soldiers' strength and teamwork.

The playing space is the Lò Cầu field in front of the communal house. The lò cầu ("ball pit") is basin-shaped, about 3 m wide and about 1.2 m deep. The ball is made of ironwood (lim), painted black, about 30 cm in diameter and weighing about 20 kg. The phết (the stick) is made from the base of an old male bamboo, carved smooth, with a wooden shaft 1.5 m long and 10 cm in diameter; its head resembles a sickle-shaped hook, hollowed like a spoon so as to fit snugly around the ball. In all, there are 18 phết for the two sides.



Figure 3: The ball (Photo: Nguyễn Thị Hà)

Before the game begins, the chief officiant gives the opening invocation and drops the ball into the pit, then calls out the command "Cướp cầu" ("Snatch the ball"). The two teams use their phết to contend for the ball and try to carry it to the goal; the game consists of three rounds. At the end, the ball is taken to a pond or lake for the players to go in and retrieve it, and is then carried in procession back to the communal house for a ceremony. After the festival, the ball is kept in the communal house as a sacred object. This structure shows that the game is not separate from ritual but is set within a sequence of actions with a beginning, a climax and an ending that carry spiritual meaning.

Popular belief holds that the winning side will enjoy good luck, prosperity and health in the new year; the players' loincloths are also bought by villagers in the hope of bringing good fortune to children. These beliefs show that the symbolic meaning of the game extends beyond the result of winning or losing, and is tied to aspirations for fertility, health and prosperity.

3.4. Cultural Values of the Festival

Belief and Communal Memory Values:

The festival is an occasion to commemorate the deities venerated by the community and to reaffirm the link between the village of today and the stories of its ancestors, heroes and guardian saints. The legends of Saint Tản Viên, Mộc Sanh and the generals form a system of local memory in which protecting the community and helping the people settle and carry on production are the foremost virtues. The value of the legends lies first of all in their role in shaping the community's beliefs and identity, and does not depend entirely on whether each detail can be verified as a historical event.

The worship of the village Tutelary Deity, in which the venerated figures are generals of the Hùng Kings era, has helped to clarify and complete the worship of the Hùng Kings within Phú Thọ province.

Community Cohesion and Knowledge Transmission Values:

The division into giáp, the organisation of two sides, the preparation of offerings, training, and participation in the processions and sacrifices all require coordination among many groups of residents. These tasks create opportunities to sustain intergenerational relationships and to pass on skills in organising rituals, crafting ritual implements, rules of conduct and knowledge about sacred sites. The festival is therefore a process of social practice in which the community not only receives its heritage but directly recreates it with each festival season.

Symbolic Values of the Folk Game and Cultural Space:

Cầu Phết combines physical exertion, skill in handling the implements, teamwork and adherence to traditional rules of play. The ball, the phết, the ball pit, the deities' banners and the palanquins are not merely objects but carry symbolic meaning throughout the festival practice. The relationship among the communal house, the shrines and the Lò Cầu field shows that the heritage lies not in a single structure but in a network of places and ritual routes that the community remembers and uses.

Heritage Education and Cultural Tourism Values:

If appropriately managed, the festival can become a resource for local history education, folk cultural experiences and the development of cultural tourism on a suitable scale. Tourism development, however, must rest on the community's consent and respect the sacred space and the ritual calendar, avoiding turning the game into a performance detached from its indigenous meaning. Activities presenting the festival to visitors should favour well-founded interpretation, clearly distinguishing legend, communal memory and information confirmed by historical documentation.

3.5. Current Situation of the Cầu Phết Festival

According to the results of fieldwork and interviews with local elders, the Cầu Phết Festival of Sơn Vi village was held regularly from about the 1920s until 2010. Over this period it became a traditional cultural activity tied to belief, custom and the cohesion of the local community. At present, the ritual part and the palanquin procession are still maintained on the third day of the first lunar month each year, whereas the festive part, in particular the Cướp Phết (ball-snatching) rite, has been interrupted and is no longer held as before. This situation shows that the festival's components have been sustained unevenly: rites of worship and belief have been preserved, but the festive activities involving direct, large-scale community participation have struggled to continue. This stems from several reasons:

First, difficulties with funding and organisational conditions. Staging the Cướp Phết festive part requires financial resources to prepare the space and facilities, to provide logistics and personnel, and to ensure security and order in the current sensitive period. The funding allocated by the commune-level organising committee has not met these requirements for ensuring safety and order.

