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Nguyen Ngoc Quang, Danny Wildemeersch & Jan Masschelein

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Community forests as heterotopia. The case of the Mu community forest – Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong Nature Reserve, Vietnam

NGUYEN NGOC QUANG*, DANNY WILDEMEERSCH AND JAN MASSCHELEIN

Laboratory for Education and Society, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Catholic University of Leuven, Andreas Vesaliusstraat 2, B-3000, Leuven, Belgium

This paper examines issues of culture and power in regard to the Mu sacred forest, Vietnam, a community forest. The research uses Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' as a heuristic tool to interpret forest management. It appears that the Mu sacred forest can be understood as a space of 'self reflective construction', but also a space that might dissolve, destabilize, interrupt and suspend power. The moment of power suspension frees people from their usual frames. They can escape to some extent from authority and repression. This suggests that sustainable forest management can be promoted through acceptance of local culture and that community forest can be a 'space of suspension and learning'.

Keywords: Community forest; Heterotopia; Space

1. Introduction

A community forest is one that managed collectively by a community or communities. There are two distinctive forms of community forests. The first is the sacred forest (or holy forest, spiritual forest, ghost forest and cemetery forest). These are often reserved for spiritual and cultural practices and are traditionally managed by communities, of which chieftains and clan leaders have the power to oversee the activities which take place there [1,2]. The second form, which grew out of the first, comprises those forests that are granted by external actors (mostly the government) to collective entities (e.g. a group of individuals/households, a village and a mass organization) to be managed under certain conditions (often conservation), and aimed at producing economic benefits [3,4].

Recently, the concept of community forest has received considerable attention [5–8]. Insights were often drawn from the second form of community forest. There is much less scholarly discussion of sacred forests in regard to community forest [2]. Discussions are dominated by scientific and economic conceptions of nature, and hence the theme of conservation rather than cultural values predominates [9]. Culture, the core value that inspires local communities to protect the forest, significantly determines the success of community forest management (CFM). Yet, for economic reasons, cultural values are often overlooked [2].

*Corresponding author. Email: ngocquang.nguyen@ppw.kuleuven.be

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The sacred sites with their cultural heritage are usually viewed as superstitious, backward, local and forbidden [10–12]. There is limited literature on sacred sites and their cultural values. Nevertheless, sacred forests can stimulate local actors to engage in sustainable forest management [13,14]. It is claimed that sacred forests offer a 'special space for spiritual healing and peacemaking', hence can facilitate the cooperation of the family and the community. Sacred forests can help to create a sense of space, and a sense of community [15]. There are increasing calls to invest more efforts in understanding the importance of sacred forest with respect to forest management. Those efforts should include: (i) the explication of histories and political dynamics of sacred forests [16–18]; (ii) the power relations interplaying within/between the community and within the space of sacred forests [19–21]; and (iii) the recognition of the importance of cultural values present within these 'different spaces' of forest conservation [9,12,22].

In Vietnam, hundreds of successful examples of community forests have been described over the past 20 years. But researchers face a common challenge. They question how to generalize these 'good practices' empirically to wider forest management. Explanations are various, but perhaps the implication of Anh [11] is most relevant: '… instead of hastily copying the whole picture (of community forest) and pasting elsewhere, we should calm down by taking some good perspectives (of that picture) and develop from there …'. Further to this view, this paper will not try to respond to all the calls above. Instead, it will aim to add to the existing knowledge on CFM by examining social and cultural practices within the Mu community forest, a sacred forest that has been managed by the Muong ethnic community for a long time in Vietnam.

Accordingly, the paper introduces Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' as a heuristic tool to explore the particularity of community forest as a space. Foucault's notion has been applied broadly across a range of disciplines. Within the context of CFM study, it has been little investigated, if at all. Heterotopia in Foucault's analysis could apply to a sacred site. The condition entails a particular relation to culture, and especially to social power. Foucault refers to heterotopia as a 'special space', a 'different space' [23]. Applied to an analysis of the case of the Mu sacred forest in Vietnam, this notion of heterotopia helps to understand community forest as a particular space. It offers a fruitful approach to deal with the issues of culture and power which are central to understanding practices of forest management.

After the introduction, this article is divided into four parts. The first part, Section 2, introduces and discusses Foucault's notion of heterotopia. In the second part, we briefly describe the Mu community forest as a research site. The third part clarifies how we carried out the research. In the fourth part, we will demonstrate how heterotopia can help to clarify our understanding of the Mu community forest and other community forests. Finally, the fifth part presents some implications and conclusions for improved CFM.

2. Foucault's 'Of other spaces, Heterotopias'

There is increasing recognition of the importance of space in social and humanities research [20,24]. This development corrects the type of scholarship that in the past few decades has tended to make space less important than movement, displacement, travelling, diaspora, migration and so forth [24]. Escobar [24] argues that there is indeed a need for a corrective theory that neutralizes this erasure of space, the asymmetry that arises from giving far too much importance to the global and far too little to place. Space is much

more than a geographic setting with physical or spatial characteristics; it is fluid, changeable: a dynamic context of social interaction and memory [20,25]. Thus, space is an important source of culture and identity, despite the pervasive de-localisation of social life [24].

