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AN INTERNATIONALIZED RELIGION:
CAODAISM'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
AND SYNCRETIC PRACTICES

This paper examines communication strategies of an indigenously founded religion with 5 million followers in Vietnam, Caodaism. Blending Orthodox Taoism from China, Indianized Champa with Siva worship, and French Catholicism, Caodaism emerged as a new religion, initially linked to the peasantry and civil movements in southern Vietnam, with a military of its own. Spread by refugees, a missionary ideal, and digital media Caodaism is a social movement and a religion known in many nations for its sacred images, symbols, colors, and Holy Scripture.

Caodaism leaders have tried to meet new demands of the followers' network and strengthen its focus while disseminating its beliefs and practices globally. Indeed, the leaders of the religion have and continue to make significant efforts to internationalize its representation through websites, translations of books and scriptures, attending international conferences, and socializing with other religions.

Due to limited funding, Caodaists make use of YouTube videos to disseminate their teachings. Of the 60 official videos on Cao Dai TV, 47 clips cover news on the operation and special activities of Caodaism. The newscast intends to spread the Caodai faith to both established Caodaists and converts. Events such as the reconstruction of a temple in a remote county and the anniversary of the inauguration of the religion became news, with hopes to show whatever progress Caodaists are making toward upholding their beliefs. The channel can be seen as an effort to interact with Caodaists all over the world.

Although a locally born religion with ample influence by Southern Vietnamese culture, Caodaism and its mediated messages are oriented towards such omnipresent values as self-improvement, solidarity, enlightenment and liberation from suffering.

Key words: Caodaism, content analysis, media spectacle, religious study.

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**Интернационалдық дін: каодаизмнің
коммуникациялық стратегиялары мен синкреттік тәжірибесі**

Осы мақалада Вьетнамдағы 5 миллион ізбасары бар тұрғылықты халықтың діні болып табылатын каодаизмнің коммуникациялық стратегиялары қарастырылады. Қытайдың Ортодоксалды Даосизмін, Шиваға табынумен Чампуды және француз католицизмін үйлестіре отырып, каодаизм Вьетнамның оңтүстігіндегі бұрыннан шаруалармен және азаматтық қозғалыстармен, өз армиясымен байланысты жаңа дін болды. Босқындармен, миссионерлермен және бұқаралық сандық ақпарат құралдарымен таратытын каодаизм әлемнің көптеген елдерінде өздерінің қасиетті жерлеріне, белгілеріне, рәміздеріне, гүлдеріне табынатын, сондай-ақ Қасиетті Жазбаларымен танымал дінге және қоғамдық қозғалысқа айналды.

Каодаизмнің көшбасшылары каодаизм ізбасарлары желісінің жаңа талаптарын қанағаттандыруға және бүкіл әлем бойынша өзінің діни нанымдары мен тәжірибелерін тарату арқылы оның ықпалын күшейтуге тырысады. Шынында да, діни көшбасшылар веб-сайттар, кітаптар мен жазбаларды аудару, халықаралық конференцияларға бару арқылы, сондай-ақ басқа да дін өкілдерімен қарым-қатынас жасау арқылы өз нанымдарын интернационалдандыру үшін айтарлықтай күш-жігерін жұмсап келеді.

Шектеулі қаржыландыруға байланысты, Каодаистер бейнероликтер арқылы өз білімдерін тарату үшін YouTube платформасын пайдаланады. Cao Dai TV-де (Као-Дай телеарнасында) 60 ресми бейнероликтің 47-сі каодаизмнің қызметі мен оған байланысты арнайы іс-шаралар туралы жаңалықтарға арналған. Жаңалықтарды шығару арқылы Каодай дінін қалыптасқан каодаистер арасында да, жаңа ізбасарлары арасында да таратуға ниеттеніп отыр. Кез келген бөлек бір ауданда ғибадатхананы қайта құру, сондай-ақ діннің пайда болуына арналған іс-шаралар өз наным-сенімдерін қорғауға каодаистермен қол жеткізілген кез келген прогресті көрсету жаңалықтар

тақырыбына айналады. Арнаны бүкіл әлем бойынша каодаистердің өзара әрекеттесуінің құралы ретінде қарастыруға болады.

