

**Zeitschrift:** Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft  
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera  
d'etnologia

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

**Band:** 17 (2012)

**Artikel:** The Vietnamese American Buddhist Youth Association : a community of  
practice for learning civic skills

**Autor:** Reed-Danahay, Deborah

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007281>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 26.11.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# THE VIETNAMESE AMERICAN BUDDHIST YOUTH ASSOCIATION

A community of practice for learning civic skills

Text: *Deborah Reed-Danahay*

## Abstract

Ethno-religious youth groups foster civic engagement for the children of immigrants in the United States. This article adopts the concept of the «community of practice» (Lave & Wenger 1991) to analyze the ways in which a youth association at a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in north-central Texas teaches civic skills. This group contributes both to cultural reproduction within the Vietnamese diaspora and to new productions of meaning and participation that facilitate a «belonging» in the new host country. This approach sees youth as active participants in the production of skills, practice, and knowledge in settings of informal learning.

**Keywords:** *youth, Vietnamese refugees, United States, community of practice, religion, immigration*

## Introduction

Religious institutions established by immigrants are not only places where newcomers and their children can gain social support and feel comfortable with others who share the same national origins, they are also important social spheres in which the children of immigrants can gain civic skills that help them feel a sense of belonging to the new host country. In a recent book, Caroline Brettell and I define civic engagement as «the

process by which individuals enter into and act within civic spaces to address issues of public concern. It involves not only actions but also knowledge about how to participate, and a sense of belonging that motivates people to become engaged» (Brettell & Reed-Danahay 2012: 2). My ethnographic research in north-central Texas<sup>1</sup> shows that Vietnamese American<sup>2</sup> Buddhist youth gain such knowledge about how to participate in the wider public sphere beyond their own refugee group when they participate in youth associations at their temple.

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised version of a paper I presented at the American Anthropological Association meeting in 2008 entitled: «Vietnamese American Buddhist and Catholic Youth Groups: Ethno-Religious Communities of Practice for Learning Civic Skills». The research was funded by a generous grant from the Russell Sage Foundation in New York. This grant was for a larger, comparative project also involving my co-Principal Investigator Caroline Brettell, who conducted research among Asian Indians in the same region of Texas. Our comparative project has resulted in a book (Brettell & Reed-Danahay 2012) that focuses primarily on civic engagement and participatory citizenship among first-generation Vietnamese and Indian immigrants. Part of my research among Vietnamese youth was also discussed, in a somewhat different context, in that book. I would like to thank my research assistants Le My Linh, Ton Quynh Anh, and Marilyn Koble for their wonderful help. See also Reed-Danahay (2008) and (2010).

<sup>2</sup>«Vietnamese American» is a term used by this population to describe their identity and is generally accepted as a label for them. Because of the special circumstances of their arrival in the United States as political refugees, and the anti-communist stance among this population (supporters of South Vietnam in the war), this term functions not only to show a double identity within the United States, but also to distinguish them from Vietnamese in the United States who affiliate with the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam, a regime opposed by most former refugees. Although the term Vietnamese American may be applied to any immigrant or refugee coming from Vietnam, those who adopt the term to refer to themselves tend to be anti-communist and former refugees or their children.

Being part of a youth group at a Vietnamese American Buddhist temple enhances forms of cultural citizenship among the children of refugees. According to Rosaldo and Flores (1997: 57) cultural citizenship includes «the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state's democratic processes». Cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1994: 252; see also Rosaldo 1997) «stresses local, informal notions of membership, entitlement and influence», and takes into account what Rosaldo terms «vernacular notions of citizenship» – that is, the claiming of distinctive and special rights, representation, and cultural autonomy that is different from juridical models of citizenship related to voting rights and duties such as paying taxes. This concept of citizenship captures the diverse ways in which new immigrants can feel a right to belong and participate while also retaining some aspects of identity related to their homeland.

My interest in youth groups predates my more recent research among Vietnamese Americans in the United States. During earlier fieldwork in rural France, I observed the important role of youth in a dairy farming community I refer to as «Laviaille» in the region of Auvergne in central France (see Reed-Danahay 1996a). In publications describing both a wedding ritual (Reed-Danahay 1996b) and a community festival (Reed-Danahay 1996c), I described how rural youth play a large role in many aspects of local life and, more importantly, take on leadership roles and learn to become engaged members of adult civil society in this way. Because of their emphasis on socialization of younger youth by their older peers, the two rituals I analyzed differ from adult-directed socialization in more formal settings such as the classroom at school or religious instruction at the local Catholic Church. I found that a youth organization called «les conscrits» provided a setting for the development of adult behaviors and civic skills including public service in the context of a rite of passage. Within a contained space that also gave the youth some degree of independence, the youth took on important leadership roles that lay the foundation for their imminent passage to adulthood. At the time of this earlier research, I did not use the vocabulary of «civic engagement» or «community of practice», but I now see that these terms capture some of what I first observed in rural France during the 1980s.

