Transnational Religious Networks in Comparative Perspectives: Vietnamese Catholic and Caodai Religious Networks in the U.S., Cambodia and Vietnam

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I. Research Interests

My dissertation compares the Catholic and Caodai transnational religious networks maintained by Vietnamese immigrant co-religionists in the U.S. and Cambodia. The comparison examines two religions of contrasting relations with Vietnamese ethnicity: (1) Catholicism, a "foreign" religion introduced to Vietnamese people by Europeans during the mid-19th century, and (2) Caodaism, a "Vietnamese" indigenous religion born in Vietnam in 1926. The cross-religion juxtaposition reveals the ways in which religious traditions – in terms of beliefs, practices, and institutions – shape the trajectory of ethnic identity formation and reconstitution. While the study situates religious lives within local socio-political conditions in the U.S.[1] and Cambodia,[2] it also deepens the temporal analytical depth by linking them to each other and to the homeland, where Vietnamese immigrants have re-established contacts.

II. Research Questions

The study investigates three questions: (1) How do Vietnamese Catholic and

[1] A recent major migration destination for Vietnamese since 1975.
[2] The country with the longest history of receiving Vietnamese immigrants, as early as the mid-1800s.

Caodai immigrants institutionalize and maintain cross-border networks with co-religionists in the U.S. and Cambodia? (2) How do they create forms of collaboration and negotiate with conflicts in this transnational relationship? (3) What are the implications of cross-border religious ties on the identity formation of Vietnamese living outside of their ancestral land?

III. Background to Ethnographic Issues

Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam by Europeans during the 1850s and it continues to retain a "strong foreign profile" in the country (Pelzer 1992: 75–79). It has a following of about 8% of Vietnam's population (approximately 6.5 million) and, like Caodaism, is heavily concentrated in the southern region. In the U.S., there are 6.1 million Catholics. Vietnamese Catholics comprise 1% of this population but, among all Vietnamese Americans, they make up 30% (about 400,000) (Bankston 2000). In Cambodia, Catholic followers number 22,000 (less than 1% of the country's population), 2/3 of which are Vietnamese (Destombes 2009).

In contrast to Catholicism, Caodaism is a distinctively Vietnamese "indigenous" religion born in Southern Vietnam under French colonialism in 1926. It is characterized as a combination of Western religious traditions (i.e. Christianity) and Eastern philosophies (i.e. Confucianism and Buddhism). Caodaism has about 3.2 million practitioners in Vietnam, mostly concentrated in the south where they constitute 5–10% of the region's population (Hoskins 2008). In the U.S., there are approximately 50,000 Caodaists, the majority of whom are Vietnamese living in California (Pivec 2006). However, 2008–2009 records from the Cambodian Ministry of Cults and Religions indicate that there are currently three Caodai temples and 3,000 Caodai followers in Cambodia. Based on my fieldwork from April to December 2010, almost all Caodaists in Cambodia are Vietnamese (I met only one Cambodian-descent woman who was affiliated with Caodaism, but even she confessed to being culturally similar to Vietnamese because she was born close to the Vietnam-Cambodia border).

Since the 1990s, Vietnamese Catholic and Caodai communities in the

U.S., Cambodia, and Vietnam have been flourishing. With population clustering in ethnic enclaves in the U.S. and Cambodia, Vietnamese immigrants are reconnecting to fellow believers and re-establishing their religious communities. Since the mid-1990s, they have also been re-creating ties with co-religionists in Vietnam, when the country lessened strictures toward religious practices and instituted favorable policies to lure their investments and return (Hookway 2008).

IV. Theoretical Orientation – Ethnic Group and Diaspora

Scholars of migration conceptualize immigrants as members of an ethnic group with a distinctive cultural framework and shared characteristics (Zhou 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). According to these researchers, shared ethnicity, as the underlying cultural bond and trust, links recently arrived immigrants to different generations and types of migrant groups (i.e. long-term co-ethnic residence, non-migrants, and immigrants in other countries) and facilitates the exchanges of capital that lead toward successful integration into host societies. Religion, through its transnational institutional mechanisms, could broaden the outreach of the ethnic group by linking co-ethnic members across multiple countries. As these religion-based transnational networks expand the pool of resources, these researchers have suggested that they also help immigrants move toward full assimilation at a quicker pace, with fewer bumps along the way. As Portes has maintained, transnationalism is an "antidote to the tendency towards downward assimilation" (Portes 1999: 471).

However, diaspora researchers have argued that immigrants who participate in transnational religious involvements could reconstitute themselves into a diaspora, a deterritorialized and voluntary group in which members are dispersed in many countries and are connected by a shared mission (Tololyan 1996; Vertovec 1999a). These scholars have argued that, unlike ethnic groups, diasporas utilize religion in order to intentionally mark themselves as distinct from local societies. Moreover, because religions

evoke universal human rights claims, diasporas can gain recognition and protection from states other than their host countries. Therefore, while ethnic groups are predicted to follow the trajectory of assimilation through religious participation, religiously grounded diasporas are motivated to institutionalize a de-territorialized community diverged from and, at times, in opposition to integration into host societies.

