

THE EMERGENCE OF CAODAIISM

(taken from the PhD thesis of Sergei Blagov, Moscow University, 1996)

Paradoxically, the personality of the undisputed founder of Caodaism had relatively small impact on further development. As professor Đồng Tân put it in early sixties, many contemporary adepts seemingly forgot about him, knowing only their local leaders (Đồng Tân, 1967, p.5). Strict followers of Ngô Minh Chiêu always constituted almost invisible minority within the Caodaist movement.

Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878-1932) is also known by his religious pseudonym Ngô Minh Chiêu. His grandfather has a Thị-Lang rank in Huế, but had to flee the disturbances of 1850-1870 and took refuge in the South. He has a son, Ngô Văn Xuân and a daughter Ngô Thị Đây. After losing high social status of an official of imperial court, Ngô family soon degraded into poverty. Ngô Văn Xuân married Lâm Thị Quý, who was a daily worker at a rice-mill in Bình Tân (Đồng Tân, 1967, p.42). By 1875 they built a small house at Hòa Hưng, Gia Định province near Bình Tây.

In this house Ngô Văn Chiêu was born on February 28, 1878: he was the single child in the family. Because of his parents poverty, they had to follow the owner of rice-mill and go to Hà Nội. So from the age of seven Chiêu lived with his aunt Ngô Thị Đây at Mỹ Tho (Đồng Tân, 1967, p44 ; R.B.Smith, 1970, p337). Ngô Văn Chiêu's aunt was married to a wealthy Chinese pharmacist, who allegedly influenced him. (Nguyen Tran Huan, 1971, p194). Such allegations now apparently may not be substantiated, but Chiêu however during all his life maintained interest in popular sectarianism, inspired by Chinese sectarian tradition.

Ngô Minh Chiêu, who originated from mandarin's family in Huế (Đồng Tân, 1967, p37), has to become self-made man. With a help from Đốc Phủ Sùng, a friend of the family, he was able to go to French school, the college of Mỹ Tho with a condition of subsequent joining government service. According to Caodaist hagiography, 10 years old Chiêu bought a small book of prayer (kệ) and worshipped a Confucian deity Quan Thánh (Đồng Tân, 1967, p45). After graduating Mỹ Tho school, he was transferred to the College Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon, and so to qualify for entry into the administrative service in 1899.

On March 23, 1899 Chiêu was given a job at Sở Tân Đáo (Service d'Immigration) and he immediately brought his parents back from Hà Nội to Saigon. In January 1903 Chiêu got a position at the Headquarters of Gouverneur Général of Indochina (Sứ Phủ). Approximately at the same time, Chiêu married Bùi Thị Thân, a poor orphan born in Thạnh Trị, Mỹ Tho (she died in 1954 in Tân An - Đồng Tân, 1967, p47). They had nine children - two daughters died in infancy, two other girls and five sons survived.

It should be mentioned that famous contemporary expert on secret societies and cults G. Coulet was

a professor at College Chausseloup - Laubat (*Revue Caodaiste*; Juillet, 1930 (lère année), Saigon, No 1, p.11) This college was a breeding-place of many prominent personalities in Indochina. For example, Norodom Sianouk also was the boarder of Chasseloup-Laubat college in Saigon (Lancaster, 1961,p 97). So Ngô Văn Chiêu got his degree at the institution, where children of the elite of the French Indochina were taught.

Official Caodaist historian stressed that “Le grand Maitre Cao Đài”, Ngô Văn Chiêu since 1919 led a life of high wisdom, conforming to the strict rules of Taoist doctrine. (*L’ Histoire du Caodaïsme*, 1950, p.6) Ngô Văn Chiêu was an ardent reader of Flammarion since 1902. The same year for the first time he participated mediumistic seance (cơ bút) in Thủ Dầu Một near Sai Gon.

In spite of the fact that Chiêu was holding an administrative position, he was mild-mannered and retiring. In 1917 he was initiated into Đạo Minh Sư or Đạo Phật Đường sect (Hue Tam Ho Tai, 1983, p 84). Having served for 10 years in Saigon, he was transferred to a post at Tân An, and remained there for a further decade. In May 1909, Chiêu was given a position as a secretary at Tân An city administration. By the time his father had already died. Sources claim that the future prophet demonstrated an exceptional humanity, forgiving thieves and urging them not to continue their criminal business (Đồng Tân,1967, p49).

In 1917 Chiêu passed Tri-Huyện exams in Saigon but asked to preserve his post in Tân An. After becoming Chủ Quận he maintained his generous attitude to underprivileged people, performing a sort of moral economy approach towards the poor. The sources also claim that Chiêu was among very officials in Cochinchina, which was not taking bribes (Đồng Tân,1967, p52). Regarding Chiêu’s evident disinterest in pragmatic affairs these claims possibly are not only agiographic exaggerations.

The remainder of his official career consisted of periods in Hà Tiên (1920), on the island of Phú Quốc(1920-1924), and once again in Saigon (from 1924 till his retirement in 1931- R.B.Smith, 1970, p338). Some modern Vietnamese experts claim that Chiêu was an agent of the French secret service. But this claim is due to misinterpretation of the French administrative terms. Ngô Văn Chiêu was really working for “2ème Bureau du Gouvernement de la Cochinchine” (*Revue Caodaiste*; Aout, 1930 (1er Année), Saigon, No 2, p.7). But it was a sort of economic department of civil administration, while ill-famed 2ème Bureau was the counterintelligence service of the military.

