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Healing by talking: Bodily and Social Therapy of Spirit Possession in Late-Socialist Vietnam

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One afternoon at the start of the rainy season in July, I was having a rest in the living room of the Binh Thanh Holy House in Ho Chi Minh City where a wedding ceremony was soon to be hosted by the Caodai priest. It was 2018 and I was doing fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation about death-related rituals in the Caodai religious community in Vietnam. The Caodai religion (or Caodaism, *Đạo Cao Đài*) is a millenarian anti-colonial movement that initially became a widespread religious network, largely through the popularity of the sect's spirit writing techniques during the period of French colonial rule in Cochinchina in the 1920s. (Jammes and Shao 2020).

Suddenly, the humid quiet of the room was shattered when several people rushed in, asking me to move away from the wooden bed. A man came into the room carrying a young woman on his back and carefully laid her onto the wooden bed. The woman seemed very uncomfortable and was retching intermittently yet did not throw anything up. With her muscles twitching, she sometimes yelled and sometimes cried and was so weak and feeble that she could only lie down or lean on someone else. The weakened physical condition of the girl stood in sharp contrast to her exaggerated body movements, creating an unnatural appearance that shook me. I watched how the girl's aunt tried to help her niece make a hand-sign known as *bát an tý* which is a gesture for praying in Caodaism¹. The harder she struggled, the more tremulous her hand became. The girl's aunt, already in tears, reached out and touched her niece's head, hoping to relieve her pain. I also noticed that, as the girl was drastically waving her arms, her aunt continuously whispered into her niece's ear the following Caodaist mantra, "*Na mo Caodai Immortal Elder Bodhisattva Mahasattva (Nam-mô Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma-Ha-Tát)*". The girl used her little finger to push her ear canal first on one ear, and then again with the other ear. I interpreted this to mean that she did not want to hear the mantra and was trying

¹- This hand gesture is formed by touching the left thumb to the joint of the fourth finger and palm, and then wrapping the left hand with the right hand.

to block it out, but Sister Sinh, a devout follower, said that her actions implied that she wanted to hear more. Just then, a high priest walked into the room. He stroked the girl's head softly and firmly, and then kneaded between the girl's eyebrows with his fingers. While doing so, he repeatedly murmured, "My dear child, what do you want? Please don't cry, tell me your wishes".

At the time, I was fairly certain that the event transpiring in front of me was a case of "spirit possession", a mysterious event that I had always hoped to witness and understand.

Later, the girl was moved from the living room to a chamber with an altar for worshipping several generations of ancestors and dead priests. There, Uncle Three, the abbot of the Holy House, repeatedly asked the girl three questions, "My child, what do you want? How old are you?" Do you want to practice Caodaism? Although the girl could not answer clearly or correctly, Uncle Three asked the questions again and again. During that process, the girl began to calm down and began to talk softly. But her voice was so low in volume that Uncle Three could only hear what she said after placing his ear closer to her mouth. From my position in the room, I was only able to hear that the girl's name was "Pham Van Dai", which was different from "Kim", the girl's name as stated by her aunt. Uncle Three also noticed this discrepancy and continued to talk to the girl,

"You are a man; how can you enter a girl's body? How old are you?"

The girl replied: "I'm 89 years old."

"Really? What caused your death?" ...

A few minutes later, Uncle Three informed everyone in the chamber that the girl should be sent to the hospital, and so the girl's aunt called a car and took her away.

Fully out of my expectation, the ritual specialist in the Holy House did not hold a exorcism ritual for her but instead advised the girl to receive allopathic medical treatment. As it transforms to a market economy, Vietnam is characterized as a "transition society" in which many aspects of traditional culture (Taylor, 2007), including ideas related to spirit possession, have undergone significant changes and transformations. What causes one's being possessed and how it connects with a general contemporary Vietnamese society culturally, socially, and politically? Exploring this question, this paper also examines a number of questions including how religious epistemological fragments are used to diagnosis mental disease and pathogenic possession? And also, by which means people could be healed?

Caodaist history has long highlighted a spirit possession tradition and a direct spiritual connection between the Supreme Lord (Caodai God, *đức Chín Tôn*) and believers that can be perceived in spirit medium techniques, including an traditional ancient spirit writing method known as *cơ bút* (automatic writing divination) and in a newly-invited spirit medium-table *xây bàn*, in which believers record the timing and rhythm of table legs knocking against the floor and interpret this according to

the order of the latinized form of the Vietnamese alphabet (Shao, 2021). Caodai spirit séances conducted by mediums, who receive messages and teachings from both supernatural spiritual beings including deities and spirits of dead people, ultimately contributed to helping the Caodai religion become the most potent new religious group during the last century and, for thirty years, the most significant mass movement in southern Vietnam (Werner, 1981; Blagov, 1999; Jeremy, 2010, 2016; Hoskins, 2008, 2015). However, these medium rituals and techniques disappeared and charismatic mediums lost their prestige with the formation of the communist state in 1975. After the reform and open up policy (*đổi mới*) began in 1987, most folk religious activities achieved legal status in Vietnam, yet Caodai's mediumship tradition did not recover.

The term “spirit possession” refers to various types of spiritual events in Vietnamese society. It can refer to the professional mediumship rituals of a spirit cult, to communication between individuals who serve as intermediaries between dead people and their living relatives, or to illness caused by ghost possession. Spirit possession events in Vietnam are generally regarded as being of two types. The first type refers to situations in which a “controlled medium” is possessed by a spirit (Endres, 2007: 90). The term “controlled” is employed to show that the person involved allows spirits to enter their body in order to communicate to the earthly world. Bourguignon's cross-cultural study on possession notes that “this form of possession alters consciousness, awareness, the personality or will of the individual”(1976: 3). The other type refers to situations in which an “obsessed medium”(Endres, 2007: 90), also called an uncontrolled medium, is possessed by the dead. The term “uncontrolled” is employed to indicate that the person possessed did not willingly (or unconsciously) allow a spirit to enter their body. When the spirit enters, a conflict ensues between the person and the invading spirit and results in illness. Bourguignon's research notes that in these cases, the possessing spirit “causes a change in bodily functioning” (1976: 3).

There are criticisms about this typology as being too vague and all-encompassing and therefore limited in its ability to interpret complexity and the multiplicity of possession phenomena in different cultures (Cohen, 2015). In Vietnam, it is a common phenomenon to see cases in which people experience uncontrolled possession, but yet later recover and continue to engage in religious ritual and worship that “controlled possession”, that involves allowing spirits to enter their body to communicate to the earthly world. These people often become professional mediums (Phuong, 2006; Endres 2011; Salemink, 2014; Kwon, 2008). A phenomenon shown in Lewis's state, the possession is “diagnosed and treated as illness” (1971: 79) in a domain of a “peripheral” cult activity and turns into “central” cult when the spirit credited with authenticity, power, and efficaciousness.