Жергілікті дін Оңтүстік Вьетнамдықтар мәдениетінің кең ықпалына ие болғанына қарамастан, каодаизм және оның жанама үндеулері өзін-өзі жетілдіру, өзара көмек көрсету, ағарту және азап шегуден босату сияқты барлық жерде жүретін құндылықтарға бағытталған.

Түйін сөздер: каодаизм, контент-анализ, медиа-өнімділік, діни зерттеулер.

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**Интернациональная религия: коммуникационные стратегии
и синкретические практики Каодаизма**

В настоящей статье рассматриваются коммуникативные стратегии Каодаизма, являющегося религией коренных народов, насчитывающих 5 миллионов последователей во Вьетнаме. Сочетая в себе Ортодоксальный Даосизм из Китая, Чампу с поклонением Шиве и французский католицизм, Каодаизм стал новой религией, изначально связанной с крестьянством и гражданскими движениями на юге Вьетнама, с собственной армией. Распространяемый беженцами, миссионерами и средствами массовой информации, Каодаизм стал общественным движением и религией, известной во многих странах мира своими поклонениями святыням, символами, цветами, а также своим Священным Писанием.

Лидеры Каодаизма стараются удовлетворить новые требования сети последователей Каодаизма и усилить его влияние посредством распространения своих религиозных убеждений и практик по всему миру. Действительно, религиозные лидеры прилагают и продолжают прилагать значительные усилия для интернационализации своих убеждений через веб-сайты, переводы книг и писаний, посещение международных конференций, а также путем общения с представителями других религий.

В связи с ограниченным финансированием Каодаисты пользуются платформой YouTube для распространения своих учений посредством видеороликов. Из 60 официальных видеороликов на Cao Dai TV (телевидении Као-Дай) 47 из них посвящены новостям о деятельности и специальным мероприятиям, связанным с Каодаизмом. Выпуск новостей ставит своей целью распространить веру Каодай как среди устоявшихся Каодаистов, так и среди новых последователей. Такие мероприятия, как реконструкция храма в каком-либо отдельно взятом районе, а также годовщина зарождения религии, становятся темой для новостей, с надеждой продемонстрировать любой прогресс, достигнутый Каодаистами в отстаивании своих убеждений. Канал можно рассматривать как средство взаимодействия Каодаистов по всему миру.

Несмотря на то, что местная религия обладает широким влиянием на культуры Южных Вьетнамцев, Каодаизм и его опосредованные послания ориентированы на такие вездесущие ценности, как самосовершенствование, взаимовыручка, просвещение и освобождение от страданий.

Ключевые слова: Каодаизм, контент-анализ, медиаспектакль, религиоведение.

Introduction

The 21st century is a time of great innovation, from technological developments to religious teaching and following. Digital and interactive functions of the Web 2.0 have empowered citizens to innovate and engage more in religious practice, creating new spaces and such notions as "online religion", "online churches", "e-vangelism" or "religion online" (Cheong, 2012, 31). In that sense, one can see the Internet as a missionary tool. This is true for long-established religions as well as for more recent religions, including one of the most popular religions in Vietnam, Caodaism.

An indigenously founded religion with 5 million followers globally today, Caodaism was established in 1926 in a small province 100 kilometers away from Saigon, Vietnam. Developing from a synthesized sect to a full religion, its founder's stated purpose was to "synthesize world religions and create a path to unification and reconciliation between the East and West", a mission that was not limited by Vietnam's borders (Perrin, 2011). A new religion, initially linked to the peasantry and civil movements in southern Vietnam, once with a military of its own, Caodaism is now practiced in many countries. It is known for its sacred images, symbols, colors, and Holy Scripture. However, Caodaism is not only a religion, it is also a cultural entity of richness and spiritual strengths. In other words, Caodaism is both a social movement and a religion (Oliver, 1976: 1).

