

Members of the Cao Dai faith gather in compound in Tay Ninh. Their cathedral is shown in the background.

INDIGENOUS TO VIETNAM

The Cao Dai Religion

By VAN NHAN

A must for tourists in Vietnam is a visit to Tay Ninh province, some 100 kilometers northwest of Saigon on the border of Cambodia. Four kilometers east of the capital which bears the same name as the province is located the colorful and magnificent Great Divine Temple of the Cao Dai religion.

The temple is unique, its architecture being a harmonious blending of the three principal architectures of the world: Buddhist, Catholic and Islamic.

It is the work of the late Pham Cong Tac, formerly chief of the legislative body, who began building it in 1933 and completed it in 1941 before he was deported to Madagascar by the French colonial administration for political reasons.

Construction expenses were provided by voluntary contributions from adherents of the religion numbering about 2 million.

Pham Cong Tac was neither an engineer nor an architect, but he achieved a masterpiece which followers said was due to inspiration from God and the great poet of the Chinese Tang dynasty, Ly Tai Pe, who is considered the Spiritual Pope of the Cao Dai faith.

Birth of Caodaism

The founder of Caodaism was Ngo Minh Chieu, a clerk in the French colonial administration at Phu Quoc, an island famed for its *nuoc mam*, the Vietnamese national fish sauce.

A clerk listened to call of spirits

Ngo Minh Chieu was a believer in Taoism and its many gods and immortals. It is said that he often climbed Duong Dong mountain in the effort to commune with them and that he finally succeeded in meeting them and was advised to continue his religious activities, observe a vegetarian diet and learn supernatural powers through spiritism.

Spiritism is a doctrine affirming that the spirits of the dead communicate with the living through a medium, i.e. an individual considered as able to establish communication between this world and the world of spirits by means of physical phenomena as spirits tapping on tables or abnormal mental states such as trances.

Spiritism is founded on the principle that God, the Supreme Being, the eternal source of life, is power, intelligence and love. He is the creator of all things and all living beings. He is eternal, infinite, absolute. The divine force is the total sum of vibrations, necessary to the functioning of the universe. He is the intense source of heat and light, of the universal fluid. The human soul, a spark of the divine source, is composed of two parts: one is immaterial, the other semi-material, the source of which is the material fluid and called perispirit. These two inseparable elements have to go through many stages, including incarnation, growth and disincarnation, before attaining supreme incarnation.

Incarnation is the fact for the soul to be reborn in a material body. When death comes, it is disincarnation of the spirit that escapes from matter, but which is still wrapped up in its fluid body or perispirit. The latter keeps it imprisoned in the terrestrial zones. It is in this state that it still is capable of acting by its fluid body on living beings and material things, through mediums, till the day when it is reincarnated again.

It is in this way that spiritism establishes and justifies the communication between living beings and spirits who manifest their presence to them, guide and advise them. The spirits manifest themselves by uniting their spiritualized fluids with the vitalized fluids of the human body, and it is this fusion of fluids that creates the existence of mediums.

Origin of Spiritism

Spiritism is believed to date back to the year 1848 in the United States. Its first manifestations were produced in the Fox family of the Methodist religion at Hydesville and later at Rochester, New York. Two unmarried girls of the Fox family were mediums. Other manifestations were produced at Stratford, Connecticut, at the home of Dr. Phelps, a Presbyterian minister, about the year 1850. The findings of well-known physicians explained spiritism as due to natural causes. However, documents published later seemed to accuse the Fox family of fraud. The findings of the physicians did not satisfy public opinion and the phenomena were then studied

by many other scientists, among them Horan Greely, Guillaume Lloyd Garrison, and Robert Hare, professor of chemistry at Pennsylvania University.

Meanwhile, spirit manifestations were produced in many places in the U.S.A. and the number of convinced followers grew rapidly. Spiritism was then accepted by a great many American clergymen and politicians who wanted social reorganization.

In 1854, spiritism was developed enough to merit the holding of a congress of spiritualists. From the U.S., spiritism quickly spread to England and many European countries.

