

From Trauma to Legend: Ghost Narratives and Postwar Memory in Mỹ Lai

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This article examines how contemporary ghost legends related to the Mỹ Lai Massacre (March 16, 1968) shape collective memory in postwar Vietnam. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, including 38 in-depth interviews conducted from 2021 to 2024, the study suggests that remembrance in Mỹ Lai is organized through two interrelated layers: institutionalized memory and vernacular memory. Based on this finding, the article proposes the Space, Spirit, and Ritual (SSR) framework to elucidate the mechanisms through which memory operates in Mỹ Lai. Although grounded in the Vietnamese case, the framework is presented as a heuristic for comparative analysis of memory-making in other communities affected by collective violence, with careful attention to local context. It also contributes to ongoing scholarly dialogues in folklore studies, memory studies, the anthropology of religion, and global memory politics.

Keywords: Ghost Legends; Mỹ Lai Massacre; Postwar Vietnam; Space, Spirit, and Ritual (SSR) Framework; Vernacular Memory



INTRODUCTION

In contemporary scholarship, memory studies have emerged as a pivotal paradigm for examining how societies confront the legacies of past conflicts and collective violence. Since the late twentieth-century memory boom, scholars across disciplines have examined how historical traumas are remembered, interpreted, and transmitted across generations (Winter, 2010). Catastrophic events such as war, genocide, and political purges not only leave scars on individual psyches but also shape frameworks of collective memory, compelling nations to continuously “negotiate with their own past” (Jelin, 2003, p. 2). This negotiation with wartime memory constitutes a shifting terrain in which competing interpretations coexist, interact, and often come into sharp conflict. Winter (1995) argues that memory is actively constructed in the present and therefore reflects contemporary needs and debates.

In post-conflict societies, collective memory rarely exists as a single, linear narrative. Instead, it often unfolds through overlapping, and at times competing, registers that reflect tensions between institutional authority and communal experience. On the one hand, institutionalized memory is produced and maintained by the state and other dominant institutions through practices such as official memorials and commemorative rituals. This form of memory

seeks to consolidate an authorized narrative of war and suffering, often in the service of national identity and political legitimacy (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989). On the other hand, vernacular memory is rooted in local communities and transmitted via oral storytelling, religious devotion, and everyday practices. This memory is emotionally charged, grounded in lived trauma, and at times challenges official discourse (Bodnar, 1992). These two forms of memory are not mutually exclusive; they engage in ongoing negotiation – a public dialogue in which what is remembered, narrated, and commemorated remains contested and subject to continual reinterpretation.

Among the diverse expressions of vernacular memory, ghost legends represent one of the most widespread and persistent forms. They serve as essential cultural mechanisms through which communities make sense of untimely or unjust deaths, especially those resulting from collective violence. This phenomenon is remarkably transnational: from *yūrei* spirits in Japan's postwar remembrance (Foster, 2009), to restless souls demanding justice in Cambodia's Killing Fields (Ledgerwood, 1997), and spectral figures entangled with national identity in Srebrenica (Mencej, 2021). These narratives function as vernacular archives, encoding complex social emotions such as grief, guilt, and moral accountability, which are often neglected or suppressed by official discourse. As such, ghost legends constitute an active mode of remembering and a key resource for shaping the moral and psychological landscapes of post-conflict societies.

Vietnam, with its history as a palimpsest of overlapping wartime traumas, offers a uniquely rich case for memory studies. What makes it distinctive is not only the intergenerational accumulation of memories from a protracted and devastating war, but also the fragmented and internally contested structure of postwar memory. A key feature of the post-1975 period is the interplay between two ways of making sense of wartime death. One is a vernacular cosmology rooted in beliefs about *oan hồn* – spirits of unjust death that are understood to require ritual consolation and moral redress (Thiận, 2007). The other is an official secular, materialist approach that has shaped state policy and public discourse (Roszko, 2012). Within this contested space, ghost legends have provided a flexible way to negotiate competing expectations about the past. They reflect both communal efforts to “work through the scars of conflict” (Kwon, 2008, p. 15) and a subtle means of preserving spiritual traditions without directly confronting official discourse. However, these local dynamics of remembering remain underrepresented in scholarship that privileges state institutions and mainstream historiographies of the Vietnam War. While widely cited works by Logevall (2012) and Hastings (2018) offer important macro-level insights, their focus on political-military narratives often leaves less room for local archives and vernacular forms of remembrance. As a result, what Bodnar (1992) describes as a public dialogue between institutionalized memory and vernacular spiritual forms – often expressed through supernatural idioms – remains insufficiently explored in Vietnam.

To address this gap, this article examines the Mỹ Lai Massacre (March 16, 1968) in Quảng Ngãi Province, central Vietnam. The massacre resulted from a directive explicitly targeting civilians, as testified by U.S. soldiers who were instructed that “in the morning, the villagers usually go to the market; whoever remains in the village is surely a Viet Cong,” a term used by American and South Vietnamese forces to refer to the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Anderson, 1998, p. 78). This assumption contributed to the mass killing of civilians; Vietnamese memorial records commonly list 504 victims, most of them women, children, and older people (Jones, 2017). Ironically, official investigations by the U.S. Army later concluded that “there was no evidence that any Viet Cong forces were present in Mỹ Lai or engaged in combat that day” (Belknap, 2002, p. 112). The massacre, initially concealed, was eventually exposed by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (1970), turning Mỹ Lai into a global symbol of

wartime atrocity. Today, Mỹ Lai functions as both a national heritage site, where official narratives emphasize victory and the enemy's crimes, and a dynamic spiritual space, where ghost legends surrounding unjust deaths are still actively recounted by local residents. The coexistence of these two mnemonic streams – one institutional, the other vernacular – within the same location makes Mỹ Lai a particularly illustrative site for examining such tensions in postwar societies. While the seminal works of Heonik Kwon (2006, 2008) and Christina Schwenkel (2009) have established Mỹ Lai as a key symbol in global academic discourse, these studies primarily adopt an anthropological perspective and do not yet integrate ghost narratives into a broader analytical framework. This article proposes a new tripartite analytical framework, Space, Spirit, and Ritual (SSR), to analyze how vernacular legends contribute to postwar memory-making. The framework is first applied to Mỹ Lai as a complex setting in which institutionalized and vernacular memory interact and is then advanced as a flexible heuristic for analyzing other post-conflict contexts.

This article addresses two central questions:

1. How have ghost legends in Mỹ Lai been mobilized by both vernacular and institutionalized memory as symbolic tools for constructing and negotiating postwar remembrance?
2. In what ways can the SSR framework contribute to expanding current theories of cultural memory, particularly in the context of postwar Vietnam and beyond?

To answer these questions, the article examines the interaction between vernacular and institutionalized memory in Mỹ Lai through the SSR framework. This framework not only identifies key components in the making of postwar memory but also explains how they interact in a dynamic feedback loop in which memory is continually generated, recalibrated, and negotiated. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork and interdisciplinary scholarship, this study clarifies the structure of postwar memory in Vietnam and offers a flexible analytical tool applicable to broader post-conflict contexts.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Foundational Theories in Memory Studies: From Social Frames to Sites of Memory and Vernacular Contestation

Understanding how contemporary ghost legends in Mỹ Lai shape collective memory rests on a core theoretical premise: memory is not merely an individual act but a socially and spatially constructed phenomenon. This perspective is grounded in the foundational work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who argued that all memory is anchored in *Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (social frameworks of memory). As he noted, “[...] there are no recollections that exist outside the frameworks used by people living in society [...]” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 43). This insight forms the basis for interpreting stories in Mỹ Lai not as isolated recollections, but as products of specific social structures and interactions.