This paper explores the process of diagnosing and treating cases of uncontrolled possession — (situations where spirits invade the body of an obsessed host and cause illness), focusing on cases where the illness caused by spirit possession can

not be healed by changing the afflicted person's identity from patient to medium. I have chosen to examine this question because Caodaist spirit séance rituals have been strictly forbidden by the state for decades due to their political competition with Communist state, with the result that Caodaist mediums are seldom seen in contemporary Vietnamese society.

In this paper, I use Cohen's typology on spirit possession: an executive possession that entails the transformation of one's identity; and a pathogenic possession that entails illness (Cohen, 2008). A pathogenic possession "primarily concerns the incorporation of spirit-as-essence, not spirit-as-person, into the body" (Cohen, 2008: 214). Spirit-as-essence are unknown entities without a clear identity. The spirits identity can only become clear after the spirit explains itself. If a spirit's identity is learnt, then it can be considered as transforming from spirit as essence into spirit as person. Conversely, professional mediums only channel spirit-as-person entities, whose identities are well-known and bring respect and enhance reputation to the medium and to the spirit. The pathogenic possession does not contain a "de-possession" process that allows a spirit-as-person to displace or transfer an individual's identity, as is evident in "executive possession". The lack of this "de-possession" aspect in pathogenic possession indicates that people are passively invaded and disturbed by a spirit-as-essence, yet simultaneously retain their own cognitive mechanisms, emotions, values, and social roles. In such a situation, if patients want to be cured, their family has to deal with plural agencies of the spirit and the patient. As a result, diagnosing the patient and holding therapeutic rituals to dispel spirits, which involves aborting the merging of host agency and spirit agency in the host's body, implies abundant social facts regarding the living and the dead. In the pathogenic possession case that I witnessed, the way people dispose of conflicted plural agencies generally encourages a diverse set of therapeutic approaches, including medicines ways for the living and religious way for the dead.

Spirit Possession in Vietnam and its cultural and political context

To distinguish spiritual therapy from allopathic and other approaches, it is first necessary to have a basic understanding of the spirit world in Vietnam. Life events that are unfortunate and difficult to explain, such as diseases, that cannot be cured through standard medical treatment, an ongoing period of bad luck, or recurrent disturbing dreams may be interpreted by some people as being caused by ghosts, spirits, or other supernatural beings (Endres, 2006). The issue of spirit possession has long been a topic of interest in Vietnamese studies and reached a peak during the French colonial period. Not only anthropologists, but also the French military, and government clerical staff paid deep attention to this cultural manifestation that Maurice Durand described as "a toned-down survival of a widespread primitive shamanism" (Durand, 1959: 11; Dumoutier, 1899; Giran, 1912). However, this focus research was disrupted by the Vietnam War and largely terminated after the reunification of North and South Vietnam by the Communist Party in 1975, when all activities related to spirit possession were criticized as "superstition" (*mê tín*). The

new communist national government designated the need to create a “progressive” (*tiến bộ*), “developed” (*phát triển*), “modern” (*hiện đại*), and “civilised” (*văn minh*) country as one of its top priorities (Duiker, 1989; Taylor, 2001). Religion - seen to be a manifestation of “backwards” (*lạc hậu*) social development - was a common target of many reforms. For decades, in Vietnam and other developing communist states, traditional and ritual therapeutic approaches were regarded as unscientific and superstitious beliefs and practices (Malarney, 2002; Taylor, 2001, 2007; Palmer, 2007). Although allopathic medicine is currently a distinct and independent field from religion, this is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the West and arose only in the nineteenth century (Serena, 2022).

Since the period of opening up and reform in the late 1980s, citizens across Vietnam have been the driving force behind the resurgence of religious festivals and pilgrimage activities that at one time were commonly found in the popular religious landscape of Vietnam, but which had been almost entirely abandoned after the Community party took power in 1975. Owing to the efforts of dedicated community groups, local esoteric activities that had formerly been conducted on only a modest scale began to grow in popularity again (Endres, 1998, 2001; Luong, 1992; Malarney, 2002; Taylor, 2004, 2007). Among all of the activities related to spirit possession, a ritual called *Lên đồng* (*Mounting the Mediums*), attracted the most academic study. Scholars found that the renewed *Lên đồng* ritual reconstructs the performances by spirit mediums that draw on French colonial literature. Interestingly, the sequence of this ritual appears not to have changed noticeably over the time span of almost a century (Chauvet, 2011). The *Lên đồng* ritual, in which mediums go into a trance, is performed throughout Vietnam as the main practice of the Mother Goddess folk religion (*Đạo Mẫu*) also known as the Assembly of Spirits (*chư vị*) (Phuong, 2006). In this ritual, the mediums are represented as empty bodies or “seats” waiting to be incarnated by goddess or gods (Ngo, 2006). The entire ritual process includes the spirit’s descent from the otherworld and movement into the medium, who at this moment of possession, changes costumes to indicate which goddess or type of attendant has arrived. This is followed by burning incense sticks, dancing, granting favours, and listening to songs about the spirits (*chầu văn*²). Because of the *Lên đồng* ritual, spirit possession mediumship again became a popular topic in Vietnamese studies (Fjelstad, Karen and Nguyen, 2006; Endres and Lauser, 2012). The ritual has remained largely unchanged despite the fact that the social, cultural, and economic conditions that form the context for spirit possession have changed dramatically in the last thirty years. Scholars have discussed whether to use the term “incarnation” or “performance”, and whether to describe the spirit possession ritual as a phenomena in which “spirits are incarnated into the mediums” or in which “individuals worship spirits by performing them” (Endres and Lauser,

²- During the ritual, mediums will change costumes and alter their dance movements to suit the appropriate spirit, ranked from high to low, including spiritual beings such as the Mother Goddess to mandarins, ladies, young princesses and princes, and even animals like tigers and snakes. During the ritual, the audience will offer fruits, flowers, food, cigarettes, incense, and money to the spirits. In return, the spirits will give blessed gifts to the audience and then leave. This ritual is filled with gorgeous costumes, music, dances, and decorated altars, which form a lively atmosphere. Overall, the *Len Dong* ritual is regarded as a theatrical performance that represents Vietnamese national culture.

2012). The definition “spirits are incarnated into the mediums” is similar to the emic definitions provided by spirit mediums themselves.