When turning to the study of the children of former Vietnamese refugees in Texas, as part of a larger study that also included adults, I observed, in a very different setting and among a very

different population, similar forms of youth socialization. This was orchestrated and passed down through the generations by youth and instilled civic skills related to the wider social group. In this more recent research, I consider youth groups at Vietnamese temples as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) in which youth learn to actively participate not only in religious or Vietnamese cultural activities but in wider social spheres and, more importantly, to negotiate the ways in which these spheres can intersect.

### From «social support» to «civic engagement»

Despite growing interest in the topic of youth and civic engagement in general and amongst immigrant populations in particular, there remains a paucity of literature focusing upon civic engagement amongst Vietnamese American youth (cf. Stepick et al. 2002; 2008). When discussing the role of religious participation in civic engagement, Stepick et al. emphasize the acquisition of social capital, even though they suggest that there are also civic dimensions. I do not deny that social capital is important. The friendships formed and social support gained through involvement in temple youth groups certainly play a key role in encouraging youth participation. However further analysis of the civic skills acquired through participation in such religious organizations is required.

Most previous work on Vietnamese youth examines either their high achievement in formal educational contexts (Caplan et al. 1991; Zhou & Bankston 1998) or the problem of Vietnamese gangs (Vigil et al. 2004)<sup>3</sup>. There is, however, a vast «middle ground» between these two extremes of high educational achievement and the social problems of youth who get involved with gangs that demands further exploration. Scholarship on Vietnamese youth and religion has been dominated by analyses focusing upon ethnic identity and assimilation and has neglected the various relationships between religious participation and wider civic participation. For example, in their work on religious involvement among Vietnamese adolescents in New Orleans, Bankston and Zhou (1996; see also Zhou & Bankston 1998) focused on issues of social adjustment and ethnic identity, seeing religious institutions as important to forming strong networks of ethnic social relations. They found that participation in a church led to increased feelings of being Vietnamese, rather than to «Americanization». At the same time, they argued that ethnic identifications provided social support and solidarity

<sup>3</sup> Key ethnographic works on Vietnamese migration to the United States include Aguilar-San Juan (2009), Kelly (1997), Kibria (1993), and Zhou & Bankston (1998).

which enhanced youth participation and «upward mobility» in mainstream society (1996: 31). On the basis of his early work on religion among Vietnamese refugees in Oklahoma City, Rutledge (1992: 54) concluded that religion «is a haven into which one can retreat when the «new world» becomes too confusing. It is the pole that provides balance while the Vietnamese refugees walk the tightrope between being Vietnamese and being American». He did not feel that religious institutions were helping to acculturate Vietnamese refugees (Rutledge 1985). A more recent study (Huynh 2000) of a Buddhist temple in the Houston region makes brief mention of the Buddhist Youth Association there, but does draw attention to its voluntary work at the temple. Like the two studies mentioned above, it concentrates upon the reproduction and transmission of Vietnamese culture and ethnicity. This is particularly clearly illustrated by Huynh's use of the phrase «recreating home» as a subtitle for a section of his essay. As with the approach of Stepick et. al cited above, these studies examined religious participation among youth primarily as it related to social support, without fully exploring the civic dimensions also at work. This focus on social support neglects the question of how youth learn social and civic skills.

I suggest that Vietnamese Buddhist youth groups provide settings where immigrant youth can learn about team work, leadership, and community service, such as collecting money to send to an orphanage in Vietnam, or volunteering at a local nursing home. This is about learning forms of participatory and cultural citizenship. Within ethno-religious associations youth learn civic skills and ways to negotiate their participation both in the cultural and social life of the Vietnamese diaspora, centered around families, religious institutions, and ethnic associations, and in the broader civic sphere. Being part of a youth group at an ethnically Vietnamese temple provides sources of social support based on belonging to the Vietnamese diaspora, belonging to a global religious group with deep historical roots, and belonging to the wider social spaces of American civic life. This participation, I argue, helps youth see the ways in which they can develop multiple forms of identity and belonging that are not necessarily in contradiction.

