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## Divination and Politics in Southern Vietnam: Roots of Caodaism

*Caodaism is a Vietnamese religious movement that appeared in colonial Cochinchina in the 1920s. What are the sociological roots of Caodaism? The author attempts to answer this question through an analysis of the Caodaist networks that developed in the early 20th century in Cochinchina. Setting out some ethnographic materials concerning the Chinese Minh religions, the author focuses on only one of the five Minh religions in Vietnam, called Minh Lý (“Enlightened Reason”). He sheds new light on the esoteric roots of Caodaism, on the political regulation of the religious sphere and, finally, on the religious and political map of Southern Vietnam.*

**Key words:** *Caodaism · colonization · network · politics · religious sectarianism · spirit-mediumship · Vietnam*

*Le mouvement religieux vietnamien Cao Đài fait son apparition dans la Cochinchine des années 1920. Mais quelles sont les racines sociologiques du caodaïsme ? C’est au travers d’une analyse des réseaux de ce mouvement dans les sphères politiques et religieuses du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle que l’auteur entend apporter des éléments de réponse. Triant ses matériaux ethnographiques concernant les religions chinoises dites Minh, il se concentre sur une de ces religions au Vietnam, Minh Lý (“Raison illuminée”). Il met en lumière le rôle des réseaux ésotériques aussi bien que le processus de régulation politique du religieux dans notre appréhension de la carte religieuse et politique du Sud du Vietnam.*

**Mot-clés:** *caodaïsme · colonisation · médiumnité · politique · réseau · secte religieuse · Vietnam*

In 1921 the Master living in the “High Tower” (*Cao Đài*) introduced himself to a Vietnamese civil servant, Ngô Văn Chiêu, who was then working under the authority of the French colonial administration. Soon afterwards, the millenarian and independantist words of this Cao Đài Master made their way among the urban religious networks of Saigon-Chợ Lớn. Five years later, “The Great Way of the Third Salvation” (*Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*), also called Caodaism, was officially presented to the colonial authorities. There followed mass-conversions, as mediums, businessmen and landowners recruited thousands of the colonized peasant population in the space of only 10 years.

If the religious movement has generated multiple social and historical studies, it is mainly due to its crucial role in Indochina as a social player and necessary mediator in the process of decolonization. At first flimsy, the political aims of Caodaism gradually gained substance and momentum to the point where it was able to postulate a society in which the syncretistic ideology of the religious movement would be considered, according to Caodaists, as a “State religion” (*quốc đạo*). Caodaism is well known for having created a strict hierarchical organization and a unique disciplinary framework in the hands of a group of mediums; hence transforming the religion into either a potential rival or an ally of anti-colonial nationalist forces.

For the historian R.B. Smith (1970), Caodaism finds its roots in “secret societies” (*hội kín*) inspired by the local settlements of the Chinese Heaven and Earth Association (*Thiên địa hội*). In other words it is the direct product of Chinese or Chinese–Vietnamese religious sectarianism, called Minh (*ming* meaning “light” in Chinese). If this Minh “sectarian tradition” had the potential to shed new light on “the real roots of Caodaism” (Smith, 1970: 349), its study may offer a privileged path to further our anthropological knowledge of Caodaism, and in particular its political and religious orientations, from its origins until now.

After the 17th century, when the Chinese Ming dynasty saw its power in decline, a large number of small Minh societies started to emerge in Cochinchina, especially around Saigon (Ownby and Heidhues, 1993; Thien Do, 2003). However, the Chinese authorities (guilds) seemed to take little interest in these Minh associations, which in any case, at least until the early 20th century, limited their activities to their respective temples. These were autonomous structures where urban, peripheral and provincial cults were practised, and they built up their local authority through divination and/or spirit writing activities. All these religious communities, driven by either philanthropy or literary pursuits, worshipped the spirits of the *Tam Giáo* (“Three Doctrines”) pantheon, which includes Confucius, Lao-Tseu and Buddha. They were self-ruling and their political activity was largely clandestine under the French colonial regime. Indeed, their esoteric interpretations of old sutras or new oracles were strongly linked to an embryonic Vietnamese nationalism pitted against the colonial domination.

From their establishment in the 17th century to the development of their political activities at the beginning of the 20th, there were signs of evolution within the ideological discourses of these Minh associations and their dignitaries. For instance, until the early 20th century, Minh Sư members preached the flight of the Qing and the restoration of the Ming dynasty in China (in Vietnamese “*bài Mãn phục Minh*”), but this motto no longer had any meaning after the fall of the Chinese imperial system and the proclamation of the Chinese Republic, by which time Minh Sư associations and their Minh ramifications had transposed their old motto (originally hostile to the Qing) to the Vietnam colonial context (Huỳnh and Trương, 1998: 9), calling for the “expulsion of the French and the restoration of Vietnam” (“*bài Pháp phục Nam*”).