Within environmental studies, space has been proposed as a useful concept for improving ecosystem management [17,25,26]. Natural spaces (e.g community forests) are not just the places territorially fixed with trees and animals, or containers of natural resources, or areas for enjoyable activities. They are locations filled with history, memories, and emotional and symbolic meanings [10,25]. Foucault questions the definition of absolute space and claims the recognition of space as a social construction which he calls social space [17].

Foucault was fascinated by social space. He has been known mainly for the way he described social space referring to Bentham's panopticon as an analytic tool – a ubiquitous form of monitoring and disciplining human behaviour, a kind of invisible fence that provides simultaneous surveillance and disciplinary power over certain groups of people [27]. For this study, we do not rely on this metaphor of the panopticon, but we want to make use of a distinction Foucault made in a now famous paper 'Des espaces autres. Heterotopies' [28]. In this text, Foucault distinguishes between three forms of social space including: real space, utopia and heterotopia.

Foucault defines heterotopias as: '… real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' [23].

Foucault [23] presents six principles to clarify this concept. Samuels [29] recapitulates these as: (i) that all societies create heterotopias, (ii) that their function can change through time, (iii) that they juxtapose several incompatible sites within a single real place, (iv) that they break or disrupt traditional concepts of time, (v) that they may require certain acts, performances or rituals, to gain entry into them and (vi) that they only exist in their relation to all other sites and spaces.

Foucault divides heterotopias [23] into two types: crisis heterotopias and deviance heterotopias. Crisis heterotopias are privileged, sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis such as orphanages, boarding schools or military camps. Deviance heterotopias are sites where those perceived to be abnormal are hospitalized or incarcerated such as prison, retirement homes [23].

Heterotopia for Foucault's has two key functions: (i) to create a space of illusion that is for and of the other and (ii) to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space [23]. It is often compared to a mirror, reflecting society upon itself and making the real seem unreal, as it re-presents, contests and inverts real social spaces. Foucault refers to heterotopia simply as an alternative social space, just like the other side of the coin. Thus, Foucault reminds us that our understanding and our relationships inside and outside of the spaces we occupy are constantly renegotiated, remapped and rearticulated. Heterotopia is often in opposition to its spatial counterparts, and it defies normal constructs of space and time [27].

Foucault [23] explains that heterotopia is a site with an alternative relation to time, marked by the perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time, constituting a place of all time that is in itself outside the realm of normal chronology; in effect, heterotopia has its own time zone(s), or even none at all. Foucault suggests that heterotopia emerges at points

that mark absolute breaks with traditional time, where time stands still. Further, he finds that heterotopia functions in relation to all the space that remains; it is 'a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself at the same time is given over to the infinity' [23]. This statement could just as easily describe a postindustrial site, cyberspace, or a cemetery [27,30].

The concept of heterotopia remains provisional, and somewhat confusing, due to the interval between the first statement in 1967 and its wider publication in 1986 [29,31]. Foucault's analysis of heterotopia has been subjected to criticism. Soja [32] criticises Foucault's ideas of heterotopias as incomplete, inconsistent and incoherent at times. He argues that those ideas seem to focus on peculiar micro-geographies, nearsighted and near-sited, deviant and deviously apolitical. Genocchio [29] uses the words '*strange inconsistency*' when he discusses the differences occurring in the meaning of the term in two publications of Foucault. For him, while 'Les Mots et les choses' [33] locates heterotopia primarily in the discursive space, 'Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies' [28] imagines them in a more tangible domain. Nonetheless, according to Johnson [34], most of the criticisms over-simplify the concept. Further, the difference between the original text and the subsequent English version due to the inexact translation by Miskowiec (e.g. *découpages du temps* as 'temporal discontinuities' rather than 'slices of time') led to misinterpretation of the concept.

The notion of heterotopia has, therefore, generated considerable interpretations and applications across a range of disciplines. These include architecture, history, social and cultural geography, literary studies, sociology and urban studies [34]. One essential feature is related to the analysis of power, which is central to Foucault's work, and which offers a distinctive and interesting perspective on power. Although heterotopia exists in relation to social power, it is a kind of 'space of suspension and learning' beyond conventional social structures of power and power relations [27]. Masschelein and Simons [35] considered this aspect in their discussion about teaching and learning in school. They argued that the 'holy or sacred space' in Foucault's analysis is the space where the economic and political are suspended. This suspension of economic, political time will allow a new beginning to emerge. In another context, where Johnson [34] synthesized previous discussions on heterotopia, he argued that it fundamentally 'dissolves, destabilises and interrupts power'. As power in relation to heterotopia is still a contested concept, the question whether heterotopia is an alternative space of liberation needs to be considered [27].