Ngô Văn Chiêu appears to have taken the evocation of spiritist more seriously than some, especially after about 1917 when he sought by this means to obtain a cure for his sick mother. Ngô Văn Chiêu did not produce amulets for healing his mother, but only asked for cure during the seance of the Minh Thiện in Thủ Dầu Một (the spirit at first agreed to give him the cure, but then refused and Chiêu’s mother died). Đồng Tân however claimed that since 1920 the Caodaists were not engaged in any healing practices (Đồng Tân, 1994, p57). So the demand for healing was the most important stimulus for Chiêu attention to practical spiritism.

About the period 1917-1919, Chiêu used to attend seances at a temple at Cái Khế (near Cần Thơ), later known as the Hiệp Minh temple, and it was then that the spirit called “Cao Đài Tiên Ông” first appeared to him (Đồng Tân, 1967, p53). The highest deity in this temple was however a Buddhist one - Tây Phương Tam Thế Phật (Buddha of Three World in the West), apparently connected with the millenarian motives in Myhayana. The adepts of Hiệp Minh had lenten periods of 6 or 10 days per month, or were fasting permanently. During the seance Chiêu asked for cure to heal his sick mother, but the medium replied that all he needed was to observe lenten periods, which were supposed to guarantee his mother recovery. Chiêu apparently was not satisfied and visited Minh Thiện temple in Thủ Dầu Một - the place he knew since 1902. There he got a spiritist message that no cure existed for his mother illness, who died in 1919.

While seaching the cure for his mother, Chiêu established contacts with other spiritualists; an informal group emerged, including the future founder of Caodaism, Trần Phong Sắc, Đoàn Văn Kim, Lê Kiển Thọ, Nguyễn Văn Vân (the latter later became Đầu Sư in Tòa Thánh Định Tường, Mỹ Tho). Thọ was the medium, and Sắc, Confucian scholar, presided over the seances (Đồng Tân, 1967, p57). The name of Cao Đài spirit first appeared in the message, received by this group. Sắc refused to recognized this spirit and called him Trung Thiên Đại Mị - he was allegedly punished by unknown illness and subsequent death (Ibid, p.59). At Tân An Chiêu met Lão Sung, the leader of Minh Sư Chinese sect. They participated together in communal worship of Quan Thánh Đế Quân (Oliver, 1976 p,34). The communal aspects of sectarian later became more important in popular (phổ độ) sect of Caodaism.

In 1920 due to some unspecified troubles in Chiêu’s administrative workplace, he asked for a position in any other province (Đồng Tân, 1967, p61). At first he decided to move to Hòn Chông, but the province chief of Tân An Tholence urged him to go to Phú Quốc. Chiêu spent several months in Hà Tiên, and he came to this island on March 1, 1920, leaving his wife and children in Tân An.

At Hà Tiên, he made further contact with Cao Đài spirit, in séances at the tomb of Mạc Cửu (Ming refugee who had founded Hà Tiên around 1690). It was after he moved to Phú Quốc that the Cao Đài spirit began completely to dominate the life of Ngô Minh Chiêu. He also participated seance in Quan Âm pagoda of Phật Đường sect: this group included Hương Hào Khâu, Giáo Mãn, Hương Đa and others (the members are mostly known by their unofficial pseudonyms). Young medium Tư Ngung later followed Ngô Minh Chiêu and went to Saigon.

In Quan Âm pagoda Chiêu got a message from Tiên Ông to extend lenten period up to 10 days per month. At Tết Tân Dậu (Fer 8-1921), he accepted an instruction to adopt the discipline of vegetarianism. The spirit of Tiên Ông in Quan Âm tự ordered him to observe permanent vegetarianism for three years (Chiêu, tam niên trường trai - Đồng Tân, 1967, p70). Chiêu reluctantly accepted and was promised subsequent clarification of everything. The same year the new spirit assumed the title Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát.

Later the spirit of Tiên Ông asked Chiêu to choose the symbol of the new teaching, At first Chiêu choose a cross, but he was told in the message, that it was a symbol of already existing religion. So in April 1921 he had the vision that led him to adopt the Celestial Eye (Thiên Nhãn) as a symbol of Caodai spirit. In January 1924 Chiêu have a vision of Bồng Lai, included an image of Thiên Nhãn near Dinh Cậu islet (Đồng Tân, 1967, p77).

In Phú Quốc the officials also practiced cầu tiên, but the arrival of Chiêu contributed greatly to their spiritist success. Chiêu also cầu tiên in Quan Âm Tự of the Phật Đường sect. This pagoda collapsed due to negligence and it was reconstructed in 1961 by Chiêu's adepts as Cao Đài Hội Thánh (Lịch sử quan phủ Ngô Văn Chiêu, Người sáng lập Cao Đài Đại Đạo. In lần thứ 5 năm 1962 tại Hòa Khánh, Saigon. Cf Toàn Ảnh, 1967, p434).

According to Chiêu's friend Trương Vĩnh Quy, the original inclination to solitude of the founder of Caodaism significantly increased in Phú Quốc: usually he was silent, even with his few local friends. After three years "Phú Quốc" period, Ngô Minh Chiêu got another job, so he returned to Saigon on July 30, 1924. Although he was very closed to Tân An, Chiêu did not reunite with his wife and children, but only went on sending them a part of his salary. In Saigon he led a very solitary life. One source claims, that the authorities suspected Chiêu of being involved in political activities because of his act of charity and generosity toward the prisoners in Phú Quốc (Đồng Tân, 1967, p82). Allegedly Chiêu was removed from the island to Saigon because of these suspicions.

