

What Are Vietnam's Indigenous Religions?

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Vietnam is sometimes described as a primarily Buddhist country (current government statistics estimate that there are 10 million Buddhists out of 78 million people) with a sizeable Catholic minority (6 million). In addition to these two "world faiths" with foreign origins, there are also three increasingly institutionalized "indigenous religions," which have a long and troubled relationship with the state. The use of this term is itself problematic in many ways, and the story behind this new category is an interesting one. It is now used to apply to three specific groups, all of which have recently re-emerged into the national arena. Caodaism, founded in colonial Saigon in 1926, has 3.2 million followers and 1,300 temples, Hoa Hao Buddhism, founded in southwestern Vietnam in 1939, has 1.5 million followers (according to statistics at <http://www.vietnambossy.com>), but leaders of these faiths estimate their real numbers at closer to 6 million and 3 million respectively. *Dao Mau* ("Mother Goddess religion") is considered a "distinct subculture with cultural nuances varying locally," so there is no official documentation of its followers [Ngó Đức Thịnh 2010], but recent ethnographic reports indicate it is expanding in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It builds on traditional veneration of female divinities and heroes going back many centuries, but many specific ritual practices have developed more recently [Endres 2011; Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009; Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; 2011].

Caodaism is a syncretistic religion that seeks to bring "the gods of Europe" and the "gods of Asia" together in a conversation that can serve to heal the wounds of colonialism and establish a basis for mutual respect and dialogue. Officially called *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do*, "The Great Way of the Third Age of Redemption," Caodaism combines millenarian teachings with an Asian fusion of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism and Roman Catholicism, an Asia-centric millenarian movement which developed in the context of anti-colonial resistance. Established in 1926, its earliest members were members of the urban educated elite in Saigon. In just a few years, Caodaism grew dramatically to become the largest mass movement in the French colony of Cochinchina, with 20-25% of the people of South Vietnam converting to this new faith in the period from 1930-75 [Werner 1981].

Hoa Hao is a reformist, millenarian form of Buddhism established in 1937, which is now the fourth largest religion in Vietnam (after Buddhism, Catholicism and Caodaism). It has several temples in California and, like Caodaism, has also established a series of websites and now publishes histories and commentaries in Vietnamese in the United States. Founded by a young prophet who preached simplicity and egalitarianism, this new religion is, like Islam, opposed to the use of religious icons, and renounces the use of ancestral tablets and even images of the Buddha in its altars [Taylor 2001]. It developed in western Vietnam, perhaps influenced by minority communities of Cham

Muslims and Khmer Theravada Buddhists.

The "indigenous religions" of Vietnam incorporate many occult aspects (spirit mediums, spirit possession, divination, talismanic blessings, etc.) which make them seem "exotic" to outsiders. Some ceremonies involve elaborate costumes, pageantry and music (for the Caodai liturgical mass or Mother Goddess performances), while others – like Hoa Hao chanting of prayers – are conducted without instrumental accompaniments and even without devotional decorations aside from the ubiquitous flowers and incense. Spirit communications are important in all these indigenous religions: Caodaism receives its scriptures from a literary form of spirit mediumship, in which teachings are spoken (usually in verse) or written with a phoenix headed basket. The "Mother Goddess" religion is performative, with spirit mediums embodying the spirits of great generals, ladies of the court, princesses and young princes and distributing gifts that carry blessings to the participants. Hoa Hao Buddhism has its own scriptures received by the prophet Huynh Phu So, which provide Buddhist teachings in simplified language, making it more accessible to peasants and small scale merchants.

State Efforts at Secularization

After 1954 in northern Vietnam and after 1975 in southern Vietnam, the socialist government tried to "modernize" the country by stripping the traditional social order of its sacred character. Following Marxist-Leninist theory, the regime leaders believed that religion would naturally disappear once the means of production were nationalized and modernized. Many religious practices were considered "superstitious" and blamed for wasting the time and money of the masses, who should turn their attention to nation building, education and increasing agricultural and industrial production. The general goal of secularization was intensified in relation to religions like Caodaism and Hoa Hao Buddhism, which were considered "reactionary groups with some religious trappings" because of their history of clashes with communist forces in the past [Blagov 2001].

For a quarter century (1975-2000), most temples built by the followers of indigenous religions were closed. Few services were held, sometimes a few older women were allowed to guard the temple grounds, and the schools, clinics, orphanages and workshops associated with these groups were nationalized. People who had *Dao Mau* home temples could have their statues and altars taken away if the sounds of ritual music were heard, so many people said they "worshipped in silence and in darkness." Caodai religious leaders suggested a more introspective, meditative practice, "turning in" rather than seeking to recruit new members or hold large ceremonies.



