Chapter 1

What Is a Refugee Religion? Exile, Exodus, and Emigration in the Vietnamese Diaspora

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Within the field of migration studies, there are many ways of describing the experience of leaving one's country. Migration is perhaps the most neutral term, since it simply designates the act or process of moving from one region or country to another. Exile is a more loaded word, referring to an unwilling rupture with the homeland, whether imposed by political circumstances or personal choice, but it hints at the idea of expulsion and suffering. Exodus evokes the biblical story of the Israelites forced out of Egypt and the movement of large numbers of people, described in less theological language as refugees. This chapter examines the narrative strategies applied to migration by followers of Vietnamese indigenous religions (Caodaism and Đạo Mẫu), and looks at the ways in which migration is inscribed into a religious theodicy, and ritual practice itself becomes a way of "returning" to an ancestral homeland. My title refers to refugees, as opposed to simple migrants, and this is because most overseas Vietnamese see themselves as refugees, people who were forcibly displaced from their homeland, although in recent years an increasingly number are legally classified as immigrants.[1] The idea of the "loss of country," and the threat that it raises of a loss of identity, is central to the very different ritual and doctrinal responses of these two religions.

I also want to address scholarly discussions of whether overseas Vietnamese communities can be legitimately described as "diasporas," or whether there is instead a "diasporic moment" that is linked to narratives phrased in terms of exile or exodus, but not necessarily applicable to the overseas community as a whole. It will be my argument that Caodai teachings infuse the Vietnamese refugee experience

with an ideology of exodus that is "diasporic," but this should be interpreted as a rhetorical device, an effort to persuade both themselves and others of the particular spiritual mission that was their destiny. Đạo Mẫu followers, in contrast, have developed a form of practice that provides an embodied and performative experience of the homeland, so for them the doctrinal emphasis on diaspora is unneeded. They do, however, see themselves as exiles who need to "bring Vietnam back inside themselves" by forging relationships with spirits from a legendary imperial past. Viewing notions of exile and exodus as part of the narrative construction of diaspora is part of an effort to refine our comparative vocabulary and come to a better understanding of the relationship between religion and nationalism, and the often porous boundaries between the two.

My argument is that religious practice can itself be a form of refuge, of solace, and of identity formation for diasporic Vietnamese. My two case studies are minority religions: Caodaism is officially Vietnam's third largest religion (after Buddhism and Catholicism), is practiced by roughly 10 percent of the population of the southern part of the country, and it has at least 3.2 million followers in Vietnam and about four million followers worldwide.[2] Đạo Mẫu had its roots in northern Vietnam, although there is also a locally distinct tradition in central Vietnam, and offers a more intense, performative ritual based on an imperial pantheon of warriors, ladies of the court, and impish baby princes familiar to the ancestor worship practiced by virtually all Vietnamese. There is strong evidence that ethnic congregations of Buddhists and Catholics share many of these idioms, although they are probably clearest in Vietnam's "indigenous religions"—those religions born in the country whose beliefs and practices enact Vietnamese historical experience (Hoskins 2011b).

Spirit Possession as a Religion of Displacement

Spirit possession is a survival strategy developed by religions that suffer displacement, since it allows the deities of the land and of origins to move into the bodies of their disciples, and does not require that they actually return to the cult house of origins. The body of the possessed person becomes a new sacred space, the "seat" on which the spirits come to sit, and the platform through which they can come to teach. Spirit possession cults are famously developed among the displaced (the African slaves who formed Vodou, Candomblé, and Santeria [Brown 2001; Matory 2005]), the rural to urban migrants of the West African Hauka cult (Stoller 1992, 1995) and Sudanese *zar* (Boddy 1988, 1994), and northern Thai villagers crowding into Chiang Mai (Morris 2000). The Vietnamese practice of spirit possession may have developed as a response to dispersion, the dispersion of rural villagers as they moved into urban centers, and the dispersion of northerners who traveled to the south of Vietnam in the 1930s seeking economic opportunity or in the 1950s fleeing the communist takeover in Hanoi.

The earliest ethnographic descriptions we have are from urban practices, despite the fact that many of the most important temples are in isolated rural areas. A refugee community in France studied in the 1940s and 1950s provided the framework for one of the most complete descriptions of the pantheon (Simon and Simon-Barouch 1973). The idea of pilgrimage and of the enhanced efficacy of a distant temple seems a long established principle, as evidenced by the Vietnamese proverb: "The statues in the local temple are not efficacious." Only those temples you need to travel to get to will really reward your wishes. Our experiences doing fieldwork this summer were that we would travel many hours on winding roads to go to a temple high in the mountains or in a remote area and there discover other minivans and even video crews. We witnessed elaborate ceremonies in isolated locations held by people from Hanoi or Saigon. These were rituals performed by urban people seeking out their rural roots, people living far from the land asking the goddesses of heaven, earth, water, and mountains to bless them so that they could be more prosperous in city-bound enterprises.

