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Rezensionen / Book Reviews

Fjelstad, Karen & Nguyễn, Thị Hiền (2011).
Spirits Without Borders: Vietnamese Spirit Mediums in a Transnational Age.
 New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-0-230-11493-7. x + 219 pages.

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In 1986, the Vietnamese government entered the era of *Đổi Mới* (renovation), entailing a resurgence of popular religiosity, in particular after the adoption of liberal reforms in the early and mid-1990s. This ‘re-enchantment’ of contemporary Vietnamese society has not only aroused the interest of numerous local scholars, producing a vast amount of ethnographic research, but has attracted attention among a number of foreign anthropologists who embarked on introducing Vietnamese religions to a Western audience. Until recently, religionists were only (somewhat) familiar with institutionalised religion in Vietnam (*Cao Đài* and *Phật giáo Hòa Hảo*), whilst the plethora of folk-religious beliefs remained widely uncharted. In the previous years, various scholars (K. Endres, K. Fjelstad, B. Norton, Q. Phạm, O. Salemin, P. Taylor, and others) have thus attempted to shed light on the popular religious landscape. The rich pantheon of Vietnamese folk traditions is often seen to be represented by *Đạo Mẫu*, the ‘Mother Goddess Religion’, which comprises a variety of beliefs and practices, associated with legions of deities and spirits. Central to *Đạo Mẫu* is *lên đồng*, a spirit possession ritual that is slowly overcoming political proscription and social ostracism, and, despite re-emerging urgent concern by the authorities, seems to develop into a veritable ‘cultural heritage’ (*di sản văn hóa*). *Đạo Mẫu* and *lên đồng* have strikingly evolved amid the Vietnamese diaspora, thereby turning into a transnational religious phenomenon that gradually extends to the non-Vietnamese population.

The study at hand endeavours to investigate the concomitant ritual and doctrinal transformation of this cross-border expansion. The authors aim at providing a sophisticated ethnographic account of *Đạo Mẫu* and *lên đồng*, as encountered in the United States among overseas Vietnamese (*người Việt hải ngoại*), highlighting the am-



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biguous, and yes, estranged relationship between Vietnamese (*người Việt*) and American Vietnamese (*người Mỹ gốc Việt*) spirit mediums.

Karen E. Fjelstad, a PhD graduate from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (1995), is a Lecturer in Anthropology at San José State University (United States) and a distinguished expert of Vietnamese spirit mediumship, focusing her research on the diaspora in California. Nguyễn Thị Hiền, a PhD graduate from Indiana University (2002), is a researcher at the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in Hà Nội, and a specialist in Vietnamese folklore.

Fjelstad and Nguyễn's latest collaboration is an impressive and needed continuation of their previous work.¹ The first chapter (pp. 1-16) sets the agenda, briefly delineating the theoretical backdrop and rationale of the study, whilst chapter 2 (pp. 17-38) depicts the authors' personal involvement in the subject and introduces the research setting including a number of protagonists. The following section (pp. 39-75) lays the foundation for the subsequent discussion, portraying key themes such as the pantheon of *Đạo Mẫu*, *lên đồng* and its topography, and the changing socio-political and legal framework. The authors put an emphasis on the adaptability and flexibility of *Đạo Mẫu*, which, they reason, is decisive for survival in times of rigorous suppression and persecution of *lên đồng* practitioners. Chapter 4 (pp. 77-98) overviews several conversion narratives and exhibits how people are called to be initiated as spirit mediums (*căn đồng*). The next chapter (pp. 99-136) proceeds to the crucial part of the study, examining the history, transformation, and characteristics of *Đạo Mẫu* and *lên đồng* in Silicon Valley (California). The authors stress the step-by-step metamorphosis of the religious/cultic context in the light of modernisation, Americanisation, and 'rejuvenation', that is, the emergence of a second generation of overseas Vietnamese spirit mediums who were largely or entirely socialised in the United States. Chapter 6 (pp. 137-168) continues with an intriguing discussion of *Đạo Mẫu* and *lên đồng* 'in a transnational age'. It is shown in which ways various (cultural, doctrinal, and ritual) challenges need to be met when US-based mediums encounter their Vietnam-based coreligionists. Skilfully weaving together multiple facets of this tense relationship, the authors underline the fact that religion is always being altered and adapted in

¹ See Fjelstad, Karen and Thị Hiền Nguyễn, ed. 2006. *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.

keeping with a changing environment.

The concluding chapter (pp. 169-185) finally accentuates the amenability and portability of *Đạo Mẫu* by referring to the 'concept of flooding' that serves as an overarching metaphor. In fact, *lên đồng* can be performed by a spirit medium (*thanh đồng*) at any given time (provided that the most basic ritual supplies are at hand), and – as many mediums suggest – irrespective of place and ethnicity, making *Đạo Mẫu* a truly universal religion.

In terms of formality, this study lives up to the demands of high-quality research, being indeed a valuable contribution to our understanding of transnational religions (p. 184). The volume contains excellent and refreshing recent scholarship by two leading academics in their fields, providing a multitude of vivid and instructive information for scholars and the general reader alike. I thus highly recommend this book to anybody who brings along sound interest in spirit mediumship and Vietnamese religions in general.

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