### Youth groups as communities of practice

Formal education is generally accepted to be the place where immigrant youth acquire civic education, in a model where the dominant host society imparts this training to somewhat pas-

sive subjects. It is, however, important to acknowledge other social arenas in which the transmission of knowledge about civic participation occurs and also to acknowledge the active role that youth can play in teaching each other civic skills. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), cultural transmission is a process of «situated learning» in which learning occurs in particular contexts and through the actions and co-production of knowledge and transmission of skills among participants in what they call a «community of practice». Etienne Wenger states «communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor» including «a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope» (Wenger 2006). Although formal schooling works towards political socialization and citizenship education, peer group socialization outside of school contexts may provide an even more effective way of inculcating civic skills through participation and what Paradise and Rogoff call «learning by observing and pitching in» (Paradise & Rogoff 2009).

Religious institutions, as locations that bring together multi-generational members of an immigrant group for activities ranging from formal religious observance to occasions of sociality and celebration, provide a rich site for research into what might be considered a «hidden dimension» of religious participation. Historian Roberto Trevino's concept of «ethno-religiosity», a form of sociality that is potentially empowering and also inextricably connected to everyday life (2006: 40), is useful in thinking about the relationship between civic engagement and Vietnamese American ethno-Buddhism. This concept employs a social practice perspective that moves beyond debate about the role of immigrant religious institutions in Americanization and assimilation or integration versus ethnic identification. Trevino writes that parish societies among Mexican American Catholics in Houston, Texas «enhanced spiritual and social life, provided cohesion for the community, and expressed Mexican ethno-Catholic identity» (2006: 66). He also notes that groups like the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) «fostered a sense of social responsibility through community service», while the retreats (*cursillos*) aimed at spiritual renewal for adults served another purpose by bringing people together in spaces where social activism could be fostered (2006: 71-72)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>Trevino draws upon some of my own earlier work (Reed-Danahay 1993; 1996a; 2007) on ways of «making do» and «making out» (*se débrouiller*) among marginal French rural people as they negotiate systems of power and influence, and also the important work of Margaret Gibson (1988) on Sikh immigrants in California who, as she put it, negotiate «accommodation without assimilation».

## Setting and research methods

This article is based on an ethnographic research project conducted between 2005 and 2008 in Tarrant County, Texas (one of the largest of 12 counties in the Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington [DFW] metropolitan region) focusing primarily upon Vietnamese Americans in the city of Arlington. This research was conducted among members of a «new» immigrant population that started to arrive in the United States as political refugees in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War, and continued to flow in large numbers until the 1990s. Most Vietnamese refugees to the United States were first placed in one of the four refugee camps<sup>5</sup>. After leaving the camps, they were helped to resettle in American towns and cities by refugee agencies and religious organizations. There have been several waves of migration since the first group right after the war, including the «boat people», and more recent arrivals coming on special visa statuses. A great deal of «secondary migration» among Vietnamese within the United States has taken place as families have relocated from their sites of initial resettlement to cluster near metropolitan areas such as the DFW region. Many of the families I met during my fieldwork had originally settled in another part of the United States and had relocated to Texas within the past ten years<sup>6</sup>.

The population of Vietnamese Americans in this region of Texas doubled during the decade between 1990 and 2000, largely as a result of this secondary migration related to reuniting with family members, fueled by a growing regional economy and a mild climate. Although the majority of the immigrant population in Texas is Latino (especially Mexican American), there is a significant number of former Vietnamese refugees in the DFW region. Over 70000 Vietnamese first-generation immigrants live there, constituting the 4<sup>th</sup> largest population concentration of Vietnamese in the United States. At least 100000 ethnically Vietnamese people, including children born in the U.S., are believed to reside in the DFW region. A substantial number of Vietnamese Americans now reside in Tarrant County, which includes the cities of Fort Worth and Arlington, where my research was conducted. There are approximately 25000 Vietnamese immigrants in Tarrant County, and many of them live in the city of Arlington where they constitute over 3% of the total population.

I used four types of research method to explore civic engagement among Vietnamese American youth: 1) participant observation at churches, temples, and in other settings related to the

development of youths' civic skills; 2) two group interviews with Vietnamese American university students (with 8-10 students in each group); 3) semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese youth who were officers of student associations on a university campus; and 4) interviews with adult youth leaders in both religious and more secular associations. This research was conducted in English, but I used bilingual Vietnamese American research assistants when interviewing adults who were not fluent in English. I conducted the interviews among youth leaders and the participant observation research by myself or in the presence of one of my research assistants. Group interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, with the help of a research assistant, but the rest of the work was recorded by me in field notes. In all cases, the identities of research participants have been protected and pseudonyms are used when referring to individuals. One arena in which I conducted research among youth was that of religious institutions.

There are different forms of religious participation among Vietnamese Americans, ranging from the sects of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai brought from Vietnam to newer evangelical Christian denominations. The two dominant religions among Vietnamese refugees are Buddhism and Catholicism, and there are eight Vietnamese Catholic parishes and six Vietnamese Buddhist temples in this region of Texas. Below, I focus upon a Buddhist Youth Association at one Buddhist Temple. This association illustrates the ways youth can work together as a community of practice teaching each other civic skills within the context of a religious institution.