Second, changes in the occupational structure and the rhythm of life of the local community. In the past, when agricultural production still played the main role, many young people living in the locality were able to take part in communal activities and devote time to preparing for the festival. Today, with the shift in the economic structure, a portion of residents work in state agencies, enterprises and industrial settings; working hours, work schedules and places of residence have also changed. This may reduce the capacity to assemble participants on a regular basis, especially for activities that require the coordination of many people. The change does not necessarily mean that the community has lost interest in its heritage; it may instead reflect a mismatch between the traditional mode of organising the festival and present-day living and working conditions.

Third, difficulties in succession among practitioners and in transmitting organisational experience. When the festive part is interrupted for a long period, opportunities for younger generations to take part directly, to learn the organisational procedures and to receive experience from their elders may also narrow. Without mechanisms for teaching, guidance and assigning successors, restoring the Cướp Phết activity will face difficulties in finding personnel who understand the customs, the manner of practice and the capacity for coordination in organising it. This deserves attention because the vitality of the festival depends not only on preserving documentation or maintaining the ritual part but also on the community's ability to practise and transmit cultural knowledge.

Overall, the interruption of the Cướp Phết festive part may result from several interwoven factors, including funding conditions, the ability to mobilise personnel, changes in livelihoods and community rhythms, and the problem of passing on practical knowledge. These factors should be considered in relation to one another rather than attributing the interruption to a single cause. In particular, it is necessary to distinguish between the direct cause that led the Cướp Phết activity to stop being held and the social conditions that have made its maintenance or restoration more difficult.

3.6. Orientations for Safeguarding and Promotion

Given the present situation of the Cầu Phết Festival, in particular the maintenance of the ritual part and the palanquin procession alongside the interruption of the Cướp Phết festive part, safeguarding and promoting the festival's values should combine preserving traditional values, strengthening the community's role as bearer of the heritage, and renewing the mode of organisation to suit present socio-economic conditions. The following solutions are proposed:

First, promote the mobilisation of social resources and diversify funding for the festival. Sơn Vi has a relatively dynamic base of economic development and production and business activity, and was once recognised as one of the leading localities in the province's new rural development movement. This may be a favourable condition for mobilising voluntary contributions from enterprises, business households, successful natives of the village and local residents for the safeguarding of the festival. The organising committee may draw up an annual sponsorship plan and establish a fund to support the safeguarding and promotion of the festival's values on a voluntary, open and transparent basis, while coordinating with local authorities, mass organisations and sponsors to secure funding for preparation, training, organisation and safety.

Socialisation should proceed on the principle that the community participates together, enterprises accompany it, and the authorities manage and give direction. The resources mobilised should serve not only the immediate staging of the festival but also, in reasonable proportion, the collection of documentation, the recording of practice procedures, the teaching of customs and the training of successors. In particular, sponsorship should not be allowed to dictate the content of the rites or turn the festival into mere commercial promotion.

Second, consolidate the organising committee and build a stable force of festival practitioners. To restore the Cướp Phết festive part, it is necessary to study the establishment or consolidation of an organising committee that includes representatives of the local authorities, elders knowledgeable about the customs, community representatives, mass organisations and those who have directly taken part in the festival. The committee should assign clear responsibilities, including units in charge of research and the safeguarding of customs; guidance and training; logistics and finance; and security, order and safety.

On the basis of historical documentation and the views of people knowledgeable about the festival, the organising committee should develop a concrete practice procedure, give guidance on the necessary content and organise training before the festival takes place. At the same time, participants should be selected on a voluntary basis, with suitable physical fitness, knowledge of the rules and the ability to commit time reliably. The list of participants should be drawn up by task group, with successors and a mechanism for substitution when necessary, avoiding dependence on a few individuals or last-minute, reactive mobilisation of personnel.