In 1857, a Frenchman, Allan Kardec (real name Denizart Rivail), published a sensational book on spiritism. Rivail was born in Lyon in 1803 and died in Paris in 1869. He was from a Catholic family, but studied at the Pestalozzi Protestant school in Switzerland. Upon his return to France, he became an accountant for Universe Magazine. For many years he had the ambition of unifying all beliefs. In 1854, he attended many meetings and seances that totally convinced him about spiritism. During one of those meetings where spirits were consulted, one of these called *Vérité* (Truth) gave him the mission of founding a religion "really great, beautiful, and deserving of the Creator." After that he consecrated all his life to his apostleship.

He was introduced by the French playwright Victorien Sardou to a seance held in Paris, Rue des Martyrs, attended by many European dignitaries of the time: Tiedmen Marthese, cousin to the Queen of Holland, Saint René Taillandier, professor at the Paris Faculty of Letters, Camille Flammarion, Sardou, etc.

At that time, two famous mediums, Mesdames Hayden and Roberts, attracted the attention of the scientific world. In England, the famous physicist Faraday asserted that the movement of tables, by which the spirits manifested their presence was due to muscular action. During this period, many famous mediums from the U.S. went to Europe among them Daniel Douglas Home (1855) and the Davenport brothers (1864). While in France, Home organized spiritism meetings at the Tuileries, with Emperor Napoleon III attending. He seemed to have been caught red-handed performing tricks.

In spite of its successes with the general public, spiritism was always opposed by the scientific world because it had its quacks; and in the hands of clever operators, it served to exploit the credulous, inclined to believe in supernatural phenomena. Nevertheless, little by little, outstanding scientists from all over the world took spiritism under consideration and studied the phenomena presented by it. Among them were William Crookes, Gurney, Myers O. Lodge, W. James, Charles Richet, a famous physiologist and Nobel Prize winner (1913), Grasset, etc. Between 1900 and 1920, Professor Richet



A view of the interior of Cao Dai cathedral showing ornate decor with intricately carved columns.

coined the word "metapsychic" to be applied to a series of phenomena, including spiritism. Richet was a member of the French Academy of Medicine and of the French Academy of Sciences.

There have been little studies on how spiritism came to Vietnam although it is agreed that the French press and popular books had a role in it. In any case, it created a sensation among the intelligentsia in Vietnam in the late 20's and early 30's of this century. Functionaries and students during that period engaged in experiments with spiritism with much enthusiasm, experiments which continue on a sporadic basis today.

And now we advert to the question of how Caodaism was born, referring to a booklet, "The Outline of Caodaism," published in 1972 by the Holy See of Tay Ninh. This Holy See is to Caodaism what the Vatican is to Catholicism.

The booklet states that in the middle of 1925 a small group of Vietnamese scholars dabbling in spiritism received surprising answers to questions posed to spirits. Deceased parents manifested their presence, talked about family affairs and gave counsel. These sensational revelations, the booklet con-

tinues, taught the group the existence of an occult world.

"No doubts were raised concerning the nature of their conversations, first as it was equally new to all, it was impossible to suppose that there was a fraud. Then because certain communications from the medium were of so high a moral level, so profound a scientific knowledge, and so deep a philosophy that they were beyond the intellectual ability of any man present."

The Spirit A, Á, Â.

The booklet also says:

"One of the communicating spirits became particularly noticeable by the high level of morality and philosophy of his teachings. He gave his name as A, Á, Â (approximate pronunciation a, ah, euh), the first three vowels of the Vietnamese alphabet, and did not reveal his real name, in spite of the entreaties of his hearers.

"Only in a seance, on Christmas Eve, the 24th December of 1925, did this spirit A, Á, Â reveal himself at last as the "Supreme Being," coming

under the name of Cao Dai to teach the Truth to Vietnam."

At the seance he is reported to have said in substance: "This day rejoices me. It is the anniversary of my coming to Europe to teach my doctrine. I am happy to see you, o disciples full of respect and love for me! This house will have my blessings. Manifestations of my power will inspire you to even greater respect and love for me."

