

**Ethnic Lineage and Religious Transmission: The Trajectories of Ethnic Boundary-
Making Among Vietnamese Caodaists Living in Cambodia**

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On November 28, 2006, Caodaists in Cambodia met with a group of Caodai dignitaries and communist cadres from Vietnam to transfer the tomb of the Head Spirit Medium Pham Cong Tac from their temple to Toa Thanh Tay Ninh, the “Holy See” of the syncretistic Caodai religion in Vietnam. Despite Vietnamese governmental infiltration and control over the religious center since 1975, Caodaists at the Kim Bien Temple in Phnom Penh remained loyal to Toa Thanh Tay Ninh in their homeland. They believed that they were acting in accordance with the wishes of Pham Cong Tac, who wrote in his will that he wished to return to his homeland only when it was “free, peaceful, and united.” Meanwhile, they turned a blind eye to co-religionists in the U.S. who were organizing demonstrations and protests against the event, including a delegation visit to King Norodom Sihamoni of Cambodia.

This paper examines how an immigrant religious congregation rebuilds broken networks with its religious center in the homeland after decades of disconnection. It addresses four inter-related questions: (1) How is the Caodai temple in Cambodia motivated to re-align with the Toa Thanh Tay Ninh, the Caodai Holy See, in Vietnam? (2) How does it foster forms of collaborations and negotiate with conflicts? (3) How does it shape this homeland orientation within the contexts of Vietnam-Cambodia regional politics and transnational relationships with Caodaists in the U.S.? (4) What are the implications of this homeland tie on the identity formation of Caodaists in Cambodia?

The study analyzes preliminary ethnographic data collected in Cambodia (3 months), Vietnam (5 months), and the U.S. (8 months). Three processes are examined: (1) the *rupture* of religious networks that resulted in the production of alternative axis of self-identification; (2) the *transplantation* of religious activities onto new grounds as a

form of ethnic preservation and localization; and (3) the *mending* and *revitalization* of inter-temple exchanges to mediate ethnic animosity, regional politics, and the global forces of capitalism.

The research reveals creative strategies of survival and self-fashioning grounded in religious ideologies. While it shows the socio-political challenges that conditioned community fragmentation, the study also challenges state-centered frameworks of immigrant integration by highlighting the re-creation and revitalization of cross-border religious networks. Three themes are developed in this paper: (1) the significance of cross-border inter-temple networks for exposing and traversing asymmetries of power (i.e. between migrants and non-migrants, relations among nation-states, etc.); (2) the influence of inter-temple relations on democratizing religious practices under the forces of economic globalization; and (3) the impact of transnational exchanges between religious temples on the reformulation of new notions of cultural or religious citizenship within the nation-state, specifically for coalescing de-territorialized identity-based claims around ethnicity and diasporic configurations.

Theoretical Orientation

Migration scholars have generally argued that engagement in cross-border activities grounded in religious inspirations is a pathway toward integration for ethnic groups. Through this participation, ethnic groups strategically capitalize on their cultural assets in order to cope with the challenges of adaptation in the host societies, such as exchanging resources with ethnic co-religionists in other countries in order to sustain

local congregational activities (i.e. Huynh 2000). As Alejandro Portes (1999) has maintained, transnationalism is not a process separate from assimilation but an “antidote to the tendency towards downward assimilation” (471).

However, ethnicity cannot be fully “optional” or “strategic” as long as it is racially marked (Omi and Winant 1994). In the U.S., Vietnamese immigrants can “become” more generic Asian Americans, but they cannot simply decide to “become” white and access the “privilege” of whiteness (Lipsitz 1998). Similarly, in Cambodia, Vietnamese must act, perform, and speak like local Khmers in order to be accepted and gain entrance into the local society.

Diaspora researchers have maintained that religious transnational involvements could lead to the formulation of a diasporan identity (i.e. Tololyan 1996). This is a de-territorialized group label voluntarily mobilized by members who are dispersed in many countries and yet have a shared concern, such as the welfare of their homeland. Therefore, unlike ethnic groups that capitalize on transnational engagements in order to attain assimilation, diasporas intentionally mark themselves as distinct from the local society while they advance their mission across national borders.