Building on Halbwachs's insights, Jan Assmann develops an influential analytical framework for understanding how collective memory is shaped within institutionalized settings. According to Assmann (2011), collective memory is “a system for storing, transmitting and reconstructing meaningful images of the past” (p. 5). He terms this “cultural memory,” a form of memory “maintained through cultural formation and institutional communication,”

represented by “objectivized symbols” such as texts, monuments, rituals, or commemorative sites (Assmann, 2011, p. 111). From this perspective, institutional memory does not aim to reconstruct events as they actually occurred but to craft a symbolic past that legitimizes the present community’s political and moral identity. As Assmann (2011) emphasizes, “[...] what matters is not the past as such, but the past as remembered [...]” (p. 19). He also warns that “institutional memory is never innocent” because it is always selective and directed (p. 20). The case of Mỹ Lai clearly illustrates how institutional memory operates: The state organizes official rituals, erects monuments, and frames the victims as national martyrs, reinforcing a nationalist discourse. Alongside this, however, exists a different paradigm – vernacular memory – manifested through ghost legends, local rituals, and indigenous belief practices. Unlike its institutional counterpart, vernacular memory does not seek legitimacy but maintains belief in spirits, interprets unjust death, and provides communal healing after tragedy. The structural, functional, and contextual contrast between these two modes creates a dual memory field in which institutional and vernacular memories intersect and conflict, reflecting fundamentally different approaches to remembering the past.

This theoretical framework is further spatialized through Pierre Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). Nora argues that these sites are not passive containers of memory but active agents shaping perceptions of the past, especially when the “real environments of memory” (i.e., living, spontaneous memory) have faded (Nora, 1989). Adapting this concept, the present study employs the term *space* to emphasize that such physical locations are not merely mnemonic repositories but dynamic stages where memory is continuously produced, negotiated, and reshaped through the interplay of spirit and ritual.

Finally, John Bodnar’s (1992) concept of vernacular memory offers a political lens for interpreting this dynamic. Vernacular memory is not merely informal; it is a contested space in which grassroots communities construct meanings that may challenge or uneasily coexist with the official memory promoted by state elites (Bodnar, 1992, p. 14). From this perspective, the ghost legends in Mỹ Lai are not simply folklore but a form of cultural politics – a medium through which local communities process trauma, affirm values, and sustain their own version of the past.

The synthesis of these theoretical frameworks – from social frameworks (Halbwachs), institutional memory (Assmann), and sites of memory (Nora) to vernacular memory as a contested space (Bodnar) – highlights a critical blind spot in postwar memory studies in Vietnam: the lack of analysis of the collision, tension, and negotiation between institutional and vernacular forms of memory within the same social space. In contexts such as Mỹ Lai, memory is not shaped by a single center but emerges through parallel and dialogic discourses – between state – directed memory on the one hand and vernacular memory maintained through local beliefs, oral traditions, and ritual practices on the other. This study approaches such interaction as a dynamic process, in which memory is continuously produced, adjusted, and negotiated within contemporary social and spiritual spaces.

From State Hegemony to Vernacular Spiritual Symbols: An Interdisciplinary Approach

The analysis of institutional memory in Mỹ Lai can be further elaborated through Michel Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power and discourse and Antonio Gramsci’s (1970) theory of hegemony. First, from the discursive perspective, Foucault (1980) argues that power produces knowledge and “truth”. In an interview, Foucault notes: “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). In the case of Mỹ Lai, the memory of the civilian victims’ sacrifice

tends to be interpreted and integrated into the dominant discourse of the resistance war. The event is thus connected to the broader narrative of the national struggle, rendering the memory of the tragedy compatible with the narrative framework of revolutionary heroism. Second, for such a discourse to be accepted, it must operate through the mechanism of “hegemony”, as conceptualized by Gramsci (1971). Hegemony is not enforced through coercion but achieved through cultural leadership. It functions by absorbing and reshaping vernacular cultural elements to serve the ideological aims of the ruling class. The commemorative rituals in Mỹ Lai illustrate this process: by integrating local devotional practices (such as incense offering and ancestral worship) into official ceremonies, the state created a flexible bridge through which vernacular memory could be softly aligned with official ideology, reinforcing its cultural hegemony. This synthesis reflects an evolution in cultural policy, where the state sought to integrate vernacular spiritual practices into the national cultural heritage. This approach aimed to foster social cohesion and national identity by formally recognizing and respecting these traditions.

Within the dialogical interplay between official and vernacular memory, contemporary legends about postwar restless spirits have emerged as a form of cultural and spiritual counter-discourse, enabling communities to renegotiate the meanings of the past from below. Bill Ellis (2001) defines the contemporary legend not as a fixed narrative genre but as a “social process” through which communities engage with the anxieties and tensions of their time. Linda Dégh offers a particularly influential theoretical foundation for this view, arguing that the power of a belief legend lies not in its unquestioned credibility but in its capacity to initiate debate over what might be considered true. Rather than passive storytelling, a legend is “a debated and debatable discourse on the possibility of belief in the supernatural in our time” (Dégh, 1994, p. 55). In this sense, legends are not merely tales but social acts through which communities collectively question, affirm, and negotiate their own versions of truth – particularly when such truth involves trauma and injustice. Within this framework, legends of restless spirits in Vietnam attain their full theoretical significance. Foundational studies such as *Thần, Người và Đất Việt* by Trường (2006), together with analyses in Thiện (2007), Ngân (2021), and Phước (2023), have shown that belief in unsettled souls resulting from *cái chết oan* [wrongful deaths] and the necessity of appeasement rituals are fundamental cultural mechanisms for processing trauma and reestablishing social order. Building upon these insights, this article develops an analytical approach by systematically connecting Vietnamese folklore studies with international memory theory. Specifically, it contends that legends of wandering spirits are not merely devotional expressions but constitute an active mechanism of vernacular memory. They enact what Dégh (1994) describes as a “contested discourse”, in which local communities question, negotiate, and occasionally resist the hegemonic narratives imposed by the state. Thus, this study does not merely analyze a local belief system but contributes to the broader theoretical discourse on memory by demonstrating how specific spiritual cosmologies produce contested mnemonic spaces, enriching our understanding of how memory functions in post-conflict societies.

Situating the Research: Previous Studies on the Mỹ Lai Phenomenon

Scholarship on memory in Mỹ Lai necessarily engages with the foundational works of Heonik Kwon. His publications, especially *After the Massacre* (2006) and *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (2008), laid the groundwork for the study of this region. Approaching the topic through an anthropological lens, Kwon made pioneering contributions to the understanding of commemorative practices and the tensions between honoring civilian victims and honoring military personnel. In particular, he interpreted ghost stories as a cultural response to trauma, emphasizing

that legends of weeping spirits wandering at night serve as a communal way of coping with and managing the scars of conflict (Kwon, 2006, 2008).

This study acknowledges and builds upon Kwon's contributions, especially his emphasis on spirits and ritual, but seeks to move beyond his thematic and descriptive analyses. Expanding upon his insights into the components of memory at Mỹ Lai, this study focuses on clarifying their underlying mechanisms. This study posits that the dynamic interaction and mutual constitution of these components can be effectively interpreted through the SSR framework. In other words, while Kwon has revealed what constitutes memory at Mỹ Lai, this study aims to explain how it functions. The proposed framework centers on the dynamic interplay among mnemonic elements, offering a potentially transferable approach for other post-conflict contexts.