This social movement and religion was not unique in its origin, but its expansion is unusual. The 20th century saw a fluctuating history of Vietnam, with different wars and regimes, as well as new religions that arose in times of hardship and endurance. Among those new religions, Caodaism has emerged as the third largest religion in Vietnam, trailing only Catholicism and Buddhism. Cao Dai means "high tower or palace", and it refers to the Father spirit at the heart of the religion, not the spectacular temples with interiors decorated like Disney castles. Growing from half a million followers by the mid-1950s to 1.5 million followers in 1975, after the fall of the Saigon administration in that year, Caodaists immigrated to Western countries as boat people and disseminated its beliefs (Perrin, 121). From then on, Caodai Temples have been established in the USA, Australia, Europe, Canada, and Cambodia. With a unique identity, the religion's activists have more than tripled the number of followers in the past 40 years.

What makes the newly born religion continue to grow and to have generated several million followers? What are the beliefs of Caodaism and how did they develop? How do Caodaists maintain their relationships as a global religious community with unified beliefs? This paper explores those questions and how the communication strategies, rituals, and shift in media approaches by the leaders of Caodaism have tried to meet the new demands of the followers' network and strengthen its focus while disseminating its beliefs and practices globally. Indeed, the leaders of the religion have and continue to make significant efforts to internationalize its representation through websites, translations of books and scriptures, attending international conferences, and socializing with other religions.

Literature review

From a cultural perspective, Caodaism was influenced by three different forces: Orthodox Taoism from China, Indianized Champa with Siva worship, and the French protectorate. However, the religion, with its unique mix of beliefs and practices, was founded by Ngo Van Chieu who said he contacted a spirit named "Cao Dai" through séances. The spirit asked Ngo Van Chieu to adopt certain practices, such as vegetarianism and ritual prayer four times a day (Possamai, 2007). From this, a complex system of beliefs and rituals developed, including a belief that the two utmost spirit gods are Cao Dai and the Mother Goddess, although there

are also many spirits who play a role in the religion. Caodaists also maintain a belief that if they live a good life, they can "escape the cycle of reincarnation and become one with Cao Dai"(Possamai, 2007: 307).

Cao Dai is believed to be the heart of the universe, the common Father of all human beings (Oliver, 1976), and he can be communicated with via a séance. Other spirits play a role in the religion as protection gods. Scholars have tried to catalogue the spirits believed in by Caodaists, and they have identified over 70 different spirits named in séances, including some non-Asians such as Descartes, Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, Pasteur, Shakespeare and Lenin (Sakisyanz, 1984: 180). It is unsurprising, then, Caodaists hold that history is divided into three major revelatory periods in which Caodaism was to be a syncretic faith which would "unite the best of the Eastern and Western religious systems present in Vietnam in order to usher in the Third Amnesty of God, or the age of renovation" (Perrin, 2011, p. 120).

Discussing symbols, in his book Communication as Culture, James Carey argues communication, through language and other symbolic forms, comprises the ambience of human existence. In other words, reality is created by communication by "the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms". He goes on the claim that the indebtedness of the ritual view of communication to religion is apparent in the name chosen to label it (Carey, 1992). This view has a significant meaning in the analysis of religious rituals because it reduces the importance of the sermon, the instruction, and admonition while it highlights the role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony. Other scholars suggest that rituals show the basic characteristics of public assembly, "the repetition of gestures" already regarded as ritual tradition by a community and "the invocation of divine beings" (Howard, 2011: 59).

From the beginning, Caodaists considered themselves parts of a universal religion, seeking to recruit their disciples from different backgrounds. Moreover, the lack of dogmatic exclusiveness allowed Caodaism to attract heterogeneous teachings. As a synthesis of all religions in Vietnam, Caodaism is covered with spirit – inspired prophecies that the religion will become not only a national religion but also the revelation for the whole world (Sakisyanz, 1984).

Indeed, in an effort to propagate the religion, Caodai dignitaries and adepts came up with two

main sources of unification: Caodai sacred texts and rituals. The former are mainly formed through séance sessions and put together in a compilation of Divine messages that reveal a hidden side of Caodaism (Jammes, 2009). The central rituals have been maintained as basic patterns in those séances since the 1920s (Oliver, 1976). The séance rituals center around the left eye of God, or the celestial symbol of Divinity. To connect to God, spirit-mediumship is used by Caodaists at different locations, including the Tay Ninh Holy Tower, the central temple of Caodaism.