Five Chinese–Vietnamese Minh movements appeared in South Vietnam in the 19th and 20th centuries: Minh Sư (“The Enlightened Master”), Minh Lý (“Enlightened Reason”), Minh Đường (“The Temple of Light”), Minh Thiện (“The Foreseeable Kindness”) and Minh Tân (“The New Light”). My analysis stresses the social relationships between the Minh Lý and Cao Đài religions, underlining

the similarities and differences in their political ideology, their theology and their attitude towards their historical relationship.

The Caodaism of the 1920s shared with the Minh associations political, territorial and nationalist concerns as well as many religious activities, including spirit-mediumship. These connections generated an extensive corpus of mediumistic texts, revealing a hidden side of Caodaism.

In response to the lack of academic research on these Minh movements, I take an anthropological approach to the historical facts, theological points and spirit-mediumistic practices, analysing the historicity, the legitimacy and the consequences of the social relationships between the Minh Lý and Cao Đài religions in particular. The historical data mentioned in this article thus contributes to a double anthropological analysis of “*l’expérience de l’Autre*” (the experience of the Other) and of “*l’expérience du Même*” (the experience of the Same, i.e. of kinship and resemblances).

### 1. Minh Lý: The sectarian roots of Caodaism

Since the colonial period, the Minh Lý religious association has occupied a crucial place in Caodaist activities. The founder of this religious group, Âu Kiệt Lâm (1896–1941), was an intellectual of half Chinese, half Vietnamese origin. A renowned spirit medium, he belonged to the colonial category of the “*minh hương*”<sup>1</sup>. Sociologically speaking, in the period between 1916 and 1926 he revealed an ability to transcend cultural barriers. Swiftly bridging the Chinese and the Vietnamese cultures, he was capable of merging the two social and cultural systems by bringing them into contact. His translation of Chinese or *nôm* holy texts into *quốc ngữ* writings provides fine examples of this ability.

Like most sectarian movements studied by Jordan and Overmyer (1986: 17), Minh Lý made reference to a millenarian vision of time divided into three stages in a moral progression. The third stage is the one that sectarian groups must experience. It is characterized by moral degeneration, a rejection of religion and the disappearance, or rather, the “modernization”, of traditional forms of teaching (through mass-publications and use of vernacular scripture, for example). Such a theological discourse corresponds to the Weberian definition of the “sect”, whose members deliberately distance themselves from religious canons and former religious institutions. For this reason Jordan and Overmyer labelled these movements “popular religious sects” or localized forms of “Chinese sectarianism”. Minh Lý inherited this tradition and may be thought of as an association of “excessively pious Buddhists” who proposed a reform of the Buddhist canon and organization (Dharma and Sangha). By integrating Taoist beliefs and practices, the Minh pantheon does, however, differ from Buddhism. Since they are closer to Chinese sectarianism, the Jade Emperor and the Queen Mother of the West are examples of Minh deities subject to worship<sup>2</sup>. This sectarian difference from Buddhist worship led the Minh Lý community to erect its own temple in August 1926 in a remote suburb of Saigon (Bàn Cờ District)<sup>3</sup>. This temple is now well known as the Tam Tông Miếu, “the Temple of the Three Doctrines” (comprising Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) or, as it subsequently became known in English, “the Temple of the Three Philosophies”.

In addition to attendance of therapeutic sessions (acupuncture and magnetism), the main objective of Minh Lý followers was the divination and the production of oracles using multiple methods such as astrology, chiromancy and physiognomy. According to Nguyễn Văn Miết (1960: 7–10), a Minh Lý dignitary, Âu Kiệt Lâm, carried out some research into magnetism (*nhân điện*, literally “electric energy in the human body”) and constructed a body of knowledge based on French spiritism and Chinese spirit-mediumship.

It should be pointed out at this stage that the “automatic writing” via the body of a medium (*đồng tử*) is also known as *phò loan* (“fuluan” in Chinese, meaning “to hold/assist the loan bird”) or *cơ bút* (“the brush”). This last expression is the Vietnamese translation of “*fujū*”, the Chinese mediumistic technique “to hold the *Ji* (brush)”, i.e. the instrument of mediumistic writing. It forms an intrinsic part of the formation and the development of Minh Lý as well as other Minh and Caodai movements. In Minh Lý and Caodaism such a practice takes the form of a codified ritual, which is seldom violent. In the strict sense of the term, this practice can be differentiated from shamanism or *lên đồng* spirit possession (Rouget, 1990: 255). The importance of this “oracular mediumism” can also be found in most Chinese sectarian groups (see Clart, 2003; De Groot, 1972; Elliott, 1990; Jordan and Overmyer, 1986).

This oracular and therapeutic knowledge has built the Tam Tông Miếu’s reputation beyond religious borders, and ever since the 1920s non-Caodaist and non-Minh Lý visitors, understanding this body of knowledge as describing the Taoist immortality process, have preferred to refer to Tam Tông Miếu as “*chùa Tiên*” (“Pagoda of the Immortals”). The phrase reflects the type of request made by visitors who participate in mediumistic meetings or the “platform of the immortal” (*đàn tiên*) or who come to learn meditation techniques (believed by adherents to enable them to enter into personal communication with the immortal) or simply to benefit from the many divinatory services on offer at the Tam Tông Miếu.