Proposal of the SSR Framework

The SSR framework emphasizes the close relationship between the site of death or burial, the type of spirit that arises, and the corresponding ritual practices. In the Vietnamese cosmological worldview, the place where one dies plays a crucial role in shaping the fate and nature of the spirit (Trương, 2006). This foundational distinction is expressed through the opposition between "death at home" (dying in one's own house, with funeral rites conducted by descendants) and "death on the road" (dying away from home, suddenly, or violently). The former is considered a "good death," as the spirit has an anchoring place, is worshiped by descendants, and gradually becomes an ancestor. In contrast, Toan Ánh (1992) notes that those who "die on the road" without proper burial rituals "have no place to rest and must wander [...] becoming lost souls" (p. 115). They are existential refugees, uprooted from familiar places and lacking any anchor of memory. The Mỹ Lai Massacre created an overwhelming number of such deaths: collective, unjust, dismembered, and left unburied. As a result, in the minds of local residents today, a sharp distinction between categories of spirits persists. On one side are the "ancestral or heroic spirits", victims honored by the state and worshiped at official commemorative spaces, regarded as having a "home". On the other hand are the numerous "restless spirits" of those not yet identified or ritually consoled, still wandering through the old traumatic spaces (Kwon, 2008). The coexistence of these two spiritual categories has compelled the people of Mỹ Lai to establish a dual system of devotion: participating in state-sponsored memorial rituals while also maintaining private practices of consolation and worship for the spirits still without shelter.

Corresponding to the two types of spirits are two memorial systems with distinct functions and scopes. For victims whose place of death and burial site are identifiable, commemorative rituals are primarily conducted within familial and communal contexts, following traditional practices such as ancestor worship at home altars and annual death anniversaries. In parallel, the state has established an official and institutionalized memorial system for those recognized as martyrs or war victims. This system is implemented through the "Gratitude to Those Who Rendered Service" policy, including key activities such as locating and reinterring remains in cemeteries, posthumously awarding the "Acknowledgment by the Nation" certificate, and constructing monuments for official offerings and ceremonies during national holidays. For the wandering spirits, whose death or burial sites remain unknown, local residents often conduct vernacular rituals of consolation, known as cầu siêu [rituals to pray for the dead's salvation] or chiêu hồn [rituals to summon and appease wandering souls]. These rituals may range from simple acts such as lighting incense where a spirit was seen and placing small offerings to larger-scale collective ceremonies such as cúng cô hồn [rituals to feed and console

wandering or unattended souls] organized at the village or hamlet level. In Vietnamese culture, it is common to build a small roadside shrine at the edge of the garden to worship *cô bác* [a respectful term for unfamiliar or homeless spirits], which is placed opposite the household's ancestral altar. Every day, the host prays in two directions: facing inward to invite the ancestors, and facing outward to welcome the wandering souls. This dual gesture transforms nameless spirits into part of the communal memory, offering them solace and gradually "inscribing them into local history" through shared ritual. These rites for the restless dead serve a dual function. Spiritually, they aim to console the souls, hoping to guide them toward liberation and prevent disturbances to the living. More importantly, on a social level, they operate as a mechanism for confronting and healing historical trauma: Each tale of a spirit returning with a specific request, such as proper burial or worship, becomes a forum for the community to engage in dialogue with its painful war-torn past.

The SSR framework is inductively developed from ethnographic fieldwork and synthesized from the theoretical discussions presented above. Rather than a static set of components, it provides an analytical framework for tracing a dynamic process in which memory is continually shaped and reshaped through material and symbolic interactions among spatial configurations, spirit beliefs, and ritual practices. Each component is grounded in a distinct body of theory.

Space, in this framework, is conceptualized as a dynamic memory structure where geographic, symbolic, and political layers converge to generate spirits and orient ritual behaviors. It operates both as *Lieux de Mémoire* (Nora, 1989), where memory is anchored to objects and landscapes, and as a discursive field in which memory is negotiated and contested (Gramsci, 1971). Within this logic, space is not a passive backdrop but the initial and constitutive link, as it conditions how communities interpret and respond to death. As Bodnar (1992) notes, it is precisely within these conflict-laden spaces that official and vernacular memories collide, bargain, and produce a polyphonic discourse of remembrance, wherein the dead are identified and the living are spiritually healed.

Spirit functions as the pivotal element in the analytical framework, connecting traumatic spaces with commemorative rituals. Following Émile Durkheim (1915), spirit is not merely a metaphysical entity but a social fact, a collective construct that symbolizes shared values, communal tragedies, and moral bonds. Its condition – whether venerated or wandering, benevolent or resentful – reflects how communities construct memory around death. From Michel Foucault's (1977) perspective, the attribution of meaning to spirits is a practice of power where official discourse and vernacular interpretations intersect to define the symbolic position of death within social and historical structures.

Ritual, in this framework, is a collective performative act that makes invisible memory visible through social enactment. It is shaped by both space and spirit, while also retroactively shaping how communities understand death and structure memory. As Assmann (2011) argues, ritual is essential in transforming communicative memory into cultural memory, turning ephemeral personal experience into durable symbolic forms. Ritual is also a site of power in the Foucauldian sense. Through repetition, spatial regulation, and bodily discipline, it expresses embedded social hierarchies (Foucault, 1977, p. 148). In this way, ritual serves both as the material manifestation of memory and as a symbolic mechanism to resolve the unsettled presence of spirits within the broader historical-cultural narrative.

The core analytical value of the SSR framework lies in how these three components function as a dynamic feedback loop through which memory is continuously produced, negotiated, and restructured. A site of death initiates the meaning-making process: when the identities of

the dead and the locations of their deaths are recognized, it becomes an identified death site associated with appeased spirits. If not, it remains an unidentified death site, where restless spirits emerge. These practices not only mediate the relationship between the living and the dead but also intervene in the symbolic meanings of these sites, transforming them from sites of trauma and haunting into spaces of remembrance, worship, and communal integration. This process of ritual re-inscription paves the way for a new cycle of memory to emerge. The loop demonstrates that memory is a field of ongoing interaction, where material spaces, spiritual beliefs, and commemorative actions constantly recalibrate one another to produce adaptive forms of remembrance across time and context.

