

The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism

JANET ALISON HOSKINS

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Founded in 1926 in colonial Cochinchina, Caodaism remains one of the least understood Vietnamese religious traditions. Although the Great Temple of Caodaism in Tây Ninh attracts thousands of visitors each year, most people stop at an impressionistic understanding of the tradition, marveling at the colorful architecture, the eclectic veneration of Eastern and Western religious figures, and elaborate ceremonies. However, carved into this spectacle is a story of religious imagination and political schisms, of struggles against colonization, of desires for national sovereignty and reconciliation, and of the establishment of a global Vietnamese community in the diaspora. Janet Hoskins's *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism* provides us with a comprehensive and sympathetic study of Caodaism and its connection to the struggles of the Vietnamese people, in both Vietnam and the diaspora.

Based on 10 years of fieldwork in California and Vietnam, and interviews with Caodaists in France, Canada, Cambodia, and Australia, Hoskins tells two narratives, one of the historical development of Caodaism in colonial French Indochina and the other of the postwar diaspora of Caodaists and their projects of developing a global Caodaism that is "at once cosmopolitan and indigenous" (p. 6). Hoskins interweaves these two narratives by presenting five paired biographies (Chapters 1 through 5) of members of the founding generation and their followers or descendants in California. Such a historical-ethnographic approach provides readers with a sense of how the colonial past informs and inspires the contemporary development of present Caodaist practices and institutions in the context of postwar diaspora.

The Divine Eye presents significant contributions to the examination of Vietnamese syncretic and transnational religion. Examining the biographies of the founding members of Caodaism in colonial Indochina, Hoskins dispels the characterization of Caodaism as a peasant "traditionalist movement" founded on confusing and "outrageous syncretism" of both Eastern and Western elements, including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and European Spiritism (Fitzgerald 1972). Rather, she argues, Caodaism "represented a conversion to a kind of modernity" in which "Caodaists . . . wanted to sit as equals with Catholic religious leaders, to have their own Vatican and their own high-ranking clergy, and thus have Vietnamese spirituality recognized on the same plane as the faith of their French colonial masters" (p. 5). This argument is noteworthy considering that the founding members of Caodaism were educated in French institutions and/or held appointments within the French colonial administration.

Early Caodaists were particularly conscious and selective in their incorporation of Western cultural and religious elements in their vision of Caodaism. On the one hand, while Caodaism

includes Jesus in its pantheon to represent the way of the saints (*đạo thánh*), the son of God is relegated to the third level of spiritual practices, underneath the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucius. On the other hand, French historical figures, such as Victor Hugo and Jeanne D'Arc, were venerated because these figures had either engaged in Spiritist practices or demonstrated anticolonial sentiments and sympathy toward the subjugated subjects. As Caodaism was created based on the practice of spirit *sénance*, both in the Chinese tradition of phoenix basket writing and French Spiritism, important religious figures and French historical figures were said to have communicated directly with the Vietnamese people and endowed them with a vision of a new millenarian religion that redeemed them as the chosen people who would lead the world spiritually (p. 83). Thus, the historical founding of Caodaism demonstrates a form of historical consciousness—one in which colonial subjects not only claim the same status for their Asian traditions as Western ones, but also attempt to transcend the Western façade of modernity and create a modernity with a more encompassing Eastern spiritual doctrine (p. 5). Building on theories of religious syncretism and religious fields (Chen 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011), Hoskins argues that Caodaism represents a form of *explicit syncretism*—the conscious project of mixing and combining different traditions to produce new doctrines and a new religious field in which religious elements are hierarchized, as opposed to idiosyncratic and instrumental *implicit syncretism*—whose goal is to create a *self-defensive* religious field against colonial encroachment on Vietnamese tradition and religion (p. 15).

Of course, there were competing visions of what constituted Caodaism. Hoskins's reading of the biographies of the five founding members of Caodaism reveals the conflicting personalities and agendas of Caodaist leaders and how these were situated within the shifting socio-political contexts of South Vietnam from the early 1920s to the fall of Saigon in 1975. Chapter 1 of *The Divine Eye* tells the story of Ngô Văn Chiêu, the “invisible” founder of Caodaism who had the first contact with the Supreme Being Cao Đài in the shape of a radiant Left Eye. While seen by many Caodai followers as the founder of Caodaism, he declined to take on the position of the “Pope” (*Giáo Tông*) and subscribed instead to a life of ascetic meditation (p. 41). The institutionalization of Caodaism was subsequently developed by Phạm Công Tắc, whose flamboyant and charismatic leadership is discussed in Chapter 2. A French-educated Saigon Spiritist and a civil servant, Phạm Công Tắc played an essential role in crafting the Caodai official declaration in 1926, in compiling the Caodai Religious Constitution based on his direct communication with the divine, in establishing the Caodai Holy See in Tây Ninh, and in composing spiritual messages in the Romanized cursive of *Quốc Ngữ* (pp. 71, 78). Different from the quietist Ngô Văn Chiêu, Phạm Công Tắc developed a modernist millenarianism that relied on divine guidance to establish religious authorities and mobilize the masses against colonial rule (pp. 71–72). His leadership produced schisms within Caodaism and increasing Caodaist engagement in the political sphere.