Sheffer (2006) has defined “ethnonational diaspora” as a type of diaspora in which members “are united by the same ethnonational origin and who reside permanently as minorities in one or more hostlands” (130). The identities of ethnonational diasporas are based on non-essentialist primordial elements, myths, psychological factors, and interests related to their homelands and members have the capacity to alter them. The author has also suggested that ethnonational elements may be only option for certain

number of people to form, consolidate, and define their organized cross-border collectivity.

A number of researchers have proposed that Vietnamese immigrants are *becoming* more of a diaspora than an ethnic group headed for assimilation precisely because of their strong orientation toward Vietnam. As Ehrentraut (2004) has found, Vietnamese in Cambodia do not comprise an ethnic group. He has suggested that they are becoming a diaspora because their homeland loyalty continues to intensify with the increasing (and ironic) support from the Vietnamese government for their well-being in Cambodia. This diasporic identity formation is further strengthened by their legal exclusion from Cambodian citizenship.

In particular, continuing religious practices from the homeland could also reinforce gradual diasporization. As Hoskins (2006) has observed, many Vietnamese following the indigenous religion Caodaism were not primarily concerned with maintaining ties to Vietnam during their early years of arrival in the U.S. They were focused on rebuilding their lives in a new country, such as learning English and other marketable job skills. A number of them converted to Christianity because they felt obligated to express gratitude to their Christian sponsors. Meanwhile, they were “hiding” their homeland-originated religion by practicing Caodai rituals secretly at home. However, as they gradually re-established their religious networks, Vietnamese American Caodaists began to revitalize and transplant their religion into American soil. During the last ten years, they have pooled enough resources to construct public Caodai temples and institutionalized an international organization with a shared concern for religious freedom in their homeland (Hartney 2004; Hoskins 2006; 2008).

In general, research on Vietnamese in Cambodia is limited, partly because of the anti-Vietnamese atmosphere. It has not examined the impacts of cross-border religious practices on the identity formation of Vietnamese immigrants in Cambodia. Do homeland-oriented religious engagements enable Vietnamese immigrants to become integrated into Cambodian society? Or do they encourage ethnic isolation and solidification by rallying an ethnonational diasporic identity on the grounds of religion?

Background to Ethnographic Issues

Caodaism is a syncretistic religion born in Vietnam under French colonialism in 1926. Its founders were Confucian scholars who grew up under the Buddhist traditions of China and wished to create harmony between Eastern and Western religious philosophies. Under the conditions of colonialism and contacts with different cultures, Caodaism became a popular religion that aimed at uniting people across political, social, and ethnic strata under one God. During its first two decades of establishment, the religion's global outreach included exchanges with faithful from France, India, Japan, and Cambodia.

While Caodai theology is the blending of many traditions, the religion's system of organization is similar to that of the Catholic Church. The Caodai Holy See, located in the Tay Ninh province in southern Vietnam and close to the border with Cambodia, is the center of authority. It oversees religious activities, from text publications to religious ordination, of all Caodai temples throughout Vietnam as well as those in other countries.

In 1956, the Head Spirit Medium Pham Cong Tac fled to Cambodia because of political conflicts with the Catholic-dominated Ngo Dinh Diem administration. He purchased a 180 meters x 60 meters piece of land in Phnom Penh to build the Kim Bien Temple as the home of The Caodai Center. The project marked the first time that a Caodai institution was being built outside of the religion's birth country. However, the construction was interrupted because his assistant did not obtain a legal building permit. After Pham Cong Tac's death in 1959, King Sihanouk intervened in the matter and the Cambodian court allowed the construction to resume in 1962. However, the Kim Bien Temple was deserted in 1970, when many Caodaists were repatriated to Vietnam because of Lon Nol's anti-Vietnamese policies. Most of the building was demolished by the Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1978. It was slowly restored beginning in 1982, after the fall of the Pol Pot government, as Caodaists from Vietnam began returning to Cambodia and re-vived their religious activities.