Since Foucault has only explored urban spaces for his heterotopic framework, he may have overlooked the exquisite potential of rural spaces as heterotopic sites, as Sophia [27] argued. Aspects of Foucault's analysis of heterotopia have begun to be applied in various environmental and rural studies. Hook and Vrdoljak [36] used heterotopia principles, on the one hand to prove that the gated security parks in Dainfern – South Africa bear the hallmarks of heterotopias; on the other hand, to understand historical structures of race and class in regard to privilege and poverty in that country. Similarly, Samuels [29] studied the fascist land reform in Italy, using heterotopia to analyse archaeological landscapes, analysing the benefits and limitations of a heterotopic perspective in archaeological contexts.

Foucault's analysis of heterotopia has not yet been directly applied to CFM; although the concept has appeared indirectly in a few analyses. For example, Manuel-Navarrete in his analysis of the Maya forest [32] argued that forests should be conceived as a social construct (similar to Foucault's [21] argument about absolute space) which consists of cultural, political, socio-economic and ecological domains. Manuel-Navarrete [17] points out that the domains have inter-relations with each other, and that one should not ignore

any domain when analysing community forests. This resembles Foucault's [23] argument that heterotopias existed in relation to each other. Similarly, Anh [11] refers to the community forests of the Thai ethnic community in Son La province, Vietnam, as the 'different spaces' (Foucault [23] used this term to refer to heterotopia) as compared to other spaces (forests types) such as state owned forest and household allocated forest. Anh metaphorically suggests that researchers step into the space of community forest to see the difference rather than staying outside the boundaries to do research.

Taking up this suggestion, in the next part we will first briefly describe the Mu community forest; then indicate how we carried out a case study in the Mu community forest in North-West Vietnam; and finally demonstrate how the suggestions of Foucault and others about heterotopia, can help to improve our understanding of the Mu community forest and the particularity of community forests. We do not seek to identify the Mu community forest as a heterotopia. Nevertheless, we think that the concept and features of heterotopia have heuristic value for the study of community forest in respects that have not yet been examined.

3. The Mu community forest – a description

The Mu village is one of ten villages of the Tu Do commune, Lac Son district, Hoa Binh province, Vietnam [37]. It is located deep in a valley surrounded by limestone ranges. The elevation of the village is in between 600 and 800 m above sea level [38]. The village comprises 80 households with 286 inhabitants [37]. All the villagers belong to the Muong ethnic group which is one of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam [37]. The distance from the village to the commune and district headquarter is about 7 km and 25 km, respectively. Access to the Mu village is very difficult because the road is provisional and degraded. Motorbike and foot are the two main means of transport for dwellers to reach the outside world.

Formed on a limestone rock formation, Mu village has limited agricultural land for cultivation. Each household has a few hundred square metres of paddy field and a thousand square metres of terraced field. For generations, forest resource collection has been the main source of income for the villagers [38].

The Mu community forest is located uphill on the mountain next to the village. The total area of the Mu community forest is about 150 ha. As shown in the map of the nature reserve (figure 1) and the sketch map (figure 2), the right edge of the forest is used for the cemetery, while the left one is a sacred forest where villagers worship or organize cultural events. Further down below is the water source providing water for the 'local'[1] villagers. The forest is a natural forest which is in a very good condition compared to the adjacent forests managed by the Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong state owned nature reserve [37,39].

The Mu community forest was notably claimed back by the government in 2004 to establish the Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong nature reserve [40]. The current management of the Mu villagers over the Mu community forest is not officially recognized by the management board of the Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong nature reserve, because the territory of the Mu community forest is within the boundaries of the nature reserve. Nevertheless villagers in Mu village still daily manage the forest by their own customary law, and the Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong nature reserve Management board accepts this fact.

Despite the proliferation of the discussion about CFM in Vietnam in the last two decades, literature on the Muong ethnic group's CFM is very limited. Most of the attention