Simply put, the "ethnic group" framework has maintained that transnational religious involvements are motivated by and ultimately follow integration into the local country and becoming a part of its citizenry. In contrast, the "diaspora" strand of theory has argued that they could lead to the formation of a cross-border axis of identification – diaspora – that is grounded upon universal human rights protection rather than citizenship of a particular country.

V. Vietnamese Immigrants: An Ethnic Group or a Diaspora?

Whether Vietnamese immigrants constitute an ethnic group or diaspora remains unclear. Dorais (2010) has argued that Vietnamese in North America may have experienced temporary and short-lived "diasporic moments" but remain as an "ethnic collectivity." In his observation of Vietnamese who practice Catholicism, Caodaism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, and The Way of the Mother Goddess (Len Dong), he has found they put strong emphasis on religious practices and, recently, have become re-connected to co-ethnic members in other countries through religious practices. Nevertheless, he has maintained that these involvements are limited within kin circles and have not institutionalized a cross-border community and identity. Moreover, he has predicted that these transnational religious ties will wane with succeeding Vietnamese generations born outside of the homeland as they join the local mainstream society and lose close attachments to co-ethnic members. His findings echo studies on Vietnamese Buddhists in Houston by Huynh (2000) and Ha (2002).

However, a number of researchers have proposed that Vietnamese

immigrants are becoming more like a diaspora than an ethnic group headed for assimilation precisely because of their strong cross-border activities. As Ehrentraut (2004) has found, Vietnamese in Cambodia do not comprise an ethnic group. He has suggested that they are transforming into 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 obtaining Cambodian citizenship.

In particular, continuing a religious practice from the homeland could also reinforce gradual diasporization. As Hoskins (2006) has observed, many Vietnamese following the Vietnamese 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 the 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 onto American soil. During the past ten years, they have pooled enough resources to construct public Caodai temples and mend ties with co-religionists in Vietnam and other countries (Hoskins 2006; 2008).

VI. Research Design and Strategies

Transnational field of data collection: My research design integrates a transnational field of data collection in order to consider the impacts of displacement, resettlement, and cross-border connections on religious life. Vietnamese immigrants number 1.6 million in the U.S. (the majority resides in California) and 600,000 in Cambodia (most are concentrated in Phnom Penh). Many of them have re-created their ties to Vietnam since the 1990s,

when the country instituted policies of economic and religious liberalization. As scholars such as Levitt (2001) and Vasquez and Marquardt (2003) have advocated, in-depth ethnographies situated within a transnational field are necessary to expose asymmetries of power (i.e. between immigrants and nation-states, immigrants and non-migrants, etc.) and cultural and structural conditions that shape the trajectory of adaptation for immigrants.

Comparative lens: By making comparisons across two transnational religious networks maintained by Vietnamese immigrants, my study shines light on the cultural worldview of religious participation among these faithful. Scholars of religion have been fascinated by the impacts of cultural shift on self-transformation grounded in religious ideology. They have generally concluded that the experience of moving to a new country heightens religious participation and devotion among immigrants. However, the research has often overlooked how this intensification is shaped by the experiences of migration, resettlement, and homeland reconnection. For example, because of the history of persecution and multiple displacements, Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. have constructed "Mary of Viet Nam" to represent their hopes for democracy and religious freedom in their homeland. Similarly, Vietnamese American Caodaists have transformed their traumatic experience of exile into one of inspiration by calling themselves "God's chosen people" to spread religious teachings to non-Vietnamese.

Data collection: For two years between 2009 and 2010, I conducted my fieldwork in the U.S., Cambodia, and Vietnam (approximately eight to nine months in each country). I interviewed 50 Catholics and 50 Caodaists in each country (300 total). I also employed participant observation by immersing myself into community religious activities and family functions for an average of 8 months in each country.

VII. Hypothesis Based on Preliminary Analysis

I expect to find two different trajectories of diasporic formation among Vietnamese Catholics and their ethnic Caodai counterparts. Within an

ethnically heterogeneous religious community, I hypothesize that the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora is mobilized to strengthen the grounding of Vietnamese cultures into Catholic life. Within the multi-cultural society of the U.S., Vietnamese Catholics fear that the cultural diversity of the Catholic community may dilute their ethnic identity. As a result, they have demanded for their own separate ethnic parish and seek support from Vietnamese faithful in other countries, particularly their homeland. In Cambodia, Vietnamese Catholics cloak their ethnic identity under religious practices (i.e. conducting masses in Khmer even though Vietnamese make-up 2/3 of the total Catholic population in Cambodia) while solidifying and perpetuating ethnic solidarity in order to counter anti-Vietnamese sentiments (i.e. forming a Vietnamese Catholic coalition that links with Vietnamese Catholics in other countries). These U.S.-based and Cambodia-based Vietnamese Catholic immigrants see co-religionists in Vietnam as an essential connection to the preservation of Vietnamese culture, thus encouraging them to financially support the building of pilgrimage sites, churches, and museums in the homeland.