## 2. Common features and complementary history

In the course of my comparative study of Cao Đài and Minh Lý, I was surprised to find so many common and complementary aspects in the two religions. Most significantly, one can clearly see the adoption of the symbolic, liturgical and mythological legacy of the Chinese Minh sectarian tradition by the new Cao Đài religion.

One common feature is the salutation *bắt Ấn Tý* (“pressing the sign of the Rat”). This salutation is performed by putting the tip left thumb against the base of the ring finger (Nguyễn, 1960: 4). It is a chiromantic reference to the sign of the Rat, *Tý*, and to the proclamation of the Minh Lý religion, which took place at the winter solstice 1924<sup>4</sup>. The *Tý* point, at the base of the ring finger, is said to possess the anti-demonic properties of a talisman. By invoking the performative power of divinatory zodiacal characters, the gesture enables the adept, whether Caodaist or Minh Lý, to protect himself both in body and in spirit from the harmful influences of the external world.

Besides this salutation, which is characteristic of the two religious communities, many links are discernible throughout their history. As this historical perspective

has already been the subject of thorough studies (Jammes, 2006a: 60–90, 134–62; Smith, 1970, 1971), I will examine the main points only.

In 1926, even before Cao Đài worshipping proliferated amongst the peasant community and the Vietnamese elite, Lê Văn Trung (1875–1934)<sup>5</sup>, a senior Vietnamese official, was nominated head of Caodaism with the title of “transitional pope” (*quyền giáo tông*). Lê Văn Trung owed a large part of his legitimacy to a mediumistic message received in September 1925 by the Tam Tông Miếu mediums, to whom he was presented by his maternal cousin Nguyễn Hữu Đắc (a former city councillor of Chợ Lớn and translator of French Occultism).

Between November and December 1925, a Vietnamese spiritist circle<sup>6</sup> decided to abandon the use of the *oui-jà* board<sup>7</sup> and table-tipping in favour of another instrument of spirit communication: the “beaked basket”. The mediumistic use of the beaked basket is a set of divinatory practices whereby the visit of a spiritual entity enables the written revelation of nonhuman messages<sup>8</sup>. This type of “automatic writing” is called by the Minh and Caodaist *cơ bút* or *phò loan*. The basket, and the prayer spoken in Vietnamese (which summons the spirit of the Cao Đài Master to descend into it), were borrowed from the Minh Thiện religious association, who originally borrowed them from Minh Lý (Huệ Nhẫn, 1999: 25). In this particular case, the Vietnamese spirit group explicitly takes after both *fuluan* and *fuji* mediumistic tradition and Chinese sectarianism<sup>9</sup>. If the transfer of the beaked basket constitutes a sociological indicator of a direct relationship between the Minh and Cao Đài communities, it is also symbolic since it implies that the deities of the Minh pantheon will appear during Caodaist mediumistic sessions. This sort of transfer probably results from the need for expertise but also for the legitimization of the Cao Đài religion, thanks to the religious authority of the Minh masters in Cochinchina.

In order to compose the first corpus of prayers, the Caodaist clergy headed by Lê Văn Trung and Phạm Công Tắc turned to the Minh religious associations. In the frame of their original dogma, the majority of Caodaist daily prayers are generally sourced from the Minh Lý corpus of prayers. This is particularly true of the opening prayers of each daily Caodaist ceremony, namely the Prayer of Opening (*Khai kinh*) and the Prayer of Incense Offering (*Niệm hương*). It also applies to prayers addressed to a few common divinities of the pantheon such as the prayer celebrating the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng kinh*) and the three prayers to the founders of the *Tam Giáo* or Three Religious Doctrines (Lao-Tseu, Confucius and Buddha). Lastly Caodaism also borrowed from Minh Lý the important prayers of Repentance (*Sám hối*), of Praises (*Xưng tụng*) and of the Dead (*Cầu siêu*), the last being said at funerals. These transfers were further endorsed by means of oracular messages received at Minh Lý whereby Minh specialists were regarded as the legitimate elders responsible for young Caodaist groups. Owing to their mediumistic competence, the content of these messages established Minh associations as both the depository and the guardians of the Jade Emperor’s knowledge (an alternative name for the “Cao Đài Master”) throughout the ages.

To explain these borrowings, we should recall that the Caodaist group of Lê Văn Trung was oriented towards mass proselytism and sought to gather religious texts in Vietnamese that would not require the learning of Chinese, hence targeting the broadest possible audience and reaching out to the peasant community. However, between January 1924 and November 1925, Minh Lý had

already triggered the same process of Vietnamization, translating into *quốc ngữ* religious texts previously available in Minh Sư circles only in Chinese.

The visibility of the Cao Đài religion, the presence of its dignitaries in the government and the involvement of some of them in the *Sûreté coloniale* were all reassuring factors for Minh dignitaries, who felt that they would guarantee the continuity of their religious practices after the 1916 suppression of secret society revolts<sup>10</sup>. At the same time a cooperative network between Minh and Cao Đài groups was established that would last until the present day.