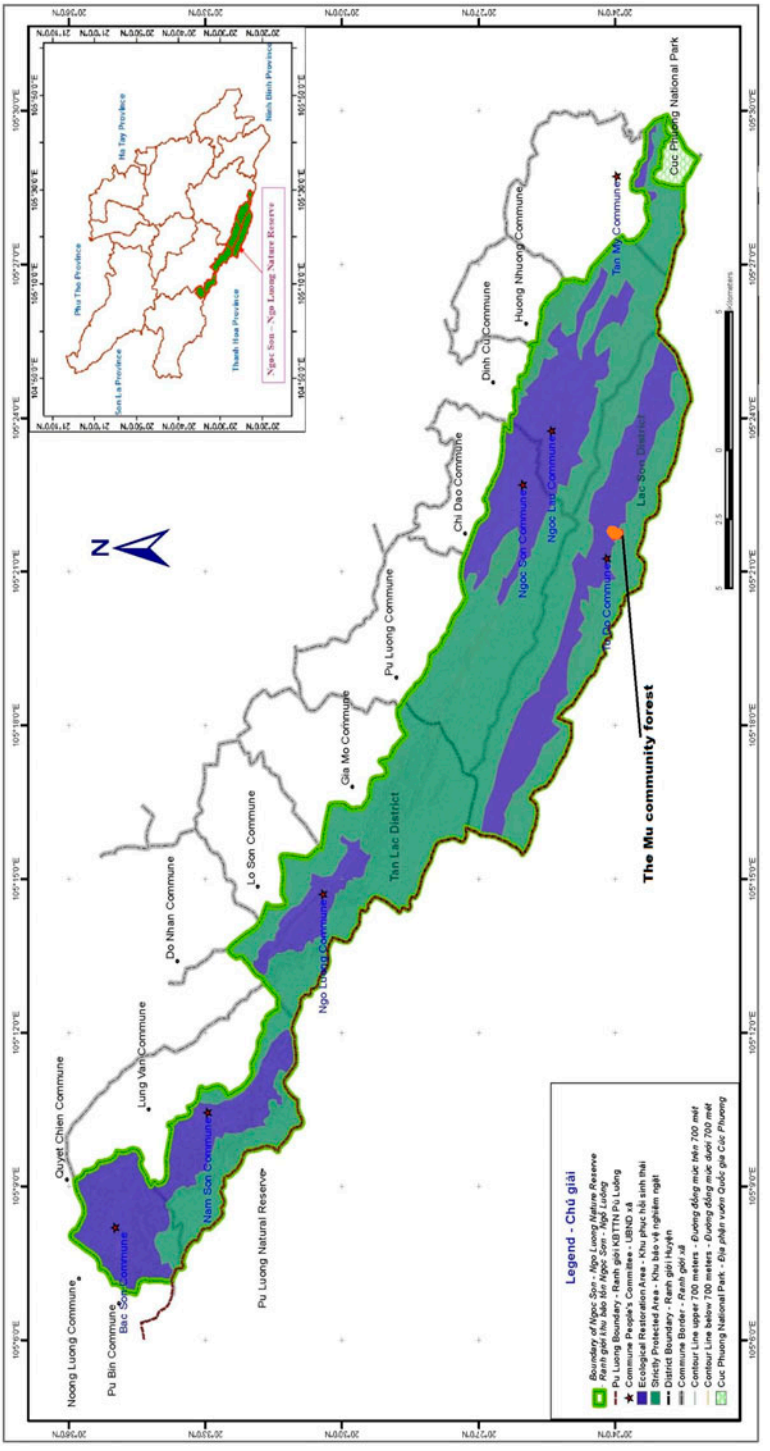

Figure 1. Location of the Mu community forest within the Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong Nature Reserve.

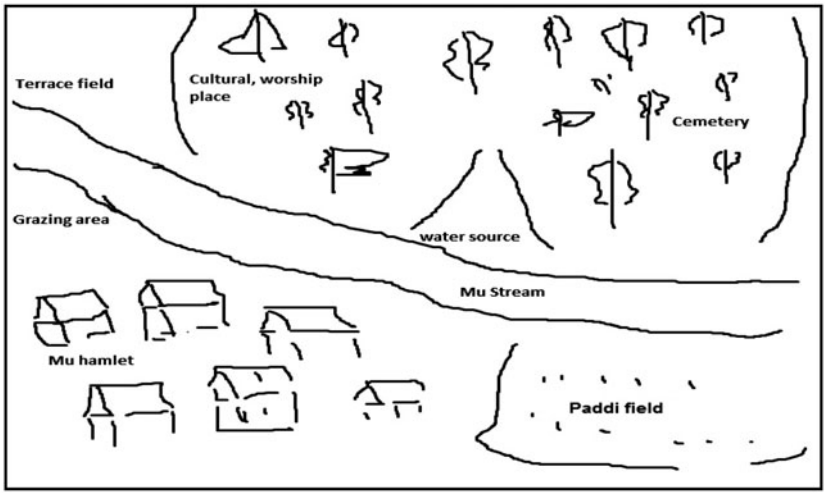

Figure 2. A sketch map of the Mu village and the Mu community forest.

has shifted to the CFM practices of the Thai [5,11,14], the Dao [5,14], the H'mong [11, 14] and the Jarai [41]. Perhaps the absence of research into Muong CFM is tied to the fact that they are distributed mostly in lowlands and that they are closely related to the Kinh (the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam) who have a limited tradition of forest management [42].

According to Pagdee et al. [8], three factors are discussed most frequently as necessary for the success of CFM: (i) well-defined property rights (acess and use rights), (ii) effective institutional arrangements and (iii) community interests and incentives. By use of these points in studying the CFM in Mu village, the following results have been observed:

First, with regard to property rights in the community forest, the access and use rights are granted to 'local' villagers in Mu village only and those rights are very restricted. Villagers are allowed to access the community forest at certain periods such as the season for harvesting bamboo-shoot and medicinal plants, for cultural festivals, funerals and timber felling for house construction or for irrigation activities. With regard to the use rights, a clear distinction is made in the Mu village regulations between timber and non-timber products. For the timber use, each year, a few households are allowed to collect timber for construction works. In order to gain the timber felling rights, people have to secure the agreement of the patriarch and all the household representatives in a village meeting. For the non-timber products, such as bamboo-shoot and medicinal plants, 'local' villagers can freely collect as much as they can carry but must not uproot the plants. This avoids extinction of the resource.