## The Buddhist Youth Association

### The Temple

On any given Sunday, starting at mid-morning, the grounds of this Vietnamese Buddhist Monastery and Temple are animated by members of the temple's Buddhist Youth Association. Older members of the group lead younger children and youth in classes on Vietnamese language and culture and on the history and teachings of Buddhism. Architecturally and spatially, this temple expresses cultural distinctiveness. It is located in an economically depressed area on the southern outskirts of the city of Fort Worth, where land is cheap. This temple is not easy to find if you don't know where to look for it. When you do drive up to it, you are struck by its exotic

<sup>5</sup> These were Camp Pendleton in California; Fort Chaffee in Arkansas; Elgin Air Base in Florida; and Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> I have described the different groups and immigration in this region in more detail in Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012).

architecture in this flat prairie Texan landscape. The temple grounds are marked by ornate golden gates that come up close to the street and the temple itself is brightly colored and also highly visible from the street. Large white statues of Buddha figures are visible on the grounds behind the temple. The first temple here was constructed on the site of an older house and its surrounding land 12 years ago by Vietnamese refugees who bought the land and renovated the outer buildings. A newer temple was completed recently on the grounds.

This temple follows the Theravada tradition of Buddhism and is part of a wider Buddhist organization in Texas. It is linked to another Vietnamese Theravada temple closer to the city of Dallas. The monks and nuns at the temple are natives of Vietnam and arrived, like the families they serve, as refugees. Vietnamese ethno-Buddhism is reinforced not only through the shared national origins as Vietnamese of its spiritual leaders but also through the use of Vietnamese language at the temple (although chanting is exclusively in Pali), and the teaching of Vietnamese language, history, and culture to children and youth at the temple. In addition, traditional Vietnamese celebrations such as Tet, and important Buddhist celebrations such as the day Buddha was born, are occasions for the preparation and sharing of Vietnamese food at the temple. The focus on holding services and activities on Sunday is an adjustment to life in the United States, because Buddhist temples in Vietnam do not follow this schedule and people go to temples on a less regular basis to make offerings and pray. Activities have been rearranged in this way due to the fact that the school week runs from Monday to Friday and most other religious institutions in Texas hold services on Sundays.

According to the monk, forty families regularly participate in the temple's activities. These families are former Vietnamese refugees from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. They include elderly widows, older men and women who are retired, middle-aged parents with working-class jobs, college-age youth, and children. English language skills vary a great deal among those of the first generation who arrived as refugees, and many working adults have jobs in manual labor that do not require strong English skills. Those children either born in the United States or having arrived as children speak fluent English, which they learn at school if not at home.

There is a range of participation in the temple for adults. Religious observance at the temple includes chanting and praying during formal services, as well as coming alone to pray and

light a candle. Some people do this often and others less so. A few parents just drop off their children for Sunday activities and do not attend any services themselves. Many older women are very involved in the temple and arrive to cook and clean on a regular basis, providing meals for the monks and helping maintain the daily activities there. Men of all ages help with grounds work and building maintenance, mostly on Sundays if they are not at work. Hence there are many ways of participating in social activities at the temple that are not directly related to religious observance in the form of chanting or praying.

On some Sundays, depending on the time of year and festival schedule, the Lion Dancers practise their routine, to the delight of the younger children. Also depending on the season, there may be groups of women in the kitchen cooking, chopping food, or peeling vegetables, squatting over large bowls or pots on gas burners on the floor. Groups of men can often be found working on physical improvements to the temple land and buildings – such as the stage where children perform during festivals or, more recently, the construction of a new temple. Such activities are halted during the more «formal» Sunday dharma talk and chanting in the temple, led by the resident monk, but resume later in the afternoon. Many children stay all day on Sundays, after being dropped off by their parents. Most parents do not stay all day, either because they work on Sunday or because they must attend to other duties at their own homes on Sunday – which may be their only day off work. Just a handful of adults are present before and after the religious service of chanting and praying on most Sundays, with the exception of holidays or other special occasions.