The considerable body of research on the *Lên đồng* ritual has been an important driving force behind efforts to have spirit possession declared a part of Vietnam’s intangible cultural heritage. From 1954 to the period of opening up and reform that began in the 1980s, because of state restrictions against religious practice, people in Vietnam only presented offerings to spirits late at night, without music, dance or elaborate offerings (Endres, 2006). Currently, however, professional groups regularly perform the *Lên đồng* trance ritual on the stage of the capital national theater. After the Vietnamese government submitted documents to UNESCO in 2014, requesting the recognition of the Mother Goddess religion in the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Huwelmeier, 2018). State-sponsored re-enactments of the *Lên đồng* ritual are direct efforts to incorporate it into the nationalism culture narrative, thus elevating the status of spirit mediumship in the eyes of the state, and of the population in general. Owing to rapid economic in contemporary Vietnam, the tradition of spirit possession is changing and shifting. Although the possession beliefs shares similarities with other folk religions, the *Lên đồng* ritual is characterized by a sumptuous attention to detail: the costumes and makeup are more sophisticated and intricate, ritual altars are more dazzling and elaborate, the economic benefits to local communities are greater, and the ritual attracts a larger secular audience. The *Lên đồng* ritual has changed significantly from its original status as shamanistic practice in pre-industrial society. This process concomitantly attracted considerable discussion on how economics and politics interact with each other amid folk religious practice in post-revolutionary Vietnam (Kendall, Tam and Huong, 2010; Schwenkel, 2017).

Academic research that focuses on the historical and contemporary context of *Lên đồng*, coupled with the high-profile roles that professional mediums have attained as their role transformed from being seen as superstitious fraudsters to nationally-renowned ritual artists in a post-socialist society, can easily overshadow the fact that *Lên đồng* was originally a healthcare ritual. In Vietnam, many people attend spirit possession ceremonies and become mediums in response to illness and misfortune (Fjelstad and Maiffret, 2006). When Fjelstad was doing fieldwork in Silicon valley in the late 1980s, he told Vietnamese Americans that his research was on “traditional Vietnamese healthcare practices” instead of spirit possession. He said so because at that time, the *Lên đồng* ritual was still regarded as a superstitious act within local and overseas Vietnamese communities, and the economic relationship between believers and mediums had the potential to “make the Vietnamese look bad” (Fjelstad, 2006: 98). In reality, Fjelstad’s explanation was not disingenuous because the *Lên đồng* ritual is indeed a traditional resource for physical and mental healthcare. In other words, it is a therapeutic practice.

People often become spirit mediums after experiencing an illness that usually starts with some form of abnormal body response, such as persistent vomiting, or flu-like symptoms that defy diagnosis and treatment. When these afflicted individuals go to visit altars or seek spirit mediums for help, they are often told that their illness

is a sign from the spirit world telling them to become mediums. For some patients, the only cure is to take part in an initiation ritual to become a professional medium. To realise this goal, they will need to establish household altars, and will be obliged to serve the spirit to whom they have sworn allegiance on a daily basis, and organise great offering ceremonies for the spirits at least twice a year. In return, the spirits will stop making them ill (Fjelstad, 2006). Through this relationship, a medium's health and well-being are believed to be enhanced by their relationship with the spirit. In exchange for their devotion, the mediums may also obtain the gift of divination from their spirits. The skill of being able to see into future and read fortunes provides the spirit medium with an additional means to earn an income, improved economic status, and thus greater ability to fulfill their allegiance to the deity.

Caodai religion and its pathogenic possession

The previously discussed cases show that spirit possession can inspire people to become mediums. These mediums actively seek out spirits and willingly lend their bodies to them, forming a mutually beneficial relationship. However, not all spirit possession leads to mediumship. In fact, I encountered many cases of "spiritually ill" patients who had passive relationships with spirits. In such cases, the spirits possessed the individuals without their active consent or desire to engage with them. In the following section, I will explain what I mean by a passive relationship.

Caodaism grew in popularity in Cochinchina during the early twentieth century owing largely to the popular appeal of its teachings, scriptures, and prophecies derived from spirit possession rituals. However, owing to social upheaval, war, and internal conflict within the Caodai sect, the central role of spirit divination in Caodaism began to decline for several specific reasons. Firstly, serious disagreement and power struggles over internal politics within the Caodai sect were related to the existence of numerous spirit-writing locations and a large number of spirit mediums. In addition to these internal power struggles, acute social upheaval would lead to fracturing of loyalties among followers and prevented the emergence of a consolidated membership that united under the teachings of one spirit possession group (Lewis, 1971: 29).

After the First Indochina war, the Caodai religion separated into more than twelve main denominations. Each of the Caodaist branches established their own spirit writing altar that was responsible for disseminating teachings related to local needs and to the political ambitions of local leaders (Jammes 2016: 250). Charismatic medium leaders, claiming to have imbued with divine authority, were able to exert considerable influence over enthusiastic followers and, thus, presented a threat to centralized religious organization. During fieldwork, believers complained to me that disunity among the various spirit mediums was the main reason for the disputes among sect leaders. Having gone through these experiences, contemporary Caodaists have a more prudent attitude toward charismatic mediumship. A high priest of the Caodai Tay Ninh Holy See (the largest centralised Caodai denomination) reminded

me: “Don’t believe in any mediums. They are all fake or channel bad ghosts (*ma*). Caodai does not need spirit writing anymore because we already have all of the teachings from gods. The Supreme Lord has stopped spirit writing in case some one takes advantage of it.”

Secondly, because some Caodai leaders cooperated briefly with the Japanese during the Indochina Wars and later supported anti-communist ideology, after the Socialist Republic of Vietnam reunified the country in 1975, the sect was branded as treasonous and reactionary (Hoskins, 2015; Jammes, 2014, 2016), and faced more severe restrictions than other folk religions and many Caodai Holy Houses, schools, and publishing houses were closed. The denial of access to sacred sites and locales used for public rituals was one of the socialist state’s most effective methods for constraining the population from engaging in discouraged practices (Malarney, 2007). During this period, spirit writing activities were totally forbidden and as spirit mediums lost their prestige, the traditions began to fade.

Caodaism’s hierarchical organization and disciplinary framework, formerly led by spirit medium, began to fall apart when their religious traditions were banned to prevent them from participating in national politics. However, other folk religious sects did not face such severe restrictions and were still able to hold spirit possession activities.

After the period of economic reform began in the late 1980s, certain kinds of religious activities, formerly labeled as “superstitious” (*mê tín*), such as village cults and ceremonies, became popular again. Caodai Holy House (*Thánh thất*) were renovated and were once again able to open their doors to followers. While Caodaist spirit writing activities continued to be practiced among a select small group of high clergy, this was done behind closed doors and in absolute secrecy. While I did not have the opportunity to witness spirit writing rituals in which deities send messages through professional spirit mediums, I nonetheless heard many whispered stories about spirit possession.