Chiêu first disciple was Vương Quan Kỳ, also a clerk of 2ème Bureau. Kỳ was born in 1880 in Chợ Lớn, he studied at Chasseloup Laubat, later he got French citizenship: he died in 1940. Vương Quan Kỳ designed the image of Celestial Eye (Đồng Tân, Nam Thành, 1995, p3), which is the object of worship of all Caodaists.

Chiêu and Kỳ participated in mediumistic seances at first in An Nhơn, later at Kỳ's house. There in October 1924 the altar was established and Caodaist rites performed for the first time. Kỳ's friend and neighbour Đoàn Văn Bản, the principle of Cầu Kho school soon also became an adept; he established the altar, which was the first state of building Cầu Kho temple. That was the third spiritist group which Ngô Minh Chiêu participated after those of Hiệp Minh And Phú Quốc (Bước đầu tìm hiểu Đạo Cao Đài, Hà Nội, 1995, p104).

In Saigon he spent a good deal of time at a temple in Đa Kao, which that time was a suburb of the city, called Ngọc Hoàng Điện "Jade Emperor Palace". That temple has been built in the years 1900-1906 by a Chinese businessman called Lưu Minh, a member of the Minh Sư vegetarian sect which in China was at that period dedicated to the cause of overthrowing the Manchu dynasty and restoring the Ming. In these obscure affiliations with the traditions of Chinese secret societies a British historian saw "a clue to the real root of Caodaism" (R.B.Smith, 1970, p349)

Among 5 Minh sects (Sư, Thiện, Tân, Đường, Lý), only Minh Sư emerged in China: only its 11th

patriarch was a Vietnamese national of Chinese origin, who introduced this sect to Cochinchina. Their ritual activity mainly included reciting of sutras and vegetariannism. By early 1970s three groups of few Minh Sư adepts were still active: Phổ Tế in An Hội, Đồng Lâm in Saigon, Kiệt Tường in Tân An (Đồng Tân, 1972, p21). Minh Đường was a group of Minh Sư adepts - they called themselves Minh sư Phổ Tế Phật Đường; this group ceased to exist after the World War II.

Minh Lý sect was established in 1924 by Âu Minh Chánh as a spiritist group in Saigon. They tried to amalgamate the French spiritism and the Chinese mediumistic practices. The Minh Lý venerated Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế. By 1940 the seances were stopped and by early of 70s few adepts were grouping around Tam Tông Miếu in Saigon (Ibid, p23). The dignitaries were to maintain constant vegetarianism and to wear black clothes.

The Minh Thiện sect was formed in 1914 by a group of patriotic intellectuals in Thủ Dầu Một which used Chinese mediumistic practices in order to receive politically motivated messages or prophecies. Its medium Nguyễn Văn Trương did not know classical Chinese, but in trance wrote in characters (Ibid, p23). The Minh Tân sect was founded in 1925 by Lê Minh Khá, who was healed in Minh Thiện Temple in Thủ Dầu Một. By 1928 this group established Tam Giáo điện in 221 Bến Vân Đồn, Saigon. The Minh Thiện emphasized the original unity of the “Three Teachings”: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Later its temple became Caodaist thánh thất.

These sects venerated Thượng Đế and Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu, the Minh Tân venerated Ngô Minh Chiêu and later became Caodaist oratory. Minh Sư and Minh Đường ceased to exist after its last patriarch (tổ) Trần Đạo Quang became Caodaist, after he has received a spirit message that Caodaism “did not differ much with Minh Sư” (không khác Minh Sư bao nhiêu). Then the Minh Sư closely cooperated with the Caodai, Minh Sư lenten practice (ăn chay) are used in Caodaism (Đồng Tân, 1974, p118-119). So the “Minh” element in the early Caodaism is undeniable.

The sources also point out other Caodaist-sectarian affiliations. There is a reference to a spirit-séance held at Cao Lãnh by in 1908, in which a message was received from the spirit of the “laureate” (thủ khoa) Huân, a leader figure in the revolt of 1874-1875 which the French attributed to the Đạo Lành sect. This message, moreover, includes two references to the Cao Đài. (Phan Trường Mạnh, La voie du salut Caodaique, Saigon, 1950, p348 - R.B. Smith, 1970, p348). Caodaism were mentioned during the seance in above mentioned Miếu Nổi pagoda (Bến Cát, Gia Định) on July 30, 1923 with the message from Tào Quốc Cự spirit : Hữu duyên đặc ngộ Tam kỳ độ (by having karmic connection, being granted enlightenment in the Third savaion) (Đồng Tân, 1974, p51) . The Minh sects were important for the emergence of Caodaist movement, but these sects were not the main fator of fast development of the new religious community.

Other member of Chiêu’s spirit group in Saigon were Đoàn Văn Bản, Nguyễn Văn Hoài and Võ Văn Sang, who were convinced to join the new teaching by Vương Quan Kỳ. The group also included Nguyễn Hữu Đắc, nephew of Lê Văn Trung.

CAODAISM: 1925

By the time of his return to Saigon in 1924, Chiêu was sufficiently confident of the importance of this spirit to begin to convert his friends to its worship of “Celestial Eye”. The first adepts of Cao Đài - Vương Quan Kỳ, Chiêu’s fellow-official in Saigon and Đoàn Văn Bản - started worshipping Caodaist altars and the Celestial Eye. Đoàn Văn Bản was in charge of a primary school at Cầu Kho [Chợ Lớn] where he subsequently founded famous Caodaist temple, which later became the center of Caodaist unification movement. Cầu Kho in fact became the first Caodaist thánh thất which was furnished by joint efforts of the first Caodaists. Its original building later was destroyed and its relics now are preserved at Nam Thành temple.