### Youth Association Organization

About 80 children and youth are fee-paying members of the Buddhist Youth Association at this temple. Membership is voluntary and not all children who attend classes at the temple are members<sup>7</sup>. The Youth Association is divided into three levels or ranks, and each has its own leader. Those young adults who become leaders take on increasing levels of responsibility the longer they are in the association, especially related to teaching and organizing the classes. Classes on Buddhism and Vietnamese language and culture are taught by youth leaders and divided into five «grades». These grades do not, however, correspond to age or even school grade outside of the temple, but to the level of proficiency in Vietnamese. Therefore, the highest grade (5<sup>th</sup>) is not usually achieved until late adolescence. One

<sup>7</sup> At the time of my research, fees were around \$10 per month. This was a lot of money for some families with several children, and this explains why not all children were members of the Youth Association, even if they took classes and came to the Temple on Sundays.



must complete these grades in order to become a youth leader or teacher. Older youth or young adults who belong to the Buddhist Youth Association work under the direction of the youth director, Mr. Linh<sup>8</sup>, a lay leader at the temple. Mr. Linh is a middle-aged former refugee from Vietnam who works in law enforcement, speaks fluent English, and, at the time of my research, was undertaking graduate studies in criminal justice. He guides the leaders of each section and rank and encourages active participation among members of the association in its activities. The more experienced members train those who are newer. There is an effort to instill self-confidence, leadership within a group context, and an appreciation of cultural and religious traditions among these immigrant youth who also inhabit a wider world outside the walls of the temple.

The association is gender inclusive, with males and females taking equal part in leadership roles and working together. There were as many young women as men in teaching positions at the temple, and girls also took part in the Lion Dance Troupe housed at the temple. This is not an unusual feature of associative life among the Vietnamese who were part of this broader research project. Many voluntary associations had females in leadership roles and Vietnamese women had served as heads of some of these associations in this region of Texas. Some of my research participants explained that a strong legacy of mythic heroines and warriors in Vietnamese history accounted for the presence of women in leadership roles in their associations. Male and female members of the youth association wear the same attire of long blue jeans and blue military style shirts with epaulettes and buttoned front pockets. The insignia of the temple is embroidered over one pocket and there are markings on each shirt indicating the number of years this person has served in the youth group. There is, therefore, no difference between the male and female uniforms signaling membership in the Buddhist Youth Association.

The uniforms resemble scouting attire, and there are vaguely paramilitary aspects to the costumes, which differ from the simple robes worn by the monks, nuns and male children who assist in temple ceremonies of a religious nature. Whilst the youth director remarked that this group was «like scouts», it is not part of the Boy Scouts or Girls Scouts international organizations. However, during summer camps organized by the temple's Buddhist Youth Association, similar skills are taught. These include «survival skills» such as learning how to live outdoors, how to build and cook upon an open fire, and how to use a compass. And much like scouting organizations, the Buddhist Youth Association places significant emphasis upon

cooperation in small groups and hierarchical ranking. More secular scout clubs can be found at Vietnamese temples in the region (but not this one), and there is a Vietnamese form of scouting that exists separately from American scouting which was brought to the United States by refugees. We should not, therefore, see youth groups or scouting as something «new» or as a mode of sociality acquired in the United States, but as a sphere for training youth that has origins in Vietnam and is being adapted in the new context.

### Youth Leaders and Teachers

It is the members of the Youth Association who are «in charge» of the children and who organize their activities, under the guidance of the adult youth leader, on Sundays. From 30-40 children remain on the grounds from 9 in the morning until about 5 in the afternoon. They are served lunch by mothers, Mr. Linh (who often cooks the food himself), and older youths who are members of the Youth Association. The children also have some free play time during this period and if the weather is good, which it frequently is in this temperate Texas climate, they play outdoors or just chat with each other in small groups. Their language of communication among themselves is English. At around 1pm, there is a meditation, chanting, and prayer ceremony held in the temple. The children attend this session, and parents and older adults also arrive to participate. The monk generally offers a «dharma talk» with spiritual guidance during this ceremony. When it ends, some children are picked up by their parents, but about half stay and play on the grounds.

The Buddhist Youth Association plays a vital role in temple organization and is central to the activities taking place on Sundays. The Buddhist Youth Association also helps to organize a summer camp at the Temple and sponsors overnight camping trips. It also helps organize the Tet (New Year) Festival at the Temple and the celebration of Mother's Day. In addition, the teachers in the Youth Association are «honored» by children and their parents in a Teacher Appreciation Day which will be described below. In this way, the youth and young adults who are the leaders in this association gain social and civic skills through active participation. They learn from each other, and they teach the younger children. They plan the lessons for the students in Buddhist teachings and the Vietnamese language, they meet to discuss the needs of the children, they meet to plan ceremonies such as the celebration of Buddha's birthday or the day to honor teachers. While doing so, they also chat informally among themselves about their lives, schooling, and jobs. They receive guid-

<sup>8</sup>This is a pseudonym, as are all other proper names used in this article.

ance from the youth leader, who encourages and mentors them. Whereas the temple may provide a source of social support and comfort to the first generation who seek a familiar refuge from the demands of adjusting to a new life in a new language, for the children of refugees the temple is a community of practice for learning new skills that help them gain confidence as they participate in broader public spheres. In interviews, the monk and Mr. Linh reported their aim to «train» the youth to be leaders through their involvement in this association. In order to illustrate how the Youth Association forms a community of practice and how civic skills are learned through its activities, the next section will describe the Teacher Appreciation Day.

