

Karen Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền, *Spirits Without Borders: Vietnamese Spirit Mediums in a Transnational Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), x + 219 pp., \$139.99 (hardcover), \$49.99 (paperback), \$39.99 (ebook).

A lesser acknowledged aspect of conflict, the world over, is its use as a force to spread religion. Whether creating a new syncretism as with the forced baptism of slaves in Haiti, leading to the beginnings of Haitian Vodou or, as is the case with this text, the flooding of religious practices of Vietnamese spirit mediums into a landscape culturally divorced from its own. Focusing on the specific case of the *lên đồng* spirit possession ritual and its movement transnationally, Karen Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền adopt the trope of flooding as a method of “illustrating the pace of transnational events” (7). At the outset of this joint project, Fjelstad and Hiền pose three questions, which their subsequent analysis of their fieldwork in America (Fjelstad) and Vietnam (Hiền) focuses around. As such, the authors are concerned with (1) the way in which ritual spreads, (2) the reasons behind its spread, and (3) the transnational effects this spread has created. The second chapter opens with a vivid descriptive outline of an illness that Karen Fjelstad suffered when she previously returned from field research in Vietnam. It provides a rich ethnographic basis for the study of spirit mediums across cultures. Focusing around Fjelstad’s discussions with *lên đồng* spirit mediums, the reader is gracefully led to a broader understanding of their death praxis, given by Phan (an 81-year-old medium) (18). This continues into discussions with other mediums in their native Vietnam who interpret Fjelstad’s illness as a calling to become a spirit medium herself (20). Spirit sickness is a very common trait amongst indigenous populations who are called to become practitioners. For example, spirit sickness can also be found in Laurel Kendall’s (the series editor) major monographs on the practices of the *Mansin*, which she studied in South Korea, although the journeys within this chapter of both Fjelstad and Hiền are very different from Korean examples. Another trait explored, and common amongst indigenous practitioners, is that of reluctance to discuss their praxis with those outside of their culture.

The text then moves to a fascinating exploration of the syncretic relationship in the way in which *Đạo Mẫu* (Mother Goddess)

practitioners, who practice *lên 10.5*, also engage in rituals commonly associated with Buddhist and Daoist practices. This amalgamation of ritual is common in many cultural praxes across Asia. Indeed my own work in Sinhalese exorcism demonstrates similar patterns of loci-relevant practices. Though divergent, *Đạo Mẫu*, *Mansin* and the Sinhalese practitioners are, in the way the authors note, not wholly particular about the knowledge of the spirits being invoked, but rather focus on the act of worship itself (40). That is not to say that these acts of worship are uniformed, as practitioners will still gain the blessings of said spirits (41). A rich descriptive personal account, this time from Hiên, opens chapter 4, on the discussion of spiritual callings. It focuses on the death of Hiên's mother and on the possession of her sister-in-law Huê by her deceased brother Hòa. Possession is, like many other practices, conditioned by kinship and can both cause and be caused by additional stressors. As Fjelstad and Hiên write, "the last bout, which caused her to feel 'heavy' and 'tired,' and pulled on her head and her eyes so much that she asked her husband to slap her" (79).

The concentration on flooding, though apt, is not new and there are interesting parallels which could have been made here between the authors' ethnographic work and the theoretical work of Thomas Tweed in *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006). Tweed relies heavily on water-based metaphors for the transference of spiritual practices to and from the United States. Tweed's framework is appropriate, as the transnational communities making their homes within the United States are drawn on human and suprahuman forces to both journey and create home. Using Tweed's model, the "flooding" is a confluence of both *lên đòng* practitioners, and the differential cultural spaces they call home.

In chapter 5 the *lên đòng* practices begin to move to Silicon Valley. The volume contains an interesting description about the contemporary style of temple which Fjelstad visits, guided by her friend Phan. As is the case with many growing immigrant religious communities these initial places of worship are usually converted buildings which hold another purpose. Here though she comments that the building, attached to a house, was "constructed solely to house the temple" (99). The temple space itself is purpose-built, but the practices themselves fluctuate according to the needs of the congregants and the cultural time allocated to religion in American life. Citing Karen McCarthy Brown and Robert Orsi, "migrants transform religious practices by changing rituals and ritual spaces" (107). With

the growth of the spiritual community so too comes the growth of its wealth and its ability to create spaces specifically for its practices, even as practices and audiences transform. Spaces specifically for the practice of spiritual growth become even more insightful when the authors discuss the impact of technological innovation on the practices of the mainly female mediums. Not only does the use of audio and video recordings allow the mediums to explore the practices of fellow mediums, developing and borrowing from each other's work, but it also allows for the mediums themselves to partake in discussions post-ceremony about the ceremonies they just engaged in. This is an interesting approach, and something which is worthy of further exploration. Though, she concedes, perhaps this is a discussion for another text.

Through this journey we encroach the very core of *lên đồng* practice as it moves across the world in time and space. Although the mediums "only incarnate members of their pantheon, they pay attention to all spiritual beings in all places" (171), an element which wholly underlines the value of this work. I am wholly enamoured with Fjelstad and Hiền's rich ethnographic accounts spread over the course of this sophisticated text. Their approach to the transnational spiritual practices of Vietnamese spirit mediums is insightful and should be commended: the discipline needs more of these vivid ethnographic accounts.

Matt Coward
University of York