Generally, Vietnamese people believe that spirit mediums who exhibit controlled and well-behaved behaviour is possessed by spirits, while spirit mediums who exhibit uncontrolled behavior is possessed by ghosts (Phuong, 2006). While the behaviors of spirits and ghosts are different, their criteria for defining the categories of “spirits” and “ghosts” are sometimes quite vaguely defined in Vietnam. This is illustrated in the Heonik Kwon’s (2008) ethnography of a young girl by the name of Bien who became possessed by a young female ghost called Lotus Flower. This case took place in a village located in central Vietnam, an area of the country that was bloody battle ground during the Vietnam war (Kwon, 2008: 119-127). The ghost Lotus Flower regularly possessed Bien for the purpose of introducing the girl to many nameless ghosts of children and victims of the war and so that Bien and Lotus Flower could ask for other villagers for help in finding the human remains of the war victims and ensure that they are properly buried so the spirits of the dead could finally rest. Because of her interest in locating the remains of the dead, Bien became

well-known in her village and throughout the surrounding areas. In the end, owing to the good deeds she performed by helping the dead find solace, White Lotus Flower was transformed into a fairy-like deity.

According to my Caodaist informants, spirit possession is called “*bẹ nhập vào*” which means “being entered into”, while in the *Lên đồng* ritual, the process of going into a trance is called “*lên đồng*” or “mounting the medium”. In Kwon’s book, the young medium is called *em xác* or *cô gái xác* or “the girl shaman” (Kwon, 2008: 116). It is clear that the dissimilar terms used by the multifarious groups demonstrate that they hold different understandings about issues related to spirit possession. Cohen noted that spirit possession concepts tend to be of two varieties: executive possession that entails the transformation or replacement of identity, and pathogenic possession that entails illness and misfortune (Cohen, 2008). Only the second type, “pathogenic possession”, is recognized in Caodaism communities today. Caodaists believe that noble spirits would not possess normal people in this way nor cooperate with people so that they can change their social identity or status and earn a living from serving as spirit mediums. Caodaists believers told me that if deities want to communicate with people, they will reveal themselves during spirit writing séances and leave behind beautiful poems. Such critical claims, of course, challenge the beliefs and social legitimacy of many folk religious groups in Vietnamese society.

Scholars have offered numerous explanations regarding the phenomena of “executive possession”. There are main factors that explain why spirit mediums allow themselves to become possessed. Usually, they are seen to have “heavy roots” (*căn nạng*, “heavy fate”) (Endres, 2006; Phuong, 2006; Nguyen, 2006), which means that they accumulated a Karma in their previous lives, causing them to feel that it is their destiny to be mediums in this life. In order to atone for mistakes in their previous lives, they must engage in self-cultivation in this life by serving the spirits (Phuong, 2006). The symptoms of spirit possession are often different from those of other diseases. Many mediums distinguish “Yin” (*âm*) diseases from “Yang” (*đương*) diseases. Yin diseases are caused by spirits, while Yang diseases are considered to have natural or biological causes (Fjelstad and Maiffret, 2006). The world of “Yang” is the secular world, while the world of “Yin” is opposite to the secular world and refers to the realm of the afterlife. While Yang diseases are treated with secular medicine, Yin diseases are cured using spiritual approaches. Some illnesses cannot be diagnosed or cured by modern allopathic medical approaches because they have “Yin” supernatural-based illness rather than “Yang” diseases that have natural causes.

Having completed our overview of the spirit world in Vietnam, we may begin to address the class question from Lewis (1971): what is the social function of mediumship in society? Ethnographic research by Endres (2006, 2011) and Fielstad (2006) suggests that mediums in Vietnam are often socially marginalised individuals for whom spiritual practice and prophetic ability can provide better economic status as well as enhanced social respect and reputation. To some extent, becoming a medium is a symbolic framework through which people use to provide explanation and

justification for their individual personality and life events. For example, among people who become mediums, a serious business failure may be regarded as punishment for disobeying a spirit's request, a man could claim that his feminine characteristics are the result of being possessed by a female spirit, and a lonely senior woman with a bad temper could blame her isolation from relatives and friends on the fact that she is possessed by a bad-tempered spirit (Endres, 2006). Even Vietnamese immigrants and refugees living in the United States claimed that being a spirit medium added meaning to their lives and helped them experience a religious atmosphere that could otherwise only be found in Vietnam (Fjelstad and Lisa, 2006). In this sense, being a medium can help establish individual identities in a confusing world of changing values, conflicting ideas, and economic struggles (Endres, 2006).

Scholars have noted that practices of mediums tends to be characterized by an economic order that emphasizes economic efficacy, encourages the accumulation of private wealth, urban commercialisation, and petty entrepreneurship (Nguyen, 2006; Leshkovich, 2014; Taylor, 2001, 2007). Many spirits are believed to be particularly efficacious in bestowing economic wealth upon their faithful devotees, a belief that may help explain why the *Lên đồng* practice is particularly widespread among female traders and market vendors (Phuong, 2006). In a society where women face tremendous social pressures, female mediums are generally more common than male mediums. By becoming a medium, women can more easily obtain "oblivion, healing, or hope" (Durand, 1959: 15) and increase women's access to the public domain through their relationships with devotees. Many of women mediums preside over private temples in households, a role that helps women transform domestic power structures by gaining discursive power, money, and fame. Becoming a medium is one of the few ways by which women can stand up to male authority in a family and pursue their own happiness (Norton, 2006). By taking on the role of a healer and adviser to the many women who come seeking their help and advice, the mediums serve as a "woman's weapon" to enhance the status and power of women (Bargen and Shikibu, 1997; Kendall 1987). Women employ spirit possession "as a means of insinuating their interests and demands in the face of male constraint" (Lewis, 1971: 79) and in doing so, they are able to live healthier, more confident, peaceful, and happier lives. The process of becoming a medium can thus be viewed as socially therapeutic.

The popularity of mediums must be considered within the overarching political context as well. Ghost beliefs and ghost related stories, although they were forbidden within the state's socialist narrative between 1975 and the 1990s, remain "a robust resource for expressing political as well as spiritual sentiments" in postwar Vietnam (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 197). After the period of opening up and reform in the late 1980s, the state began to adopt a functional approach to achieve socialist secularism. This turn included removing restrictions against ghost beliefs and allowing spirit mediums to assist civilians to locate improperly buried corpses, provide proper burials, and thereby appease wondering ghosts (Schlecker and Endres, 2011). In these moving rituals, the living relatives of dead soldiers organized spirit possession rituals

to help rescue the spirit of the deceased and prevent them from becoming suffering ghosts who would haunt the living. New spirit-possession séances were invented as novel forms of ritual that negotiated new social and cultural positions in the context of post-socialist modernity. These new rituals allowed relatives to interact with the dead member of the family and release traumatic emotion (Sorrentino, 2016).