Under the conditions of political instability and forced migration, transnational relations between the Kim Bien Temple and its Holy See were never fully formalized until the turn of the twenty first century, when Cambodia and Vietnam liberalized their economies and improved bilateral diplomatic relations. The close Kim Bien Temple-Caodai Holy See relations caused a rift among Caodaists in the U.S., most of whom had fled Vietnam when communists took over country in 1975. They believed that the Caodai Holy See is no longer a legitimate religious institution as it has been under the control of the Vietnamese communist government.

Currently, Caodaism has about 3.2 million followers in Vietnam, mostly concentrated in the south where they constitute 5-10% of the region's population

(Hoskins 2008). The number of Caodaists in Cambodia is unknown and probably fluid because of the continual flow of back-and-forth migration across the border with Vietnam. Nevertheless, the Kim Bien Temple in Phnom Penh claims to have 2,000 members who are mostly Vietnamese. In the U.S., there are approximately 50,000 Caodaists, the majority of whom are Vietnamese living in California. Almost all of the Caodai followers in these countries are ethnic Vietnamese.

Ethnic Insularity and Isolation

The Kim Bien Temple was an important sanctuary for Vietnamese immigrants and their descendents. During the 1950s and 1960s, it was an important refuge for Vietnamese immigrants who sought safety from political and social agitations in Cambodia (Ha 2007). Although political instability and forced repatriation during the 1970s disintegrated the temple's congregation, community life gradually resumed during the 1980s when Vietnamese began resettling in Cambodia. Based on interviews and field observation, most active members at the Kim Bien Temple were either returning Vietnamese who fled to Vietnam in 1970 or new migrants from Vietnam who were seeking economic opportunities in Cambodia. Irregular members made up the majority of the congregational membership. Most of them either lived in Vietnamese ethnic enclaves far from Phnom Penh or travelled from Vietnam for business activities.

The Kim Bien Temple's ethnic insularity was solidified under the conditions of anti-Vietnamese hostility in Cambodia. Unlike other minority ethnic groups such as Chinese, Vietnamese faced ethnic discrimination that restricted them from full

participation in Cambodian society (Tarr 1992). They continued to be seen as colonial intruders and invaders even though they had lived in Cambodia for as many as four family generations. In particular, Vietnamese had been forbidden from receiving citizenship that would have facilitated their integration into Cambodian life, such as access to public education. Without proper legal documentation and the lack of Khmer knowledge, they could not easily find employment, are vulnerable to poverty, and are not own property.

The ethnic marginalization restrained religious life and activities at the Kim Bien Temple. By the 1990s, the temple had lost almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of its purchased land to local Khmer. Caodai faithful had to also conduct religious activities privately, such as wearing ao dai (the Vietnamese traditional dress worn by all Caodaists during religious rituals) and speaking Vietnamese only within the temple's compound and reserving traditional religious instruments exclusively for important ceremonies. Moreover, the economic deprivation of Vietnamese Caodaists had also hindered many Vietnamese from fulfilling their religious duties and obligations, such as visiting the temple on every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month. For example, a Caodaist informed me that a round-trip motorbike ride from his village to the temple costs approximately \$4. The price is too high for him that he could only afford to visit the temple once a month.

During the 1990s, as Cambodia aimed to recover from decades of wars and transition into a free-market economy, the Kim Bien Temple saw legal opportunities to protect its ethnic identity under religious claims. In 1992, Cambodia established the Ministry of Religion and Cults to institutionalize transparent mechanism for certifying religious groups and safe-guarding their well-being. The initiative removed the control of

the Cambodian socialist party over religious life and lessened restrictions toward religions. It opened a door for the Kim Bien Temple to register as a religious institution and gain legitimacy for Caodaism.

Inter-Temple Collaborations

The Kim Bien Temple had to establish a formal body of management in order to be recognized by the Cambodian Ministry of Religion and Cults. This organization, known as the “Management Committee” within the Caodai community, must be led by a dignitary appointed by the Caodai Holy See. The leader and his committee members are responsible for getting approval for all religious activities from the religious center and following its mandates.