Second, according to the rules, organizations and social norms [44], the patriarch is the highest manager of the Mu community forest. The patriarch is not necessarily the oldest but the person with the highest prestige and in close lineage to the first founder of the village. The incumbent patriarch is chosen by his predecessor but accepted by villagers in a village meeting called by the predecessor. A committee of elders in the village supports

the patriarch. For any decision with regard to access to and use of the community forest, meetings with representatives of all households are called.

There are no written rules for Mu CFM. The rules are orally transmitted. All local villagers know the regulations by heart because they just simply mention the principles of access to and use of the forest resources. Although some scholars [1,10] state that clear boundaries would help maintain effective institutions, the boundaries of the Mu community forest are not clearly demarcated. Canyons, rivulets and ancient big trees are the marks of boundaries. Those symbolic boundary marks are respected by both 'local' villagers and outsiders (see more in Section 5.3). Despite the fact that this institutional practice is rather simple, without monitoring and evaluation protocols, and that the boundaries are not clearly demarcated, the forest is effectively managed. Moreover, we noticed that the regulations are accompanied by mysterious stories about the taboos related to the community. These include stories about the people who dared to violate the taboos such as cutting trees, or entering the forest without permission, becoming sick and even dying [41].

Finally, the issue of spiritual attributes also relates to the third factor, namely community interests and incentives. Beyond the motivation to protect community forest for economic purposes (timber, non-timber products) and biological purposes (conservation as discussed by most scholars e.g. [1,8,21]), the Mu community forest is also protected for cultural purposes. The forest is considered a place where villagers' ancestors live; a place for performing the Muong cultural practices; a place for comparing the past with the present reality – a sacred space. This expression of cultural identity will serve as an important element of the discussion in the next sections.

4. Methodology

This study on the Mu community forest is a case study. It describes in detail the characteristics of a single and specific place: the Mu community forest. A case study [45] provides a means of examining social and cultural phenomena, especially policies and programmes, in a real-life setting where it is not possible to perform experimental manipulations [46]. Scholars and practitioners might choose to apply a more positivist approach introduced by Yin [46], or a more interpretive approach used by Stake [47]. Case study is considered to provide good knowledge of specific conjunctures. It highlights the causal processes significant in those conjunctures. It can also be a tool to identify the direction of causal forces and specify the contextual features that lend a particular cause its leverage over outcomes [19]. But case study is less effective when the objective is to assess the magnitude or relative importance of different causal factors [19]. In CFM research, case study may lead to misinterpretation when generalizing the factors of success to overall community forestry cases [8]. This case study on the Mu community forest limits itself to Stake's argument [48] that case study is good for generalization about that particular case or generalization to a similar case, rather than generalization to a population of cases.

Our study of the Mu community forest uses qualitative methods; including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and textual analysis. The first author of this article had the opportunity to work with the Muong ethnic community in this region since 2001. Initially, he participated in one integrated conservation and development project implemented in the region by Fauna and Flora International, a UK non-governmental organization operating also in Vietnam. While working as a project officer, he interacted daily with local communities on conservation and development issues. In 2009, he

received a scholarship to pursue his PhD; and so, the forest management issue of this region became his research topic. During his residence in the region, he has acquired a better understanding of its natural, social, cultural, political and economic characteristics. He learned the Muong ethnic language to make both himself and local villagers feel comfortable during conversations.

When he began his research project, he was faced with a challenge. Even though he was well known by local communities in the region, he could not access the practices of their CFM because, according to customary law, only local villagers are allowed to bear the law and have access to the space of community forest. But, he had the good fortune to be adopted by one family in the Mu village. This status meant that he was granted the full rights to access and make use of the Mu community forest. He therefore entered the daily life of the Muong community.

All these experiences have been important for constructing and implementing the study methods. The practices of living together with the local communities, knowing the local language and being a local villager exactly fit with what Emerson et al. [49] described about the participant observation method, viz: '… an ethnographic research approach in which the researcher participates in the daily routines of a research setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes and actively reflects on what is going on'.These practices built a trustful relationship between the local villagers and the researcher. During the study process, the researcher had various interviews with the villagers to check his observations and to receive their views on each issue. All the interviews were in the local language. Throughout the investigations, the local villagers remained very cooperative and supportive. Finally, information was retrieved from diversified national and internal publications about community forest and heterotopia in view of the development of our theoretical framework. This comprised technical reports, field notes of various organizations including the Ngoc Son – Ngo Luong nature reserve management board working in this region, and especially some inscriptions about the Muong culture and its sacred forests.

In the next section, we are going to use the notion of heterotopia as a heuristic tool to analyse the Mu sacred forest.