The next section describes the extent to which the theological and sectarian vision of Minh Lý was diffused in South Vietnam in the second half of the 20th century, finding its own dynamics of expansion by progressive, multi-centred grouping near Caodaist communities. My fieldwork highlights the role within this network of a Caodaist branch named *Cơ Quan Phổ Thông Giáo Lý Đại Đạo* or “centre of diffusion of the [Caodaist] Great Way doctrine” (henceforth referred to as CQPTGLĐĐ).

The study of this centre, which I began in 1999, revealed its numerous and repetitive contacts with all other Caodaist branches (currently 15) and several Minh groups. On the one hand, a large proportion of its adherents came from Minh Tân (and *Nữ Chung Hòa*, its female section); on the other, its missionary activities were performed in conjunction with the religious associations of Minh Lý and the Minh Đường (also known as the Vĩnh Nguyên Tự Oratory). Their common objective was to promote the unification of the Caodaist branches through a set of activities oriented towards individual and collective missionary action.

### 3. One man’s Caodaism–Minh Lý collaboration

The headquarters of the CQPTGLĐĐ were established in 1965 in the heart of Saigon<sup>11</sup> and comprised 129 men and women. In the course of a mediumistic session organized at the Tam Tông Miếu, the same people had ratified the “holy ordinance” (*thánh dụ qui điều*), and this act marked the emergence of a new Caodaist group. Reminiscent of the 1920s, the spirits of the Minh Lý pantheon were again used to legitimate the new group.

The permanence and the contemporary dynamism of Minh Lý divinatory activities are due largely to one man, Trần Văn Quế (1902–1980), and the game of political alliances he played with certain Caodaist branches from the 1940s. These achievements have largely been ignored by scholars of Caodaism. Conversely, Trần Văn Quế’s involvement in the Vietnamese political sphere, as well as his experiences of the Caodaist reunification project and the Minh Lý mediumistic circle, have been covered in detail. With respect to his life<sup>12</sup> I will endeavour to pass over the numerous details that may obscure his role in the solidarity network linking Minh Lý and Caodaism.

It was at the Petrus Ký college, where he was teaching mathematics, that Trần Văn Quế discovered the Cao Đài movement and its project for a national religion<sup>13</sup>. In August 1929, he joined Caodaism and immediately got involved in the struggle against Caodaist schisms. He saw that both unity and a large number of adepts were crucial if Caodaism was to counter colonial power. In time of war, the gathering of all Caodaist branches had become a political necessity, placing

them in a favourable position to claim an autonomous Caodaist land or request other favours when the victors came to partition territory. Trần Văn Quế worked to fulfil this project in close collaboration with a famous figure in Vietnamese politics, Nguyễn Phan Long, a Constitutionalist<sup>14</sup>, spiritist and publicist who was also Prime Minister of Bảo Đại (from January to April 1950) and of Nguyễn Văn Tâm (from June 1952 to December 1953).

After his incarceration in French prisons (1943–1945) as a result of his support for the return of the prince Cường Để to Vietnam (Jammes, 2006b), Trần Văn Quế pursued his political activities while combining the positions of Vice-President of the nationalist but non-communist Committee of the Resistance Administration (*Ủy ban kháng chiến hành chính*) in his native province of Biên Hòa and Minister for National Planning under the government of Trần Trọng Kim. He became one of the leaders of the Nationalist Front of Unified Vietnam (*Việt Nam Mặt trận Quốc gia Liên hiệp*) in May 1947.

Between 1949 and 1952 he travelled to the North with the ambition to introduce Caodaism with the help of the Caodaist medical doctor and freemason Cao Sĩ Tấn. With the latter he gave a new impetus to his so-called “Caodaist Institute” upon his return to Saigon. Since 1930, this Institute has drawn Caodaist and Minh intellectuals, who have regularly contributed to the *Revue Caodaique*. The objective of the *Revue* was to raise the status of all Cao Đài-related studies to the level of a genuine theological discipline. To this end, like the Minh sectarian groups of Vietnam, the publishers participated actively in the Vietnamization of Caodaist theological knowledge by using the *quốc ngữ* in place of the Chinese scripture and language.

Immersed in the political and religious circles of the South, Trần Văn Quế was appointed Deputy to the Caodaist Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm (1952–1953), responsible for research and the reform of the government<sup>15</sup>. Simultaneously he founded with Nguyễn Bử Tài and Phan Khắc Sửu (Caodaist president of South Vietnam in 1964–1965) the *Cao Đài Qui Nhứt* (“Caodaist gathering”) centre at the temple of Minh Tân<sup>16</sup>. He then, in 1956, founded the missionary group of Central Vietnam *Cơ quan Truyền giáo Cao Đài Trung Việt* in Đà Nẵng. Promulgated archbishop (*phối sư*), he took over the chair (*chủ trưởng hội thánh*) of this centre, which was characterized by intensive mediumistic activity. Thereafter the oracles he received served him well in his political and religious ambitions.