### Teacher Appreciation Day

On this Sunday, children, their parents and temple teachers assembled in the temple for the annual ceremony honoring teachers. Students were encouraged to present letters «thank-ing» their teachers, who were members of the Buddhist Youth Association. All of the teachers and those in training were introduced to an audience of parents (about 35 in attendance). The schedule for the ceremony included a welcome introduction and talk by Mr. Linh, the adult youth mentor, then an introduction of all six teachers (four female and two male) and a few brief remarks by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, then students who had done well in their language and religious classes were presented with certificates, then teachers received gifts from their students, and finally a slide show depicting the year's activities was displayed. This brought delight to the children as they saw images of themselves and their teachers.

Mr. Linh spoke to parents about their responsibilities. He encouraged them to be more involved in their children's activities both at the Temple and at home. He warned them to be more vigilant in monitoring what their children were looking at on the internet at home and to be certain they were studying when they said they were. Mr. Linh reminded parents that they could block certain websites and told them to ask one of the youth leaders if they did not know how to do this. He said that they needed to make sure their children got to the Temple each week for these classes and that it was important for them to be punctual. He noted that whereas the Temple only asked children to come once a week on Sundays, the Catholic Church required children to come to Church an extra day a week for Catechism instruction. As someone who works in law enforcement, Mr. Linh was particularly concerned with anti-gang activities. He warned parents about the dangers of gang symbols and images on clothing, even if children are not aware that they are wearing something that communicates gang affiliation. His final remarks were about the need to pay fees and he asked the Treasurer, a

Youth Association member, to hand out a list of who owed fees to the Association. He also asked parents to volunteer to purchase food for the lunch served each Sunday, stating that he would reimburse them for these expenses. One father asked if the parents should form a committee to organize this and it was decided that a «helping group» of parents would be formed.

When the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Manh, spoke after all the teachers were introduced, his remarks focused on the Vietnamese language and he urged parents to reinforce this and practise Vietnamese at home with their children so that they would retain knowledge of two languages (English and Vietnamese). Manh also said that they were teaching history and proverbs in Vietnamese to the kids, not just reading and writing. Finally, he let parents know that after 5<sup>th</sup> grade, children could become youth leaders themselves and start to help out and could remain at this level for a few years and continue attending classes.

After a brief period of taking questions from parents, most of them about language issues, the children gave presents and roses to their teachers. Then the monk gave each teacher a calendar scroll. The ceremony ended with a slideshow of images of Tet, a camping trip, Sunday activities, people cooking at the temple, the circle the children form at the end of each Sunday, and their celebration of Halloween (an American holiday).

This ceremony shows the ways in which the Youth Association forms a community of practice for the older youth who eventually become leaders and teachers. They have gained a particular set of perspectives on how to socialize younger children at the Temple including the importance of retaining the Vietnamese language, learning about Vietnamese history and traditions. They have also learned many organizational skills about handling money (fees paid to the Association), holding ceremonies, working together as a team of teachers who coordinate the curriculum, and learning how to interact with parents who are themselves learning how to raise children in this new setting of America. As Lave and Wenger (1991) describe for communities of practice, the youth leaders move from peripheral positions (as younger children and those with fewer skills in the lower grades) to central positions of leadership (as teachers) in the Association. This is a form of apprenticeship, in which older peers teach younger peers and help guide them through the stages.

At the same time, this ceremony has links to older Vietnamese traditions valuing teachers and takes place within an ethno-religious institution linked to the refugees' homeland. In this setting, it is not uncommon for teachers to offer parents moral education. Several research participants told me this reflects hierarchical norms in Vietnam in which the monk or priest is elevated above the teacher who is in turn elevated above the par-



ent. The monk described children as a «white sheet of paper». This metaphor is also found in research on childhood in Vietnam by Rydström (2001). This idea of moral instruction for children who are not already formed or «written» upon is one that informs the emphasis on training provided by the Youth Association. This illustrates the ways that the association is an institution fostering forms of vernacular, cultural citizenship, a blending of Vietnamese values and forms of leadership that help youth become civically engaged in the United States.