Following this message, there were a series of others during nearly the whole year of 1926 and of which are reproduced in a book published by the Holy See of Caodaism in Tay Ninh in 1969.

Inspired by these messages, a religion was created under the name of Cao Dai, limited in the beginning to a small circle of Ngo Minh Chieu's friends. Then on October 7, 1926, the religion publicly declared its existence after an official declaration to the government.

The head of the religion is the *Giao Tong* or Pope. The Spiritual Pope is the spirit of Ly Tai Pe who, as previously mentioned, was one of the greatest poets of China during the Tang dynasty. Appointed temporal Pope by Spiritual Pope Ly Tai Pe during a seance was Le Van Trung.

Since the creation of the new religion, the late Le Van Trung, disincarnated in 1934, had been the only living man to receive the title of *Quyên Giao Tong* (temporal Pope). To date he has no successor.

The late *Ho Phap* (Protector of the Law) Pham Cong Tac was elected Superior of Caodaism, serving as such until his death a few years ago. Today the highest dignitary of the religion is His Holiness *Hien Phap* (Guardian of the Constitution) Huynh Huu Duc.

Cao Dai Principles

As we have seen Cao Dai was the name that the "Supreme Being" of God gave himself in that seance of December 24, 1925. Cao means high and Dai, palace. Hence Cao Dai means high palace where God lives, ruling over the whole universe as the divine master or all.

The Cao Dai religion also has another name: *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do*. Dai Dao means 'great religion; Tam Ky, the third time; Pho to show, and Do, to save. So Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do means great religion that for the third time shows itself to save all living beings.

Why the third time?

In a seance on April 7, 1926, according to the Caodaists, the spirit of God taught that since the creation of mankind, the great way of God was manifested in three different epochs.

The first time it was through Nhien Dang Co Phat, Thai Thuong Lao Quan Phuc Hy, and Moses. The second time it was through Sakyamuni, Laotseu, Confucius, Jesus Christ, and Mahomet. The third time, in 1926, under the name of Cao Dai, God united all these religions into one, Caodaism.

According to Caodaism, during the first two periods, the different peoples of the world did not know one another, because there were not enough means of communications. God founded his religions and adapted them to the ways and customs of the communities called upon to practice them.

With the development of communication enabling the different races to be in contact with one another, God united all the different religions into one, Caodaism. Moreover, the Caodaists say, human thought does change. Mankind aspires to have a universal concept of love and justice, i.e., in order to survive they need harmony among all peoples. None of us would say: "My religion is the only saviour of Mankind."

Concept of Universe

According to Cao Dai teachings, there is a Supreme Being, God, who created the whole universe, all living beings, including men, women and animals. God is perfectly good, almighty. He has no beginning and no end. He has created all Immortals, Buddhas, Saints, and Genies. He is known by men under different names: Emperor of Jade, King of the Heavens, Allah, Jehovah, etc.

Under his rule, there is the Immaterial World and the Material World.

The Immaterial World includes three classes:

- (a) The Upper Class composed of Immortals, Buddhas, and Saints.
- (b) The Middle Class composed of Genies.
- (c) The Lower Class composed of Ghosts and Devils.

The Material World is composed of the human race and animals.

Men and animals of the Material World can become Ghosts or Devils of the Lower Class; Genies of the Middle Class, or Immortals, Buddhas, and Saints of the Upper Class. This depends on their merits.

This concept would be a synthesis of all the concepts of other existing religions, but actually, it is more like the Buddhist and Taoist concept than that of Christianity.

On Human Beings

Caodaism teaches that human beings are made of two parts: the Body and the Soul. The Body is that part subject to decay. It is a kind of container that shelters the Soul. The Soul is immortal and indestructible. It is of the same divine substance as God.

As the Body decays and does not last long, the Caodaist gives it little importance. The Soul being immortal, it is given utmost care. It is the Soul that determines happiness of the Body in this world and the fate of the Soul in after life or in other incarnations.

World of the immortals man's reward



Cao Dai Pope Truong Huu Duc (center)
and other members of hierarchy.