Trần Văn Quế was not a medium, but mediumism featured in the various centres in which he took part. Thus, in 1965, his Minh Tân circle received an oracle appointing him “legislative chief of the Enlightened Way” (*tổng lý minh đạo*) and summoning him to set up and run a new missionary centre for the reunification of the Caodaist branches. Trần Văn Quế founded this centre in collaboration with his friend Đỗ Vạn Lý, an Ambassador for South Vietnam under the Ngô Đình Diệm government. In parallel he was employed as a lecturer at the Faculté des Lettres of the University of Saigon.

In October 1968, Trần Văn Quế set up the “Association of Caodaist culture” (*Hội Văn Hóa Cao Đài*) in cooperation with devotees of Minh Lý and the missionary assembly of Central Vietnam. One of its mediums, Trần Thái Chân, known as Đông Tân (b. 1934), later took it over. This association was originally composed of a circle of teachers, businessmen and students who were either Caodaist or interested in Caodaism. The objective of their meetings was the study

and the propagation of “Cao daist culture” throughout the world. In other words they aimed at adding their philosophy, theology, literature and exegesis to the university teaching curriculum (Oliver, 1976: 111–4). *Đông Tân*’s mediumistic activity within Cao daist and Minh Lý circles substantiated this project through oracles. The activities of the association collapsed in 1975 with the exile of *Đông Tân* to Australia. This did not, however, prevent him from continuing the publication of historical exegesis on Cao daism (*Đông Tân*, 1980, 1998).

In 1969, *Trần Văn Quế* once more confirmed his personal affinity, as well as that of the CQPTGLĐĐ, with the Minh religious associations by taking on the joint management of Minh Lý with *Nguyễn Văn Miết*, alias *Minh Thiện* (1897–1972). The temple of Tam Tông Miếu was thereafter referred to by Cao daist authors as the “Holy Association of Enlightened Reason” (*Minh Lý thánh hội*). Although the Minh Lý Association continued to refer to a specific and autonomous religion (Minh Lý), this new nomenclature had a Cao daist resonance for Cao daists. Since then, the Tam Tông Miếu has by no means become a “Cao daist oratory”; it has rather maintained a relationship of privileged cooperation with the Cao daists.

In 1973 at the Holy See of the Đà Nẵng branch (*hội thánh truyền giáo Trung Việt*), a mediumistic message called *Trần Văn Quế* to the rank of “principal archbishop” (*chánh phối sư*). He died on 21 November 1980 and his funeral took place at the Trung Minh oratory, which is affiliated with this same branch.

#### 4. The Minh religious networks after 1975

In the 1950s, the Minh Sư group claimed to have 37 principal temples in Vietnam (Thien Do, 2003: 142). Today, the entire Vietnamese territory contains around 50 temples or Minh Sư ramifications (*Huệ Nhân*, 1999: 9) and Ho Chi Minh City itself shelters some 5,000 followers (*Huỳnh and Trương*, 1998: 11).

Minh religious associations have currently taken on different orientations. Some have become places of Cao daist worship while others, in regions affected by conflicts, population migration, land confiscation and industrialization, have progressively diluted their religious activities. This is the case, for instance, for the cramped yet magnificent Minh Sư pagoda of Hóc Môn (in the north-east of Ho Chi Minh City), which is threatened by disappearance because of the scarcity of devotees. Others have developed new strategies to be economically viable, as is the case with the Minh Sư temple in Đa Kao (First district of Ho Chi Minh City), which attracts Buddhists, Taoists and ... foreign tourists, since the ancient pagoda of the Jade Emperor features in several guide books under the evocative name of the “Pagoda of Happiness” (*chùa Phước Hải*) (*Trần*, 1990).

If the buildings of these Minh associations are still present in Southern Vietnam, the clandestine communities and subversive ideology and activities they witnessed are seldom referred to, rarely thought of and therefore often forgotten by the members of the communities of devotees who spend time in them. In the course of my 10 years’ fieldwork, I have nonetheless met representatives of three of these associations, Minh Tân, Minh Lý and Minh Đường, which still have dynamic places of worship and a keen consciousness of Minh identity. The Minh Tân (“Modern Light”)<sup>17</sup> group has nevertheless been absorbed by the Saigon branch of the CQPTGLĐĐ, whose manpower came to a large extent from the

rallying of Minh Tân faithful to the Caodaist cause. This transfer is in line with the general migration of Minh followers to Caodaism, and it led to the transformation of the Minh Tân temple into a place of Caodaist worship, distinctive for its Left Eye (*thiên nhãn*) icon.

However, this trend does not apply to all Minh associations. The Minh Đường association, for instance, although officially linked to the Caodaist cause since the early 1920s, has maintained its originality in liturgical and ritual matters. Following the example of the two Caodaist branches, CQPTGLĐĐ and Chiếu Minh, with which Minh Đường followers have maintained links since the 1920s, its Vĩnh Nguyên Tự temple (in Cần Giuộc) has dedicated a large space to the practice of meditation and the esoteric interpretation of the religious texts. Undoubtedly, although Minh members do not all maintain relationships with Caodaist devotees, these facts suggest that a study of such social bonds deserves detailed, long-term research.