Selection of participants should be based on suitability for the practical role and should not rigidly restrict by age or occupation. Conditions should be created for young people, enterprise workers and those who work far from home but wish to take part to contribute to heritage safeguarding.

Third, renew preparation plans and overcome difficulties of time and personnel. In a context where residents' work and daily schedules are increasingly varied, preparation for the festival should not be concentrated only in the days just before Tết. The organising committee should plan early, assign tasks and announce the preparation schedule from the last months of the preceding year. Guidance, exchange of experience and training can be scheduled on days off or at times convenient for most participants, so as not to unduly affect workers' jobs and incomes.

In addition, digital technology can be applied to the safeguarding and development of the festival in the current period in several ways: using online contact groups to announce training schedules, circulate regulations, update participant lists and coordinate work; and making audio and video recordings of the teachings of elders who are knowledgeable about the customs. This approach both addresses the limitation of time and makes it possible for cultural knowledge to be preserved and handed on systematically.

Fourth, study the restoration of the Cướp Phết festive part on the basis of documentation and community consensus. The local authorities, the organising committee and the community should jointly assess the feasibility of restoration and determine which core elements must be preserved and which should be adjusted to suit present conditions.

Fifth, strengthen heritage education and promote the role of the younger generation. Young people are an important force in inheriting the festival and sustaining its vitality. It is therefore necessary to step up communication about the history, cultural meaning and communal values of the Cầu Phết Festival through sessions in residential areas, schools, mass organisations and local cultural activities. Meetings between elders and young people can be organised so that stories, customs and experience in organising the festival are gradually passed on.

For young people who work in state agencies and enterprises or live far from home, flexible modes of participation should be developed so that they can contribute time, funds, documentation or organisational capacity. Promoting the role of the younger generation is intended not only to supplement personnel but also to foster a sense of responsibility toward the home-village heritage, helping the festival to remain meaningful in modern life.

Sixth, strengthen documentation and the application of technology in safeguarding and promoting the festival. The locality should compile a documentary dossier on the Cầu Phết Festival, covering its history of formation, the course of its organisation, the meaning of its rites, the accounts of village elders, photographs, videos and the changes it has undergone across different periods. The materials should be verified, classified and archived systematically with community participation in order to reduce the risk of loss as those who know the festival grow older.

On this basis, articles, introductory videos and digital materials can be produced for heritage education, for promoting Sơn Vi culture and for supporting research. The locality may link its presentation of the festival with local-culture programmes of the Phú Thọ Provincial Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and present it through tourism channels with large followings, such as https://dulichphutho.gov.vn; the "Đất Tổ" YouTube channel; the "Du lịch Phú Thọ" (Phú Thọ Tourism) YouTube channel; and the "Du lịch Phú Thọ" Facebook page, among others.

Seventh, promote the festival's values in connection with controlled community-based cultural tourism. When conditions permit and the community consents, the Cầu Phết Festival can become a resource that helps present Sơn Vi's history, customs and cultural identity, and, combined with nearby tourist sites, forms an experiential tour programme for discovering local culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Cầu Phết Festival of Sơn Vi village is a composite cultural practice linking the worship of the Tutelary Deity, local legend, the system of communal house and shrines, procession and sacrificial rites, and the ball-snatching game. The festival expresses hopes for peace, a favourable harvest and prosperity, and at the same time helps sustain communal memory, strengthen social cohesion and transmit folk knowledge. Its value lies not only in the appeal of the game but also in the relationships among people, ritual objects and the village's cultural space.

To safeguard and promote the festival's values, attention should be given to mobilising social resources, consolidating the organising committee, building a force of successors, strengthening documentation, applying digital technology and promoting heritage education. Research into restoring the Cướp Phết game must rest on well-founded documentation, community consensus and conditions that ensure safety. At the same time, the development of cultural tourism must be tied to safeguarding, respect the sacred space and the role of local people as bearers of the heritage, and aim to sustain the festival's vitality in contemporary life.

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