Cầu Kho group was infiltrated by the agents of the French sureté Nguyễn Văn Tường and Trần Văn Tạ (Đồng Tân, 1972, p.132). But the spies, allegedly impressed by the new teaching, confessed to their correligionists and later became good adepts. After some time Caodaists located their seance meetings at Vương Quan Kỳ house, 80 La Grandière (later called Gia Long and the Lê Lợi street).

Then in December 1925 Ngô Minh Chiêu was visited by Phò Loan group. It was established in July 1925 when Cao Quỳnh Cư [1887-1929], a clerk in Saigon railway office, Cao Hoài Sang, Cư’s nephew, who worked in the customs department, and Phạm Công Tắc began meeting together to investigate table-tournante (Phò Loan). Mrs Cao Quỳnh Cư acted as their secretary. Her reports indicate that the first time they sat around 3-legged table with their hands resting on its surface, the table began to shake. In answer to the men’s questions the table legs would knock on the floor. Each successive number of specific raps indicating a letter of Vietnamese alphabet. They had read some Western literature on spiritism, but were so naive that they did not even know what a corbeille à bec was (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 29; Oliver, 1976, p. 37). By the end of 1925 they often met in two groups, one using xây bàn, other using corbeille à bec (ngọc cơ). At first these seances seemingly were just a hobby, without any religious motivation.

In July 1925 this group contact with a spirit of Vương Thị Lễ, daughter of Vương Quan Kỳ’s eldest brother, who died in 1918. In August 1925 AÃ spirit appeared in their seances. Approximately by the same time the spirit of medieval, inspired by Taoism Chinese poet Li T’ai Po appeared. The poems another T’ang poet, Confucian-minded Tu Fu also were received as spirit messages, but later this author was not given a place in Caodaist pantheon. On December 15, 1925 AÃ spirit proclaimed himself to Cao Đài Thượng Đế.

The background of the Phò Loan group is somewhat different, comparing with the Minh sects, for they appear to have had no education in Chinese culture or religion, and apparently some of them were originally Catholics. In August 1925 they practised spiritism “in European manner”: that is using the ouija-board. Phò Loan literally means “enlisting the aid of the phoenix”. Phò Loan spiritism was one of the spirit techniques expressly forbidden in article 144 of the Nguyễn code and in the Ch’ing code. It is sometime translated as corbeille à bec because it is similar to the technique practiced

by French such as Allen Kardec (Hue Tam Ho Tai, 1983, p. 85). In August 1925 Cao Quỳnh Cư borrowed Ngọc Cơ from Phan Văn Tỷ, who acquired it from Minh Thiện sect in Thủ Dầu Một (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 46).

Being a closed friend of Kỳ's older brother Vương Quan Trân, Lê Văn Trung often attended these seances. Caodaist historian claims that in 1925 Trung suffered from eye decease, but was healed after attending the seances. Mrs Cao Quỳnh Cư notes that on January 11, 1926 Trung came to her house to see her husband - he wanted officially to become a disciple of Cao Đài. Two of the first 3 Caodaist mediums Cư and Tắc made a return visit to Trung on January 18. On that occasion they held a seance and Cao Đài revealed himself to Trung (Oliver, 1976, p. 36). But according to Đồng Tân, Cư and Tắc visited Lê Văn Trung in his house at quai Testard (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 79).

Lê Văn Trung (1875-1934, some sources say that he was born in 1880) originated from Chợ Lớn, canton of Phước Điện Trung. He was the son of a small farmer, but was able through hard study to gain entry to the Collège Chausseloup-Laubat whence he graduated in 1893. He entered the administrative service soon afterwards, and advanced by the normal stages until 1905. But in that year he left to enter a business enterprise, and when it succeeded he resigned his government position for good. Subsequently he was elected to the Conseil Colonial of Cochinchina, and later was chosen by the authorities to serve on the Conseil Supérieur de l'Indochine; he resigned from the latter in October 1925. "Lục tỉnh Tân văn" (#27, May 21, 1908) introduced Lê văn Trung as "Minh tân man" (người Minh Tân). Later Caodaism attracted many Minh Tân members (Sơn Nam, 1971, p.151).

By that time he had suffered some severe financial set-backs, especially in 1924; also, he had become interested in Caodaism. There are two different versions of his first attendance at a séance. According to one story, he was taken to a séance at Chợ Gạo in June 1925 by his friend and relative, the Conseiller Nguyễn Hữu Đắc; the same account mentions that he was also a friend of the brother of Vương Quan Kỳ (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 76). The other version tells how Lê Văn Trung was introduced to a séance by a 'relative', who was a member of the Minh Lý sect, and how the spirit of Lý Thái Bạch (Li Po, the T'ang poet) predicted a spiritual future for him: whereupon he gave up all his vices overnight (R. B. Smith, 1970, p. 340).

Lê Văn Trung was reportedly known for his passion for gambling and opium-addiction. His shady financial reputation was partialle due to his expensive addiction to opium and indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh. At the moment of conversion, he had nearly ruined his fortune (Lancaster, 1961, p. 86). So all sources agree, that Lê Văn Trung before his conversion was inclined to gambling, opium smoking and young ladies (cờ bạc, thuốc sái, trăng hoa - Toàn Ánh, 1967, p.410).