Traditional Vietnamese ancestor worship defined social identity as rooted in a particular place, the village of birth, and the family of descent, whose tombs provided the physical proof of the enduring presence of the past. Over the last three centuries, the Vietnamese people moved out from the Red River Delta to populate what is now central and southern Vietnam. To make this transition they needed to evolve modes of access to their deities that transcended any particular place—new ways of carrying the past with them and recreating its sacred authority in new locations. For those living far from the ancestral homeland, it became necessary to not only create new sacred spaces, but also acknowledge that these are only "shadows" or "reflections" of the original spaces once inhabited by the ancestors. Emigrants' religious practices are not only echoes of the "land of origins," but also transformed and reinvented on new territory. Spirits are summoned to fulfill new needs, reinvigorating some older rituals and repurposing them to fit another context.

Both Caodaism and Đạo Mẫu are often described as "indigenous Vietnamese religions," since they were born in Vietnam and draw on

the historical experience of the Vietnamese people. Since the most basic definition of an indigenous religion is one that is practiced in the land where it originated, there is an implicit contradiction in terms in talking about "indigenous religions in diaspora." If these rituals are practiced overseas, then the religion is no longer purely "indigenous"—but it is precisely because the ritual practitioners are displaced from their homeland that they feel a stronger need to evoke these spirits specifically to get the guidance of their ancestors in a new world. The idea of the "indigenous" is associated with tropes of depth, density, and authenticity, which are framed by arguments that a particular practice is "true to its origins." The indigenous and territorial would seem to be opposed to the cosmopolitan and diasporic. But in fact these two claims to religious authority are linked and mutually constitutive. As Johnson (2007) argues, the "indigenous" can only be defined in relation to the extended context of external relations, and "the diaspora" takes on its own identity through a project of maintaining aspects of indigeneity in a new world.

The refugee is defined by exclusion and forcible displacement, while the disaporic subject is—to a certain extent—a displaced person who has chosen to take on a specific subject position, which involves a new way of seeing the homeland. Forced into the political category of refugee, she or he can choose to respond with sentiments of affinity, making efforts to resettle in an ethnic enclave, performing certain ritual gestures, and choosing to identify with a particular community. Racial difference places certain boundaries of how far one can choose one's own group membership, but within the framework of recognized physical differences there is still much room for individual agency. "Indigenous religions" offer one type of community in which the homeland is sacralized and performed in various ways that both reinforce the consciousness of displacement and try to transcend it.

The Practice of Spirit Possession

In March 2010, I attended a special ceremony at the home of a Đạo Mẫu medium who had traveled back to Vietnam to purchase a full set of paper votive offerings for his temple in Orange County. Brightly colored horses in red, blue, and green, with shiny gold foil saddles and bridles stood in a small enclosure overlooking the drained swimming pool in the backyard of a suburban home. Elaborate ships filled with paper doll passengers and decorated with ribbons of pink, turquoise, and yellow fluttered softly in the breeze on the patio. Inside his apartment, an altar with statues of highland ladies, fierce warriors, stern mandarins, lovely princesses, and impish child spirits dominated the living room. Beside it was a "sacred mountain" topped by the Sixth Lady in Green (Châu Lục), his guardian spirit, and her retinue of ladies in waiting, arranged behind a pyramid of tropical fruit (pineapple, mangoes, oranges, and dragon fruit) and a plate with fresh betel nut and sirih leaves.

The medium, who I will call Kiếm, was bowing in front of the altar, dressed in a simple white tunic, touching his head to the ground beside a stack of elaborately colored costumes. After a prayer by an older ritual master, he raised his hands above his head and attendants slipped on a sparkling red and gold veil. Rhythmic music began to play, another attendant started to beat the drum, and his body swayed from side to side. The first spirits evoked are always the Mother Goddesses—one in red, one in gold, and one in green—who sit, veiled, at the top of the altar. They preside over the ceremony but they do not "do the work" of interacting with their worshippers. Instead, they send a series of other spirits, coming down in hierarchical order, from the imperial court: famous heroes wielding swords and lances, lovely ladies with feathered fans, spoiled princes who sip wine and smoke cigarettes (some of them shaking slightly like opium addicts), and pretty princesses who dance with oars and distribute flowers. The final spirits are always the boy princes, who play with a bow and arrow, do pratfalls, tighten their fists in temper tantrums and scatter candy to the audience. Each ceremony is unique, and the medium himself does not know which spirits will descend to "sit on his shoulders," although he has prepared costumes for about a dozen of his favored spirits.

Kiếm gestures with a hand signal to let his attendants know which spirit has come into his body. Then they dress him as he sits, wordlessly, watching himself be transformed into a coquettish dancer, a haughty mandarin, or a highland girl carrying a woven basket on her back. In the mirror, he sees his face take on the characteristic expression of the spirit he now embodies, and he stands in front of the altar. First, he will bow with a velvet cloak, and dance with flaming incense sticks. Then he will lift his sword or shake his feathered fan, stage props that dramatize the personality who dances inside him, using his arms and his legs but blocking his ability to speak. Figures from Vietnamese history and legend come alive in his living room, as he incarnates up to two dozen spirits.