To enable his soul to enjoy bliss, man must lead a charitable life. He must love his fellowmen because all men belong to the same family created by God. Men must also love animals, his fellow creatures made by God. He must also love plants and vegetables because they never harm men and are useful to them.

Finally men must think of their other lives after death. Their situation in the future life depends on their behavior in this life. So they must be good and charitable. They must worship God, obey him, and practice his teachings.

In order to achieve all these aims, the Caodaist:

1. Shall not kill.
2. Shall not be greedy.
3. Shall not eat meat or drink alcohol.
4. Shall not be wasteful.
5. Shall not misuse his language.

In observing these commandments, the Caodaist is only a disciple of Man's religion. As in the Cao Dai concept, the human soul is of the same nature as God's, the soul of the good Caodaist is admitted, upon his death, to the Middle Class of the Immaterial world, the World of Genies. His life does not end

there. He has to go on observing many rules of good conduct and becomes the disciple of God's religion, acquiring the duty of spreading that religion to every corner of the universe. If he is perfect in his behavior, he is promoted to the Upper Class of the Immaterial World, the World of Immortals, Buddhas, and Saints.

How do the Caodaists represent God? They think that any human shape is unsuited for God's universality. They say that in a seance, God asked them to symbolize him with an eye representing universal and individual conscience. Thus, in Caodaist temples, God is always represented by an eye.

To sum up, here are the fundamental principles of Caodaism.

1. From the moral point of view: Men have duties toward themselves, their family, their society (that is a broadened family), and then toward humanity—the universal family.

2. From the philosophical point of view: Men must despise honor, riches, luxury; this means that men must emancipate themselves from material power; on the contrary they must reach, through spirituality, the full quietude of their soul.

3. Worship of God: The Caodaist must worship God, the Father of all, and all the superior spirits of the Immaterial World. The ancestor cult is tolerated, but there should be no offering of meat and votive paper (men, women, animals and furniture made of paper to be burned after being offered. They are believed to become real in the other world and be at the disposal of the spirits to whom they are offered).

4. Existence of the soul: the soul is immortal, it survives the material body and will be reincarnated to live again on earth as animals or humans whose fate is a consequence of past actions according to the Karma (law of cause and effect or natural causation: the merits or demerits of a being in past existences determine his condition in the present one, as a cause determines its effects, as inexorably as in any physical law). This concept or principle comes, as is easily recognized, from Hinduism and Buddhism.

Structure of Caodaism

The Caodaist religion is managed by two powers: the Celestial Power and the Earthly Power:

(a) Celestial Power:

The Celestial power, seated at the *Bát Quái Đài* (Octagonal Palace or Palace of the Creation), headed by God Himself, gives orders and messages to Earth. God is assisted by Divine Spirits.

(b) Earthly Power:

God, desiring that no man on earth should hold both Spiritual and Temporal Power, has these two powers separated, and entrusted each of them to a body:

1. The *Hiệp Thiên Đài* (Place of meeting between God and Mankind) or Legislative Body on Earth. Representing the Spiritual Power, it has the right of jurisdiction and control.

It is headed by the *Hô Pháp* (Hô: to protect; Pháp: Law) or Protector of the Law.

2. The *Cửu Trùng Đài* (Nine degrees of the Angelic Hierarchy) or Executive Body, headed by the *Giáo Tông* or Pope. Representing the Temporal Power, it is in charge of the administration of the religion.

Besides these two bodies, there is also the Charitable Body under the supervision of the *Hiệp Thiên Đài* or Legislative Body.

The Executive Body has actually three branches, corresponding to the three principal Asian religions:

(a) Buddhist Branch, (*Phái Thái*) whose dignitaries wear yellow robes, the yellow color symbolizing Virtue.

(b) Taoist Branch (*Phái Thượng*), whose dignitaries wear azure robes, the color of which represents tolerance and pacifism.

(c) Confucianist Branch (*Phái Ngọc*), whose dignitaries are dressed in red, symbol of authority.