From the early 1940s, Caodaists witnessed the establishment of the Caodai military forces under the leadership of Trần Quang Vinh, the adopted spiritual son of Victor Hugo featured in

Chapter 3. The fate of Caodaists from 1940 to 1975 was determined by the shifting alliances among Caodai forces, the French, the Japanese, the Viet Minh, the Communists, and the South Vietnamese government that during critical junctures led to the killing of many Caodaists, the exile of Phạm Công Tắc, and attacks on Caodai leadership and establishments. The Fall of Saigon in 1975 resulted in an exodus of South Vietnamese, a large number of whom were Caodaists, to North America, Europe, and Australia. Among these Caodaists was Đỗ Vạn Lý, featured in Chapter 4, an intellectual educated in Japan and the United States who served as a diplomat under South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm and who established the Caodai Saigon Teaching Agency dedicated to the teaching of meditation, religious doctrine, and esoteric philosophy (pp. 132, 134). The Teaching Agency, still operating today in Ho Chi Minh City, declared no affiliation to the Holy See in Tây Ninh and promoted a form of intellectual Caodaism that does not rely on religious hierarchy and titles (p. 134).

In the diaspora, Caodaists have been called by the divine to reestablish Caodaism. They continue to face disagreements over theology, religious practices, and institutional arrangements, while attempting to innovate and construct a Caodaism that is transnational in nature. Across Chapters 1 through 5, but particularly in Chapter 6, Hoskins documents how Caodaists in the United States have been able to use the resources of the diasporic community and of virtual technology to establish various Caodai temples in California, and to reach out and gain new followers, including those who are not Vietnamese. For many of these “converts,” Caodaism offers a universal message of unity, redemption, and forgiveness (pp. 198–202). For the Vietnamese, Caodaism has been transformed from a “religion in diaspora”—that is, a religion of the people who were displaced as “victims” of the Vietnam War—into a “religion of diaspora” reformulated based on the 1926 prophecy given by the Supreme Being Cao Đài, designating the Vietnamese as the chosen people who would “become the master teacher of all humanity” (p. 147). Caodai’s millenarian, syncretistic, and universalist message provides overseas Vietnamese with a sense of connection to both the religiously and ethnically plural American society and the international network of Vietnamese in Vietnam and abroad (p. 231). This is not to say that all Caodaists abroad have a fond opinion of the Communist government and even the Caodai Holy See in Vietnam. In fact, Caodaist leaders abroad are divided in terms of their relationship with the Hanoi government and the Holy See, with leaders like Trần Quang Cảnh (Chapter 3) attempting to work with the Communist government and get Caodai temples in California to be affiliated with the Holy See, and others vehemently criticizing such an attempt.

Rich in historical-ethnographic data, *The Divine Eye* provides scholars of Southeast Asia with a nuanced and sympathetic understanding of the syncretic tradition of Caodaism. Hoskins engages with and builds on the scholarship of religious syncretism and transnationalism, examining not only the historically conditioned process of religious imagination, but also how diasporic communities rearticulate and rework religious messages and boundaries to “manage and overcome religious

differences and geographical challenges.” Readers of *The Divine Eye* will also appreciate the documentary on Caodaism produced by Janet and Susan Hoskins in 2008 as a companion to the book. While Janet Hoskins has conducted interviews with Caodaists in Canada, France, and Australia, little of these non-US materials are presented in the book. Moreover, since she focuses predominantly on Caodai leaders, the voices of ordinary Caodaists are not heard. *The Divine Eye* portrays Caodaism as a rather elitist project formulated by colonial French-educated intellectuals who aspired for a particular form of Asian modernity. What were—and are—the motivations for ordinary practitioners of Caodaism to participate in the religion? If they were to aspire for a form of modernity, would their understanding of modernity be similar to that of the anticolonial intellectual elites? And how would the “conversion” process to Caodaism by ordinary Caodaists differ from that of intellectual Caodaists, and more interestingly, how would it differ from that of Christian conversion in both colonial and contemporary Vietnam? Despite these shortcomings, *The Divine Eye* is a remarkable contribution to a rather thin scholarship on Vietnamese religious and diasporic studies.

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Animism in Southeast Asia

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Animism in Southeast Asia is a rich study that reaches well beyond the bounds of regional and disciplinary expertise. Surely, anthropologists of religion in Southeast Asia will have some commentary on the work, but so should scholars who work in the fields of global history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, politics and society, and any number of subdisciplines. The rich comparative approach between Amerindian—in particular, Amazonian along with Ojibwe—animism and Southeast Asian animism broadens the possibilities of analysis for experts who work in East,