

Oracles and secrecy in the quest for religious legitimacy in Cochinchina  
- Anthropological approach of the historical roots of Caodaism

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Caodaism is a syncretist Vietnamese religious movement which appeared in the colonial Cochinchina in 1920's. Which are the sociological roots of Caodaism? I attempt to answer this question through an analysis of the Caodaist networks developed in the early twentieth century in Cochinchina, under the influence of Chinese and Western ideas.

This paper will set out here some ethnographic materials concerning the Chinese Minh religions, which emerged in Cochinchina from China in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Here I focus on only one of the five Minh religions in Vietnam, called Minh Lý.

Since the 1920's, Caodai and Minh Lý religious communities share cultural activities (mediumistic séances and meetings), exchange texts, develop various forms of actual or fictive kinship. These connections highlight similarities and divergences between these two religions.

Materials on Minh exegesis, practice of divination and spirit writing were collected along the last seven years, during field research on Cao Đài religion in Ho Chi Minh City. My paper exposes a hidden face of Caodaism, from its political and religious origins to its current shadowy cooperation.