He sits after each dance and receives requests from the audience. People approach with fresh dollar bills arrayed like a fan on a plate, asking for blessings of prosperity, true love, and healing. Rarely, he

Figure 1.1 Kiếm dancing while possessed by the spirit of the child prince (Cậu Bé) in front of the altar in his home in Orange County, California

will speak to them, but if he does so it is not his own voice but that of the spirit. More often, he will respond with a gift—a bit of betel and sirih, a glass of wine, or other dollar bills he takes from the fruit displays on the altar. These gifts are blessed with incense and contain within them the power of his spirit. The spirit of a highland healer may rub the swollen knees of an older woman, or blow smoke into an envelope and hand this "spirit breath" package to a devoted disciple. Through an exchange of gifts, the human community and the spirit community are joined, and members of audience share in the health, wealth, and charisma of a glorified imperial past (Figure 1.1).

Kiếm came to California 15 years ago, as a young man accompanying his father who had been released from prison camp in Vietnam. He spoke little English at first and felt isolated, even within the Vietnamese community, since so many things were different. He worked several different jobs, serving as a mechanic, a factory worker, and a busboy in a restaurant. He had a failed romance with a young woman who aborted the fetus they had conceived together. For years he was haunted by the idea of that lost child, his descendant who was never born, and he became convinced that he was cursed and would

not be able to marry. He had attended spirit possession ceremonies in Saigon with his grandmother, and was happy to discover that they were held in California as well. Under the guidance of the Đạo Mẫu ritual master, he became initiated into the practice and built a small altar to the lost fetus in his home, so that he could be released from his obligations to mourn its passing. He did not marry, but became a part of the world of effeminate younger men who gathered around the Đạo Mẫu ritual master and assisted him at ceremonies.

"Some of us find that we have female spirits within us," he told me. "We think that we are destined to marry and have a family, but really we are being called to serve the spirits." The circle of Đạo Mẫu practitioners became his surrogate family, and he started cooking for them, inviting the younger men to stay with him when they first came into the area. Soon he was the "older brother" who was able to set up his own temple in his apartment, and he developed a special skill in choosing and playing the music required for the spirit ceremonies. Uncertainties about new and different expectations for home, family, and sexuality seem to be linked to a certain gender fluidity among spirit mediums in California, which is marked in Vietnam as well (Norton 2003; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011). Traveling between the human and spirit worlds is seen as a vocation that has particular appeal for young men who also find themselves somewhere between the world of women and that of men.

Most of the participants in possession ceremonies, however, are older women, mothers and grandmothers, who enjoy the gossip and convivial meals before each ceremony. Many of them were initiated as mediums in war-torn Vietnam, and some say that protection from the princess in white who rows across a sea of sorrows was what allowed them to survive perilous boat escapes. Many have lost a husband or been separated from one during years of forced displacement, and dancing to serve the spirits forges a ritual-based kinship circle. Women spirit mediums are described as flamboyant, hot-tempered, and unusually assertive, so they also defy traditional gender norms in many ways (Endres 2008; Norton 2003; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009).

"These are spirits that can cross the oceans," Kiếm told me. "When I feel them come into my body, it is as if Vietnam is dancing inside me. I do not feel nostalgic or homesick any more, because I know that they are still a part of me even here." Embodying spirits from the imperial past is both empowering and liberating, a new way to affirm a national origin and actualize its potency in a transnational space.

Đạo Mẫu, "the way of the Mother Goddess," has since 1975 become a "Transpacific religion," as its traditions and spirits have crossed an

ocean (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2003, 2011), as much as Matory argues that Vodou or Candomble is a "Black Atlantic Religion." The devotees or disciples of these religions have "understood themselves as the simultaneous inhabitants of multiple nations, some territorial and some transoceanic" (Matory 2005: 232). In terms more faithful to their own words, they understand that when they worship their bodies are filled with beings whose origins in a distant heartland bring that heritage alive in American suburbia.

For centuries, the Chinese spread their gods through imperial conquest of neighboring lands, and for roughly a thousand years they had dominion over Vietnam, conquering the once great Hindu empire of the Cham people. About 200 years ago, the Vietnamese began a march southward that eventually pushed aside Khmer kingdoms in the south, absorbing their gods into an imperial cosmology that blended Chinese characteristics with a more diverse pantheon of spirits associated with the ethnic minorities of the mountains and forests. The Đạo Mẫu pantheon represents this history as a series of statues on an altar in which the three great mother goddesses sit highest, usually hidden behind veils, with rows of generals, mandarins, and princes in front of them, and side altars to the spirits of local rivers, hills, and rock formations.