Nguyen (2016) has explained the notions of Axis Mundi and Cosmic Cross as they apply to the Tay Ninh Holy Tower. The Axis Mundi is the connective place between heaven and earth, and the Cosmic Cross can be considered the intersection between straight lines. The exterior and symbols of the Holy Tower were built in accordance with these rules of religious architecture. In that, the left eye is the most important symbol to unify the disciples. It is only at this spot that the medium leads the ritual séance.

While the architecture of the Tay Ninh Holy Tower is unique, Caodaists have other centers of worship. In order to understand how and why they are designed as they are, one must understand the Caodaists' beliefs about the soul and Walter Benjamin's discussion of aura. Caodaists believe in the soul, which is the Divine light of God and which reigns the whole body. Everyone's soul is equally clairvoyant, and that may be called the divine enlightenment or the aura. Walter Benjamin discusses this area of aesthetics in great depths. He argued that religion and religious practice is all about process and movement, in that, "religious aesthetics must take into account the interlocking forces of creation and destruction – a dialectic perhaps more unfamiliar to Western religions than to South Asian religions"(Plate, 2005, p. 9). In Benjamin's words, "aura is the strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be" (Plate, 2005: 88). He also differentiates the concept of "trace" and the aura: the trace is the appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is the appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. Aura depends on a metaphysical distance from an object even though it may be physically close (Plate, 2005, p. 88). Clearly, the aura has been implied not by the object itself, but is built up around the object through history and social conditions.

Caodaism with its specific criteria of the rituals, the decoration and architecture of the Temple, the aura has been formed by the historical texts and the relationship with the Holy Temple in its original location. Of course, the work of art can be easily reproducible as long as the reproduction serves to preserve and promote the authenticity of the original, building up a thicker aura. In that sense, the reproduction of Caodai temples should abide by six blueprint samples issued by the Caodai headquarters. The selection of the sample should be approved in advance to legitimate the birth of a new temple. Only the Great Temple or Holy Tower can bear the eye symbol and the lotus flower. Other temples are smaller and have to omit these details to prove their position in the system. By this regulation, Caodaism maintains the central power for the Great Temple and assures that all the branches are doing the same thing so as to build up the aura and retain the sense of belonging to the central organization.

Recognizing the importance of the Great Temple or Holy Tower explains how the recordings of rituals and prayers practiced there become an important part of the media used to spread Caodaism. The Holy Tower is where the daily prayers are offered in Caodaist ceremonies. The solemnity of the Holy Tower and the rituals of saying these prayers in lyrical tones and traditional background music enhance the effects of Divine-human communication. One should note that Caodaists were 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" (Jammes, 2009: 361). In accordance with the Vietnamese language, traditional music acts as a peculiar cultural trait, making the prayers more like a chorus singing with different levels of tones and frequencies. Caodaists have kept records of the prayer sessions since the early days and these recordings are part of the propagation of the religion.

Apart from the rituals, Caodaism has built a huge trove of newspapers, books, audio clips, and legal documents to fulfill the mission of the Caodai Pope who teaches that the religion should be spread over five continents. In the publication campaigns, the image of left eye of God has functioned as a symbol to unify believers and has allowed for a consistent recognition of publications propagating the doctrine. The purpose of the periodical is to research, exchange, and present laws and regulations of Caodaism in order to direct the disciples to the best practices. Between 1926 and 1975, approximately

20 newspapers came into existence to spread its religious principles and unify the followers. Two main reasons for the proliferation of newspapers exist. One reason is Caodaism was divided into different smaller branches and each branch wanted its own influence and strength (Thanh Xuan, 2013). The second reason is that most Caodai newspapers could last only a few years due to the complication of the wars in the southern part of Vietnam. The first Caodai newspaper, L'Action Indochinoise, was born in 1928, two years after the birth of the new religion. The most recent newspaper, the Caodai Periodical, was launched in 2009.