5. The Mu sacred forest – a case study

5.1. The Mu community forest as a crisis heterotopia

In order to make use of Foucault's notion, there is, first, a need to clarify the distinction between the 'sacred sites' as described in contemporary community forest literature and the way Foucault conceives of heterotopia. The term 'community sacred forests' in research work often refers to a time and a space with a particular value such as the place of Gods, of ghosts; of spirits of ancestors [1]. The 'sacred' in Foucault's analysis is understood in the sense which we also find in the notion of 'sanctuary'. The 'sacred' is not mainly a space and time of God and his laws but a space and time where laws (of politics, of economy, of state, of market, and so on) are suspended. In this sense, the 'sacred' is a free space and free time [35]. This is not to say that 'religious sacred sites' cannot comprise heterotopia. The 'sacred' according to Foucault [23] bears a more profound sense than the religious sacred. Nevertheless, the 'sacred' in Foucault's sense could be a space that can attract religious practices (e.g. the Church). Indeed, the religious sacred spaces have heterotopic characteristics, but of course, heterotopia is not simply equal to a sacred

place in the religious sense, because things happening within the sacred site are not necessarily defined in relation to religion. For example, the church sometimes functions as an asylum for refugees; and as we will see in the observations below, the Mu community sacred forest is not only the place for religious worship.

As noted, Foucault distinguishes between deviance and crisis heterotopias [23]. He refers to crisis heterotopias as sacred, or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis. In this sense, next to its religious function, as a space for worshipping and as a cemetery space (figure 2), the Mu community forest also has some features of a crisis heterotopia. First, as Foucault [23] notes, the crisis heterotopias are often 'nowhere' spaces, without geographical markers or mapping of any kind. Sophia [27] argues that, despite these non-geographical signs, local people know where they are and what function they serve.

The Mu sacred forest fits this kind of description. The boundaries of the site are not concretely and obviously marked. Moreover, the regulations of access to and use of the site are not explicit or formally written. Yet, all the Mu villagers know very well about the place and understand the functions of the site. Second, according to Son [43] and Ha [42], since the Muong ethnic traditional culture has undergone a serious assimilation process by the Kinh people (the dominant culture), the Muong community forests were among the remaining places to celebrate and preserve traditional culture. Thus the Mu community forest functions both as a religious sacred space and one to safeguard and presrve cultural practices. As earlier noted, although the function of community forests for resource protection has been much discussed, the aspect of cultural preservation has not yet been sufficiently understood. Accordingly, it is argued that 'conflicts over forest resource management often represent conflicts between cultures, clashes between opposing or simply different views of the world' [12]. Therefore, conservation objectives of the community forest will not be achieved if cultural values are not explicitly recognized [2].

5.2. The Mu community forest as a place of self reflective construction of culture

Foucault's brief discussion of the cultural aspects of heterotopia has provided a source for contentious debates of subsequent scholars. Babhha [30] and Hetherington [51] suggest that heterotopia is a space of resistance and or subversion in relation to the dominant culture. On the other hand, Johnson [31,34] and Davis [30] argue that Foucault does not explicitly relate heterotopia to such a space. Further, Davis [30] affirms that she sees heterotopia as a space of self-reflection and inversion rather than resistance as Babhha suggests. The following observations about cultural practices taking place within the Mu sacred forest may be useful.

Foucault [23] believes that heterotopia has a particular function in relation to all remaining spaces. This means that in spite of the distinction of heterotopia from the spaces around it, it does connect and link with other spaces, even if such connections may create effects of contrast and difference [36]. Soja [32] calls this connection the 'external function' of heterotopia. This function can be related also to our observations in the Mu community forest. As shown in the sketched map (figure 2), within the space of the Mu community forest, there are various smaller spaces (for worshiping, for cultural celebration, for cemetery and for water provision). Each space has a specific function related to life in the Mu village. The space for worship is created for the villagers to pray to the Gods

(*Trời, Thần* in Muong language) and to the ancestors (*Tổ* in Muong language), who are expected to fulfil their hopes (which in a way we could treat as 'illusions' in Foucault's sense) of wealth (good harvesting season, good business, etc) and health.

All these hopes relate to things expected to happen in the village outside the Mu community forest. Similarly, the cultural celebration space is created to engage in cultural practices which apparently offer experiences of joy and peace to the villagers who attend. Those religious or cultural practices have a special connection with the life and the productive practices of the villagers outside the forest. The cultural practices simulate the daily activities taking place in their village (paddi threshing, fishing, house building, etc), in their rice fields (rice cutting and rice ploughing). Finally, for the Muong community, the cemetery is the space of new life for the dead. Villagers make a new house (above the grave) including the necessary production equipment for the dead. The Muong people conceive of death as a new and better life. Thus, all 'partitioned' spaces within the Mu community forest have a specific connection to the real space of the daily life of villagers in the Mu village.

Furthermore, in relation to the two kinds of heterotopia discussed above, we can conceive of the Muong's culture being in a mode of crisis. As Ha [42] has asserted '… traditional clothes are now worn by the old only … the young generation now prefers pop music to their own traditional songs …'. An observation which is shared by the patriarch of the Mu village: '… we {the old} are freaks in the eyes of the youth … I am worried that there will be no successor in preserving our culture … Our forest {the Mu community forest} is the last remaining place that preserves our culture and our forest …' (fieldnotes).