Religions, as Matory (2005: 238) notes, are "among the most widespread and institutionalized ways in which people employ the images and reality of faraway places and times as models of [an] underlying idea, or super-powered realities." The spirit possession religions of the African diaspora have been reconceptualized not as "African survivals" (a retention of cultural traits) but as practices that have emerged in the context of transnational flows. Yet "these religions of the translocal self" have also proved highly useful in the projects of territorial nationalists—native folklorists, anthropologists, and others who have framed them as "indigenous traditions."

In Vietnam, as in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, it has been intellectuals and cosmopolitans who have defended these "folk traditions," and argued that they should be respected by a once contemptuous Marxist state (Ngô Đức Thinh 2010; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009). At the Phủ Giầy temple in the remote countryside many hours from Hanoi, I was surprised to see a photograph of a scholarly conference, where I recognized American anthropologists Laurel Kendall and Marjorie Balzer who studied shamanism in Korea and Mongolia, meeting with Vietnamese scholars seeking to "legalize" spirit possession. International conferences validated the status of this spirit possession practice as a legitimate expression of "the original matriarchal

Vietnamese culture," and so of time of egalitarian origins sacred to Marxist evolutionary theory.

Diasporic religion is not an atavistic "survival" but a form that needs to be enacted by living and embattled communities to fill their own needs in new locations. The selective reproduction and transformation of Vietnamese cultural dispositions in California communities allows old gods and goddesses to come to serve new purposes.

Paul Christopher Johnson has described many of these characteristics in his study of the Black Carib religion in New York City:

> Diasporas are social identifications based on shared memory bridges linking a lived space and a left-behind place. The remembered land must be sustained through periodic physical returns, imagined and ritualized returns, or both. If to be "in diaspora" is to reside in two or more spaces, at least imaginatively, it is also to occupy a memory space between them. At least two gaps are implied in diaspora religious "identity": between words or acts in a host land and those in a homeland (a gap in space), and within those groups from one moment in time to the next, between a recollected past and a projected future (a gap in time and memory). Being "in diaspora" is best understood not as the final closure of those gaps, but rather as the active engagement with, and evocation of, such gaps as a source of meaning (2007: 48).

Đạo Mẫu is a diasporic religion because it connects refugees with their lost homeland, but it still delicately balanced between these gaps in space and in memory. The homeland then is not only a physical place but also a concept and a desire—a place to return to through the imagination, through a kind of simultaneous doubling of psychic space—the possibility of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination, or performing a ritual in order to collapse together these doubled spaces, and bring the distant homeland back into the body located in California.

Caodai Ideas of Prophecy and Diaspora

Caodaism (also called Đạo Cao Đài) is a new religious movement that came into being in 1926 in French Indochina as a response to the great dislocations and upheavals of the colonial period. The brutal French conquest and subsequent suppression of literacy in Chinese characters and many of the intellectual traditions of East Asian culture created a crisis of meaning for the first generation of Vietnamese students educated at French language schools. Several new religious movements emerged in Vietnam during the twentieth century, in

response to both the new age of global communications and the inequities of French colonial polices. Caodaism was the largest of these, and converted over a million people in its first decade, becoming the largest mass movement in the southern colony of Cochinchina. From the 1940s onward, the number of Caodaists in Vietnam has ranged from two or four million, although the highest-ranking Cardinal in Vietnam told me that he believed there were six million today, with some of them practicing in private.[3]

Caodaism emerged in response to the "loss of country" during the colonial period. The earliest spirit medium séances asked for divine guidance to deal with the loss of sovereignty to the French. Christianity was presented to colonized intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century as an alternative to what French critics considered not Confucianism but "confusionism"—an amalgam of different faiths and practices that were all seen as premodern and incoherently entangled with each other. Catholic missionaries had considerable success in northern Vietnam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, forming a committed but rather thoroughly "Vietnamized" version of Catholicism, but they had little success in the southern Vietnamese colony of Cochinchina. Saigon, the capital of Cochinchina, was an ethnically diverse city of recent migrants, including the Vietnamese who had moved south in the eighteenth and ninteenth centuries, Ming Chinese refugees who had come in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Khmer Theravada Buddhists, Chan Muslims, and Tamil Hindus.

Instead of converting to Christianity, the educated elite of this region forged a new modernist syncretism that built on Sino-Vietnamese secret societies (the "Minh") and claimed inspiration from the Jade Emperor himself. Its aim was to present a new doctrine that would reconcile the various diverse cultural elements of southern Vietnamese urban society, as well as to erect an alternative apparatus of power (a "Vietnamese Vatican") that would have to be respected by the secular colonial regime. Christ himself was, paradoxically, less important in this scheme than a number of Christian ideas about history and popular emancipation—the notion of the Vietnamese as "God's chosen people," the idea of a prophet who would fight for the independence of his people against an empire based in Rome, and the erection of an intricate administrative hierarchy blending Confucian titles with Catholic ones (a Pope, female and male cardinals, bishops, and so on).