The Kim Bien Temple was forming the Management Committee during its early years of establishment in Cambodia but ceased during the 1970s, when Caodai members fled to Vietnam under the heightened anti-Vietnamese atmosphere. Although the temple re-opened during the following decade as Caodaists began returning to Cambodia, it could not resurrect the Management Committee. It did not have a dignitary among its members and was disconnected from the Caodai Holy See, which came under the tight control of the newly-installed communist Vietnamese government in 1975.

As in Cambodia, Vietnam lax its policies toward religious practices as the country liberalized its economy during the 1990s. It institutionalized a system of certification that protected “legitimate” religions while suppressing all “superstitious” activities (*mê tín dị đoan*) (Roszko 2010; Bouquet 2010). The change prompted the Caodai Holy See to re-

write its religious charters in order to compromise state policies, including the intervention of the Vietnamese government in religious ordination and the prohibition of “superstitious” religious practices such as séances, which Caodaists believe as an essential method for communicating with the divine. The Caodai Holy See also established the Council of Governance to supervise and report Caodai activities to the Vietnamese government. In effect, it re-centralized its authority as the religious center and, in principal, has control over all Caodai temples inside and outside of Vietnam. By 1997, the Caodia Holy See successfully gained recognition for Caodaism as a religion of Vietnam (U.S. State Department 2004).

The Kim Bien Temple initiated contacts with the Holy See after its recognition in 1997. Representatives began making regular trips across the Vietnam-Cambodia border to meet with the Council of Governance. Among them included Mr. Ngo¹, who was seen by members at the Kim Bien Temple as a potential candidate to lead the establishment of the Management Committee. He grew up in a Caodai family in Vietnam and immigrated to Cambodia in 1980 for economic opportunities. He obtained Cambodian citizenship through his marriage to a local Cambodian woman and, over the years, had become fluent in Khmer. His experiences in Vietnam and socio-cultural immersion in Cambodian life made him an ideal leader in negotiating cross-border diplomacy and navigating through the Cambodian bureaucratic system of legalization.

In 2002, the Kim Bien Temple established its first Management Committee with Mr. Ngo as its president. During the same year, it filed for registration with the Cambodian Ministry of Religions and Cults. A year later, it obtained the formal

¹ This is a pseudonym.

certification. In March 2003, the Kim Bien Temple held a grand public celebration of its recognition, with the attendance of Cambodian politicians and representatives from the Caodai Holy See.

Under the legal of protection of religious freedom, the Kim Bien Temple became shielded from anti-Vietnamese antagonism and emboldened its participation in Cambodian society. Members began wearing Vietnamese traditional costumes and speaking in Vietnamese without fear within the temple's vicinity. In 2003, the temple filed a court complaint to demand for the return of land that had been encroached on by local Khmer. It was a futile battle since the temple had lost its original documentation of ownership during previous decades under the Pol Pot regime. Nevertheless, as Mr. Ngo explained, the event energized the sense of community among Caodaists: "See, the land was stolen and now houses and airport had been built on it. To get it back would be very difficult. In my opinion and a number of Caodaists here, I wish that our faithful inside as well as outside of the country [Cambodia] will work together and pool in our resources to get this land back. Otherwise, I only see this place [the Kim Bien Temple] as a small community center. Its future is really beyond my control." News of the temple's legal defeat came in July 2010 as it had been expected, and yet the court case remained as a significant political undertaking by the Caodai community in Cambodia.

In August 2010, the Kim Bien Temple made another historic achievement. It had completed the construction of a palanquin that would be used publicly during funeral processions. Caodaists in Cambodia had never been able to pursue such a project because their religion had been seen as a colonial intrusion into the Buddhist state (Edwards 2007). However, under the leadership of Mr. Ngo, local Caodaists as well as co-

religionists in Vietnam provided full financial contribution to the initiative. The palanquin was a symbol of extra-ordinary collectivity amongst Vietnamese Caodaists. It represented another major step of Caodai religious revitalization and transplantation on Cambodian soil.