Books and translations of those books were also part of efforts by oversea Caodaists to spread the religion, as was attendance at religious conferences and going to universities to talk about the religion (Tran, 2002). These efforts increased after 1975, including the formation of one of the Cao Dai Overseas Missionary. This is a "means of expression, gaining recognition, channeling resources, legitimizing conflicts, and as a source of identity for Caodaist communities" (Jammes, 2009). At Tay Ninh Great Temple, there is a mural showing Victor Hugo, Sun Yat Sen, and Trang Trinh signing a divine accord. Its implication is to spread the religion overseas, too, because Victor Hugo, in Caodaists' belief, is the spiritual head of the overseas mission (Hoskin, 2015).

More recently, having spread to 16 countries worldwide, Caodaists have utilized new methods to communicate with one another. The Internet has made it possible for Caodaists to promote the religion and develop the population of adherents. They can migrate to different continents and still remain in contact with each other. New media production techniques include websites, online videos, international LISTSERVs, and emails (Hoskin, 2015).

Discussion

Carey (1989) discussed the isolation of science from culture, arguing that science provides culture-free truth, whereas culture provides ethnocentric error. One can argue that Caodaism, among other new religions, makes use of this sort of "ethnocentric error" to enhance its development. For example, during the initial stage of the religion's development, Caodai séances were popular among Vietnamese followers as the communication process with the Jade Emperor and other spirits or Caodai saints. This kind of spirit-board or talking-board

played an important role in spreading their beliefs within a community that valued spirits and valued spirits that were culturally familiar. However, Caodai also included spirits of Western personages, such as Descartes and Shakespeare, thus bridging the East-West cultural gap through symbolism. If we view "communication as a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (Carey, p.23), in religion, that symbolic process is more prominent if it is a syncretic religion.

Today, with a worldwide network, Caodaism has taken its syncretistic outreach to disciples online. Its beliefs are presented in three main different genres: Caodai laws and regulations; speeches, books and séance quotations from dignitaries; and online religious channels. Caodaists have realized that they can only surpass the territorial obstacles by making use of new communication technologies of the modern time. In that realization, Howard Rheingold's (1994) powerful metaphor of a virtual community becomes highly significant. Based on his own experience of participating in the election bulletin board system known as the Well, he argued that long-term participation in these electronic forums creates a shared system of beliefs, values, norms, and specific behaviors (Rheingold, p.9). His reasoning also notes a collective sense of belonging and creates a new kind of community, based solely on common interests, goodwill, and solidarity. Bakardjiieva claims that the Internet is exactly the place where the online and offline meet. In a similar vein, in her "How religious Communities Negotiate New Media Religiously," Heidi Campbell discusses some issues concerning how religious institutions, and individuals retain something of their traditions and identities in contemporary communication environments. Particularly, Campbell looks at the complex interactions between religious communities and new communication technologies through a framework called "religious-social shaping of technology" (Cheong, 2012, p. 4). Carey (1989, p.134) explicated Innis' perspective arguing there are two approaches to communication: space-binding media, such as print and electricity, and time-biding media, such as manuscript and human speech. The former is meant to be connected with expansion and control over territory and favored the establishment of commercialism, empire, and eventually technocracy. The later deals with close communities, metaphysical speculation and traditional authority.

As a new born religion, historically bearing a prejudice by the government due to spiritualism,

which is in nature against the Marxist doctrine, Caodaism has to build its population with new communication technologies. Their dignitaries and adepts from around the world know that modern media of communications have a common effect: "they widen the range of reception while narrowing the range of distribution" (Carey, 1989,p.136). However, in Carey's time, it was not possible for the audience to respond directly or participate in the conversation. Now that situation has changed, and the disciples can interact with their headquarter or leaders more than ever before via rituals as well as online exchanges. In that sense, ritual is defined as "purposeful engagement with the sacred"; ritual is also an aggregate of performance, media, script, and representation of belief (Campbell, 2013: 27).

Today, with the virtual community, new concepts as well as new practices have been built to make the flow of information exchange possible. Jorgen Straarup suggests the notion of "avatar religion" in which he analyzes that "despite the revolutionary potential of new media, even avatars seek community – community that appears to require precisely the traditional, real-world communities and practices that serve as the origins and destinations of their virtual counterparts" (2010, p.4). Other contrasting points may be appropriate in the context of Web 2.0: Some people hope that the interactivity of Web 2.0 may empower the followers to shape and participate in the life of institutions, including congregations. However, Mark Johns (2012) finds that those who join such groups usually stop there. That means they do not surpass the virtual environment to proceed to the actual communities.