Cao Đài, the highest one, spoke directly to his first disciples in spirit séances that—unlike the spirit possession ceremonies of Đạo Mẫu—were primarily verbal, resulting in the dictation of a series of new teachings that described how the various religions in Vietnam could be unified, and how this spiritual unification was linked to the struggle for national liberation. Along with a host of other Asian religious and political leaders, Cao Đài directed his disciples to cleanse themselves spiritually in order to be strong enough to win the struggle for independence. Jesus was included in the pantheon and Cao Đài spoke of his love for his human son, but his divinity was not stressed. What was stressed was the sacrifice he made in order to lead his people to freedom against a foreign empire: Jesus died as a criminal, with his corpse displayed as a religious icon. Unlike the sages of east (Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tzu) who all lived long lives and died peacefully, Jesus lived a short and tragic life, and never acquired the wisdom of old age. So he sits in a somewhat junior position in the pantheon (below Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tzu, and also below the female Boddhisattva Quan Ăm and the ferocious god of war, Quan Công). Christianity is called "the way of the saints," associating it with the veneration of heroes and local guardian spirits, who are also called "saints" in Vietnamese folk religion. "The way of the immortals" is considered a more demanding path, as is the "way of Buddha," which leads to union with the deity.

In Confucian orthodoxy, the emperor is deified and all citizens should display an unquestioning loyalty to the state. The revolutionary message of Christianity, however, was that no regime could declare itself above review. All power is conditional, and when the powerless rise, God may be their ally. Human authority begins to lose its grip on unimpeachable legitimacy. In order to challenge the French colonial regime, young colonized intellectuals needed first to absorb this Christian message of rebellion, and then use it to reanimate the distant, literary figure of the Jade Emperor and turn him into a fond but demanding father who would guide them to a new religious and national destiny.

Spirit messages told young educated Vietnamese that they were "God's chosen people" because they had suffered for so long under the imperial domination of first China and then France. Their recompense was the opportunity to reconcile the various religions of the world and bring them together under divine guidance. Max Weber argued that the existence of suffering was a central problem for all religious faiths, and each of the world's religious leaders had to struggle to establish a vindication of the divinity and justice of allowing suffering to exist. This is why I call the Caodai doctrine a "theodicy of loss," which had a diasporic impetus even before the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Whether the events of April 30, 1975 are described as "Black April" (the term used in Little Saigon, referring to the day of "national tragedy") or the day of liberation and reunification, the changes that followed created a huge crisis of meaning for a whole generation of people whose lives were marked by migration (for many of them starting with internal migration from north to south Vietnam in 1954), reeducation camps, dangerous escapes by boat, and the challenges of building new lives in a new land.

It is unclear exactly how many Caodaists left Vietnam after 1975, but we do know that many members of the leadership were imprisoned and executed, and the departure of refugees continued through the 1990s. Their presence at places like Camp Pendleton and other refugee processing centers generally went unrecorded because Americans were familiar only with Buddhism and Catholicism, and did not recognize these new faiths as "religions." Heavy pressures were also placed on Vietnamese refugees to convert to the Christian churches that sponsored their resettlement, so it took some time before these communities could be rebuilt in the diasporic conditions of the overseas Vietnamese community.

Since the 1990s, however, a new generation has established transnational communities of faith that have linked Caodaists in the United States to their coreligionists in other countries and in Vietnam. After 1997, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has officially recognized the religion, although it has done so only under conditions of heavy government control and restrictions on religious expression. In diaspora, dozens of Caodai temples have been established in California, and websites have spread the message of Caodai teachings over a very wide geographic area. There have also been efforts to train new religious leaders in the United States, to forge stronger links with Vietnam by raising funds to rebuild Caodai temples destroyed during the war, and to translate Caodai scriptures into English so they will be accessible to both Westerners and American-born Vietnamese.

Religious leaders in California told me: "We did not realize why we had to leave our country at that time. We simply wanted to be with our families out of harm's way. Now we can see that we did bring a mission with us. Our mission was to spread the message of Caodai, of the unity of all religions and the need for peace. The exodus of people from South Vietnam, and the fact that many more left in the years that followed and settled in Australia, Canada, France, and all over the world was in fact part of a divine plan. It was a way to put the followers of Caodai in many parts of the globe so that they could then carry out their spiritual mission in a new place."

Almost all of the people I spoke to said that in April 1975, they thought we were just refugees fleeing a dangerous situation, but as the years passed they realized that this was God's way of forming new missionaries in countries like the United States, Australia, Canada, and France. They came to see that it was their role to help create a global religion of unity, not merely a religion in exile that would serve the Vietnamese community. They understood that the suffering of millions in fact had a reason and a justification. "Now, we realize that our country is here. Not here in the US specifically, but here where we are in the world. In a sense, the world is all one country on a spiritual plane, and what we are trying to do is to return to our own spiritual country in our hearts, and to help others to do so as well."