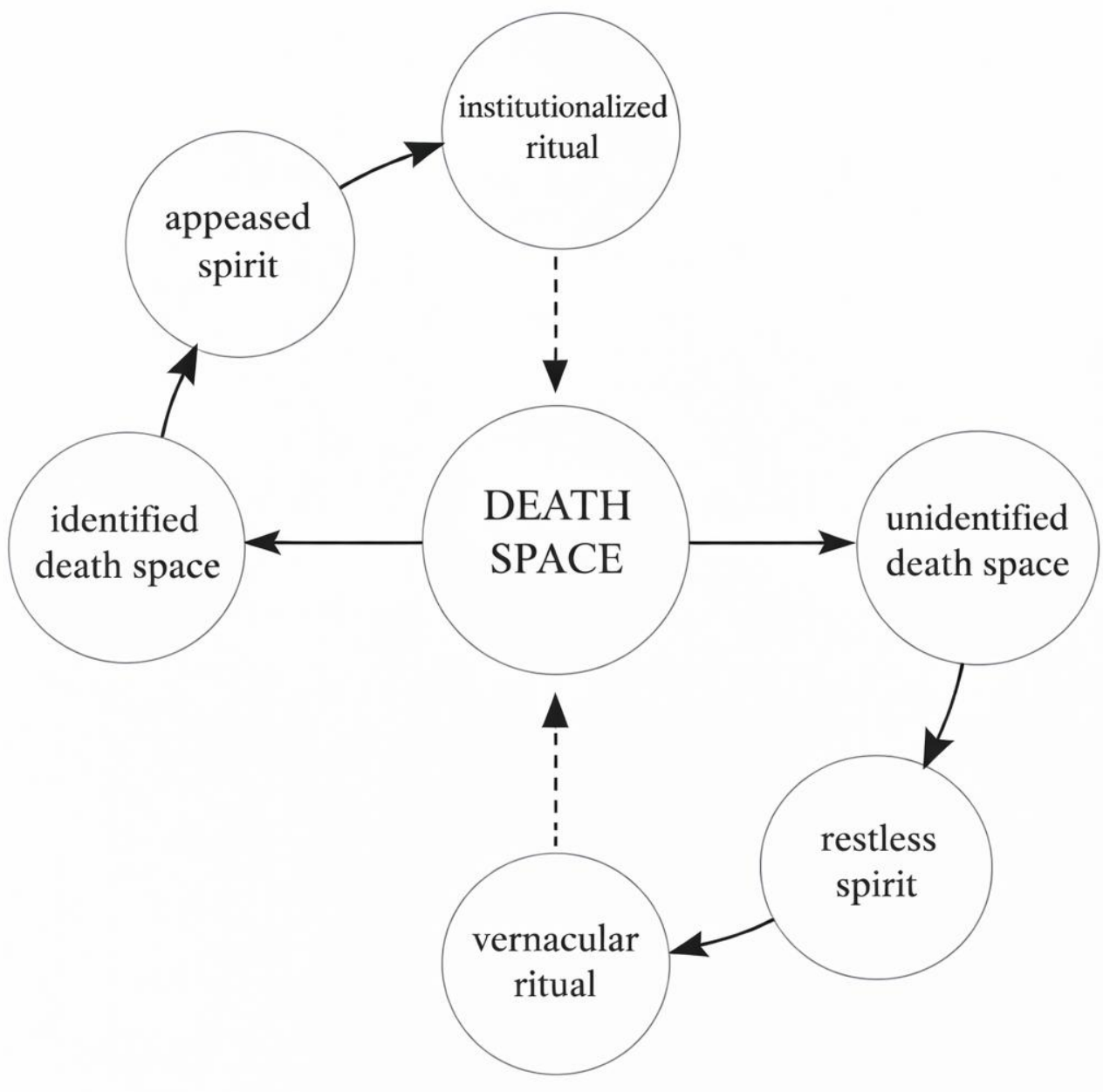


Figure 1. The SSR framework: A recursive loop linking death space, spirit classification, and ritual regimes

The dynamic interplay among the elements of the SSR framework is not unique to Vietnam but reflects broader cultural responses to collective traumatic violence. In Cambodia, facing the Killing Fields, local communities have performed vernacular rituals to transform anonymous spirits into *neak ta* (guardian earth spirits), thereby producing a counter-memory to the state's narrative (Guillou, 2012, p. 209). In Srebrenica, where genocide was concealed through the relocation of mass graves, reburial at the Potočari Memorial Center has become a politically and spiritually charged ritual (Pollack, 2003). Marjetka Mencej's (2021) analysis demonstrates that stories of unburied souls "reflect the perception of unfulfilled justice and persistent ethnic tensions" (p. 412). In Japan, the folk belief in *goryō shinkō* (veneration of vengeful spirits) was so powerful that, in addition to Yasukuni Shrine, the state established the Chinreisha Shrine to appease all war dead, regardless of nationality, including former enemies (Kuroda, 1996; Breen, 2005). This constitutes an implicit acknowledgment that fear of unappeased spirits represents a cultural force that even the state must manage through ritual. These examples suggest that the SSR framework holds broad applicability, revealing how communities across the globe engage with spiritual cosmologies to confront trauma and negotiate with state authority.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in an interpretive–constructivist epistemology. Within this framework, collective memory is not treated as an objective entity but is continuously constructed, negotiated, and sustained through discourse, ritual, and cultural practice. The aim is not to reconstruct the past as historical fact but to elucidate the operative mechanisms of memory in the present, particularly within the postwar context. Two principal methods were employed: (1) ethnographic fieldwork to access vernacular memory practices within local spatial and devotional settings; and (2) discourse analysis to decode the symbolic-linguistic structure of institutionalized memory. This methodological integration enables a comparative reading of official and vernacular memory as interwoven processes.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

Fieldwork was undertaken between 2021 and 2024 in Tịnh Khê Commune, Quảng Ngãi Province, the site of the Mỹ Lai Massacre. This locale is characterized in particular by the coexistence and complex interaction of two primary currents of memory: the official state memory and the vernacular memory of the local community. The data corpus comprises three main sources:

(1) Semi-structured in-depth interviews: 38 interviews were conducted with three participant groups: (1) local residents and relatives of victims (18 people), (2) heritage officials and local authorities (17 people), and (3) massacre survivors (three people). Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized in accordance with the principles of informed consent and confidentiality.

(2) Participant observation: The researcher directly participated in both official and vernacular commemorative rituals, including death anniversary ceremonies, *cầu siêu*, and *thờ vong* [worship of unidentified spirits], as well as everyday activities at informal shrines, former house foundations, and memorial sites.

(3) Fieldnotes: Fieldnotes consisted of a reflexive research journal, mapping of memory-relevant sites, notes on nonverbal interaction in ritual settings, and written records of informal conversations.

Ethically, the research adheres strictly to informed consent and the protection of participants' identities, particularly given the intersection of traumatic memory, vernacular devotion, and political discourse. The researcher worked from a semi-insider position, being familiar with local ritual idioms and able to participate in commemorative practices, while maintaining analytic distance through systematic documentation, anonymization, and iterative memo-writing during analysis.

Data Analysis

Drawing on grounded theory methodology and supported by NVivo 14, the data analysis proceeded in three stages:

Open coding: All 38 interview transcripts, along with fieldnotes, were imported into the qualitative data analysis software. At this stage, the material was segmented into the smallest units of meaning and assigned descriptive codes. Initial codes focused on analytic categories such as wrongful death, wandering spirits, roadside shrines, curse, collective death-anniversary rites, and martyrs.

Axial coding: Discrete codes from the previous stage were compared, connected, and grouped into broader categories. For instance, codes such as shrine, former house foundation, and memorial site were grouped under the category Space. Codes like restless spirits, martyrs, and souls of the dead were grouped under Spirit. Codes such as offering rituals, incense burning, and national commemoration were grouped under Ritual. It was at this stage that the interactive relationship among the three categories became evident.

Selective coding and synthesis: In the final stage, a central category was identified to integrate and interpret all others. The data revealed that the SSR framework served as a core theoretical structure. This framework not only systematizes vernacular narratives but also explains the parallel and interactive operation of official and vernacular memory.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation across three data sources: interviews, observations, and supplementary materials (archival photographs, memory maps, administrative documents, journalistic reports, and epigraphs). The collected legends were further categorized by motif, using the systems developed by Thompson (1955-1958) and Dégh (1996) to identify the narrative structures and cultural functions of each story.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Stratified Memory Structure in Mỹ Lai: An Analytical Overview

Findings from fieldwork in Mỹ Lai reveal a complex memory ecosystem, shaped by two parallel processes: one is the state's effort to integrate the massacre into the overarching national historical narrative, and the other is the community's effort toward healing and the restoration of spiritual equilibrium. Rather than operating in isolation, these institutional and vernacular currents of memory engage in a dynamic, two-way interaction. The national-level discourse is localized through local beliefs and legends. Conversely, community rituals gradually absorb and integrate new meanings, thereby connecting them to the broader socio-historical context (Gramsci, 1971). This interaction is enacted through a cultural grammar of deathscapes, spiritual states, and commemorative rituals. The table below outlines the distinct logics of each memory stream, thus providing a foundation for analyzing their interplay.