Scholars trying to understand spirit possession and the importance of spirits and mediums, tend to arrive at a conclusion that considers supernatural phenomena as “symptomatic of the ideological un-mooring or cultural un-tethering of contemporary Vietnamese society” (Taylor 2004:16). This social perspective, or perhaps it may be considered as a cultural diagnosis, differs greatly from that of the mediums. Mediums diagnose instances of possession by considering Karma and previous life events of the afflicted person. The explanations provided by both mediums and scholars focus on reasons other than physical bodies. For mediums, the concept of Karma underpinned their destiny to assume this role. Scholars, on the other hand, consider the social identity of mediums as a way of coping with difficulties during a period of social transformation. While both explanations are of value, they are both vague about how the body is seized by spirits.

When Caodai religion challenges other folk spirit possession beliefs and practices, it experiencing problems of social deadlock. How to explain spirit possession or pathogenic possession to its believers in terms of social and communicative functions?

What is special about Caodaism is that its various doctrines can clearly explain the process of “seizing the body”. The diagnosis of the pathogenic possession provided by Caodai believers involves aspects of both the “Yin” and “Yang” worlds. Their diagnosis and treatment is bodily and social.

Diagnosis of spirit possession and mental disease

In the Holy House, people could hear the girl crying in pain. Sister Sinh began talking with the girl's aunt:

Is the girl a Caodaist? How old is she?

She was born in 1991. She hasn't had the admittance ritual yet, but she knows how to worship like a Caodaist. She also knows Caodaist scriptures, the woman replied.

Sister Sinh responded:

The Supreme Lord will protect people who believe in Caodaism. Are the girls' parents Caodaists?

No, they are not, responded the woman.

The conversation ended here because the girl's aunt did not want to talk any more. We could do nothing but watch the girl struggle to recite the scriptures with her aunt, vomiting and twitching from time to time. In the room, no one touched the girl's body except her aunt.

People in the room began to discuss what had really happened to the girl and

asked Uncle Three why the girl should go to hospital. All of them tried to identify key information from the girl's largely incoherent words.

What a poor girl, her spirit must have been possessed by someone else, said Sinh. She continued, Her family should listen to her carefully. Even though they may not know what the girl is talking about at the beginning, if they keep listening and asking questions, they will eventually understand the details and learn the truth. The girl just said that she was treated unfairly in her company. She has a job in finance there, but she was wronged by her leader, and her colleagues also gave her a great deal of pressure. She suffered quite a lot, said Uncle Three. I have written down the company's address as indicated by the girl. If I recall correctly, there is a building at that address where many companies have offices. Now we don't know anything about her family, so we can only arrive at a general understanding about her situation after we learn about her company and family, said Nguyen, (Fieldwork notes from the author in July 2018 in Ho Chi Minh city).

In the end, the ritual specialists diagnosis was that she suffered psychological problems and at the same time was also possessed by an 89 year-old male ghost and thus arrived at the conclusion that, the girl was simultaneously physically and spiritually ill and should receive two different types of treatment. The first form of treatment involves consulting a psychologist in the psychiatric ward of the hospital. The second form of treatment involves receiving sacred ritual therapy. Medical science as well as religious believers, including followers of peripheral cults, and tribal people, generally tend to hold non-mystical understandings of trance (Lewis, 1971). Early anthropological and medical analysis perceived trance as a cultural phenomena associated with either madmen or mystics, an analytical approach that has since been strongly criticized (Klass 2004). In the cases I witnessed, families will generally follow a set of actions to arrive at their diagnosis of the afflicted person. The most fundamental part of diagnosis and treatment involves engaging in conversation with the patient or spirit. The treatment options offered by allopathic clinics and by traditional folk or religious spirit-possession specialists generally share a common approach, both involve conversing with the afflicted person in order to obtain information on the patient's self-perception of their illness. In Vietnam, mental health treatment tends to encourage "medical pluralism" (Orr and Bindi, 2017) that includes complementary and alternative medical practitioners including traditional healers, herbalists, religious figures, territorial deities, shamanic healing, and allopathic-style psychological counselling and mental healthcare.

Although the girl's affliction was seen as both physical/biological and spiritual, there was a causal connection between her physical illness and spiritual illness. The girl was "entered into" (*bị nhập vào*) by ghosts because she was physically and spiritually weak. The interconnection between possession and being physically and spiritually weak is explained through "the law of three bodies" (*tam thể sắc thân*). In the eyes of Caodai

believers, the girl's illness has a causal root that links the secular world with the sacred world.

Inspired by Asian esotericism (Daoist and Buddhist), Caodaists consider a complete human to be comprised of “three bodies” (*tam thể sắc thân*), that refer to different ontological statuses (Shao, 2021), that commonly appear in the cosmologies of the East Asian cultural sphere, areas of the world that were historically influenced by Chinese culture. These cosmologies envisage human beings as consisting of three superior or rational souls (*hồn*, 魂), and seven inferior or sensitive souls (*phách*, 魄). The concepts of *hồn* 魂 and *phách* 魄 are deeply rooted in Chinese tradition and also commonly found in Vietnamese folk religions. Yu (1987) provides a succinct explanation of *hồn* 魂 and *phách* 魄

When a man dies his three *hồn* (魂) move in three different directions: one will accompany the body in the tomb; one will dwell within the tablet of the ancestors; and the third will go to one of the many purgatories or hells described by the Daoist texts (Yu 1987: 81).

Although they maintain a type of unified structure, the three *hồn* (魂) can be separated after death. The seven *phách* (魄), which are more sensitive than the three *hồn* (魂), can easily get scared by, or taken away by ghosts or evil spirits. The seven *phách* (魄), associated with from the Yin principle, enter the body at conception and do not survive death. The three *hồn*, associated with the Yang principle, enter the body at birth and survive death. In Caodaism, the “law of three bodies” (*luật tam thể*), which re-explains and reimagines the poly-soul human system, entered into Caodaist canon after being transmitted by the spirit of Cao Quỳnh Cư (1888-1929), one of the founding pioneers of Caodaism, to a spirit medium at a spirit writing séance (Trần 1974). The “first body” (*Đệ nhất xác thân*), which is visible and touchable, is called the “physical body” (*thể sắc*). The “second body” (*Đệ nhị xác thân*), remains invisible and is called *giác hồn* “the soul of sensation” or, more commonly, the “true mind” (*chơn thần*). It is connected with people's memory, affection, thinking, and appetency. It is more difficult for someone who has a heavier “true mental” to attain salvation when death comes (Jammes and Shao, 2020). The “third body” is known as the “true spirit” (*chơn linh*), is a spiritual refinement that is eventually granted by the Supreme Lord.