In Lundby's Dreams of Church in Cyberspace (2012), there is a notable comment about the church and its mission. Church and mission are "social movements", when the media become social, it matters for church as well as for mission. Social media enhances the following features: connectivity, immediacy, and sharing culture. Those features, again, help to link communication, exchange, and social interaction offline with activities online (Cheong, 2012, p. 34).

Online Caodaism Presence

For Caodaism, Internet activism is considered an important role in the globalization of the religion. The importance of cyberspace as a "meeting place" for Caodaists has been stressed in its effort to become globalized and interconnected. The leaders must think about balancing the possibilities created by the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies and the new communicative desires and patterns they create for members against their established spiritual goals and beliefs. Campbell reiterated how new technologies generate certain cultural and behavioral expectations, which may run against traditional structures of authority, social interaction, and virtual engagement (Cheong, 2012).

Some scholars contend that technology is value-neutral and simply a tool that can be used to accomplish religious goals. By contrast, some others see media as a conduit or a mode of knowing. They suggest religious groups are left only with the choice of either accepting or rejecting technology. From the point of view of an indigenous religion, most Caodaists began their practices as a family tradition or from a background of peasantry. Thus, they simply use the Internet or virtual environment as a place to interact and share cultural and religious beliefs. The perspective of media as a mode of knowing, emphasizing that media messages are closely intertwined with the medium is too far reaching and may not apply to this type of interaction (Cheong, 2012).

As early as 2000, a website called Thien Ly Buu Toa came into being by a Caodaist who has been living in the U.S., specifically in California. The temple wanted to create a tool for reaching its followers due to the policy of the U.S government to evenly distribute Vietnamese refugees across the country. There was a time when the Tay Ninh Great Temple was paralyzed due to the pressure from the local government when the Caodaists wanted to exert an influence on the local policies. As a result, a new commission was established abroad to strengthen and take charge of the international expansion. Before that time, in September 1998, at the third annual conference held in Montreal, Canada, the Cao Dai Overseas Mission was formed with 15 delegations from around the world (Hoskin, 2015). From these initiatives, Caodaism began to spread and recruit not only overseas Vietnamese but also native citizens. Nowadays, there still exist about 20 websites under different names whose content related to Caodaism. Most of these pages are not professionally designed. However, the content shows the commitment to support the religion and aims at recruiting more followers from all over the world. For that purpose, the official website Caodai.com.vn is presented in three languages: Vietnamese, English, and French. The website looks more like an administrative organization than that of a religion.

Caodaism on new media

Caodaism's strongest presence on new media seems to be on YouTube, with an official YouTube channel. The Great Temple in Tay Ninh, Vietnam, and the Caodaist branch in California have cooperated in the videos to propagate the religion to the disciples. Although the channel simply conveys the messages of teachings, meetings, conferences, and receptions, it reflects the ongoing interest in making the religion known to different groups of audience from around the world. Some videos have also been broadcast via Viet TV, a television channel in California. Although the videos are made by amateurs, they fit in well with the purpose of spending less to reach more viewers in the virtual communities. In a research article in Caodai Periodical, the author stressed the vantage point of Caodaism as a multi-lingual religion, suggesting that the Great Temple, and other organizations should take the opportunity to propagate the religion in terms of spiritual activities around the world (Thien Chi, 2016).

Of the 60 official videos on Cao Dai TV, 47 clips cover news on the operation and special activities of Caodaism. The newscast is hoped to spread the Caodai faith to both established Caodaists and converts. Events such as the reconstruction of a temple in a remote county and the anniversary of the inauguration of the religion became news, with hopes to show whatever progress Caodaists are making toward upholding their beliefs. The channel can be seen as an effort to interact with Caodaists all over the world. As the religion has branched into 12 different divisions, the television channel from the original Great Temple serves as a unifying force and keep Caodai doctrines in place. The rest of the videos concentrate mostly on traditional Caodai songs and music, as well as spiritual practices and teachings from the first Caodai Pope. The message here is to build a connection between the Holy Temple and the followers in a mystic and enticing way. The teachings stress the spiritual gain when joining the sect. One can feel free of guilt and go with the Jade Emperor to the paradise. The Caodai Holy Scripture says that the Great Temple is the source of spiritual knowledge. Thanks to technology, the source is connected with the followers regardless of where they are living.