While only 2% of the population were addicts, the toll among the Vietnamese elite was considerably greater. With an addiction rate of almost 20%, the native elite, most of whom were responsible for local administration and tax collection, were made much less competent and much more liable to corruption by their expensive opium habits (McCoy, 1972, p. 76). So Lê Văn Trung, in the words of

Vietnamese writer Nguyễn Công Hoàn, belonged to the world's sixth race of drug addicts - green.

While a vigorous international crusade against the "evils of opium" during the 1920s and 1930s forced other colonial administrations in South-East Asia to reduce the scope of their opium monopolies, French officials remained immune to such moralizing. By 1938 opium revenues accounted for 15% of all colonial tax revenues - the highest in South-East Asia. Annual Statistical report on Indochina in 1943: 748,000 piasters for schools, 71,000 - for hospitals, 30,000 for libraries, 4,473,000 for purchase of opium by state monopoly. In the long term, however, the Opium Monopoly weakened the French position in Indochina. Vietnamese nationalists pointed out the Opium Monopoly as the ultimate example of French exploitation. Some of the Ho Chi Minh's most bitter propaganda attacks were reserved for those French officials who managed the monopoly (McCoy, 1972, p. 75).

Another Caodaist leader Nguyễn Ngọc Tương (1881-1951) was born in An Hội, near the town of Bến Tre, he was educated in Chinese at home and in French at the Colleges of Mỹ Tho and Chausseloup-Laubat. He entered the administrative service in 1902, and from 1903 till 1919 served in his own province of Bến Tre. Then from 1920 till 1924 he was a district chief at a place called Hòn Chông, not far from Hà Tiên, where the population was mainly Chinese and Cambodian. There he began to lead ascetic life and to study the religion of Minh Sư sect, with which Chiêu had also had connexions. In 1924 he was transferred to the district office of Cần Giuộc, where he remained till 1927; it is said in his biography that he was moved from Cần Giuộc to the more remote district of Xuyên Mộc (Bà Rịa) as a result of prozelyting activities. Towards the end of 1930 he left government service (R. B. Smith, 1970, p. 339).

By the 1920s, the membership of Heaven and Earth society was effectively dispersed in three different directions. What remained of its membership after 1916 was mostly absorbed either into secular political movements, such as the radical Nguyễn An Ninh society in 1928, or into the Cao Đài, some of whose leaders had personal ties with Tư Mã. The rest of the membership gradually fell within the orbit of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition (Hue Tam Ho Tai, 1983, p. 78). The tradition of urban banditry was a factor in the emergence of politico-religious movements.

CAODAISM: 1926

In January 1926 Lê Văn Trung and Phò Loan group met Ngô Minh Chiêu: on January 1927 they started joint seances according to Chiêu's instructions. Thus on January 27, 1926 the Phò Loan held their first seance under Chiêu's direction at his house on Bonard St (Oliver, 1976, p. 38). Later the message urging Trung, Cư and Tắc to learn from Chiêu's religious experience was omitted in Tây Ninh editions of Thánh Ngôn. On February 12, 1926 or on the eve of the lunar New Year (đêm Giao Thừa Bính Dần) the names of the new teaching - Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ - and its highest deity - Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát - were declared. Ngô Minh Chiêu presided over the

seance, while Cư and Tắc were mediums and Nguyễn Trung Hậu interpreted the message. The latter claimed however, that the most important Caodaist text Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển was “compiled hastily and contains many errors” (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 95).

During the seance of February 12, 1926 Ngô Minh Chiêu allegedly was given heavenly approval of his idea, that the new religion should not be established until 1933 (Ibid, p. 99). But Trung, Cư and Tắc disagreed and started prozelyting activities. Later Chiêu refused to become Giáo Tông, because he considered this to be a temptation, while Trung and his supporters blamed Chiêu of disobedience.

On September 29, 1926 (23rd of the 8th lunar month) most of the adepts gathered in the house of Nguyễn Văn Tường (alias Nguyễn Công Tường) in Gallieni street, Saigon. This date is still commemorated in Cầu Kho oratory. The faithful agreed to disclose the new religion with the French authorities and signed a petition. The document had 247 signatures, but 7 adepts, including Trần Đạo Quang, in fact did not participated this meeting (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 136). 52 out of 247 signatories were women, including wives of Cao Quỳnh Cư, Cao Quỳnh Diêu, Phạm Công Tắc, Lê Văn Giảng, Cao Hoài Sang, Nguyễn Văn Đức (Bước đầu, 1995, p. 172). It needs to be mentioned that there were 8 members of Cao family in the list, while Trần Đạo Quang was not among the signatories.

Lê Văn Trung and Lê Văn Lịch were given a seance directive to ask for permission to launch a new religion. But in fact it was Lê Văn Trung who organized the petition of 7 October 1926, addressed to Le Fol, the Governor of Cochinchina, in which 28 Caodaists, mentioned below, appealed for the official recognition of their movement as a religion:

1. Mme Lâm Thị Thanh from Vũng Liêm
2. Lê Văn Trung, former member of Conseil Supérieur de l'Indochine
3. Lê Văn Lịch, religious practioner from Long An, Chợ Lớn
4. Trần Đạo Quang, religious leader from Gia Định
5. Nguyễn Ngọc Tương, tri phủ from Cần Giuộc
6. Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, entrepreneur from Saigon
7. Lê Bá Trang, đốc phủ sứ from Chợ Lớn
8. Vương Quan Kỳ, tri phủ from Tax department in Saigon
9. Nguyễn Văn Kinh, preacher (thầy tu) from Gia Định
10. Ngô Tường Vân, clerk from Saigon
11. Nguyễn Văn Đạt, businessman from Saigon
12. Ngô Văn Kim, landowner and village chief from Cần Giuộc
13. Đoàn Văn Bản, schoolmaster from Cầu Kho
14. Lê Văn Giảng, clerk from Ippolito company in Saigon
15. Huỳnh Văn Giỏi, clerk from Saigon