The First Body	The Second Body	The Third Body
corpse (<i>phạm thân</i> 凡身)	true mind (<i>chơn thần</i> 真神)	true spirit (<i>chơn linh</i> 真靈)
Flesh	Memory, affection, and appetency	Spiritual refinement

Fig. 1 - The Cao Dai Three-Body theological conception.

A Pathogenic possession, according to Caodaism, is the process by which someone's body is “entered into” by a deceased person's “true mind”, which results in bodily abnormality. In the case of the possessed girl discussed above, the pressure from her job weakened her second body or “true mind”, or in other words, weakened

her “mind/will” (*thần*, 神). As a result, the connection between the girl’s physical body (the “first body”) and the “true mind” (the “second body”) became weak, reducing the ability of the “true mind” to control her material body. Consequently, another entity’s “true mind” obtained a chance to enter the girl’s body. Therefore, the concept of “spirit” in Caodaist “spirit possession” is different from the concept of “soul” in spirit-body dualism. Trying to understand this traditional concept of the body that did not objectify “a physical body [as] separate from mental functions or even the individuals’ social persona” through the use of a perspective that is strongly rooted in a binary distinction between the mind and physical body is quite problematic (Palmer, 2007: 9). The “true mind” (the second body) acts as a bond between secularity (the first/physical body) and holiness (the “third body et non third body”) and is a component of a complete body. In essence, being “entered into” by other spirits, means that the inter-relationship between the “true mind” (the “second body”) and the “secular body” “the first body” is damaged³. The essence of this analysis can be found in the explanation provided to me by Uncle Three:

If one has ever been entered, it’s like a door is opened somewhere in the body, through which he or she is very likely to be entered again in the future. So, in order to fix the body, we need to strengthen the girl’s will. She should receive mental treatment in hospital. And her family should comfort her and ask what actually happened at her work. At the same time, to expel the spirit that possessed her body, we can also hold a redemption ritual at the Holy House for that spirit. (Interview with Uncle Three in June 2018 in Ho Chi Minh City).

Upon reviewing the case of the young girl, it becomes apparent that her illness was caused by a combination of work-related stress and the presence of a malevolent spirit. The Caodaist diagnosis considers the social role of its patient, and simultaneously develops an agreed-upon account of body theory. It is not easy for people to explain or differentiate between the symptoms of psychiatric disorders and spirit possession. Believers gathered at the Holy House have to find a way to explain how the girl, Kim, inexplicably became involved in this case of spirit possession. The possession of the girl was attributed to various sources of tension and inequality that arose between the employers and employees. Some areas of research interpreted the social phenomena of spirit possession as a disguised manifestation of protest against the dominant social structure and their related social and communicative functions (Firth, 1967; Lewis, 1971). My research and case studies suggest that spirit possession represents new characteristics of a developing country where entrepreneurs begin to search greater efficiency and profit in labor relations and the business market (Leshkowich, 2014). A bad social relationship is seen as a key reason for her spirit possession. Nonetheless, there still remains unanswered a crucial question: how a person’s

³- A more detailed symbolic and structural equivalences of the Three-Body theological conception diagram showing connections of three bodies see Jammes J., & Shao Z. S., 2020, “The Cao Đài Deathscape: Reimagining Death, Funerals, and Salvation in Contemporary Vietnam”, *Religions*, 11 (6): 280.

identity can passively combine with a dead spirit and result in a mysterious and abnormal body condition? To address this question, the following section examines how Vietnamese diagnose ghost/spirit possession events in contemporary society in the context of modernization and post-socialism.

Healing by talking

During my fieldwork research, I conducted several in-depth interviews on cases of possession by ghosts and tangentially knew about many others. My interviewees include individuals who were possessed by spirits who were not related to them by blood, as well as individuals who were possessed by the spirits of deceased members of their family. I found that the narratives of my interviewees were filled with aspects of kinship (stressing the contradiction between relation by marriage and relation by blood), household politics (domestic violence, marital disharmony, and bad traumatic memory about war), ancestor worship (acquisition of ancestors' guidance in the earthly world), and modern lives of individuals (focusing on the individual's environmental pressure).

My experience of witnessing a spirit possession case at the Holy House was very important to my fieldwork. The first time I spoke with the family members of the person who was possessed, they were cautious about revealing certain details. This was quite natural because on the one hand, incidences of spirit possession are generally private family matters. Moreover, relatives reminded me of talking about the experience of being possessed with the patient might increase the possibility of being possessed again. On the other hand, because possessions are abnormal incidents, stories related to possessions are easily exaggerated and can quickly spread through a village or community, leading to rumours that may disrupt families. To avoid unnecessary gossip and trouble, families are generally unwilling to share many details about spirit possession, especially when they are unsure of other people's attitudes and perceptions about spirit possession. Learning more about spirit possessions can also be inhibited in certain cases in which the spirit that is inhabiting a person may refuse to disclose much information about their life story prior to their death. However, after I had personally witnessed the possession of the girl, the girl's family members softened their initially cautious responses to my questions. I found the same situation when interviewing other people about spirit possession as well. After I told people that I had witnessed a number of spirit possession cases, interviewees felt a greater bond with me that allowed them to more easily share stories, experiences, and feelings with about their own family members who had experienced similar experiences of spirit possession.

Nguyen's story

I have known Nguyen for many years. She was studying in Ho Chi Minh City when we first met but has now graduated and works at an overseas education consulting company in the city. I told Nguyen how I witnessed the spirit possession at the Holy House not long ago. She shared her own story with me, about her sister's possession

by spirits. Nguyen's parents got divorced shortly after her birth because each side held different religious beliefs. Later, Nguyen's mother remarried, and had four children with her new husband. But her mother was still unhappy. Nguyen's stepfather was an alcoholic and often beat his wife and kids. Every time her stepfather got drunk, all the children would hide at their grandma's house. Meanwhile, the family's financial status left much to be desired.

Nguyen's younger half-sister caught a severe disease during the third grade of middle school and suffered from a long-lasting fever, the cause of which eluded all explanation and diagnosis by the doctors at several big hospitals. Nguyen recalled that although her sister was abnormally quiet at that time and seldom spoke, she was always repeatedly hitting the wall with her fist, without saying a word. Sometimes, Nguyen's sister would look at her two arms and soliloquise: "why this arm is longer than that arm?", while on other occasions, she insisted on cutting her long hair and wearing men's clothes instead of her own. Nguyen, suspecting her sister was possessed by a spirit, tried asking: "Who are you? What do you want?" When her sister replied: "My child, cheer up. You are always well-behaved", Nguyen became fairly certain that her sister was not ill, but rather, was possessed by a spirit. This diagnosis was further confirmed when her sister addressed her paternal grandmother as "Mother", which demonstrated that the spirit possessing her was likely the spirit of the girl's father's elder brother, who had died several years prior.