### From religious participation to civic skills

How does participation in an ethno-religious youth association translate outside the temple to the wider society? How are the skills learned at the temple or church put into practise in other realms? Buddhist youth mention youth groups at their temples as important sites of civic learning. Mai, a young woman I interviewed, was the President of the Vietnamese Student Association at her university, and also very active in her Buddhist temple association. She was born in the United States to former refugee parents, and felt strongly that she could retain her multiple identities and participate in various social fields in the United States while still being a practising Vietnamese Buddhist. One young man, Tuan, who, at the time of my interview, was a Buddhist youth leader in training in his mid-20s told me that «being involved in the youth association increased my self-confidence and this helps me advance in my career, so now I want to help out as a youth leader». Tuan arrived in the U.S. from Vietnam with his family as a teen-ager, and was working as a professional in the computer industry at the time of our interview. As with many Vietnamese youth, Tuan drifted away from regular temple attendance during his college years, but returned to help out after graduation. He feels that participating in the youth group helped him with public speaking and learning how to manage groups. He expressed the mission of the Youth Association in this way: «to encourage Vietnamese kids to stay in school, stay with parents (meaning not to be out on the streets), and stay with Buddhist temples». Tuan's Vietnamese ethno-Buddhism provided a basis for developing leadership skills beyond the temple, at work and in the community, and he adopts a strategy of combining educational achievement, family ties, and religious participation. Many of the youth leaders interviewed spoke of the ways they drew upon traditional Vietnamese values to succeed in leadership positions beyond their ethnic group. There is also recognition, in the case of Tuan profiled above, of the value of helping mentor youth and encouraging peer learning.

We can see the Buddhist youth group teaching civic skill in a context that «filters» participation through the lens of being Vietnamese American and helps peers develop forms of cop-

ing with and also becoming actively involved in the wider civic sphere. The Buddhist Youth Association is a community of practice through which younger members learn from older members how to participate, how to work in groups, how to negotiate Vietnamese and American identities, and how to 'belong' to the new host society. As children move through the ranks of these youth associations, they move closer to becoming «full participants» in these communities of practice. They learn about the organization and structure of the group, adopt its worldview, share information with each other, and acquire leadership skills and a sense of responsibility. The youth leaders feel that they set an example through their own behavior for those coming up in the ranks.

### Conclusions

Vietnamese American youth live in neighborhoods and attend schools with a diverse group (including many non-Vietnamese) of children and adults. The aim of the youth association discussed here is not to isolate these youth from American society and reinforce Vietnamese culture but, rather, to provide a sense of connection to their own religious and cultural heritage that will provide a source of social support from which they can then move to become civically engaged with the wider society. As Vietnamese Americans who attained leadership roles in the youth associations in their temples assume adult roles, in fields such as teaching, medicine, or business, they can utilize the skills they have learned to help them negotiate the different social spaces they occupy.

The Buddhist Youth Association is located in an institution headed by adults and part of a larger infrastructure and established religious tradition with deep historical and broad geographic reach. It nevertheless provides a semi-autonomous space for youth to teach each other how to be Vietnamese and how to be American, alongside their religious identities. It is significant to focus on organizations like these through which immigrant youth learn civic skills not from the so-called «mainstream» or dominant society directly, but through informal interactions with their peers and co-ethnics. This promotes a form of cultural or vernacular citizenship (Rosaldo 1997) that has wider implications than the legal and juridical definitions of citizenship. It is about participation and a sense of «belonging» without leaving behind a sense of ethnic identity. And it represents a form of learning by doing and by observing, through apprenticeship in communities of practice.

The strongly ethno-religious component to the Buddhist Monastery and Temple profiled here reinforces Vietnamese language and culture. There is a slogan about «Viet pride»

used by Vietnamese American youth, a slogan that encourages them to be proud of their heritage at the same time that they are participating in activities beyond their families and other co-ethnics. By learning civic skills and gaining leadership training in the context of a Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association, these young people are teaching each other that they can be Vietnamese, Buddhist, and American. They can acquire skills of confidence and leadership at the temple which can be deployed outside of the temple walls.

This analysis of ethno-religious youth groups underscores the importance of peer learning for immigrant youth and sheds light on ways that participatory citizenship is fostered among the second generation. These groups also promote the development of friendship and social support among peers who share

a similar background and face similar challenges as the children of former refugees. But youth associations do not only supply forms of social support and reinforce ethnic ties, they also provide skills in leadership, in organization, in working with others, and in helping others that can be transferred into other realms of social life. Thus in order to understand the present and future of the Vietnamese diaspora, future work must pay closer attention to youth organizations outside of school that foster civic skills. By seeing youth groups as communities of practice among peers, we can see how vital it is for youth to learn civic skills in contexts that engage them directly and through which their own cultural heritage and values are part of the process.