In contrast to the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora, I predict that the Vietnamese Caodai diaspora is in formation because members are motivated to breathe new cultural life into their ethnically homogeneous religious community. In the U.S., Vietnamese Caodaists see themselves as "God's chosen people" and as having the responsibility to bring the word of God to non-Vietnamese, such as by translating scriptures into English. In Cambodia, members have been mobilizing to receive official Cambodian recognition of their religion and continue to keep alive the 60-year history of missionary activities in the country. Within the past ten years, Vietnamese Caodaists in the U.S. and Cambodia have been mending ties with the Caodai Holy See in Vietnam and are institutionalizing missionary outreach programs to non-Vietnamese.

VIII. Plans at Academia Sinica and Long-Term Professional Goals and Commitment

I would like to work at Academia Sinica from September 1, 2011 to May 30, 2012 under the Doctoral Fellowship. During this time, I intend to write my dissertation and publish 2–3 peer-reviewed journal articles while taking advantage of Academia Sinica's intellectual resources. In particular, I believe that my graduate training and writing could benefit significantly from scholarly exchanges with researchers at the Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies (CAPAS). For example, Dr. Wen-chin Chang's expertise on Vietnamese culture and traditions could deepen the analytical framework of my case studies – Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists. Moreover, I hope to broaden my regional perspectives by engaging in dialogues with other CAPAS scholars. Among these include Dr. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, whom I met at the conference on Taiwanese and Vietnamese Studies at the National Cheng Kung University in October 2010 (I also met current Academia Sinica Dissertation Fellow, Edyta Roszko, at this meeting). While he is also a sociologist like myself, Dr. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao's work is uniquely grounded in the Asia Pacific region and contextualized within global dynamics of nation-state relations. Thus, his analytical framework, rooted internally within Asia, could expand my U.S.-trained perspective on cross-border forces, flows, and exchanges concerning Vietnamese Catholics and Caodaists. In addition to CAPAS, I intend to work and network with scholars affiliated with other centers who share similar research interests. For instance, I look forward to finally meeting and continuing conversations with Dr. Heidi Fung at the Institute of Ethnology, with whom I have had numerous e-mail exchanges. Her research on Vietnamese transnational marriages, the socialization of morality, and the negotiation of cultural frameworks in multi-ethnic families are essential to my dissertation's examination of self-fashioning based in religious ideology among overseas Vietnamese. Ultimately, in addition to successfully writing a competitive dissertation and publishing several articles in peer-reviewed journals during

my fellowship residency, I plan to work closely with Academia Sinica's scholars toward multi-country collaborative projects and publications in the near future. I am confident that I can achieve these goals within the intellectually enriching environment at Academia Sinica. This is a prospect that my dissertation committee member, Dr. Viet Nguyen, also strongly supports, partly based on his participation in the Institute of European and American Studies' "Asian American Studies in Asia" Conference last summer.

Upon receiving my Ph.D. in May 2012, I intend to pursue a career as a professor teaching at a research university. I hope to contribute to research by providing a nuanced understanding of Vietnamese immigrant lives. Unlike other Asian American immigrant groups, for nearly two decades, Vietnamese immigrants were dispersed and isolated from each other due to the history of religious persecution in their homeland and refugee resettlement policies in host societies. It was only during the past 15 years that they began to form ethnic enclaves and cultivate cross-national ties. Today, among Vietnamese immigrants, the faithful across different religions constitute at least twice their respective proportions in Vietnam. As such, an examination of the unique religious life of Vietnamese immigrant populations would expose processes of cultural transformation, negotiation, and reconnection that are undergirded by religious practices. One cannot assume that Judeo-Christian frameworks necessarily characterize Vietnamese American religious life as the case may be for other Asian American groups. There is a great deal of "translation" work that needs to be done, and I believe that my research provides the context for such religious translation and understanding.

Moreover, I intend to continue shedding light on the connections between religious life in the U.S. and Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). Reports have shown a significant recent increase in the number of Catholics in this region within the past decade despite its strong foothold in Buddhism. A part of this growth, I believe, is due to overseas influences,

especially refugee immigrants originally from these countries who have become devout Christians and yearn to bring the promises of God to their co-ethnic members in the homeland. The religious change and cross-border ties make this region an important laboratory for tracing social renewal within the context of a universal, multi-cultural religious community. Although there has been very little research in this area of U.S.-Indochina religious connection, I am committed to utilizing my foreign language skills (Vietnamese and Khmer), cultural sensibilities, and research training to continue to pursue it. In doing so, my research will also foster institutional networks and scholarly collaboration in Indochina, where the infrastructure of research has been burdened by poverty and a long history of political turmoil and isolation.

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