Inter-temple Conflicts

The legal leverage that the Kim Bien Temple garnered from relations with the Caodai Holy See was also fraught with conflicts. Many members of the Kim Bien Temple believed that the Caodai Holy See has become desecrated under the control of the Vietnamese government since 1975. In particular, they maintained that the establishment of the Council of Governance in 1977 violated religious charters written by Caodai founders. It concentrated Caodaism's three separate branches of governance (legislative, judicial, and executive) into the hands of 12 dignitary members approved by the state rather than chosen by the divine through séances.

The centralization of Caodaism under the control of the Council of Governance in turn had restrained the Kim Bien Temple from creating and maintaining ties with co-religionists in the U.S. When a delegation of Vietnamese Caodaists from California and Texas visited it in 2004 and 2006, the Kim Bien Temple welcomed the visitors and, as a friendly gesture, accepted their gift of a statue of Pham Cong Tac. However, the temple could not fulfill the delegation's request to permanently install the statue on its compound because of disapproval from the Caodai Holy See. Mr. Ngo explained, "The Holy See informed us that, according to religious laws, only it could house any statue of Pham

Cong Tac. It is a blasphemy to have his statue elsewhere.” However, when I asked him for the details of the religious laws, he said that the Holy See did not share this specific information with him.

Similarly, in 2006, the Kim Bien Temple could not heed co-religionists in the U.S. when they protested vehemently against the transfer of Pham Cong Tac’s remains from Cambodia to Vietnam. It had to collaborate with the Caodai Holy See because the Council of Governance had received approval and support from the governments of Vietnam and Cambodia. As Mr. Ngo elaborated, “Everything had already been planned and so we had no choice but to accept and collaborate with the request [to transfer the remains of Pham Cong Tac]. Because of my prayers, along with a number of brothers in the Management Council and the Council of Governance, the event went smoothly and peacefully. Here in Cambodia they [the government] helped us by providing three ferry-boats...When we arrived to the other side of the border, our brothers and sisters waited in as many as 500, 700 cars....So the Cambodia [government] side helped out a lot with security and we did not encounter any problems along the roads...the Vietnamese [government] side also supported this effort.”

The Kim Bien Temple’s relations with Caodaists in the U.S. would threaten Vietnam’s national agenda of economic liberalization. Since the country opened up its border and entered the free-market economy in the late 1980s, the Vietnamese Caodai community in the U.S., the largest one outside of the homeland, had the opportunity to scrutinize Vietnam’s human rights records. It remained distant from the Caodai Holy See, accusing it as an arm of the Vietnamese government, and developed an independent international system of organization. In 1999, a delegation of Caodaists and other

religious groups presented their concerns over religious freedom in Vietnam to the U.S. Congress. In 2004, the U.S. State Department designated Vietnam as one of the “countries of particular concern” because of its violations over religions.

Thereafter, Vietnamese government further lax its policies toward religions in order to be removed from the blacklist two years later. At the same time, it strengthened the grounding of Caodaism in Vietnam in order to counter and divert the political leverage of Caodaists in the U.S. In 2007, ten years after Caodaism was recognized as a religion, the Vietnamese government officially recognized it as “an indigenous religion of south Vietnam” (tôn giáo bản địa) with the publication of Pham Bich Hop’s state-sponsored work, *People of the Southern Region and Indigenous Religions: Buu Son Ky Huong – Caodaism – Hoa Hao Buddhism (Người Nam Bộ và tôn giáo bản địa: Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương - Cao Đài - Hòa Hảo)*. Although Caodaism has been locally known as a domestic religion, this event marked the Vietnamese government’s acceptance and celebration of the role of Caodaism in Vietnamese cultural identity. It also re-affirmed Vietnam as the root of Caodai religious life and practices, where Caodaists abroad must return to be connected to their religion.

Today, the Caodai Holy See has become a stage for showing Caodaism to the rest of the world. Tourists arrive daily on tour buses at 11 a.m. to observe the Caodai noon meditation session. In 2010, it granted permission to delegations from Cambodia and India to attend the annual Festival of the Great Mother at the Caodai Holy See.