Similarly, the Minh Lý religious association persists, with its particular rituals, altars, costumes and internal social organization. The temple of the Three Doctrines, today located at the heart of the megalopolis of Ho Chi Minh City, has kept its octagonal architecture since 1951, explicitly calling upon the divinatory power of *Bát Quái* (“the eight trigrams”). In the same period, Minh Lý followers have built a cemetery (in Phú Lâm) as well as an annex, which is devoted to meditation; the *Bát nhã Thiên đường* is located in Long Hải, which is 80 km to the east of Ho Chi Minh City.

In contrast to Caodaism, Minh Lý is not divided into branches or sects, which in its terms would be an indication that there had been a series of schisms. The number of devotees (300) seems to have remained more or less constant since the 1920s, which is a result of the selective policy adopted by the followers. The religion’s leaders have indicated that there could be 80 faithful and a further 200 or 300 sympathizers or donors scattered amongst the Vietnamese diaspora. Following the example of Chinese sectarian groups studied by Jordan and Overmyer (1986: 16), the Minh Lý community is based on the idea of “voluntary adhesion of the individuals, a hierarchical organization, beliefs and distinct rituals, the possession of their own sacred texts, women’s active participation, the building of temples and the awareness of belonging to a group with its founders and its traditions”.

While carrying out my fieldwork, I noticed that Tam Tông Miếu was widely known amongst the diaspora communities because of the success of a “Tam Tông Miếu divinatory calendar”, used since the 1960s both in Vietnam and abroad. Even if since 1975 Tam Tông Miếu has had little to do with its content<sup>18</sup>, the traditional lunar calendar is still being sold to the public in addition to collections of divinatory recipes and esoteric reflections, which contribute to the erudite reputation and legitimacy of Minh Lý.

After Trần Văn Quê’s death in 1980, Lê Chơn Huế (alias Tường Đình, b. 1929) took over the direction of the Tam Tông Miếu until 2003. He is the son of Lê Văn Nguru (alias Lê Chơn Nhứt), a Minh follower from the first generation who was an interpreter prior to becoming Chief-Sergeant in the gendarmerie, as well as being the principal donor of books to the Minh Lý library in the 1930s.

In 2004, Lê Chơn Huế was replaced by Lâm Lý Hùng (b. 1940), grandson of Âu Kiệt Lâm, one of the Minh Lý founders. Holder of a PhD in mathematics and, until 1975, a professor at the University of Sciences of Saigon, Lâm Lý

Hùng joined the wave of boat people travelling to the United States. Now an American citizen, he teaches mathematics and divides his time between Ho Chi Minh City and Norco in California (Riverside). His leadership provides links not only between his grandfather's Chinese–Vietnamese past and contemporary Vietnam but also between Vietnam and the United States, where he has spent half of his life fulfilling religious and professional obligations.

Today, the efforts of both the CQPTGLĐĐ and Minh Lý are thus largely oriented towards their monopoly of mediumistic and missionary activity, and the two groups have never ceased to maintain their relationship and to undertake regular exchanges (of books, mediumistic expertise, sermons, etc.). Until 1975, Minh Lý and Cao daist members of the CQPTGLĐĐ used to organize mediumistic séances. Since 1975, a number of clandestine mediumistic séances have been held, as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam prohibits all disguised forms of “superstition” (*mê tín dị đoan*) and potential sources of protest against the regime. Nevertheless, the objective of the séances, as well as the content of the mediumistic messages, was less to produce oracles than to train mediums, thus ensuring the transmission of ritual expertise to young Cao daists, “those who in the future will become the pillars of the religion” (Đình, 1997: 186–9).

Amongst Cao daists, Tam Tông Miếu has a reputation for sheltering “religious specialists”. This reputation was built mainly by the first Cao daists and to a lesser extent by subsequent Cao Đài and Minh Lý followers. Since 1927, in accordance with an oracle of the Jade Emperor, Minh Lý members have been considered as “religious Masters” (*thầy tu*) who lead “séminaires” (in French in the oracle) (see Holy See of Tây Ninh, 1968: 88). Nowadays, the CQPTGLĐĐ sends young Cao daist students to Tam Tông Miếu to further their religious knowledge and train them to become missionaries. Since 2004 they have benefited from religious teaching carried out in English by Lâm Lý Hùng. He claims that his approach to religion is “rational” and draws largely on books dealing with spirit-mediumship. Each year, he takes on around 20 students from the CQPTGLĐĐ to teach them the relationship between Cao daism/Minh Lý and the sciences. In addition, numerous Cao Đài and Minh Lý followers attend a common seminar approximately once every two months<sup>19</sup>. Minh Lý lecturers draw theological comparisons between their oracles and texts sourced from the Three Doctrines, from the *Kinh Dịch* (*Yi Jing* or *The Book of Mutations*), from Catholicism and from Theosophical Society teachings. The Tam Tông Miếu library is an invaluable asset in this regard, both for the lecturers and for exegetic specialists in Southern Vietnam<sup>20</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Lâm Lý Hùng's non-political approach to religion and his investment in the pedagogical activities of Tam Tông Miếu since 2004 has played a positive part in the official and legal recognition of the Minh Lý religion. Indeed, on 17 October 2008, the Religious Affairs Office (*Ban Tôn Giáo Chính Phủ*) granted Tam Tông Miếu's adepts legal authorization to worship their “religious way [named] Minh Lý” (Minh Lý Đạo). The authorization of Minh Lý came 10 years after that of the Cao daist branches Tây Ninh and Bến Tre, and the decree (*quyết định*) can be understood in the context of the government's economic strategy to attract