There were many spirit messages in the early 1960s that warned wealthy people that their riches would be taken from them. The people who profited from the wartime situation were told that they would have to suffer later, because material rewards were not the same as spiritual rewards. Caodaists now say the fall of Saigon was part of God's plan, and ultimately the traumas caused by the communist victory could be understood retrospectively as part of a larger story of the globalization of their religion and its eventual triumph.

Vietnam has experienced a resurgence of interest in religion since 1990, so while restrictions are still strong, there is a mood of optimism that conditions for religious freedom are improving. Caodai temples are being renovated and new ones are being built in many areas of the south and center of the country, and a global momentum is forming for tolerance and spiritual diversity.

Other Refugee and Diasporic Religions: Malkki's *Purity and Exile*

There have been other studies of religious ideologies in refugee camps and communities that suggest that they can be particularly suited to formulating new "national cosmologies." Malkki's study *Purity and Exile* looks at Hutu refugees in Tanzania to explore how displacement and disruption shaped the social construction of a new mythico-historical order, comparing it to a spider who ingests and digests new events to spin them into new webs of cultural meaning:

> Insofar as these orders are spun in an oppositional context, in struggle, making history inevitably implies the unmaking of someone else's history... One of the most important aspects of the mythico-historical ordering stories is that they powerfully articulate the close interrelationships between the production of historical and national forms of consciousness (1995: 245).

Comparing the "national cosmologies" of Hutu refugees in camps to those in towns, Malkki finds that the refugee camp fosters a strong sense of collective identity that is not present in the towns. She concludes that the liminal status of peoples in the camps led to the creation of new national cosmologies, heavily laced with biblical metaphors of purity and exile, while refugees in the towns saw their liminality as a simple "noise" that was eventually resolved into strategies of shifting identities and cosmopolitanism. Drawing on Mauss's distinction between internationalism and cosmopolitanism, she argues that visions of "historical destiny" are linked to notions of categorical purity and omnipresent dreams of contamination, both constructing and essentializing differences between national identities, while urban cosmopolitanism goes in the opposite direction, favoring the assimilation model of identities like "porous sieves" (Tambiah 1986: 6) through which one can move in and out of at will (Malkki 1995: 258).

Caodaism would seem to challenge these categorical distinctions, since it is at the same time a vision of national identity and one of universal salvation. Malkki's thesis would predict that those Caodaists who experienced refugee camps and reeducation camps would be most inclined to affirm a new national vision, while those who adopted more cosmopolitan, urban lifestyles might reject them. Paradoxically, the opposite seems to have occurred: While many Caodaists were moved by harsh experiences in refugee camps and reeducation camps to commit themselves more fully to religious practice, they have tended to do so by embracing the esoteric tradition of Ngô Minh Chiêu looking inward for spiritual strength. Members of the diaspora who have been most active in propagating a new form of long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1998) had well-established cosmopolitan credentials before 1975, since many of them were highly educated and served as diplomats, doctors, engineers, and urban professionals.

Đạo Mẫu, in contrast, is practiced mainly by people who were small-scale merchants, shopkeepers, and tailors in Vietnam, and was not identified with a literary intelligentsia until recent efforts by folklorists to defend the practice. Their response to what Malkki calls the "noise" generated by a liminal position has been to recreate their own version of this "noise" in home temples where participants can travel in spirit back into the glorious imperial past. While Đạo Mẫu is less overtly nationalistic, it is clearly associated with a pride in the national heritage, and tries to infuse these reenactments of the powers of the past with the efficacy to transform the present.

Đạo Mẫu disciples state that they practice not only to honor the spirits but also to get their help in improving their businesses, restoring harmony to their marriages, even attracting new lovers, and fighting against the ravages of aging. This is a "religion of prosperity" that offers concrete benefits, so the money distributed at ceremonies will be repaid "with interest" by future success.

Scholars and theorists of diasporic religion (Tweed 1997, 2006; Vasquez 2003, 2010) have argued that religious affiliations are a shifting flow of "crossings and dwellings" (Tweed 2006) that move across the globe to create new communities. Tweed defines religion with metaphors that stress its fluidity: "Religions are confluences of organic cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to create homes and cross boundaries" (2006). But Vasquez argues that this emphasis on fluidity seems naive to elements of power and coercion that are also involved in religious change. While stressing the ability of religion to reinvent itself, it also pays little attention to the weight of history and tradition that is an important part of the way all religions—including "new" ones like Caodaism—legitimize themselves.

Diasporic religion often involves a traumatic dispersion from the homeland, and has a temporal element where memory plays a prominent role, as the past is retrieved and reframed in a new context. Diasporas ritualize the relationship between the past and the future, because they are based on the experience of deferral—the gap between the present dwelling space and a wish for reunion with the homeland. What is at stake in diasporic religion (and in nationalism more generally) is the power to name and represent the past, to invest past suffering with meaning and a sacred mission.