## REFERENCES

### **Aguilar-San Juan Karen**

2009. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

### **Bankston Carl L. III, Zhou Min**

1996. «The ethnic church, ethnic identification, and the social adjustment of Vietnamese adolescents». *Review of Religious Research* 38: 18-37.

### **Brettell Caroline B., Reed-Danahay Deborah**

2012. *Civic Engagements: The Citizenship Practices of Indian and Vietnamese Immigrants*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

### **Caplan Nathan, Choy Marcella, Whitmore John K.**

1991. *Children of the Boat People: A Study of Educational Success*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

### **Gibson Margaret**

1988. *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

### **Huynh Thuan**

2000. «Center for Vietnamese Buddhism: Recreating home», in: Helen Rose Ebaugh, Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*, p. 45-66. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

### **Kelly Gail**

1997. *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of Vietnamese Immigration to the United States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

### **Kibria Nazli**

1993. *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

### **Lave Jeanne, Wenger Etienne**

1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

### **Paradise Ruth, Rogoff Barbara**

2009. «Side by side: Learning by observing and pitching in». *Ethos* 37: 102-138.

### **Reed-Danahay Deborah**

1993. «Talking about resistance: Ethnography and theory in rural France». *Anthropological Quarterly* 66(4): 221-246.

1996a. *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

1996b. «Champagne and chocolate: Taste and inversion in a French wedding ritual». *American Anthropologist* 98(4): 750-761.

1996c. «Persistence et adaptation d'un rite de passage: la fête communale et les conscrits dans une commune du Puy-de-Dôme». *Revue d'Auvergne* 539(2): 130-6.

2007. «De la résistance: ethnographie et théorie dans la France rurale». *Education et Sociétés* 19(1):115-131. [Revision and translation of Reed-Danahay 1993]

2008. «From the 'imagined community' to 'communities of practice': Immigrant belonging among Vietnamese Americans», in: Deborah Reed-Danahay, Caroline B. Brettell (Eds), *Citizenship, Political Engagement, and Belonging: Immigrants in Europe and the United States*, p. 78-98. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

2010. «Citizenship, immigration, and embodiment: Vietnamese Americans in north-central Texas», in: Meenakshi Thapan (Ed.), *Contested Spaces: Citizenship and Belonging in Contemporary Times*, p. 101-119. Hyderabad, India: Orient Blackswan.

#### Rosaldo Renato

1994. «Social justice and the crisis of national communities», in: Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iverson (Eds), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, p. 239-52. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

1997. «Cultural citizenship, inequality, and multiculturalism», in: William V. Flores, Rina Benmayor (Eds), *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Politics*, p. 27-38. Boston: Beacon Press.

#### Rosaldo Renato, Flores William V.

1997. «Identity, conflict, and evolving Latino communities: Cultural citizenship in San Jose, California», in: William V. Flores, Rina Benmayor (Eds), *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Politics*, p. 57-96. Boston: Beacon Press.

#### Rutledge Paul

1985. *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-identity: A Vietnamese Community*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

1992. *The Vietnamese Experience in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

#### Rydström, Helle

2001. «Like a white piece of paper»: Embodiment and the moral upbringing of Vietnamese children». *Ethnos* 66: 394-413.

#### Stepick Alex, Stepick Carol Dutton, Labissière Yves

2002. «Becoming American, constructing ethnicity: Immigrant youth and civic engagement». *Applied Developmental Science* 6: 247-257.

2008. «South Florida's immigrant youth and civic engagement: Major engagement, minor differences». *Applied Developmental Science* 12: 57-65.

#### Trevino Robert

2006. *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston*. Durham: University of North Carolina Press.

#### Vigil James Diego, Yun Steve C., Cheng Jesse

2004. «A shortcut to the American dream? Vietnamese youth gangs in little Saigon», in: Jennifer Lee, Min Zhou (Eds), *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, Ethnicity*, p. 207-220. New York: Routledge.

#### Wenger Etienne

2006. *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/>.

#### Zhou Min, Bankston Carl L. III

1998. *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

## AUTHOR

**Deborah Reed-Danahay** is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for European Studies at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). She has recently published (with coauthor Caroline Brettell) *Civic Engagements: The Citizenship Practices of Asian and Vietnamese Immigrants* (Stanford, 2012) and co-edited (with Brettell) the volume *Citizenship, Political Engagement, and Belonging: Immigrants in Europe and the United States* (Rutgers, 2008). Her other books include *Locating Bourdieu* (Indiana, 2005), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Berg 1997), and *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling* (Cambridge, 1996). She is currently working on the Vietnamese diaspora in France and the United States, but also continues her interests in rural Auvergne and in social theory.

*Department of Anthropology, 380 MFAC, Ellicott Complex, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14261-0026, USA*  
*der5@buffalo.edu*