

# Độc Kinh: A Vietnamese Sonic Landscape

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When mainstream—primarily English-speaking—American Catholics hear the term “Vietnamese Catholicism,” what do they think? Do they know enough about the Catholic Church in Vietnam to think of the apparition of Our Lady of La Vang in 1798? Do they picture young Asian women in flowing áo dài dresses doing subtle liturgical movement? Do they know about the heritage of the 117 Vietnamese martyrs? How about the rich blend of Christianity with Confucian and Taoist traditions that gives rise to the reverence of ancestors and honoring elders during Tết (Lunar New Year)? Or the deep respect for parents, as attested in their liturgical repertoire?

In comparison to the influence of other Asian cultures on Catholicism, what is unique and most impressive about Vietnamese Catholicism is the chanting. However,



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*a series of instrumental meditations drawn from Vietnamese liturgical melodies.*

very little about this heritage has been translated into English, and unless one is fortunate to be close to a Vietnamese American community and able to attend Mass in Vietnamese, few mainstream Americans have ever experienced the gentle sonic landscape that permeates the atmosphere of Vietnamese ritual.

Since mainstream Americans speak a non-tonal language, the concept of “độc kinh” is difficult to comprehend. First, *độc kinh* is not a song or a composition created and transcribed by a particular individual, nor is it a traditional folk repertoire—melodies passed from generation to generation with unknown authorship. Although *độc kinh* is normally performed a cappella, it is not chant in the genre of Gregorian, Byzantine, or other Orthodox chant traditions.

The Vietnamese enhance their prayer texts by engaging in a vocal technique that has no correlation in Western musical literature. The flow of sound, neither hymn or song, is based on their tonal language. Vietnamese, spoken by more than 94 million people across the globe, is a monosyllabic and tonal language. Each morpheme may have six different meanings, depending on six different tones or accent marks. See the graph of “Vietnamese Tones” on page twenty-three to understand that when one speaks “ma,” it can have numerous meanings, depending upon whether the tone is high, middle, or low, rising or falling in pitch. It may sound to Westerners as though Vietnamese are singing when they speak.

In addition, there are regional variations to these six tones. The fifty-nine provinces of Vietnam can be grouped into three main historical and cultural regions: Northern, Central, and Southern. This gives rise to three dialects (along with regional vocabulary, traditional songs and dress, cuisine, and a character unique to each region). The chart “Musical Transcriptions of Different Accents in Time and Space” on page twenty-three gives an approximate comparison of the Northern, Central, and Southern accents, if they were to be transcribed by phonologists. Note that an 1838 dictionary, attempting to group the entire country's language onto one chart, had tone #4 *mả* in a much higher range than usually spoken by those from North or Central Vietnam. Note also that the six distinct tones in the Northern Accent are in essence reduced to five in the Central and Southern Accents (*mã = mả*).



Mass of the Vietnamese Martyrs, celebrated in Phuc Nhac, Vietnam

### Praying with Devotion in Liturgy and the Rest of Life

The sidebar on page twenty-five lists several YouTube clips that will give the reader an aural experience of what has been written so far. In the first “Hail Mary” clip, Kyle first speaks one phrase of the Hail Mary prayer. Notice his pitch falling and rising at various words. Then Kyle chants the same phrase in a *đọc kinh* style; you will notice the same exact falling and rising of pitch. He repeats this couplet with another phrase, and then chants the entire prayer.

The musical notation on the screen and transcription on page twenty-four is an approximation of what Kyle is chanting. Vietnamese do not transcribe *đọc kinh*. How could they? There are so many minute variations in performance practice. Pitches and slurs are determined by region (Northern, Central, Southern) and various cultural and migration factors. Since Kyle is Vietnamese American, he does not chant in a “pure” Southern accent; he left his homeland when he was a teenager. Across town, in his city of San Jose, California, other Vietnamese Americans would chant the Hail Mary with more use of the “G” note

and different slurs. So non-Vietnamese musicians must be aware that Vietnamese Americans across the country will not chant this prayer exactly as transcribed here or as heard on the video clip.