Vasquez argues that the metaphors used to understand religion can be grouped into the "hydraulic" ones favored by immigration scholars (first wave, second waves, flows, fluxes, streams), the "spatial" ones used by geographers (landscapes, maps, territories, fields), and the ideas of "relativity and connectivity" in the more cybernetic metaphors of networks, webs, and pathways. Arjun Appadurai (1996) brought hydraulic and spatial metaphors together in his talk of ethnoscapes, and Tweed has added the notion of a "sacroscape" to this tool kit of tongue-twisting terminology (2006). Vasquez (2010) argues that the notion of networks, as a kind of "reification of motion," allows us to see how many flows are "gated" and "channeled" by forms of power and coercion, and so network theory can be freed of its functionalist heritage and incorporated into a more phenomenological approach to the body and to experience.

"Religion as Faith" vs. "Religion as Ideology"

The poignant quest for the meaning of Vietnam's suffering remains undiminished today, as a leader of the Vietnamese American Student Association noted in the special Tet 2005 issue of the magazine *Non Sông*. He calls for the emergence of a new ideology that could be "neither capitalism nor communism but simple Vietnamism" (Nguyen 2005: 21). Vietnamism—a national faith based on combining the diverse Asian traditions with a dose of Catholic activism and social organization--is what Caodaism tried to be in the 1920s and 1930s in French Indochina, and it is still what it is trying to be in the twenty-first century context of the overseas community. It is also what Đạo Mẫu followers do, although they formulate this in a practice-based "religion as faith" as opposed to a "religion as ideology," in the useful distinction developed by the Indian scholar Ashis Nandy (1988, 1998).

Nandy defines a "religion as faith" as a ritual practice that you follow to protect yourself, to cure your ailments, and to help you along the path to happiness, wealth, and success. The motivating idea is "if you believe in it, it will work for you." Nandy developed this idea to distinguish popular Hinduism from Hindu nationalist movements like the Hindutva, but it can also be applied to practices like Đạo Mẫu. A "religion as ideology", in contrast, sees itself as a "cause," and so its followers feel that they have to actively protect and promote their religion. The motivating idea is "if you believe, you should work for it." Caodaism is a revealed religion, received by colonized intellectuals, and it has the characteristics of a religion as ideology, while Đạo Mẫu is a vernacular tradition, practiced by a wide range of people but most identified with market women and the resurgence of the market economy, so it can be seen as a religion as faith.

Contrasts between the Two: Modalities of Expression

Caodaists, as part of a modernist syncretism, adopted the idea of diaspora as part of their religious doctrine from the beginning. The "loss of the country" was a theme in the early spirit messages (when this referred to a loss of sovereignty rather than a territorial displacement), and the Vietnamese were identified as "God's chosen people" who would bring the message of the single origin of all religions to the rest of the world. It was also prophesied that Japan would come to occupy Vietnam, and the country would eventually achieve independence but only after a period of trauma and dispersal.

Đạo Mẫu followers, in contrast, have said that "Vietnam dances inside them" through the experience of spirit possession. 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 that cuts out the conflicts of the twentieth century entirely, but it is a particular method of reconnecting to a glorious past that they believe can provide guidance for living in a new homeland and navigating the generational divide. In Vietnam, the resurgence of popular religion has come hand in hand with the resurgence of a market economy. In California, the creation of new home temples has come hand in hand with ethnic enclaves and efforts to turn ethnicity into a transnational resource (Figure 1.2).

Caodaists stress learning to read and write Vietnamese, and offer language classes for children in almost all their temples (as do most Buddhist temples). Đạo Mẫu offers no direct instruction, but since all the songs are in Vietnamese, some language skills are needed for a successful performance, and petitions should ideally be written in Nom characters (known only to the ritual masters today). One leaves

Figure 1.2 An older female spirit medium possessed by the "Lady in Green" (Châu Lục) handing out wax candles as blessed gifts to members of the audience

Caodai temples carrying books and documents, while one leaves Đạo Mẫu temples with video and audio CDs. The first stresses written doctrine, and teachings that can be received from the past, while the second is performative, so that the past is made alive by being reenacted with colorful gestures, movement, and mime.

I would describe these differences as differences in the modality of religious expression. In one, narrative and a particular view of history is primary (Caodaism), while in the other religious concepts are expressed through ritual, costume, and dance in ways that rely less on narrative and more on the intensity of participation (Đạo Mẫu). But both express a refugee impulse and a reflection on exile, which crosses the Pacific through a devotional exercise even when material crossings are not possible. Two related modes of religious transmission and collective memory are described by Harvey Whitehouse (1995, 2000, 2004) as the imagistic and the doctrinal. Caodaism fits into the doctrinal mode, since it involves frequent repetition of highly scripted ritual events. An elaborate religious hierarchy ensures orthodoxy and fidelity in religious reproduction, and these values are reenforced by sermons, teachings, and the exegesis of sacred texts. Đạo Mẫu, in contrast, is largely imagistic: spectacular sensory ritual performances are individually variable and highly context dependent. The intense "episodic memory" of particular spirit possession performances evokes intense feelings of cohesion in a small group of participants, but it is hard to share this among a much larger group of disciples.