overseas Vietnamese back to Vietnam. One year after this official authorization, the first academic article on Tam Tông Miếu in Vietnamese was published by the head of the Religious Institute of Religion, Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2008), who compiled a theological history of Minh Lý but adopted the Minh Lý point of view (not the Caodaist view of Minh Lý).

My fieldtrip assessment shows that the “legalization” process lasted more than five years, starting with the formulation of a detailed petition, describing the Minh Lý doctrine and methods of worship in such a way as to make it clear that it was not merely a “local cult” nor a State conspiracy, and inflating the number of followers (by bringing together 100 sympathizers with the 300 worshippers) in order to reach the necessary minimum requested by the government.

The authorization process was the subject of some debate among the Tam Tông Miếu leadership. Some followers preferred to remain in the shadow of the Caodaist and Buddhists networks, considering their old status of “secret societies” as the best social and ideological framework for achieving a kind of independence from the State, and for perpetuating a traditional system based on solidarity and separation from the establishment. However, the majority of the followers and their leaders decided to co-operate with the current regime, not only in order to avoid the prohibition of their religion but also to clearly establish a non-Caodaist and non-Buddhist denomination.

The legal registration of the Minh Lý religion did not change anything in the relationship of its followers with the Caodaists or the Buddhists. It did, however, make it possible for Minh Lý to be regarded not as a “local and superstitious cult” but as a religious institution with its own doctrine, philosophy, rituals, calendar and clergy. The official status now allows Minh Lý followers to underline their identity, to define more precisely their religious aims. Their main objective is not only to organize seminars, but also to support their religious institution, its spiritual objectives, its rituals and its specific strategies with regard to other religions and the State. In a wider sense, official registration makes it possible for even the weakest religious group—numerically speaking—to continue to exist and to express its identity and philosophical orientation.

For the researcher, the influence of the Minh societies sheds light on the social processes that contributed to the development of Caodaism. It is indeed in the continual interactions between the Cao Đài and Minh religions that one can most clearly observe the way in which their kinship and partnership have evolved from the 1920s to the present day. My literature review and interviews with Caodaist and Minh followers testify to constant re-definition in the production and circulation of symbolic, religious and identity-related goods of the two religious communities. The researcher should not be surprised to encounter an initially obscure *chassé-croisé* of people, ideas, institutions and practices.

In his work on the dynamics of dissidence in traditional Vietnam, G. Boudarel (2010) devoted a study to secret societies, predicting that there would exist two types of Sino-Vietnamese secret societies. Societies of the first type would prefer not to be secret but suffer from State repression because of their aims to modify the political and moral order, to oppose the establishment. The other group would like to go beyond questions of politics and legality, concentrating instead on purely religious matters, seeking to share their faith with a certain number of initiates who could achieve illumination or immortality, or could communicate

with spirits—though such concerns inevitably have a political aspect (in the choice of the “right” people).

In many ways (doctrines, political aims, historical links with Minh organizations, rituals, etc.), Caodaism seems inspired by secret society structure. Both types of secret society mentioned by G. Boudarel can be found within Caodaism, explaining the large number of schisms within this movement—for instance, between the partisans of social reform and those who want the movement to be detached from society. Tam Tông Miếu sheltered mainly adherents to the second ideology, i.e. a group of initiates, although it maintained bonds with Caodaism, thus enabling Minh Lý followers to retain a role in the political establishment in Southern Vietnam.

This situation reveals the complexity of the political and religious challenges that have derived from the interactions between Minh Lý and Caodaism from the colonial period until today. Future research may further “unveil” their relationship and look more closely into the issue of the existing links between the Minh and Cao Đài religions. The study of the complex interplays between Caodaism and “secret societies” should be the subject of parallel research into Western occultist or esoteric groups (Spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, etc.). The latter, which often take the form of spirit groups or freemasons’ or theosophical lodges, have played a large part in the construction of the identity of the Cao Đài movement, thus defining its originality compared with other religious Chinese–Vietnamese movements that appeared in the first half of the 20th century.