Spirit mediums cross gender lines, with men embodying female spirits like this princess in white, and women embodying fierce mandarins and warriors.

Vietnam was listed as a “country of particular concern” for reasons of religious freedom by Amnesty International (in 2000) and the US State Department (in 2004), but since that time there has been substantial change. The reformation era “opening up” of Vietnam to the market economy (starting in 1986), and the normalization of relations with the US (in 1995) paved the way for new contact between exiled religious followers and the homeland. In 2007, Vietnam joined the World Trade organization and took various steps to show how religion was being re-integrated into public life.

Becoming “Indigenous”: A New View from the Vietnamese State

In 2007, the official Religious Press of Hanoi published a book by Phạm Bích Hợp [2007] titled *The People of the Southern Region and Indigenous Religions*, with a combination of interviews, surveys and ethnographic research concerning the southern millenarian religious movements known as Buu Son Ky Huong (“Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain”), Cao Dai (“the highest tower”) and Hoa Hao Buddhism (designating its village of origin). This new study expressed a more conciliatory government attitude towards groups once designated as practicing “superstition” and “reactionary politics,” sanctioning them under the new and increasingly common description of these groups as “indigenous religions” (*tôn giáo bản địa*). But the nature of this new sanction and its history raises a series of questions about what exactly could be meant by “indigenous,” and how it is being used in today’s Vietnam.

The term “indigenous” has the general meaning of native, originating in and characterized by a particular region or country, and the Vietnamese term (*bản địa*) means quite literally “emerging from the land.” A second sense given to the English term is innate, inherent, natural, which is rendered by another Vietnamese term often used in the book—*bản sắc*, which could be translated literally as the “true original colors,” and has taken on the modern meaning of “identity.” This characterization is often used to designate the religious practices of ethnic minorities, who once inhabited the region but have now been displaced by

larger groups who have migrated to the area.

All these “indigenous religions” are practiced primarily by ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh), who migrated to the region now known as southern Vietnam in the past 300 years. They are not, therefore, the people who have the earliest historical connection to the land. The southern region had been a part of the kingdom of Cambodia, inhabited by Khmer speaking people and various highland groups, many of them speakers of Austronesian languages. Highland ethnic groups live primarily from hunting and swidden gardening, and so are often described as “indigenous minorities,” but it would be hard to use this label for the followers of “indigenous religions,” who are primarily agriculturalists, and include many traders, city residents, intellectuals and members of the professional class. Caodaism in particular originated among colonial civil servants, many of them of high rank, and was led by a number of wealthy landowners, businessmen and journalists. The Caodai pantheon is both syncretistic and cosmopolitan, involving as it does the veneration of historical personages not only from Vietnam, China and India (Trang Trinh, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha) but also from France, Russia and Palestine (Victor Hugo, Vladimir Lenin, Jesus Christ). So how could these belief systems come to be described as “indigenous”?

I think the labeling of these practices as “indigenous” religions is primarily a strategic one, which combines a recognition of regional traditions and a perception that the 1975 “reunification” of Vietnam also had elements of an annexation and even subjugation of the peoples of the south who were supposedly “liberated.” As part of an effort to normalize relations between religions and the state, this term revises earlier policies which had condemned Caodaism and Hoa Hao as “superstitious” or “heterodox” practices (*mê tín*), and allows their adherents to be seen as “mainstream” (*chánh tín*) religious believers. Scholars now speak of “folk beliefs” (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) which were never fully absorbed into elite or official culture, what Philip Taylor calls “an unofficial counterculture that reflects the priorities of groups who have been excluded from state power” [Taylor 2006: 10].

These more narrow definitions of the term suggest that

the relation between the Hanoi government and the “indigenous people of the south” might have been excluded from the dominant culture of the northern nation state. These are claims sometimes made by southern leaders, even those who were themselves active in the National Liberation Front, who felt that reunification in 1975 did not in fact place the two formerly separated halves of Vietnam on an equal footing but resulted in a period during which all southerners, whatever their political convictions, were viewed as unreliable, and were not allowed to share evenly in their own new government.

The situation is somewhat different with *Dao Mau*, since it is a modern version of spirit medium rituals long practiced in rural northern Vietnam. In the early 1990s, a number of Communist party leaders began to promote the idea of using cultural activities to foster traditional values, allowing practices once considered “superstition” to become “folk culture.” Scholars associated with Ngô Đức Thịnh’s Folklore Institute began to document the songs and dances of what was then known as the Four Palaces cult. By highlighting the kinship between these practices and shamanism in other societies, these scholars were able to allow *Dao Mau* to be considered an indigenous folk religion (*Đạo*) and a “living museum” of Vietnamese culture. The resurgence of popular religion was sanctioned by scholarly efforts to gain recognition for once suppressed traditional practices [Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009; Endres 2011]. In the new market economy, these practices also became more attractive because they were said to promote health, confidence and entrepreneurial success.