	<i>Type 1: Institutionalized Memory</i>	<i>Type 2: Vernacular Memory</i>
<i>Space</i>	- Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site - Sơn Mỹ Cemetery	- Mass graves - Wandering soul shrines - Temporary altars at village corners, forest edges, or pathways
<i>Spirit</i>	- Considered appeased and transformed into ancestral spirits in the community's memory	- Seen as wandering souls, unsettled and prone to negatively influence the community's well-being
<i>Rituals</i>	- Annual collective death anniversaries held at the Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site and Sơn Mỹ Cemetery, organized by the authorities	- Vernacular consolatory rites and offerings initiated by local residents to appease the spirits and prevent them from causing harm

Table 1. Comparative cultural framework of institutionalized and vernacular memory in Mỹ Lai

Table 1 does not merely illustrate the coexistence of dual memory streams in Mỹ Lai; it reveals a stratified mechanism through which memory is organized and legitimized within a fluid postwar configuration. Rather than encouraging us to view institutional and vernacular memories as “parallel narratives” or “competing discourses,” this stratification suggests the operation of a multilayered memory system, in which symbols, spaces, and commemorative practices are distributed according to varying degrees of intervention, symbolic stability, and political legitimacy. At the upper tier, institutional memory dominates the architectural, administrative, and symbolic domains, holding the authority to name, construct, and prescribe ritual. This layer functions to stabilize collective memory by reordering space, institutionalizing spirits, and standardizing ceremonies. In contrast, the lower tier – vernacular memory – although fragmented and unofficial, activates emotional, moral, and spiritual motifs and sustains a substratum of memory on which the upper tier relies for cultural legitimacy. The coexistence – and at times tension – between grassroots rituals such as cúng cô hồn, gọi hồn [spirit summoning], and makeshift shrines, on the one hand, and official commemorative events, on the other, indicates that institutionalized memory cannot sustain itself without drawing on the cultural energies generated from below.

Thus, the postwar memory structure in Mỹ Lai should not be seen as a battleground between two discourses but as a stratified memory mechanism governed by asymmetrical interdependence rather than simple antagonism. Vernacular memory, though positioned as subordinate and unofficial, constitutes the foundation on which institutional memory constructs sacredness, imbues symbols with affect, and organizes political rituals. Through its capacity to activate motifs of haunting, injustice, and healing, folk legends generate a mnemonic undercurrent that compels official memory to respond, accommodate, or appropriate. A closer analysis of how institutional memory is organized, legitimized, and symbolized within the Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site reveals how commemorative power operates – not by erasing vernacular memory, but by reordering the broader mnemonic ecosystem.

Institutionalized Memory: The Political Shaping of Contemporary Legends

Collective memory is profoundly influenced by political forces and social institutions. Feola et al. (2023) emphasize that collective memory is actively reconstructed in the present and

shaped by socially dominant frames rather than simply preserved as an unfiltered record of the past. In postwar Vietnam, the state plays a significant role in shaping public memory. The commemoration of sacrifices, victories, and war crimes is part of this process, contributing to the strengthening of patriotism and to the construction of national identity. From this perspective, the commemoration of the Mỹ Lai Massacre is not merely an act of remembrance; it can also be understood as a sociocultural practice with profound political significance that articulates discourses about the brutality of the war of aggression and affirms the just cause of the national liberation struggle.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Vietnamese government constructed commemorative sites in Mỹ Lai to institutionalize the massacre as a publicly legible object of remembrance. The Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site, located at the site of the killings, was officially inaugurated in 1976, one year after national reunification. At its center stands a monumental white stone sculpture depicting a grieving elderly mother holding her deceased son and a woman embracing her dead child while raising a clenched fist in defiance. This image has become a powerful symbol of remembrance of the victims in both local and national memory. Adjacent to the monument is a museum featuring a stone tablet engraved with the names of 504 victims as recorded by the memorial site, alongside photographs and documents chronicling the massacre and the war.

The remnants of the old village, including house foundations and bomb shelters, have been preserved. A concrete path marked with the footprints of both victims and perpetrators guides visitors through the site. This spatial design aims to immerse visitors in the horror of the massacre, allowing them to confront representations of the atrocity and to engage affectively with its memory while absorbing the historical lesson promoted by the state (Kucera, 2008). These commemorative structures serve to reinforce a state-oriented historical and political narrative. By memorializing the innocent civilians who died, the authorities emphasize the legitimacy of the revolutionary struggle, presented as a people's war against foreign invasion, while also highlighting the cruelty of the aggressors. Each year, the provincial government of Quảng Ngãi organizes an official memorial ceremony at Mỹ Lai, attended by representatives from central agencies and covered by both domestic and international media. These events are not only acts of remembrance but also function as public rituals that sustain the national message about wartime suffering and the significance of peace achieved through historical struggle. Today, the Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site is curated as an open-air museum, serving both as a space for historical education – especially for younger generations – and as a site of cultural engagement and international dialogue on the traumatic legacies of war in Vietnam.

The anthropologist Heonik Kwon (2006) observes a postwar reconfiguration of commemorative space in many villages in the vicinity of Mỹ Lai. Specifically, while martyrs' cemeteries were constructed in prominent central locations, the mass graves of civilians were relocated to peripheral areas. He suggests that this spatial rearrangement reflects a broader pattern of postwar commemorative culture in Vietnam. Accordingly, the memory of martyrs' sacrifices is often prioritized within principal public spaces, as this aligns with the dominant national narrative of heroic struggle. The memory of civilian fatalities, which entails more complex narratives, consequently occupies a less prominent place within the collective memorial landscape. The Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site, however, stands as a notable exception. At the very site of the massacre, a memorial dedicated to the civilian victims was erected in a central position as early as 1976. This exception may be attributed to the nature of the massacre itself, as the perpetrators were clearly identified as American soldiers and the commemoration of civilian victims could be readily incorporated into the national memory of war and sovereignty. This constitutes a

salient example of the politics of memory, a process through which remembrance is shaped by spatial repositioning (center versus periphery) and symbolic reclassification of the dead (heroes and ancestors versus restless spirits). Within this state-curated commemorative space, vernacular memory is not excluded but interwoven, transforming the memorial into a complex memory-scape where state narratives and local spiritual practices coexist and interact.

Of the 42 documented legend accounts, 16 – despite variations in specific detail – share a common narrative structure that can be grouped into a single storyline type with the following three-part sequence:

(1) Introduction – The Tragic Massacre Event: The narrative typically begins with the recollection of the Mỹ Lai Massacre, emphasizing the brutal deaths of civilians.

(2) Development – Supernatural Phenomena (restless spirits): The story then introduces eerie encounters with spirits, often described as wandering souls manifesting through ghostly sightings, whispered voices, or unsettling atmospheres.

(3) Conclusion – Ritual Action and Restored Order: The resolution typically involves a ritual act, such as burning incense or making offerings, which are believed to appease the spirits and restore peace.

An illustrative example is drawn from an interview with Mr. P.V.D. (Interviewee No. 9), a staff member at the Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site:

“They died so tragically, all at once, that their spirits are believed to be incredibly powerful”, people around here often say. People still talk about what happened that morning on March 16, 1968 – a group of women and children were rounded up by American soldiers. The soldiers forced them to dig their own grave, then ordered them to lie down inside before opening fire. Afterward, they poured gasoline over the bodies and set them alight. Smoke billowed for days, and the stench of burning flesh lingered in the air long after. Ever since that day, people in the village have whispered about strange sightings. On bright, moonlit nights, they say you can sometimes see a group of pale, shadowy figures drifting along the narrow village paths, calling out to one another. People believe these are the restless spirits of those who died that morning – still searching for their loved ones, still calling each other's names just as they did in life. After the government held a large-scale memorial ceremony to console the spirits, those sightings seemed to fade. But a few years ago, some locals claimed to have seen them return – only this time, the ghosts seemed different. The children who once appeared as infants were now seen running and playing alongside their mothers, as though they'd grown up in the spirit world. I had a strange encounter myself one night. It was a stiflingly hot evening in March, unusually warm for that time of year. Around 11 p.m., after locking up the museum, I grabbed a flashlight and went to check the graves. As I neared the memorial statue, my flashlight suddenly went out, plunging everything into darkness. At that moment, I heard faint whispers – the soft voice of a young female soldier, perhaps a youth volunteer, calling out for her comrades. I froze on the spot, unsure what to do. The voice seemed close, yet distant – as if she hadn't realized she was no longer among the living. For a brief moment, I had the unsettling feeling that she mistook me for one of her fellow soldiers. In my mind, I quietly whispered a prayer: “We mean no harm; we're only here to look after this place. Please bless our work and keep things peaceful.” Strangely enough, the moment I finished my prayer, the flashlight flickered back on – its beam shining directly at the relief carving of fallen villagers. After that night, I made it a habit to light incense every evening at the graves and the memorial. The locals say that ever since I started doing that, no one has seen or heard the spirits crying anymore. (Fieldnote, Interviewee No. 9, male, 59 years old, March 2024)

Analytically, this narrative illustrates how the SSR framework operates as a mechanism of memory domestication within institutional settings. The caretaker's nightly incense offering functions not merely as maintenance but as essential ritual labor that translates administrative power (site management) into spiritual authority (care for the dead). Crucially, the interpretation of the invisible voice as a female soldier rather than a malevolent ghost signals an ontological restructuring: under the discipline of the curated Space and official Ritual, traumatic civilian deaths are reclassified as heroic sacrifices. Thus, the legend does not disrupt state order; rather, it internalizes official discourse to convert the terror of untimely death into a safe, ordered, and state-sanctioned spiritual presence.