However, no one, including Nguyen's stepfather, believed that the girl was possessed until she pointed at her stepfather and rebuked him, crying out: "Why do you beat your wife?! Why don't you love your kids?!", a statement that left him shocked. He was even more surprised when his mother told him that the spirit of his older brother had possessed the girl. Nguyen's step-grandmother explained that before giving birth to the girls' stepfather, an earlier pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage during war. This explained why the spirit didn't know how old he was and didn't have many memories, because he had never born⁴.

The spirit said he wanted to go to the Caodai Holy House to begin religious practice. To appease the spirit and grant his wishes, they held a ritual to relieve his grievances and to purify his spirit at the Holy House. Meanwhile, Nguyen's sister was required to take part in a medication seeking ritual, in which she drank holy water provided by the Supreme Lord. After two rounds of the ritual, the girl completely returned to normal and was unable to remember what had happened during the time that she was possessed. Sometime later, Nguyen's mother left home after a quarrel with her husband, who fell into a depression, and ended his life by ingesting poisonous pesticide. After his death, the family attached great importance to his funeral in the hope that he could

⁴- Jordan (1972: 134-140) employed the use of social structure theory to explain how "ghosts may gain salvation by being forgotten". According to him, the precondition of being tortured by a family ghost is the existence of such a ghost. If people know there is such a ghost in the family and suspect it is torturing them, they may go to visit mediums. Jordan concluded that only those relatives who are part of an abnormal social structure will be remembered in this way. In the case of Nguyen's sister, the possessing spirit was a male immediate family member. He had formerly been forgotten, but has now been placed on the family altar.

obtain redemption. Nguyen's mother became happier because she believed that she had paid off the accumulated karmic debt (*nợ nghiệp*) that she owed to Nguyen's stepfather during a previous life. Now her mother is working at a restaurant in the village and is very healthy and optimistic. Nguyen told me, "The bad times are over, my mom is fine and we are all fine". (Interview with Nguyen in April 2018 in Vung Tau).

I do not want to claim that the stepfather's violence towards the family was necessarily related to her sister's pathogenic possession. However, based on Nguyen's narratives, indeed an inseparable connection exists between the pathogenic possession event and the family violence issue. Spirit possession, which is an abnormal event in the regular, daily lives of families, has the ability to penetrate into the most complex and subtle aspects of family relationships. The event reflects how ghosts become involved in coordinating and resolving ethical and moral troubles, dissolving emotional conflicts, and maintaining family justice. The case reveals how pathogenic possession is not simply a "disease" but is also related to addressing issues related to everyday life, ethics, and justice. This "disease" of possession, with its "abnormal" manifestations, is a window into family ethics that cannot be easily covered by civil law, and as well as into internal conflicts and dynamics that cannot be solved by conventional family power structures.

Dat's Story

In contrast to Nguyen's willingness to share stories about spirit possession in her family, another friend and informant was much more reluctant. When I first met Dat, he was hesitant to share the story of how his mother became possessed by a spirit. When Dat was ten years old, his mother became very moody. When I explained to him that I had witnessed a possession in which a girl became moody, retched and twitched uncontrollably, he confided that his mother had also experienced the same type of symptoms. He also pointed out that the type of pain and symptoms experienced by the afflicted person depended on how the spirit had died. In the case of Dat's mother, the woman was first taken to a Buddhist temple after exhibiting abnormal behavior. However, when kneeling before the Buddha, his mother heard someone chanting the prayer to the Caodai Supreme Lord. Although his mother's ancestors were followers of Caodaism, his mother had not inherited the tradition and had no idea about Caodaist rituals. Later, it was revealed that the spirit who had possessed his mother was his father's grandmother. Dat's father was born into a non-religious family of which many members had been conscripted into the army of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Because most her family members were communists who rejected all religion and "superstition", when Dat's father's grandmother died, none of the living descendants were willing to perform ancestral worship rites. The spirit of Dat's father's grandmother possessed Dat's mother in order to request that her offspring be raised as followers of Caodaism and pray for their ancestors. After the initial possession event, although Dat's mother returned to normal and no longer experienced any abnormal symptoms, dead relatives continued to communicate with living family members through the body of his mother. In one case, an ancestor possessed of Dat's mother and slapped his father's face admonishing him "Why you don't treat your wife well?" In addition to being possessed by Dat's father's side of

the family, deceased relatives from his mother's side of the family would also speak via his mother's body. After witnessing many of these instances of possession, Dat's entire family, including his father, are sincere followers of Caodaism.

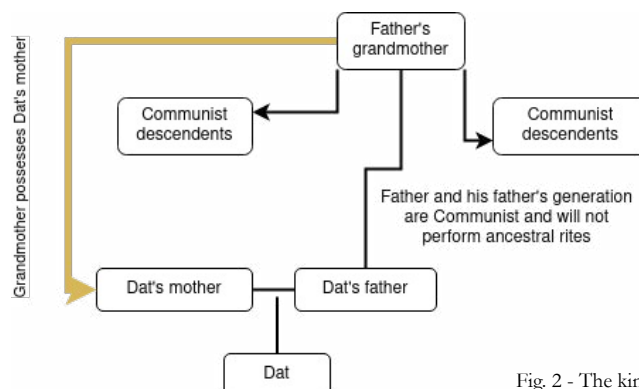


Fig. 2 - The kinship diagram of Dat's Family.

From these two cases, we can see that the spiritual world appears to be helping these two families solve a number of entangled problems. Because they were family members, the ghosts who possess the body of a living person can directly point out the internal conflicts within a family. When Nguyen's sister was possessed by her father's elder brother (the miscarried infant), she directly questioned her father's violence. In the case of Dat's mother, it was clear that a mesh of family problems clearly extended beyond the family itself. In Vietnam, it is widely believed that families with ties to Communist political traditions have likely neglected their duties regarding ancestor worship. On several occasions during my fieldwork, I heard people express this sentiment through statements such as "They believe in Communism, so they care little about worship (*Họ là cộng sản, thờ cúng không nhiều*)".

In Vietnam, ancestor worship is widely practiced. Even Vietnamese people who do not have a specific religious identification still regard ancestor worship as the most important part of family life (Jellema, 2007). Many Vietnamese avoid marrying foreigners, because their children would not know how to worship their ancestors whose spirits would then become hungry ghosts and cause trouble for the living family members (Endres, 2006: 81). Most Vietnamese feel that it is very important for the next generation to inherit the traditions of ancestor worship as they believe following this tradition will ensure that they too will receive proper and sufficient worship after death. For these reasons, families that practice ancestral worship commonly believe that entering into a marital relationship with a Communist family may bring about a significant conflicts of beliefs, a fear that can be substantiated in the case of Dat's family. Because she had not received offerings and worship from her children, all of whom were Communists and so did not practice ancestral worship, to help her in the afterlife the father's grandmother possessed the mother to tell the family that they must provide worship offerings to her and other deceased family members. Because of this event, which engaged the entire family, after his mother was cured, his father converted to Caodaism.