Contrasting Narratives of Religion and Diaspora

In an introduction to the edited volume *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Philip Taylor outlines several ways in which contemporary religions can be understood in Vietnam [2006: 10-15]. While acknowledging the many conflicts between religious leaders and the current government, he concludes that it is wrong to overemphasize the

role of the state, even if its control over publications means it can keep the “court transcript”: “From time to time the official record is tactfully re-edited to find aspects of formerly censored or un-noticed popular practice to be in conformity with state policy” [*ibid.* 2006: 14].

Two contrasting narratives have appeared in the 21st century to make sense of the resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam and in the diaspora. In Caodai communities in California, leaders of the religion have argued that they were fated to leave the country in order to globalize their faith [Hoskins 2006; 2009; 2010; 2011]. In today’s Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), scholars and intellectuals argue that the “indigenous religions” of Vietnam should be recognized and reintegrated into the national fabric by emphasizing their ties to the regional culture of the South. There is a paradox in the contrast between these two narratives: In one, a local religious movement becomes “international” and assumes the mission of a universalizing belief. In the other, a syncretistic ideology is refocused on its local antecedents and becomes “indigenous” in order to neutralize the political controversies in which it was once entangled and tie it to the “traditional psychology” of southern Vietnam (Nam Bo) as the meeting place of a diverse and distinctive mix of cultures.

Caodaism presents an Asian perspective on universal religion, and yet in many respects it is a very specifically Vietnamese perspective. It deliberately evokes themes of exile, exodus and long distance nationalism, and uses a number of Biblical idioms to argue for the significance of Eastern religious philosophies in a world threatened by western domination. I often heard, for instance, that the last time God spoke so directly to humanity before 1925 was when Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Vietnamese refugees, who often spent several years “sponsored” by Bible Belt Protestant families, explicitly compare their experiences to those of the Jews cast out of Palestine, and inscribe their exile in a theological discourse with a strong millennial component. This model is also adopted to some extent



Mediums can also be possessed by the *ky lan*, a chimerical dragon horse who is attended by masked servants.



The Caodai pantheon includes Lao Tzu, Buddha and Confucius in the top row, Quan Am (Kuan Yin), Li Pei and Quan Cong (Guan Yu) in the second row, followed by Jesus Christ in the third row and a figure of Vietnamese ancestor worship.



A woman prays in the Caodai great temple at Tay Ninh, in front of images of the three mediums who first received teachings from the Jade Emperor (Cao Dai) in 1925-26.



Caodai dignitaries in red, yellow and turquoise robes kneel before the image of the left eye of God on a giant globe at the main altar in Tay Ninh.

by the leaders of Hoa Hao Buddhism, who also seek legitimacy by identifying with global Buddhist ideals.

Followers of *Dao Mau* use a different narrative strategy, since their origins in the north allow them to stress a less controversial “patriotic loyalty to the fatherland.” In the diaspora, many Vietnamese see themselves as exiled, and travel on pilgrimages to famous Mother Goddess temples in *Nam Dinh*. They say that “Vietnam dances inside them” when they are possessed by the spirits. Through embodied rituals, they conceptualize, map, inscribe and document their history. Their worship of ancestors, heroes and saints is a way of practicing and developing a historical consciousness. It is a selective history, and notably one which cuts out the conflicts of the 20th century entirely, but it is a particular method of re-connecting to a glorious past which they believe can provide guidance for living in a new homeland and navigating the generational divide [Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; 2011; Hoskins in press].

For immigrants and exiles, diaspora can be constructed as a narrative of “crossing and dwelling” [Tweed 2006], in which movement through space is given meaning by ideas of a transcendent connection to “home,” making the longed for land of origin into a “holy land” (*thánh địa*) of universal importance. This fusing of religious discourse and nationalist political goals is in fact not unusual in a post Cold War era in which the resurgence of religious politics has challenged the predicted triumph of secular nationalism. As scholars rethink earlier trajectories that predicted that the “imagined community” of the faithful would inevitably be replaced by the nation state, we may come to see new diasporic formations as crucial to understanding the competing ideologies of order of the 21st century. While it seems ironic that the so-called “indigenous religions” have been revitalized in part because of diasporic communities, this is an emerging characteristic of a globalized world.

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