The Son Mỹ Memorial Site operates not only as a symbolic "site of memory" but also as a carefully engineered itinerary of witnessing. Its material choreography – the preserved house foundations and shelters, the museum's archival display, and especially the walkway marked by the footprints of victims and perpetrators – structures how visitors move, where they pause, and what they are invited to feel. In Foucauldian terms, the site can be read as a governed space in which visitor movement, visual cues, and scripted interpretation shape what becomes publicly sayable and feelable about the massacre. The inscribed list of 504 names further stabilizes the massacre as a clearly enumerated and nationally assimilable event, translating vernacular loss into an authorized archive. Read this way, Space in the SSR framework is not a neutral container but a pedagogical apparatus that formats affect and anticipates interpretation—conditions under which subsequent spirit narratives are more likely to be received as commemorative testimony rather than disruptive haunting.

Within this highly commemorative space, contemporary legends about the spirits of the female victims have gradually emerged. These spirits are not portrayed as mournful entities lamenting their tragic fate, nor do they haunt the living in menacing ways. Instead, they appear as silent witnesses to history – souls unaware of their own deaths, lingering between the earthly realm and the spiritual world. This narrative portrayal reflects a vernacular belief that, having been solemnly memorialized through official rituals, the victims have transcended their suffering and assumed a form of benevolent spiritual presence.

The prominence of female figures in contemporary legends about the Mỹ Lai Massacre reflects the intersection of historical trauma and collective memory. Most victims were women and children, who were among the most vulnerable groups, thereby evoking both compassion and moral outrage. As Kwon (2008) observes, such portrayals construct the image of the "ideal victim" within communal remembrance. The recurrence of female spirits in these narratives not only heightens the tragic dimension of the event but also resonates with postwar state discourses on peace and humanitarian values. In contrast, male deaths are often framed as honorable acts of martyrdom, associated with heroic sacrifice and therefore less likely to signify unresolved suffering. Women, however, are culturally associated with motherhood, familial care, and vulnerability, making their deaths powerful emblems of grief and violence. For this reason, the repeated depiction of female spirits in Mỹ Lai legends carries a profound humanistic meaning while also simultaneously reinforcing postwar state narratives. These legends sustain collective memory through a convergence of vernacular beliefs and official themes of peace, sacrifice, and national resistance.

The recurring identification of an unseen voice as a 'female soldier' is analytically significant precisely because it sits in tension with the archival record, which positions the dead as civilians and finds no evidence of North Vietnamese combat units at the site (U.S. Department of the Army, 1970; Tung, 2008). Rather than treating this slippage as mere inaccuracy, it is more productive to read it as a strategy of mnemonic plausibility, whereby the category 'soldier'

names a culturally authorized form of death that is publicly speakable and nationally honorific within Vietnam's dominant commemorative idioms (Foucault, 1977). In this register, the supernatural becomes legible through a state-compatible moral grammar – sacrifice, duty, guardianship – without requiring narrators to directly contest the massacre's official history. The term also exemplifies what Dégh (1996) calls contested discourse: it signals an ongoing local negotiation over what kind of dead the site contains and what obligations follow from that classification. The interpretive payoff is not that civilians are rewritten into combatants, but that vernacular experience is translated into a politically intelligible idiom through which the dead can be publicly valued and institutionally remembered (Verdery, 1999).

At the level of public ritual, the annual commemoration on March 16 functions as a state-managed temporal anchor that periodically reactivates the massacre within an authorized calendar of remembrance. The ceremony's choreography – official delegations, scripted speeches, and the presence of national media – does more than 'honor' the dead; it standardizes the interpretive frame through which suffering is rendered politically meaningful and publicly teachable. In Assmann's terms, such recurrent performance converts fragile communicative memory into cultural memory by stabilizing who may speak, what may be said, and which emotions are appropriate in this space. At the same time, the rite provides a pragmatic interface through which locally salient practices (most visibly incense and offerings) can be reframed as heritage-like gestures rather than stigmatized 'superstition,' thereby enabling vernacular forms to circulate within a state-legible moral idiom. Contemporary legends that cluster around the commemoration should thus be read not simply as derivative folklore, but as narrative residues of a ritual regime that authorizes certain modes of haunting as commemorative rather than disordering.

When analyzed through the SSR framework, these legends reveal core features of institutionalized memory. The designated space is the Sơn Mỹ Memorial Site, a state-sponsored commemorative location. The depiction of restless spirits closely parallels representations of martyrs, who are reimagined through local folklore as revered spirits capable of recalling the past or protecting the living. Meanwhile, the formally organized commemorative rituals have become vital cultural practices that carry deep spiritual significance, contribute to community cohesion, and reinforce collective understandings of wartime memory. This configuration aligns with Jan Assmann's (2011) notion of "cultural encoding", in which memory is not only transmitted orally but also institutionalized through symbols and collective rituals, thereby integrating historical events into the spiritual life of the broader public. Through the integration of shared memory and vernacular belief, these legends have endured within the community, enriching the national historical narrative that valorizes patriotism and sacrifice for the homeland.

During fieldwork, recurring supernatural motifs emerged in local narratives, indicating the extent to which such stories have become embedded in everyday cultural life. These legends have also entered mainstream media. The *Sound of the Violin in Mỹ Lai*, a documentary by Trần Văn Thủy, portrays American veteran Mike Boehm's symbolic act of playing the violin to console the spirits of the massacre victims (Thủy, 1998). Initially, the film faced censorship from the Department of Cinema, but it was later approved following ministerial intervention and received widespread public attention (Thủy & Dũng, 2013). This shift reflects broader adjustments in cultural policy, allowing for the inclusion of spiritual elements and vernacular traditions in official media. While wartime memory was once predominantly conveyed through state-centered narratives, it is now increasingly enriched by contemporary legends – a form of storytelling that resonates particularly strongly with the public. Taken together, these

developments suggest a shift in how spiritual motifs can be accommodated within official cultural production, allowing certain vernacular idioms to circulate more visibly in public narratives about wartime suffering.

From the perspective of collective memory studies, contemporary ghost legends have become integral components of Vietnam's postwar commemorative culture. These narratives are used by local communities to interpret spiritual phenomena, such as cries heard at night or the perceived presence of unsettled souls, and to foster moral reflection that emphasizes respect for the dead and a condemnation of past violence. Although the official stance discourages superstitious practices, in practice, spiritual narratives linked to historical events continue to flourish, particularly when they resonate with the broader orientation of national memory toward denouncing war and honoring peace. While not formally recognized by state institutions, these legends are informally accepted, as their underlying themes of resentment, gratitude, and ethical contemplation closely mirror the moral and historical values promoted by institutionalized memory.