Members of the Kim Bien Temple negotiated conflicts with the Caodai Holy See by evoking the history of affiliation. They recognized their temple as “Model #2,”

modeled after the Holy See and was planned as the second largest temple behind only it². A Caodaist evoked the history of affiliation: “Our temple is far [from the Caodai Holy See] but the Reverence Leader [Pham Cong Tac] came here long time ago to establish the Caodai Missionary Center here. The Caodai Holy See is the most important religious site, the second is here. The Reverence Leader came here in order to spread the religion.” The Caodai Missionary Center was established in 1933 but was abolished in 1956 because of political instability in Cambodia. Since then the Kim Bien Temple was reduced to being only a gathering site until 2002, when it re-established formal ties with the Holy See and gained recognition as a Caodai religious institution.

However, by preserving and drawing upon the history of inter-temple ties, Caodaists in Cambodia affirmed the Caodai Holy See as the “religious root” [dao goc] and the center of authority of Caodaism. They believed that all Caodaists must show submission to it even though it is under the control of the Vietnamese communist government. As a Vietnamese Caodai elderly woman shared, “Cardinal Tam is the oldest brother of the whole world.” A Cambodia-born Vietnamese Caodaist similarly echoed, “the Kim Bien Temple belongs to the Holy See therefore it must obey the religious center...in religion, we must obey the older brother.” Furthermore, as the center of the religion, they believed that the Holy See has global authority over all Caodaists. A Caodai elaborated, “[The Holy See] is our religious root. For any country that wants to establish Caodaism in its society, it must receive permission from the Caodai Holy See...only it could decide...Why is it like this? Because it was established according to

² In August 2010, I visited the newly constructed Caodai temple in Dalat, Vietnam and learned that it is now considered as “Model #2.”

divine mandates received by the Reverence Leader [Pham Cong Tac]. No one would dare to disobey the orders of any dignitary.”

From this loyalty and deference to the Caodai Holy See grounded in religious ideology, Caodaists in Cambodia expressed sympathy to its conditions under communism. They understood that the Holy See must work with the Vietnamese government and not dwell on the history of separation between state and religion. As a Caodaist at the Kim Bien Temple explained, “If we want to do anything, we must present a proposal to the Vietnamese government so that they would know. When they accept it and give us permission then we [Caodaists] would proceed....This is different from before, when the country was different. Religious groups had authority. They could do anything they wanted and the government did not put its hands in religious issues. However, today’s situation is different.” He also acknowledged that the Vietnamese government has lessened its grip over the Caodai Holy See, allowing its authority to have more independence.

Conclusion: Implications of Inter-Temple Relations for Collective Identity Formation Among Vietnamese Caodaists in Cambodia

The inter-temple relation between the Kim Bien Temple and the Caodai Holy See had facilitated the transition of Vietnamese Caodaists in Cambodia from being an ethnic group toward an ethnonationalist diaspora. As they established ties with the Caodai Holy See, these Vietnamese Caodaists were able to gain religious legitimacy in Cambodia.

They used the legal recognition of Caodaism to buffer themselves from anti-Vietnamese hostility and, in turn, solidified their ethnic boundary under religious claims.

However, the inter-temple relation had also restricted the ethnonationalist diaspora from expanding. As an affiliate of the Holy See, members at the Kim Bien Temple had vowed deference to it and must follow its mandates. In particular, they could not establish ties with Caodaists in the U.S., who presented as a threat to the authority of the Holy See and Vietnam's economic interests. Consequentially, the Kim Bien Temple's full dependence on the Holy See had re-installed and maintained authority in the diaspora at the religious center in Vietnam.

The homeland orientation is an act of healing for an ethnonationalist diaspora that has been traumatized by the history of displacement, isolation, and marginalization. From ethnic violence to political persecution throughout the 20th century, Vietnamese Caodaists in Cambodia had been fleeing between their host society and homeland, neither of which had embraced them fully. These moments of ruptures had broken their inter-temple ties, congregational organization, and kinship relations. However, the re-establishment of affiliation with the Holy See in Vietnam in 2002 marked the beginning of a new chapter. The re-mending of inter-temple relations that breathed new life into Caodaism and aspired to bring the rest of the world to the religion's root in Vietnam.

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