16. Nguyễn Văn Tường, interpreter from Saigon
17. Cao Quỳnh Cư, clerk from Saigon railway department
18. Phạm Công Tắc, clerk from Saigon trade department
19. Cao Hoài Sang, clerk from Saigon trade department
20. Nguyễn Trung Hậu, schoolmaster from Đakao
21. Trương Hữu Đức, clerk from Saigon railway department
22. Huỳnh Trung Tuất, businessman from Chợ Đũi, Saigon
23. Nguyễn Văn Chức, official (cai tổng) from Chợ Lớn
24. Lại Văn Hành, village chief (hương cả), Chợ Lớn
25. Nguyễn Văn Trò, teacher from Saigon
26. Nguyễn Văn Hương, teacher from Đakao
27. Nguyễn Văn Kính, teacher from Cần Giuộc
28. Phạm Văn Tỉ, teacher from Cần Giuộc

(Cf. Đồng Tân, 1972, pp.142-143; Nguyễn Trung Hậu, 1930, pp.23-25; R. B. Smith, 1970, p. 340).

In 1926 Trung made his request because, according to the decree of 1873, official authorisation was needed for establishing new religious community. None ever came back but the polite note of acknowledgement of the letter was widely circulated to persuade potential converts of the legality of Cao Đài recruiting (Hue Tam Ho Tai, 1983, p. 85). Rather influential person, like Lê Văn Trung, was needed to address the French authorities directly and effectively.

The French accepted the application of October 7, 1926 and indicated that the document would be studied. This letter briefly stated that Caodaism was a new religion, that perfected Tam Giáo of Việt Nam. Cao Đài was believed to be universal creator, communicating via spirits and mediums. The declared goal of Caodaism was to propagate new teachings in a spirit of peace and mercy (Oliver, 1972, p. 85). As it was pointed out in this letter, “L’appellation Cao Đài ou Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ qui signifie la Troisième Manifestation de la Miséricorde divine a été donnée par l’Etre Suprême, Le Très Haut ... qui s’est manifesté sous l’appellation Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế dénommé Cao Đài qu’est le Maître de l’Univers, le Roi Céleste des Mondes, des êtres et des choses (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 139).

“Haut science éthique” of Confucianism and “hautes vertus cardinales” of Taoism and Buddhism were emphasized in the letter. The author claimed, that the declaration was written “au nom d’une majorité d’Annamites qui ont approuvé notre point de vue” (Ibid, p. 140).

The Governor Le Foll announced to Lê Văn Trung his attention not to make official decision before observing the developments for a certain period of time. But later he sent confidential telegram to province chiefs, particularly to Vilmont in Tây Ninh demanding to scrutinize the results of Caodaist propaganda (Bernadini, 1974, p. 22).

The inauguration ceremony took place in the village of Gò Kén, five kilometers south of the town of Tây Ninh, where the Từ Lâm Tự temple had just been built by a Buddhist monk, the hòa thượng Như Nhãn. Earlier he was an abbot of Giác Hải pagoda in Phú Lâm, Chợ Lớn and had connections with the family of Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ. Như Nhãn lay name was Nguyễn Văn Tường: he was a convert to the new religion, and in August 1926 had eagerly made his new temple to its leaders. He was given Thái Chưởng Pháp Thiên sư Linh diệu Đạo sư title by a message (Đồng Tân, 1974, p. 121).

But the laymen who had subscribed the funds to contract the temple were less happy with the arrangement, and consequently the Caodaists had to leave and find a new home as early as March 12, 1927. Some sources claim that the laymen were encouraged by the French administrator of Tây Ninh province to demand “decaodaization” of Từ Lâm pagoda in order to prevent further development of the new religion (Lê Quang Tấn, 1990, p. 6). On the other hand, this pagoda and the parcel of land were too small for the future Holy See (Toàn Ánh, 1967, p. 414).

However, the first and unsuccessful inauguration ceremony took place in Từ Lâm Tự pagoda, which was called by the Caodaists thánh thất Gò Kén. The Hiệp Thiên Đài was represented by Phạm Công Tắc, Cao Quỳnh Cư and Cao Hoài Sang, while Cửu Trùng Đài - by Trần Đạo Quang, Như Nhãn, Nguyễn Văn Tường, Lê Văn Trung, Lê Văn Lịch, Thiện Minh, Lê Bá Trang, Nguyễn Ngọc Tương, Lê Văn Hóa, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ. Hundred of cars were parked along the road, while the Governor of Cochinchina, who also was invited, ignored the gathering.

November 18, 1926 the religion was inaugurated - 50,000 followers and curiosity-seekers attended (Oliver, 1972, p. 86). The official inauguration - Captain Monet, “un grand spirite français” (L’Histoire du Caodaïsme, 1950, p.12). The French sent the secret service officer De Mouton to observe the Caodaist activities in Tây Ninh under the guise of the captain of the border guard. When the Caodaist religion was officially inaugurated the French agents Bonet and Latapie were present in Tây Ninh (Báo cáo, June 30, 1983, p. 1). There were agents of the French Deuxieme Bureau (tên phòng nhì) among the founders of Caodaism as Trương Hữu Đức, so the French permitted them to launch the movement (Báo cáo, October 1, 1983, p. 2). Chiêu did not participate in inauguration (Khai Đạo) ceremony in Tây Ninh (Đồng Tân, 1974, p. 112).