Vernacular Memory: Reconstructing Legends Through Grief and Belief

The Mỹ Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968, left behind a haunting aftermath that continues to structure vernacular remembrance. In the chaotic days that followed, many victims were buried hastily – if at all – leaving families without the funerary sequence that, in Vietnamese moral-religious idioms, helps the dead 'settle' and the living regain order (Tung, 2008, p. 25). This perceived ritual rupture underwrites a local sense that some victims remain spiritually unanchored, and it is within that gap that contemporary legends take shape.

Building on this perceived rupture in mortuary sequence, narrators repeatedly frame the post-massacre aftermath through a recognizable plot logic that links spiritual unease to practical acts of repair. Across the remaining 26 accounts collected during fieldwork, this vernacular sequence typically unfolds in four moves:

(1) Introduction – Origin in Tragedy: Begins with a tragic event, often involving sudden and unjust deaths without proper burial rites, fueling beliefs in restless spirits.

(2) Development – Supernatural Manifestation and Retribution: The spirit returns to seek vengeance, bringing misfortune upon those who show disrespect or neglect.

(3) Climax – Ritual Reconciliation and Sacred Space Creation: The community responds by establishing shrines or conducting rituals to console the spirits and restore social harmony.

(4) Conclusion – Transformation into a Protective Spirit: Once appeased, the spirit shifts from a threatening presence to a guardian figure, offering protection and blessings to the community.

One of the most notable narratives was recounted in an interview with Mrs. N.T.T. (Interviewee No. 17), an elderly woman who runs a small drink stall beside the large banyan tree, where numerous village altars are now situated. She recalled:

The fear lingered long after the horrors of 1968. The massacre had left bodies scattered across the village, some hastily buried, others left exposed. Among them were a young mother and her child, whose remains were never properly tended to. Not long after, her figure began to appear, dressed in a worn brown áo bà ba (traditional southern Vietnamese blouse), carrying her lifeless child as she wandered along the old village paths. Her mournful eyes lingered at doorways, as if silently pleading. Those who ignored her presence often awoke to dead livestock or unexplained illness within their families. In response, a small altar was built beneath the banyan tree, which is

believed to be where she and her child had fallen. From that time onward, villagers began leaving offerings of sticky rice and fruit during full moons and communal death anniversaries. Those who prayed with sincerity reported hearing a soft lullaby drifting through the night. Yet her presence demanded reverence. One evening, a group of drunken youths desecrated the altar. Within days, each experienced strange misfortunes, including accidents, illness, or worse. The story spread rapidly, and no one dared to disturb the site again. Over time, the once-feared spirit was believed to have transformed. Rather than inciting fear, she came to be regarded as a guardian silently protecting the village. The altar, originally erected in response to fear, gradually became a symbol of remembrance and peace, offering solace to her spirit and restoring harmony to the community. (Fieldnote, Interviewee No. 17, female, 73 years old, drink vendor near banyan tree altar site in Mỹ Lai, November 2023)

When interpreted through the proposed SSR framework, this narrative illustrates how the community actively metabolizes the trauma of an unmarked death site into a stable cultural form. The banyan tree, initially a liminal space of ambiguity and fear, is transformed through the legend into a regulated moral landscape. The construction of the altar does more than memorialize loss; it anchors the wandering spirit within a localized regimen of care, converting the unpredictable threat of haunting into a structured system of reciprocal obligation. Furthermore, the episode of desecration and punishment functions as a vernacular enforcement mechanism, authorizing the villagers to police the boundaries of legitimate remembrance outside of state certification. In this sense, the legend operates as a contested discourse (Dégh, 1994), enabling the community to negotiate their own ethics of repair and ensuring that the memory of the massacre remains a living, demanding presence rather than a closed historical chapter. Crucially, the explanatory leverage here lies in the mechanism: the legend does not simply articulate grief; it distributes concrete obligations – offerings, restraint, and routine upkeep – through which the dead become subjects of enforceable moral claims. In doing so, it establishes a vernacular mode of authorization that operates alongside, but is not contingent upon, official recognition.

Rather than foregrounding questions of genre similarity, the analytic value of the Mỹ Lai material lies in how legends stabilize an open-ended aftermath into a workable vernacular regime of remembering. They convert uncertainty about the dead into situated responsibilities anchored to specific sites and routines, thereby preparing the ground for divergences from institutional commemoration that unfold along three axes within the SSR framework: spatial configuration, spirit symbolism, and ritual practice.

Such plots are not unique to Mỹ Lai. Folklore scholarship has long noted that legends organize uncertainty by staging debates over what may count as credible experience and what forms of conduct follow from it (Dégh, 1994). Read in this light, the banyan-tree account resonates with other post-violence contexts where narratives about the dead function less as ‘belief’ than as practical guidance for restraint and care (e.g., Fishkin, 2015). The ‘warning’ element, then, is best understood as a vernacular ethics of repair sustained in the absence of formal closure.

Viewed through the lens of vernacular memory, the Mỹ Lai ghost legend reveals distinctive modes of expression when contrasted with institutionalized memory. This relationship is most evident in three aspects: Space, Spirit symbolism, and Ritual practice.

Institutionalized memory is anchored in formal, state-sponsored memorials and cemeteries, whereas vernacular memory in Mỹ Lai is organized through modest sites maintained by residents – roadside shrines, small altars under trees, and locally marked atrocity locations.

Since the mid-1990s, many such sites have been restored and expanded through community labor, shifting them from concealed corners of the landscape into recognized places of mourning and care (Tung, 2008). Analytically, these small sites function as a non-institutional memory infrastructure: they localize where responsibility attaches, converting diffuse post-traumatic unease into a legible place that can be revisited, serviced, and morally policed.

In official commemorative discourse, the victims of Mỹ Lai are often portrayed as anonymous representatives of collective national sacrifice. In contrast, vernacular memory depicts them as individuals with inner lives, personal thoughts, and emotional depth. The figure of the grieving mother exemplifies this shift: she appears not as an anonymous casualty but as a relational subject whose presence reasserts claims of care and recognition. In contexts where identification and formal commemoration have been uneven, such spirit figures re-personalize loss by re-attaching roles (mother/child) and obligations to deaths otherwise absorbed into national-scale abstraction. Over time, repeated offerings and narrative reiteration enable a move from threatening presence to protective spirit, consistent with processes of ancestorization described by Endres (2008) and the wider observation that ritual can reframe the dead as guardians (Kendall, 2009). Amid such tragedy and disruption, some families – due to personal hardships and overwhelming grief – were unable to perform full ancestral rites, leaving their loved ones as unsettled spirits (*vong linh*). Over time, however, the grieving mother's spirit evolved into an *âm linh*, a venerated protective spirit. This trajectory reflects a process of ancestorization as theorized by Endres (2008), in which ritual remembrance integrates the dead into communal spiritual life. Kendall (2009) likewise observes that in many Asian contexts, ritual acts not only pacify but reframe the spirit as a guardian figure. In Mỹ Lai, this transformation is more than symbolic; it is cultivated through sustained ritual practice. Though informal, such vernacular rituals serve as powerful mechanisms for post-traumatic healing, underscoring the resilience of local devotional frameworks in preserving memory and negotiating collective suffering. Put differently, spirit here is a device of re-personalization: it re-attaches names, roles (mother/child), and relational claims to deaths that would otherwise remain abstract within national-scale narration.

If large-scale official commemorative events represent the mode of institutionalized memory, vernacular memory in Mỹ Lai is expressed through intimate, community-based rituals. These practices are often carried out by families or villagers themselves and include offering incense at home, presenting food to 'invisible neighbors' – a vernacular way of acknowledging nearby spirits, or praying at roadside shrines. Such acts resemble what Margry and Sánchez-Carretero (2007) describe as improvised or ephemeral memorials. Though modest, these rituals are resilient and highly adaptive. Importantly, there is a reciprocal relationship between ritual and narrative: as ritual activities increase, reports of ghostly encounters proliferate; in turn, these stories reaffirm the necessity of ritual and stimulate further practices in liminal spaces such as roadsides, trees, or village boundaries. This cyclical mechanism between folklore and ritual sustains a vibrant mode of communicative memory, which operates alongside and enriches the more formal narratives promoted by institutional frameworks. In SSR terms, this reciprocity forms the feedback loop: ritual stabilizes Space and reclassifies spirits, while legend provides the normative script that sustains and regulates continued ritual labor.