It is certainly useful to emphasize this dimension of interaction between the occultist and esoteric milieus, between the thinking of the colonizers and that of the colonized to properly account for the political strategies of Caodaism, its efforts at institutionalization and its universal syncretism. The voluminous presence of Western occultist or esoteric literature in the majority of the Caodaist libraries that I have searched allows us to think that it has been sedimented in the Vietnamese imagination throughout the 20th century, influencing to a greater or lesser extent the local religious surges.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Originally, this term referred to the villages built by Ming refugees in South Vietnam. During the colonial period, when there was an increase in the number of Chinese half-castes, *minh hương* came also to refer to the half-blood Chinese population (Chinese–Vietnamese and Chinese–Khmer).

<sup>2</sup> The principal altars are devoted to the three Infinites (*tam cực*): Vô Cực (the Infinite) or Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (the Divine Mother); Thái Cực (the First Principle) or Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (the Jade Emperor); Hoàng Cực (the Principle of the Emperor) or Hồng quân Lão Tổ (the Old Ancestor of the Heavens), alias Lao-Tseu. The altars below are reserved for the three patriarchs of the three religious doctrines (Buddha, Confucius and Lao-Tseu), the four highest Bodhisattvas objects of worship (Văn Thù or Manjusri, Địa Tạng or Ksitigarbha, Quán Âm or Avalokiteçvara and Phổ Hiền Bồ Tát or Samantabhadra), then the five Astral Genies of the five Cardinals (East, West, North, South and Middle).

<sup>3</sup> 82 Cao Thắng street (3rd district) in modern Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>4</sup> This gloss confers to Tam Tông Miếu a divinatory and predestined nature, and asserts its status and designation as an “esoteric religion”. In contrast, the Cao Đài religion would be the *phổ độ* or “exoteric” face of the same path to salvation.

<sup>5</sup> A former student at the French-speaking college of Chasseloup Laubat, who was made a *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* in 1912, Lê Văn Trung became a member of the Indo-China Government Council. In the early 1920s, he was nominated to the private council of the Governor Maurice Cognaçq.

<sup>6</sup> This circle was led by the colonial secretaries Phạm Công Tắc (1893–1958), Cao Hoài Sang (1901–1971), Cao Quỳnh Diêu (1884–1958), his younger brother, Cao Quỳnh Cư (1888–1929), and the latter's wife, Nguyễn Thị Hương (1887–1971).

<sup>7</sup> A *oui-jà* (ouija or talking) board is a flat board marked with letters, numbers and other symbols, on which a *planchette* (small heart-shaped piece of wood) conveys the spirit's message by spelling it out during a séance.

<sup>8</sup> The spirit-mediumship instrument is called *Đại Ngọc Cơ* (large jade brush). This object is made of exorcised peach wood and is designed to allow drawing, writing or tapping on an oiled table. One interpreter reads aloud the characters or the letters formed by the medium(s). At the same time, a scribe or secretary transcribes the oracles into a book (see De Groot, 1972: 1295; Clart, 2003: 16–7).

<sup>9</sup> The *fuji* technique developed during the Tang dynasty (618–907) and underwent changes from the 11th century, under the Sung dynasty (960–1279). At that time, *fuji* was used to collect messages from immortals or divinized heroes (De Groot, 1972: 1310).

<sup>10</sup> Under the leadership of activist Phan Xích Long, the Heaven and Earth association was typical of the secret societies that frightened the establishment between 1913 and 1916 (Coulet, 1926: 7–13).

<sup>11</sup> At 171 B Công Quỳnh, in the 1st district.

<sup>12</sup> A series of interviews enabled me to clarify some obscure areas of his biography.

<sup>13</sup> He did indeed meet with professors Phạm Văn Tươi and Thái Văn Thâu, two mediums from the Holy See of Tây Ninh, at the Petrus Ký college.

<sup>14</sup> The Constitutionalist Party was officially created in 1923 with the support of indigenous landowners and young bourgeois in Cochinchina; it promoted Vietnamese capitalism, Indochinese autonomy and progressive decolonization.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Văn Tâm was President of the South-Vietnam Council from 25 June 1952 to 19 December 1953.

<sup>16</sup> He then took the religious name of “Huệ Lương”, which can be translated as “perfect kindness”.

<sup>17</sup> 236 Quai de la Marne (221 Bến Vân Đồn (4th district) in modern Ho Chi Minh City).

<sup>18</sup> Since 1975, the profits from the publication of this calendar have gone entirely to the publisher, who operates overseas and continues to print a photograph of Tam Tông Miếu on the cover. Although they had nothing to do with the calendar's publication, the followers of Minh Lý suffered from this “capitalist” image and were accused of receiving dividends from the sale of calendars.

<sup>19</sup> In 2005, Lâm Lý Hùng noted the presence of approximately 40 Cao daist and 20 Minh Lý followers when the sessions were held at the CQPTGLĐĐ, and approximately 30 Minh Lý followers and 25 Cao daists when the seminars were held in Tam Tông Miếu (email communication, January 2006).

<sup>20</sup> For the detailed contents of this library, see Jammes (2006a).

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