Lê Văn Lịch was performing spirit-exorcising ceremony, but forgot about one side: so, according to Caodaist tradition, evil spirits (quỷ) arrived and disrupted the inauguration. Lê Thế Vinh and Vương Thanh Chi, girlfriend of Vương Quan Kỳ, were possessed by the spirits and performed chaotic dance in the altar. Trần Đạo Quang lost consciousness. Most of the guests left, but Monet stayed and took part in a subsequent seance: he was told to sacrifice himself for providing Western civilization with the new morality (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 182).

They moved to another village, Long Thành, not far away, to construct a new oratory of their own with funds donated by Mme Lâm Thị Thanh, a businesswoman of Vũng Liêm (Mỹ Tho), who was rewarded by becoming the first woman to hold high office in the Caodaist hierarchy, with the grade

of phối sư (R. B. Smith, 1970, p. 337). Lâm Thị Thanh gave 30,000 piasters (Dufeil, 1956, p. 10). With the money supplied by Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and his wife Mme Lâm Thị Thanh - the former Mme Monnier - the land in Long Thành was purchased. Rich widow Mme Monnier provided funds for the purchase of land near Tây Ninh. Cao Đài Oratory - occidental plan and oriental overplay (Lancaster, 1961, p. 87).

“Directed by Lý Thái Bạch”, Lâm Thị Thanh accompanied by all Caodaist leaders - Trung, Tắc, Tương, Trang and Thơ - visited Cà Na area and purchased land of French landowner Aspar. The French man asked for 20,000 \$ but Thơ offered 18,000 \$ and succeeded (Lê Quang Tấn, 1990, p. 6). After purchasing the land, Caodaist dignitaries sent công quả workers to clear 96 mẫu of forest, bought from forestry department with the price of 25,000 \$, for the Holy See site. This work was finished in 3 months and temporary wooden temple (Đền Thánh) was erected.

Letter of October 7, 1926 to Le Foll was signed by 28 officials and 247 adherents (seance of September 28) (Oliver, 1976, p. 45). The letter of October 1926 was not signed by Ngô Minh Chiêu. In 1926 he organized his own small following at Cần Thơ (Cái Khê) - there he retired in 1931 and died the following year. It is necessary therefore to suppose an open quarrel at this stage in the development of Caodaism, although we can not of course be certain than none had occurred (R. B. Smith, 1970, p. 341). Chiêu, habitué a la solitude, fut contrarié par l'affluence des adeptes qui l'inquiéta (L'Histoire du Caodaism, 1950, p. 10). Savani cynically mentioned Lê Văn Trung as a person who “avoir rapidement éliminé le trop naïf Ngô Văn Chiêu”.

But according to Caodaist historian, Ngô Minh Chiêu believed that the religion was established too early (thi hành quá sớm việc Khai Đạo) (Đồng Tân, 1974, p. 65). Although Ngô Minh Chiêu even bought the papal (Giáo Tông) robe (thêu hình Bát Quái) later he refused to accept the post in order to guard the Caodaist secret teaching of non-exertion (chơn truyền bí pháp của đức Cao Đài trong phần Vô Vi) (Ibid, p. 41; Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 153).

Chiêu believed that the religion should not be officially inaugurated until 1933. His confrontation with Phò Loan climaxed when Chiêu refused papacy. The author of Ngô Minh Chiêu's biography believes that the Phò Loan mediums Cao Quỳnh Cư and Phạm Công Tắc were guilty of seance manipulation when Chiêu was excommunicated by a seance message of 1926 (Lịch sử Ngô Văn Chiêu, s.1., 1935, pp. 21-23). Few Caodaists are aware that there was such a seance directive: it had been hidden by the Tây Ninh leaders for it does not seem to be mentioned in any of their official publications, nor included in the list of officially authorized seance messages (Oliver, 1976, p. 93).

Cao Quỳnh Cư became so insensed at Chiêu's presence in a seance that he jumped on a table in a middle of one seance shouting that God had entered his body and then he began uttering ugly things to Chiêu (Ibid, p. 22). During the seance on May 3, 1926 the message was given via Tắc and Cư: “Dear disciples, from this day do not consider Ngô as Cao Đài disciple” (Ibid, p. 20). On May 11, 1926 the same message was given about Võ Văn Sang who left Phò Loan to follow Chiêu. On

August 2, 1926 Chiêu and Sang were accused of establishing a false religion and a seance order was received to excommunicate them (Ibid, p. 21). Chiêu's biographer clearly states that these seance directive were part of a plot to eliminate Chiêu (Ibid, p. 23) (Oliver, 1976, p. 94).

During 1926-1927 period Caodaists sometimes hired Buddhist pagodas in order to organize seances. In Vĩnh Nguyên (Saigon), Trương Sanh, Hội Phước (Cần Giuộc) pagodas the monks also participated the seances, but they were not mediums (Đồng Tân, 1974, p. 121).

Starting from thánh thất Cầu Kho, where Nguyễn Trung Hậu and Trương Hữu Đức performed the seances, Lê Văn Trung's supporters established several other temples. One was founded in Trung's house with the participance of Lê Bá Trang and Cao Hoài Sang. Nguyễn Ngọc Tương and Lê Văn Lịch established đàn in Tân Kim (Cần Giuộc) in Nguyễn Văn Lai's home. Another congregation was formed by Trần Duy Nghĩa in Phước Long pagoda in Lộc Giang, Chợ Lớn. Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ established đàn in his house in Tân Định: Cao Quỳnh Cư and Phạm Công Tắc participated the seances (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 133).