These three branches, with their distinct colors, form the tri-colored banner of Caodaism.

Women may become dignitaries, but there is no special branch for them. They are all dressed in white.

The Holy See in Tay Ninh is the seat of the central administration of the religion. It is in a certain way like the Vatican. It is a city with a population of more than 100,000, and it is equipped with hospitals, markets and schools.

Three Councils govern the Holy See:

1. Popular Council (composed of student priests, sub-dignitaries and representatives of followers or adherents, in the ratio of one delegate for 500 followers). This council makes plans for the future.

2. Sacerdotal Council (composed of priests, bishops, archbishops and principal archbishops.) This council examines the plans made by the Popular Council.

3. High Council (made up of cardinals, censor cardinals and the Pope.) All plans made by the Popular Council and supported by the Sacerdotal Council are submitted to this council for approbation. If there is a disagreement between this council and the other two, the question is settled by God through a medium.

The Cardinals at the Executive Body control the administration of the religion. They are assisted by three principal archbishops in charge of nine ministries, according to their respective branches:

(a) The Principal Archbishop of the Buddhist Branch takes charge of *Hô-Viên* (finances), *Luong Viên* (supply), *Công Viên* (public works.)

(b) The Principal Archbishop of the Taoist Branch is in charge of *Học Viên* (education), *Y-Viên* (health), *Nông Viên* (agriculture.)

(c) The Principal Archbishop of the Confucianist Branch takes care of *Lai Viên* (interior), *Lê Viên* (rites), and *Hoà Viên* (justice.)

Provincial Administration

This administration includes the administration of:

(a) Region (consisting of several provinces), headed by the Chief of Region.

(b) Province, headed by the Chief of Province (of Cao Dai religion.)

(c) Delegation, controlled by the Chief of Province.

(d) Village, under the leadership of the Chief of Village (of Cao Dai religion). By what we have seen above, the Cao Dai religion is strongly organized. Nevertheless, a little after it was officially recognized (1926), there was disagreement among the founders, and a secession resulted. Other secessions followed:

1. In 1928, Ngô Minh Chiêu seceded and created a branch in Can Tho (Can Tho Cao Dai.)

2. In 1931, another leader, Nguyen Ngoc Tuong, disagreed with the *Hô Pháp* about the creation of an armed force, withdrew to Bến Tre, and created what is called Bến Tre Cao Dai.

3. In 1934, Nguyen Huu Chinh and 14 of his colleagues proclaimed themselves saints and wise-men, and went across the country preaching. They constitute what is called the *Tiên Thiên Sect* (Heavenly Immortals Sect.) In 1955, they built a temple at Soc Sai, near Truc Giang City, Kien Hoa province.

4. In 1932, the *Doc Phu* (high functionary in the Civilian Administration) Nguyen Hao Ca claimed to have received an order to found a separate branch. He then went to My Tho and created a Cao Dai sect called *Minh Chon Ly* (Luminous Truth.)

5. In 1933, a Cao Dai group from the precedent sect *Minh Chon Ly* seceded and, led by the *Doc Phu* Nguyen Van Kien, created a sect in Tan An, called *Chon Ly Tam Nguyen* (Looking for the Source of Truth) sect.