Technology also makes it easier to collect texts on Caodaism worldwide. A plan has been made to reach out to other cultures with an aim to assess how Caodaism is perceived by peoples in different continents. That is why YouTube is a main source for followers to share their opinions, ideas, and charity activities.

Media spectacle

Thanks to the peculiar architecture of Caodai Temples, ritual events become a great chance to promote the religion to the mass audience. By definition, media spectacles are "those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggle, as well as its modes of conflict resolutions"(Kellner, 2010). By spectacle, Kellner refers to "media constructs that are out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine which become special media spectacles. They involve an aesthetic dimension and often are dramatic, bound up with competition like the Olympics or Oscars" (Kellner, 2010: 1). Every year the main spectacular event is celebrated at the Great Temple in Tay Ninh. It is called The Mother Goddess Annual Festival. Every year, about 100,000 people attend the event at Tay Ninh Holy See in southern Vietnam. For the first time since 1975, delegations from the U.S, Cambodia, Canada, and Bangladesh were invited to attend the festival in Autumn 2010. That marked a crucial milestone in the battle between Caodaism and the local administration to promote the religion worldwide. The most awaited performance was the evening march that immediately preceded the midnight service (Ninh, 2013: 51).

With colorful and lively shows, the parade serves as an attraction to a huge mass from around the country. The performances fit well in a spacious square, creating a mystic and unifying ambivalence. In his essay "The Commodity as Spectacle", Debord suggests that "the spectacle presents itself as all of society, as part of society, and as instrument of unification" (as cited in Durham, 2009: 117). Only Tay Ninh Holy See can organize the parade. That is why it is the most important ritual event on the lunar 15th of the eighth month of every year. Disciples from various locations return to the source of their religion and pay respect to the Mother Goddess. The event attracts the media and tourists as well. Gradually, the ritual gains its big name and becomes an inevitable festival of the year. The festival starts with a ceremony and then a follow-up festival that lasts from the afternoon to 12 p.m. The colorful festival is filled with parades, dragon dance and lion dance in different episodes. The 20–meter-dragon shows the power of Mother Goddess when it

performs very skillful moves in front of the pageant. The festival night is a cultural and spiritual activity full of light and ritual sounds. It helps to strengthen the essence of Caodaism in its quest for worldwide recognition.

The festival is officially recognized by the authorities and covered by mainstream media. Together with other activities, the festival is a holy event resembling some other religions in the world. The aura from the rituals has given the followers concrete beliefs in the development of Caodaism year by year. The linkage between disciples both inside and outside the country is maintained and fostered.

Conclusion

Caodaists are advised to go into spiritual practices, doing good deeds in order to be taken by the Jade Emperor to the High Temple and enjoy a peaceful life. The propaganda strategies above play a very important role in spreading the religion to foreign territories. With an aim to extract the best essence from various religions, Caodaism continues to grow, especially in the digital age. There are cases of mystic practice as well as individual efforts to uphold the religion that seems to go against the regulations of the authorities. It is true that "individual believers are more responsible for the nature of their religiosity when they are empowered to construct their worldviews from the vast possibilities afforded by Internet communication technologies" (Howard, 2011, p. 4). Howard also argues that technological and spiritual changes have cultivated a more voluntaristic attitude toward spiritual involvement. This argument is supported in this case with the proliferation of Caodaism in recent years in new territories. Technology is also a balancing force between the rigorous regulations of the religion and the need to connect the disciples to the Holy See.

Limitations

This paper is just an attempt to examine Caodaism in its media activities and application. Interview and access to more official publications would enhance the analysis. This research also neglects the division of the branches in terms of their faiths towards the original teachings. A thorough study should include it to see whether the issue leads to more connection or division among Caodaists around the world.

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