By 1926 the seances were expanded to other localities:

1. The leader of Cầu Kho was Vương Quan Kỳ: he was assisted by Đoàn Văn Bản, Ngô Tường Vân, Nguyễn Văn Mùi, Huỳnh Văn Giỏi, Nguyễn Văn Tường. The mediums were Nguyễn Trung Hậu and Trương Hữu Đức. The meetings took place in Bản's home.
2. Chợ Lớn congregation was led by Lê Văn Trung and Lê Bá Trang, the mediums were - Cao Hoài Sang and Cao Quỳnh Diêu.
3. The head of Tân Kim (Cần Giuộc) was Nguyễn Ngọc Tương and Lê Văn Lịch: the adepts met at Nguyễn Văn Lai's house. The mediums were Ca Minh Chương and Nguyễn Văn Tươi.
4. The congregation of Lộc Giang (Chợ Lớn) was led by the ethnic Chinese Yết Mã Giống and Mạc Văn Nghĩa: the services took placed at Phước Long pagoda, the mediums were Trần Duy Nghĩa and Trương Văn Tràng.
5. In Tân Định Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ (allegedly, he was given important rank of chánh phối sư because his sizable contribution in cash) directed the seances at his house. Mediums were Cao Quỳnh Cư and Phạm Công Tắc.

The home of Trần Văn Tạ was selected specially for services held exclusively to heal the sick (Đồng Tân, 1972, pp. 132-133; Oliver, 1976, p. 41).

In 1926 Lê Văn Trung sought goverment permission for the opening of 21 'oratories' in east and central Cochinchina, most of which had been permitted to open under strict conditions of worship. Despite administrative neutrality of governor Blanchard de la Brosse, certain officials misunderstood

the orders of their superiours (L'Histoire du Caodaism, 1950, p. 27).

In October 1927 three recruiting groups were formed:

1. Lê Văn Trung, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Trần Đạo Quang with Phạm Công Tắc and Cao Quỳnh Cư as mediums were responsible for Western Nam Bộ: Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh, Cần Thơ, Sóc Trăng, Bạc Liêu, Long Xuyên, Châu Đốc, Hà Tiên, Rạch Giá provinces.
2. Lê Văn Lịch, Nguyễn Ngọc Tương, Yết Ma Luật with Nguyễn Trung Hậu and Nguyễn Hữu Đức as mediums were responsible for Chợ Lớn, Gò Công, Tân An, Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre provinces.
3. Lê Bá Trang, Vương Quan Kỳ, Yết Ma Nhung with Cao Quỳnh Diêu and Cao Hoài Sang as mediums were responsible for Tây Ninh, Thủ Dầu Một, Gia Định, Biên Hòa, Bà Rịa, Sa Đéc provinces (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 167).

The recruiting activity based heavily upon “demonstration seances”, during which the potential adepts were delivered messages with mentioning some facts of their life. New adepts were taught the basis of Caodaist lanten practices and their names were registered in special books (Ibid, p. 169). The first recruiting group evidently was the least successful - fifteen years later the provinces of Western Nam Bộ in few months became a stronghold of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. The areas of two other groups’ prozelyting are still under noticeable Caodaist influence. The recruiting also included healing, allegedly, by the invention of the spirits.

According to a Vietnamese scholar, who apparently quoted Tây Ninh source, the Caodaism gained 20,000 adepts within the first two months of its official existence (Toàn Ánh, 1967, p. 411). Caodaist source claims, that more than 20,000 adepts were recruited in less than two months, and 500,000 by 1930 (L'Histoire du Caodaisme, 1950, p. 16). But according to other sources (Đồng Tân, 1972, p. 184), 90-150 new adepts were recruited daily in October-December, so the above mentioned figure of 20,000 adherents in two months seems to be unrealistic.

Centralization of control is difficult to achieve in thaumaturgical practices (Wilson, 1973, p. 130). The conversionist model, exported from more advanced societies, has perhaps provided the best organizational base for the thaumaturgical response. The amalgamation of conversionist orientations and the demand for wanders, healings and reassurance, is perhaps the most effective pattern of regulation for thaumaturgy. The difficulty for movement that emphasize thaumaturgical elements is to institutionalize the oracular and miraculous in such a way that they acquire legitimation without loosing immediaty and spontaneity (Ibid, p. 165).

Although Caodaism followed a pattern of rise and decline, this evolution was not a function of the rise of charismatic energy followed by its routinization. Caodaism was endowed with “routinized” and institutionalized structures from its earliest days. The Cao Đài were able to attract a large mass following precisely because of its strong organization (Werner, 1980, p. 63). By introducing the

hierarchy, the Caodaist leaders also relied on charisma of the office (Amtscharisma). In this latter context Weber's concept of charisma is identical with Durchein's concept of the collective sacred. Primarily, a religious community arises in connection with the routinization (Veralltaglichung), i.e. as a result of the process whereby either the prophet himself or his disciples secure the permanence of his preaching and the congregation's distribution of grace, hence insuring the economic existence of an enterprise and those who man it (Weber, 1965, p. 61).

(taken from S. Blagov- PhD Dissertation thesis. University of Moscow-1996)

Hội Văn Hóa Cao Đài - Đồng Tân Trần Thái Chân