To come back to the ideas of emigration, exile, and exodus with which I opened this discussion, I would say that Đạo Mẫu performs a narrative of exile, evoking the religious idea that a ritual embodying the spirits of ancestral heroes is itself efficacious, and can bring success in other endeavors as well. Caodaism—in its syncretistic fusion of Christian and East Asian elements—uses the narrative of exodus instead, arguing that its followers had a religious mission to fulfill in leaving their homeland and this global dispersal was itself predestined. Whitehouse's categories could perhaps be modified to include a narrative dimension, since the contrast of the "episodic memory" of small-scale rituals versus the "semantic memory" of larger, standardized ceremonies implies a narrative structure as well.

Johnson (2007: 240) notes that the spatial separation imposed in the diasporic context often affects the mode of transmission: Diasporic versions of "tradition" may come to take on an increasingly doctrinal form, with a standardization of form and meaning. Simple ritual acts that were part of the fabric of village life in the homeland (like burning incense on an ancestral altar, or decorating it with fruit and flowers) become self-conscious acts in another country, and often ethnic and religious markers as well. For Vietnamese refugees, however, this dynamic worked differently, since there was a two-decade period when contact with Vietnam was closed off (1975–1995). During this time, there was a lot of innovation and reinvention in diasporic congregations. Two women spirit mediums in San Jose began to dress in the colored robes worn only by male dignitaries in Vietnam's Caodai temples, and many new spirit messages were received in spirit séances to justify a separate order of things for California Caodaists. Once contact with the "Vatican in Vietnam" was reestablished, many of these new adaptations were shelved (Hoskins 2005, 2009, 2015b). Isolated Đạo Mẫu temples made creative use of dolls and a variety of local costumes and decorations in the 1980s and 1990s. But since it has become more possible to return to Vietnam to shop for temple decorations, traditional costumes, and votive offerings, these marks of "authenticity" must increasingly come exclusively from the homeland (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011, Hoskins 2015a).

Emigration as a demographic phenomenon, the movement of populations across the world, must also be understood from the inside as a phenomenon with a religious dimension. Timothy Smith (1978: 1115) has argued that migration is a "theologizing experience"—it challenges received categories and forces a spiritual reappraisal. Although followers of both these religions see themselves as "reclaiming tradition" in the New World, they are in fact also transforming it, and creating a religious diaspora whose territory is not only of this world but also of the spirit realm.

Notes

1. Many people are under the mistaken impression that only those Vietnamese who came to the United States directly after 1975 are considered "refugees." In fact, Vietnamese who came as "boat people" in 1978–1984 were also admitted as refugees (under the Orderly Departure Program under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), as well as those who came as part of the "humanitarian order" to receive former political prisoners and their families in the period 1992–2000. Among Vietnamese born outside the United States, 46.5 percent entered before 1990, 38.8 percent between 1990 and 2000, and 14.6 percent after 2000. According to the 2010 census the Vietnamese American population has grown to 1,737,433. Approximately 30 percent of Vietnamese Americans identify themselves as Catholic, with the others practicing a fusion of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and native animist practices, including ancestor

worship, influenced by Chinese folk religion. Both Caodaism and Đạo Mẫu are part of this "fusion religious practice," although membership in Caodai congregations is marked by regular attendance at the temple, while Đạo Mẫu followers are initiated and practice primarily in private homes. Lee, Jonathan H. X., and Kathleen M. Nadeau, *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 1204–1206.

2. On May 23, 2013, the website adherents.com listed estimates of Caodaists ranging from two to eight million. A study by the Vietnamese Department of Religion estimated 3.2 million in 2007 (Phạm Bích Hợp 2007). I cite their figures of 2.2 million "official" Tây Ninh Caodaists and 1 million in other denominations, although I agree with religious leaders that there may be at least a million more "unofficial" followers. The number of official followers has grown since 2007, since dozens of temples have been restored and reopened, and it has become less of a liability for Vietnamese citizens to profess a religion on government ID cards.
3. The discrepancy in estimates should be understood in the context of Caodaism's history of anticommunist politics, which would suggest both that government statistics might undercount the number of practitioners and that in many families younger people might choose not to specify their religion on their official identity documents (since this might still disqualify them from getting government jobs or membership in the communist party). The Tây Ninh Holy See, the first and largest denomination of Caodaism, has 800 temples out of a total of 1,346 (with the others affiliated with smaller denominations in the Mekong Delta and central Vietnam).

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