6. In 1931, another Cao Dai sect was created in Bac Lieu, called *Minh Chon Dao* (the True Luminous Religion) sect.

7. In Tay Ninh itself, another sect was created, called *Bach Y Liên Dân*.

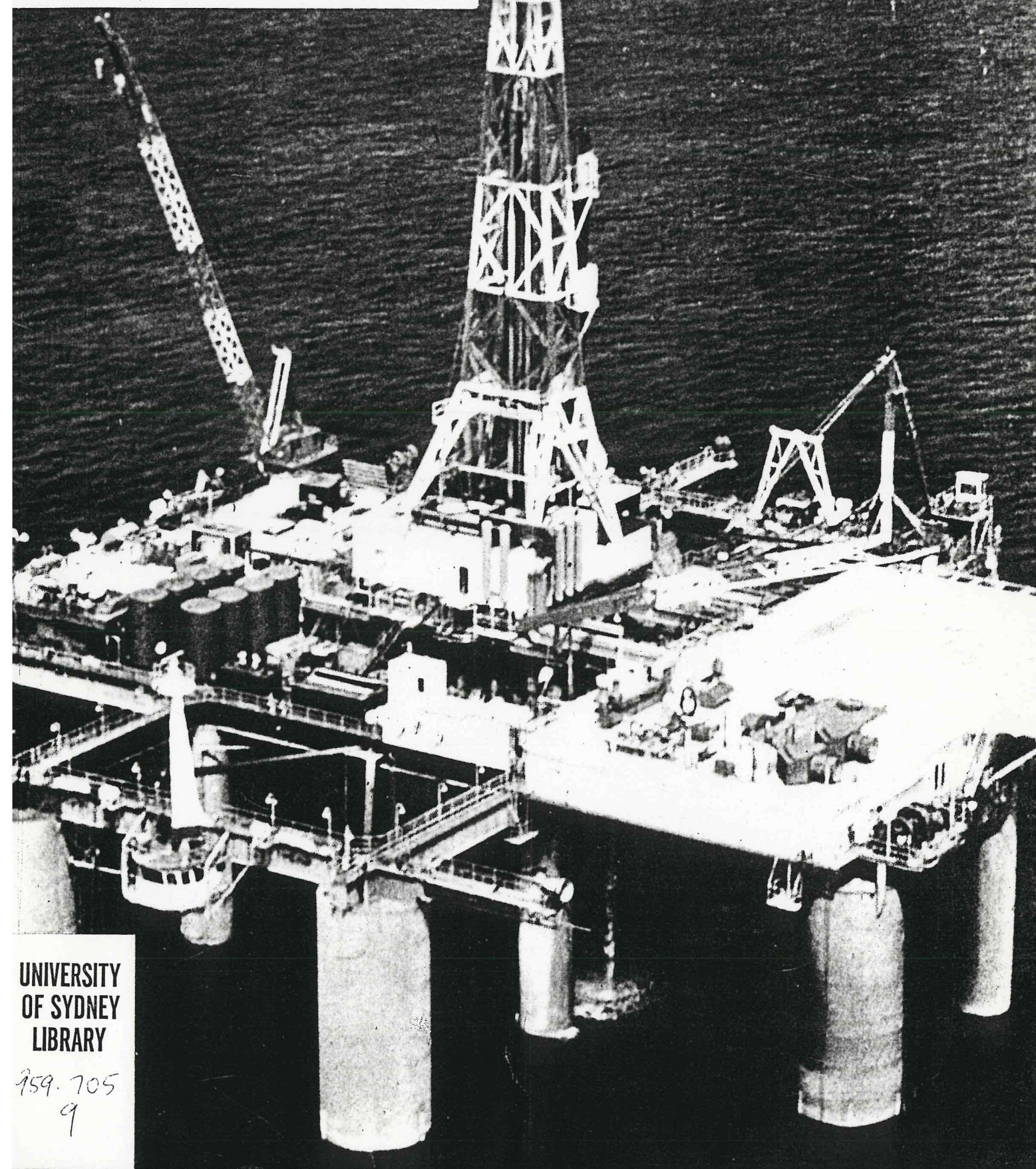
All these subdivisions or sects follow the structure, organization, and rites of the Tay Ninh Cao Dai religion, with some minor variations.

During the years of the second World War, the Caodaists had a military force fighting the Communists till 1955, when it was disbanded by the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, after an armed conflict. The late Caodaist General Trinh Minh The was well known in South Vietnam as well as abroad as a great nationalist fighting both the French and the Communists. He joined the late President Ngo Dinh Diem's armed forces, and was killed in an expedition against the Binh Xuyen forces in 1955. A large thoroughfare in Saigon along Khanh Hoi Quay has been named after him.

VIET NAM

Magazine

Published by The Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations
Vol. VII, No. 8, 1974



UNIVERSITY
OF SYDNEY
LIBRARY

959.705
9