The pathogenic possession events have the effect of disordering kinship relations and causing families to enter into a state of “anti-structure” (Turner, 1969: 109). The analytic framework developed by Van Gennep (1965) considers the series of incidents related to spirit possession to be a complete symbolic ceremony. A trance state that is caused by ghosts possession signifies that the patient’s body is partly-separated from their identity, while at the same time the body integrates with the ghost’s social identity and agency. Listening to the words of the ghost signifies a diagnostic process that challenges the existing structure of everyday life and, from this, identifies which aspects of daily life led to the crisis in which the body and identity become disordered. In other words, the possession event involves antisocial and rebellious behaviours on the part of the patient, which constitute an attack on the norms of daily life. Thus, the possession event as a whole reflects, critiques, and mimics daily life. In the end, the ghost will leave when accompanied by sound of religious chanting, and the patient will re-enter the world of daily life⁵.

Ancestors, or ghosts, derive benefit from the therapeutic ritual of helping the patient return to normal life. When the ghosts’ wishes are fulfilled, they will no longer possess people’s bodies, and the families of the patients will be able to return to the original “structure” of everyday life. The restoration of family structure occurs in parallel with helping the ghosts and helping patients.

Conclusion

Although spirit possession is very common in Vietnam, the explanation and diagnosis of spirit possession in Caodaism are closely connected to the way that the Caodai imagines the body. To these believers, illness embodies kinship, household politics, moral principles, as well as how the sacred macrocosm and secular life are connected through the human body. When we rethink the girl’s case, we can see that her illness resulted from problems related to her employment and an old man’s ghost. The Caodaist diagnosis considers the social role of its patient, and simultaneously develops an agreed-upon account of body theory. By employing an ontological imaginary of body, the Caodaist approach explains why and how people experience a pathogenic possession. Its therapies take into account bodily and social healing, a living person’s daily world and mental state, as well as people’s karmic debt from lives and solutions. The accumulated karmic past is understood “as memory” in this world, but as “as deeds” in the supernatural world (Lincoln 1982)⁶. When people die, all of the history that they have accumulated during their life must behind. But on the other, this world is not cut off from the afterworld in the same sense, for those

⁵- Rituals for expelling ghosts may sometimes be violent in Vietnam. Pham’s work (2006) cites examples of a female patient who had to fight against spirits that were torturing her by striking her own head or throwing herself into a river to drown the evil spirit (Pham, 2006: 37). Exorcism specialists will expel ghosts using methods that may involve “violent scenes of ecstasy” that can see the possessed person puncturing their cheeks with large puncheons and cutting their tongues to collect blood, to be used to for “amulets that the faithful and the patients will carry or swallow” (Pham 2006: 39). The national hero spirit, Tran Hung Dao, was a general who helped the living to transform ferocious ghosts into his soldiers, in order to increase their deadliness. The war god Guanyu is attributed with similar abilities in China too. His heroic exploits as a subduer of demons is recorded in merits book (善书三界伏魔关圣帝君忠孝义真经) from the nineteenth century.

memories about deads constantly flow back. In this paper, memories and affections come back in forms of pathogenic possession to represent individuals' traumatic feeling. Although the dead have departed the secular world, the living still need to face their unresolved unhealthy relationships and karmic debt related to the dead. As to the living secular world, a possession represents the conflict amongst individuals, families, and social relations in general. There are underlying, unvoiced, suppressed, sometimes forgotten anger or displaced feelings and emotions that exist but are never properly dealt with within families. In the story of Dat's mother's possession, Dat's communist relatives accumulated Karma for neglecting to worship their ancestors. Nguyen's mother considered the violence she suffered at the hands of her husband to be payment for karmic debts. Kim was possessed due to the mental abuse she suffered at her work and her family's lack of concern for her. To some extent, possession, its diagnosis, and its treatment are actually a form of social interaction among living people. Karmic debt that remains and keeps accumulating in the living world and the ethical conflict that it symbolises, is diluted through the process of possession, diagnosis, and treatment. The abnormal physical and mental status of the patient gives rise to a state of "anti-structure" (Turner, 1969) that clashes with the original order of family life. In Vietnam, the post-war period of transformation, cultural trauma, economic development, and ideological conflict has led to the emergence of a highly complex network of karmic debt, as a way of dealing with these complicated and intertwined issues. In this sense, the concept of karma, the ghost possession, diagnosis of disease, and healing through dialogue or communication comprise a flexible system that helps to release internalised unhealthy relationships and traumatic memory that are ignored by government, official narratives, and by overt family dynamics.

⁶- Lincoln (1982) believed a river that annihilated memories after death is best understood as a specifically Indian transformation of a Proto-Indo European cosmology under the influence of the theme of karma (deeds, actions), see Lincoln (1982), 24-25. The Buddhist concept of Karma is very popular among both general Vietnamese and spirit mediums.

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Healing by talking:**Bodily and Social Therapy of Spirit Possession in Late-Socialist Vietnam****Abstract**

This paper explores the diagnosis process of spirit possession and therapeutic treatment for pathogenic possession in the Caodai community, which based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Vietnam. The Caodai theological understanding of body and spirit applies people with resources to adopting allopathic medicine and religious therapy simultaneously. In this sense, the concept of karma, the ghost possession, diagnosis of disease, and healing through dialogue or communication comprise a flexible system that helps to release internalized unhealthy relationships and traumatic memory that are ignored by the government, official narratives, and by overt family dynamics.

Keywords: : Vietnam - Cao Dai - Spirit Possession - Diagnosis - Medical Pluralism

Guérir par la parole : Thérapie corporelle et sociale de la possession spirituelle dans le Vietnam postsocialiste**Résumé**

S'appuyant sur une enquête de terrain menée au Vietnam, cet article explore le processus de diagnostic de la possession et le traitement thérapeutique de la possession pathogène au sein de la communauté Caodai. La compréhension théologique du corps et de l'esprit chez les Caodai permet aux personnes qui en ont les moyens d'adopter à la fois la médecine allopathique et la thérapie religieuse. En ce sens, le concept de karma, la possession par des fantômes, le diagnostic de la maladie et la guérison par le dialogue ou la communication constituent un système flexible qui aide à libérer des relations malsaines intériorisées et la mémoire traumatique qui sont ignorées par le gouvernement, les récits officiels et les dynamiques familiales.