In an effort to understand better why the Mu community forest preserves culture, we suggest that the taboos and the myths about the Mu community forest which are verbally transferred from generation to generation play a key role in the protection of this place. They act as an important institution that regulates the place. Moreover, we noticed that villagers led by the patriarch have taken advantage of this informal institution [41] to educate the young generation in the Muong cultural values. In various cultural festivals/ceremonies taking place within the space of the Mu community forest that we have attended,[2] apart from the normal actions of the ceremonies, the organizer loudly explained the meanings of each step/activity to the villagers around. Various villagers described this additional exercise as rather recent, with the main aim to teach those who do not know or tend to forget the Muong traditional culture.

> … our children are forgetting the customs, the patriarch and those who organize the ceremonies have to speak loudly to explain the processes of a ceremony … (Mr Bui Trong Dinh)

> It is not so nice to speak loudly because God and our ancestors might not be happy… but we hope they will understand … this is the best way of teaching people, especially the young generation since only in this sacred space are they willing to learn because that is the way to show respect to God and our ancestors … (Mrs. Bui Thi Ban, the harvesting season ceremony organizer)

> … within this sacred space, within the ceremonies, they {young generation} learn better because their minds are filled with joy and peace … they forget all about other things, they forget about the time … all concentrate in the ceremonies … (Mrs. Bui Thi Ly, the new year festival organizer)

This last statement carries an important suggestion that we have taken up in our research. It relates to the temporal dimension that Foucault [23] has added to heterotopia: '… heterotopias that are linked … to time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival. These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal; they are rather absolutely temporal … '. The statement also resonates with what Masschelein and Simons [35] and Masschelein [52] observed regarding particular spaces operating as a kind of heterotopia insofar as they suspend regular time and space: they call these times and spaces educational times and spaces (based on the ancient notion of 'scholè' as 'free time'). Masschelein [52] further states '… These spaces are "free spaces", but not recreation or leisure spaces, precisely in the sense which seems to be indicated by the Greek scholè. Spaces where (economic, social, cultural, political, private …) time is suspended'. It is time where the regular order and all the forces that constitute it are not destroyed or discarded but temporarily prevented from being in operation. This moment of suspension contains the opportunity to reshape the order. Not in a spectacular, revolutionary way, but in a slow way offering people chances for reshaping their relationships (with the environment and with others) and their ways of behaving. It therefore allows people to form new relationships and offers the opportunity to learn [53].

Thus, the analysis provides more evidence to affirm that the cultural practices taking place within the Mu heterotopia have particular functions in relation to the life and time experience of the villagers in Mu village. The cultural education taking place in the space of the Mu sacred forest supports also the observation of Davis [30] that heterotopia is a space of self reflective construction.

Our most important finding might relate to the issue of time suspension. Indeed, the (temporal) suspension of economic, social, cultural, political and private time could have much meaning for forest conservation. Where, 'out there', forests are seriously degraded because of the influence of power relations, of economics, of politics, of markets and so on [10,11,54], the moment of suspension within the Mu sacred forest operating as heterotopia could be a precious moment for people to re-think the conflict, to re-shape the relations and therefore to protect the forest better.

5.3. The Mu community forest as a space of power suspension

The experience of time suspension as observed during the cultural ceremonies raises interesting questions regarding power relations: (1) 'Is heterotopia free from constraints of social power?' and (2) 'Is heterotopic social power any different from that which exists in real society?' These questions are important for forest resource management since in real life, just outside the boundaries of the Mu community forest, the forests of the Ngoc Son Ngo Luong nature reserve are greatly degraded, and power issues (dominant power, power imbalance and power abuse) are believed to be among the key causes of forest degradation [1,55,56]. If the Mu community forest could exist outside the grasp of dominant power relations or at least could (temporarily) neutralize the constraints of social power, there might be opportunities for contributing to halting forest degradation through the reshaping of relations.

Within the framework of our research, we have observed various practical examples of how power relations change between the outside and the inside spaces of the Mu community forest. To some extent they give an answer to the above questions.

The first observation relates to three forest rangers working for the nature reserve (one senior and two juniors). They were themselves born in the Mu village and live there, but

since they are equipped with particular administrative power delegated by the nature reserve their position and their way of living distinguishes them from all other villagers. The father of one junior official even contended that '… they are really condescending … they were born here but they now speak the language of the nature reserve … they never listen to our contributions to forest protection …' (Mr Bui Van Hoi). Because of their different life-style and also because of the long term conflict between villagers and the nature reserve over forest resource use and management, villagers asked (half seriously): 'Police, tax officer, and forest ranger; among those, whom should we stab first?[3]'. Interestingly, these officials were seen to change their attitude and behaviour completely when they entered the Mu community forest to attend the cultural practices. They became friendly with all the villagers participating in the ceremony and *vice versa*. They helped to prepare necessary things for the cultural ceremony. They listened to the instructions of the ceremony organizers and did exactly what they were asked for. All this behaviour and attitude contrasted strongly with their behaviour and attitude in the village.

