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Luminous Elegies: Chăm Family Documentary in Phước Lập, Vietnam

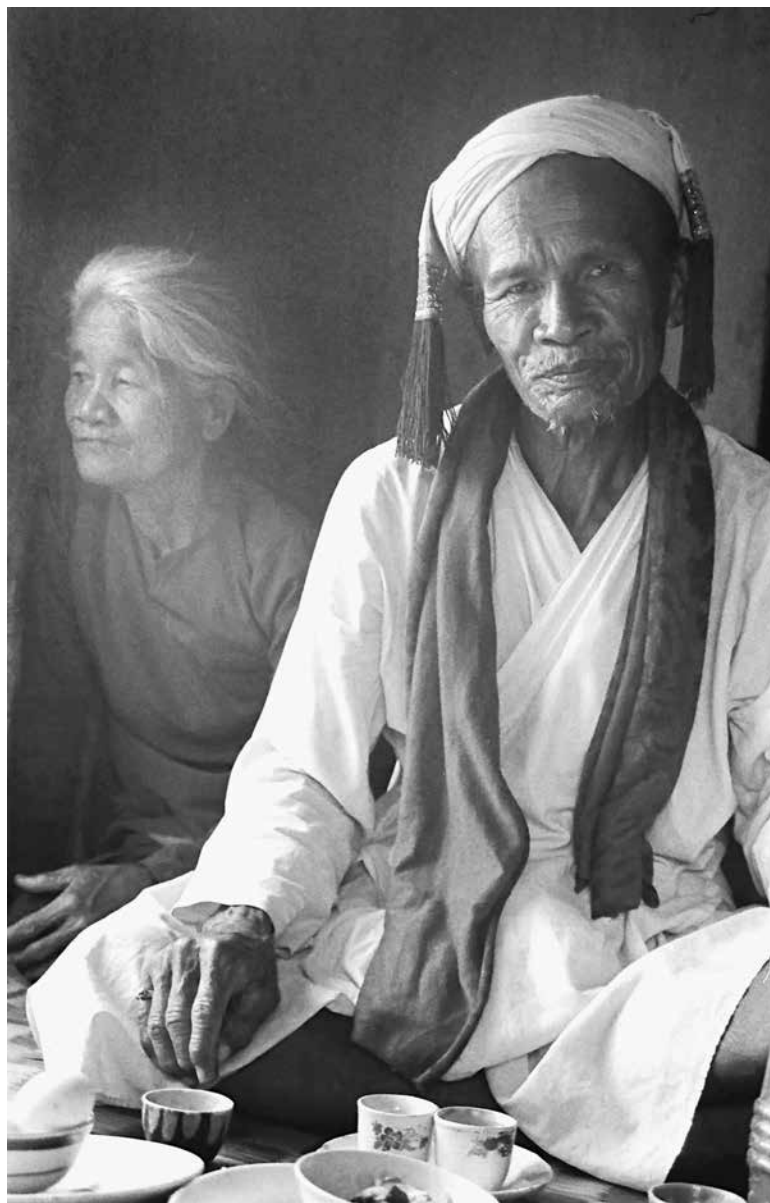
Julie Thi Underhill

Once she arrived in the United States, my mother Ly mourned her loss of home with food and incense supplications. Once she found a *National Geographic* from 1971 on the peoples of Southeast Asia, she held our sole representation like a prayer. Framing Po Nagar, the Chăm mother goddess, she ventured, “We must have been the original people, like the Native Americans here, existing long before the Vietnamese came, at least a thousand years.” Yet sometimes when I’d repeat her observations, with questions of my own, she’d reply, “How were we supposed to learn our culture, when we had to struggle to survive?!” During war, Ly traveled for hours with her mother, north to Nha Trang, to pray for protection at Po Nagar’s temple. How many centuries had the Chăm bowed with those echoing prayers? Our people’s destruction became another unanswerable sorrow Ly carried from Viet Nam, like the deaths of her husband and daughter, like nightmares

and offerings. I'd consult school library encyclopedias on our behalf, until I grew too disheartened to report upon our apparent extinction as a people.

In the few surviving family photos, the legacies of territorial conflict linger in our faces and bodies—my mother with French paternal ancestry, my elder siblings with a Vietnamese father, and my younger siblings and I with European American blood. In the one photo of my elder Chăm grandmother, she sat far away on the front steps, blinking away sunlight and sadness. In 1999, I traveled to Viet Nam to meet her, Thị Oai, as she lay blind and dying. She sought the essence of her daughter, with fingertips on my face, just as I searched hers for my mother. She cried for Ly, who'd been too frightened to make the journey yet who carried a deep desire for amends. At my mother's request, I photographed Thị Oai across barriers of three languages, during a nine-thousand-mile span of twenty-four years, within two months of burial. My photographs are the first portraiture I'd ever seen of the Chăm, through which I'd hoped to capture elegance and resilience, even in death. During my third trip to Viet Nam in 2006, my family gathered for the second burial of Thị Oai. In continued remembrance, I recorded my mother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings performing the rituals that committed my grandmother to the Chăm holy grounds and ancestral afterlife.

Even before my first visit at age twenty-two, during previous travels in Mexico and south central Africa, I'd grappled with photography's functions of memorialization and the ethics of documentary. My Chăm series differs from the paternalistic concerns of "salvage ethnographers" staging and praising the exoticisms of pending extinction. However elegant and sublime their eyes and gestures, my photographs cannot stop the Vietnamese government's construction in 2012 of a nuclear power plant on already impoverished Chăm lands. My photographs cannot demand the protection of our people from such poisons, nor remedy the psychological, cultural, and social impact of colonialism and war, after six hundred years of exploited humanity. I cannot salvage the Chăm from our vulnerabilities, any more than I could salvage my grandmother from her death. Instead my photographs linger in the liminal zone between history and memory, where our generations "re-member" those silenced and lost by dispossession and disconnection. As a transnational family ruptured by wars, our commemorations have become material and immaterial sites for expressions of loss and other vocabularies of remembrance, amidst continuously remade notions of identity, belonging, and home.



Grand aunt and grand uncle. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Three ages of women. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Grandma. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Granddaughters. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Aunts and uncle. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Reunion. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Children. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Vigil feast. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Prayer for Thị Oai. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill



Thị Oai's reburial. Courtesy Julie Thi Underhill