Contemporary legends in Vietnam reflect a gradual convergence between vernacular spiritual beliefs and the materialist worldview endorsed by the state. Prior to the *Đổi Mới* reforms (Vietnam's comprehensive economic and political restructuring launched in 1986), the government promoted scientific rationalism and sought to eliminate so-called superstitions. Nevertheless, practices like ancestor worship persisted in everyday life. As Roszko (2012) notes, the

post-Đổi Mới period brought broader sociopolitical shifts that led to the revalidation of previously marginalized ritual practices. This shift was codified in Resolution No. 03-NQ/TW (1998) and further reinforced by Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW (2003) (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998, 2003). Within this evolving framework, the endurance of Mỹ Lai ghost legends can be understood as the result of an interplay between memory and belief: while war memories demand preservation, spiritual traditions shape how they are narrated, ritualized, and internalized. This convergence does not neutralize the supernatural; rather, it makes vernacular ethics of care for the dead more publicly sustainable by allowing them to circulate as cultural value and social order rather than stigmatized superstition.

Synthesizing the Framework: SSR as a Recursive Mechanism

Synthesizing the ethnographic evidence presented above, this section clarifies how the SSR framework operates not merely as a taxonomy of memory types, but as a dynamic, recursive mechanism of postwar recovery. Analytically, the transition from trauma to legend in Mỹ Lai is driven by a cyclical interaction among Space, Spirit, and Ritual, through which the classification and governance of deathscapes shape the perceived status of the dead and organize distinct modes of commemorative intervention.

First, the material demarcation of Space conditions the social intelligibility of Spirit. The discontinuity between state-curated memorial settings and vernacular sites associated with atrocity fractures the local spiritual landscape: official spaces stabilize the dead within authorized narratives of sacrifice, whereas liminal or informally marked sites are more readily associated with unsettled presences that remain morally and ritually ambiguous.

Second, these differentiated spirit imaginaries mobilize distinct Ritual regimes. Where death is publicly named and spatially contained, rituals tend to be standardized and commemorative; where death is experienced as uncontained or socially unresolved, ritual labor is more reparative, improvisational, and oriented toward appeasement and everyday safety. In this sense, legends do not merely reflect belief but provide practical scripts that instruct appropriate ritual responses to particular sites and presences.

Finally, the recursive logic of the SSR framework becomes visible when Ritual re-inscribes Space. Through repeated offerings, prayers, and acts of maintenance, violent or haunted locations are converted into durable mnemonic nodes in which fear, obligation, and remembrance are spatially organized. This feedback loop – where space configures spirits, spirits solicit rituals, and rituals stabilize space – captures a key mechanism by which communities negotiate the aftermath of collective violence.

Two brief cases from the corpus illustrate this recursion. At the Son Mỹ Memorial Site, Interviewee No. 9 (a staff member) recounts a night patrol in which his torch failed near the memorial statue and he heard what he interpreted as faint whispers; he responded with a quiet prayer and subsequently began lighting incense each evening at the graves and the memorial. In local retellings, that routine is linked to the reported disappearance of nocturnal crying and sightings, indicating how an institutionalized commemorative space is re-activated through everyday ritual maintenance that renders the site orderly and spiritually settled. By contrast, at the banyan tree altar described by Interviewee No. 17, a mother-and-child apparition is narratively associated with neglect and misfortune; villagers respond by building a small altar and offering sticky rice and fruit on ritual occasions, while the story also encodes sanctions against desecration. Over time, these repeated offerings and the moral discipline surrounding the altar reclassify the spirit from threatening to protective and transform a village threshold into a recognized place of remembrance. Read together, the two cases show that the SSR framework does

explanatory work across both institutional and vernacular settings: it specifies how narrative, ritual labor, and spatial ordering co-produce what counts as appeased memory in Mỹ Lai.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that contemporary ghost legends in Mỹ Lai are not merely peripheral or superstitious remnants but operate as mnemonic practices in the construction of postwar remembrance. Drawing on thick ethnographic description, the article rejects the binary view that treats state and vernacular memory as two distinct, opposing streams. Instead, it proposes a stratified memory mechanism, wherein these streams coexist in a relationship of asymmetrical interdependence: while state institutions provide the framework for space and discursive stability, vernacular practices sustain emotional intensity and spiritual legibility – core elements that allow the traumatic past to remain socially and emotionally present in everyday life.

Using the SSR framework, the study elucidates the mechanisms underlying these two memory configurations. At the institutional level, the framework reveals a process of institutional domestication. Here, spatial planning, architectural design, and scripted rituals translate haunting supernatural narratives into publicly permissible commemorative testimonies. Repetitive practices – such as the nightly incense offering by site staff – function as a form of ritual labor that simultaneously reinforces state administrative power and addresses local needs to soothe the spirits and the land. Conversely, at the communal level, a mechanism of vernacular authorization is activated. From ruptures in traditional mortuary processes, the community constructs legends to redistribute moral obligations (offerings, taboos, and spatial protection). This process transforms liminal deathscapes into tightly regulated moral landscapes, compelling the living to maintain a durable relationship of responsibility with the dead.

Theoretically, the SSR framework contributes an analytical tool that moves beyond describing static memory components to explaining their dynamic mechanisms. In contrast to approaches that focus primarily on the content of memory, such as Bodnar's (1992) analysis of vernacular memory and Kwon's (2006, 2008) work on ghosts of war in Vietnam, the SSR framework emphasizes a recursive process: how spatial classification defines the ontology of the spirit, which in turn prescribes the corresponding ritual mode. The concept of reparative ritual labor proposed here also broadens discussions on transitional justice and the anthropology of religion by demonstrating that post-conflict healing occurs not only through courts or macro-level policy but also through micro-practices aimed at reconstructing spiritual order within the community.

These findings offer significant implications for heritage management and the politics of reconciliation. The reality in Mỹ Lai suggests that effective memory policy cannot focus solely on orthodox centers of commemoration but must also acknowledge the role of non-institutional memory infrastructure—such as spirit shrines, temporary altars, or sacralized natural sites. Disregarding or marginalizing these practices depletes the community's resources for psychosocial resilience.

However, the potential universality of the SSR framework requires careful consideration of its scope conditions. The framework offers the greatest explanatory value in social contexts where traditional cosmologies still govern everyday life and where violent deathscapes remain socially unresolved. Future research should further test this framework through interregional comparison (with other massacre sites in Vietnam) and cross-national comparison (such as the Killing Fields in Cambodia or war sites in East Asia) to assess how the SSR mechanism shifts under different political and religious regimes. Additionally, the migration of ghost legends

from oral to digital space is an essential avenue for understanding how younger generations reconstruct obligations to the past.

Ultimately, the case of Mỹ Lai demonstrates that living with the aftermath of war involves not merely managing physical remnants but learning to live with ghosts – understood as accepting the invisible but durable moral bonds between the living, the land, and the dead.

Limitations of the Study

While this study was conducted with methodological rigor, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, because this is a single-site case study focused on Mỹ Lai, the generalizability of its findings to other post-conflict settings should be interpreted with caution. Second, memory is inherently fluid and constantly evolving; the research findings represent only a specific 'slice' of memory as observed during fieldwork. Finally, due to the sensitivity of the topic, it is possible that certain narratives were not fully disclosed, or that zones of silence may remain beyond the reach of this investigation.



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