The second observation relates to the invitation of the head of the nature reserve by the villagers. As a mark of hospitality, the head of the nature reserve is often invited to join the main cultural festivals taking place either within the Mu village or the Mu community forest. It was surprising to observe that if the ceremony takes place within the village, the head of the nature reserve will wear his uniform, will claim a priviliged place in the room and will try to intervene in the ceremony by some speeches about forest conservation. But, if the ceremony is organized within the Mu community forest, he will wear casual clothes and behave like every other participant. Furthermore, he even actively assists the preparation of the ceremony, and listens to the instructions of the organizers. Moreover, he makes no speech and claims no particular place or privilege.

The third observation relates to the nature reserve forest violation. For livelihood reasons, a number of Mu villagers sometimes enter the nature reserve territory either to cut timber or hunt animals. They often encounter the forest rangers and are chased by them. In those cases, these villagers try to reach as quickly as possible to the territory of the Mu community forest. Once they enter the Mu community forest, the forest rangers do not dare to follow them in order to arrest them. Moreover, the villagers, when fleeing for the rangers and entering the Mu community forest will leave the timbers and hunted animals outside, being afraid of polluting the sacred space.

Finally, the last observation very much relates to what Foucault [23] calls 'a highly heterotopic heterotopia' – the cemetery. Foucault argues that the cemetery begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their usual time. In the space of the cemetery, we noticed moments when the living engage in peaceful talks with the dead (at the funeral- *tang* in Muong language), when they confess and apologize for any misdeeds towards the dead, when they promise to live better. In our conversation afterward, they stated that in those moments, they neither feel shy, nor afraid, but feel at peace. Perhaps, the following Muong expression is a good illustration of the cemetry as highly heterotopic space: '… No matter what you are, rich or poor are the same, power and money are meaningless in this space[4]'.

Thus, these observations suggest that within the context of the Mu community forest, power relations seem to be transformed, reversed or suspended when the boundaries are crossed and the space of the community forest is entered. These observations resonate with Johnson's argument that '… heterotopia fundamentally dissolves, destabilises and interrupts power' [31]. A further or perhaps comparative analysis of power issues is needed to confirm these observations. Nonetheless, within the framework of forest resource manage-

ment, it appears that, if power is suspended in the space of community forest, it could perhaps also become a space for a cooperative and equal discussion about forest protection and use. The particular positioning of those wandering in those spaces, the particular suspension they operate, could allow for different kinds of conversation and negotiation.

6. Conclusions and implications

We have tried to indicate how Foucault's notion of heterotopia (including the discussion about it) has helped us to clarify and to understand our observations regarding the operation of the Mu sacred forest. We do not think it important, whether or not the Mu community forest can be identified in all respects as a heterotopia. But, we think that the concept and features of heterotopia can be a heuristic tool which helps to reveal something about community forest as a particular space that until now has remained unrecognized. We are convinced that it offers an interesting and innovative approach to deal with the issue of culture and power which are of central importance when we try to understand (and support) practices of forest management.

The insights that emerged have re-affirmed the arguments of previous researchers regarding the functioning and operating of heterotopias. They have also suggested interesting implications for forest management. We found indications that the Mu community forest can indeed be conceived as a space of 'self reflective construction' [30], but also as a space where economic, social, cultural, political and private time is suspended and where we therefore have time at our disposal for a new beginning, for a reshaping of social relations. Our observations appear to support the view that the Mu community forest is a space that dissolves, destabilizes, interrupts and (to a certain extent) suspends power [31]. Within the context of forest resource management where forest degradation through over-exploitation becomes a serious problem, the investigation of power suspension is increasingly important. Power suspension would be a precious moment in which people are at peace, freed from their usual frame [35] and escaping usual authorities and repression [27]. During the moment of suspended power, there might be emergence of opportunities for people to reshape their relationships or to learn new things from each other and with each other. These could offer some hope for sustainable forest management in the sense that the community forest could operate as a 'space of suspension and learning': a space where actors could convene and find solutions for forest conservation. Since the research is still a case specific study, more comparative efforts are needed to arrive at more valid conclusions.

Notes

1. Huong [57] argued that the notion of 'local' could be misleading and even derogatory if not elaborately defined. Taking up her suggestion, in this article we will put the term 'local' between inverted commas to refer to specific Mu villagers who live in the Mu hamlet and have daily interactions with the Mu community forest.
2. The corresponding author attended two harvesting season ceremonies in April and in September, two events of worshipping God for wealth and health in May and December, and one New Year festival in January (following the Lunar Calendar).
3. In Muong language: Công an, Phòng thuế, Kiểm lâm; trong ba đua đó thi đâm đua nao?
4. The original expression in Muong: Ở đay, bất kê ai, sang hay hèn đều như nhau; quyên lực nhu tien bac thi vô nghia– in Vietnamese: Ở chỗ này, bất kể là ai, dù sang hay hèn đều như nhau, quyền lực và tiền bạc là vô nghĩa.

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