Vietnamese Catholics use the term *đọc kinh* for this style of chanting. A literal translation of the phrase would be “to read a prayer.” A poetic translation of this phrase—to intone a religious text—would be “to pray with devotion.” Vietnamese have three choices of how to approach a religious text: recite it; intone it, adding breath to the pitch of their tonal language—*đọc kinh*; or sing the text to a composed melody. All devotional prayers, especially daily morning and evening prayers, are chanted in *đọc kinh*. They are chanted at home or at church before the early morning Mass or in the evening/night gathering of the family at the designated prayer corner of the household.

Books of Vietnamese Catholic devotional prayers are numerous. The earliest versions were compiled by one of the first missionaries to evangelize Vietnam, Alexander de Rhodes (1591–1660). None of these books contain one note of music, yet all of these prayers are chanted.

For English-speaking Catholics, incorporating the

## Chart of Vietnamese Tones

Tone Name	Description	Diacritic	Example	Translation
<b>Thanh ngang</b>	plain mid/high tone	(no mark/accent)	a ma	ghost, phantom
<b>Thanh huyền</b>	plain low falling tone	( ` ) grave accent	à mà	but, and, which
<b>Thanh sắc</b>	high rising tone	( ´ ) acute accent	á má	mother or cheek
<b>Thanh hỏi</b>	dipping, low-high tone	( ˆ ) hook	â mã	grave, tomb
<b>Thanh ngã</b>	constricted/glottal middle-high tone	( ~ ) tilde	ã mã	horse
<b>Thanh nặng</b>	constricted/glottal low tone	( . ) ‘dot below’	ạ mạ	young rice plant

Adapted from "Music Ministry: The Inculturation of Liturgical Vocal Music in Vietnam" by Joseph Nguyễn Xuân Thảo, OFM, © 2008, page 66.

### Musical Transcription of Different Accents in Time and Space

A) Taberd (*Từ Điển Annam-Latinh [Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary] 1838*)

1.Ma      2.Mà      3.Mã      4.Mả      5.Má      6.Mạ

B) Trần Văn Khê (*Northern Accent by 1962*)

1.Ma      2.Mà      3.Mã      4.Mả      5.Má      6.Mạ

C) Nguyễn Xuân Thảo (*South Central Accent, based partly on Đoàn Xuân Kiên, 2003*)

1.Ma      2.Mà      3.Mã      4.Mả      5.Má      6.Mạ

D) Trần Văn Khê (*Southern Accent by 1962*)

1.Ma      2.Mà      3.Mã      4.Mả      5.Má      6.Mạ

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practice of “praying with devotion” at Mass might mean enhancing the ritual texts by intoning the dialogues, responses, and prayers. The 2011 English translation of the *Roman Missal* incorporates revised, adapted, and newly composed chant melodies within the Order of Mass and with the special texts of certain celebrations, placing the notated versions in prominence before the printed texts, signifying that a lyrical liturgy is normative and preferred. If you open the Vietnamese *Sách Lễ Rôma*, the second edition of the Vietnamese *Roman Missal* (1983), you will not find one musical note. And if you open the third edition of the Vietnamese *Order of Mass*, promul-

gated for mandatory use on Easter, 2006, you will find that the translation is closer to the Latin, perhaps, but again not one note of music can be found. Yet within the Vietnamese Mass, both in South East Asia and overseas, chanting is normative.

The assembly and presider in the three YouTube clips (see the sidebar) have never read musical notes for what they are singing. They have never seen a transcription of their chanting. No choir director taught the melodic patterns to them. It is *đọc kinh*, a mesmerizing wave of pitch and rhythm during the liturgy that elevates the text with a prayerful, meditative reverence. No one (priest,

# Kinh Kính Mừng (Hail Mary)

Vietnamese Chant  
(Southern Accent)

Kính mừng Ma - ri - a đầy ơn phúc, Đức Chúa Trời ở cùng Bà, Bà có phúc lạ  
Hail Mary, full of grace...

hơn mọi người nữ và Giê - su con lòng Bà gồm phúc lạ.

Thánh Ma - ri - a Đức Mẹ Chúa Trời cầu cho chúng con là kẻ  
Holy Mary, Mother of God...

có tội khi này và trong giờ lâm tử. A - men

## Asian Chanting: Cross-Cultural Comparison

Vietnamese Catholics are not unique in tonal chanting. Hmong and Lao Catholics, in South East Asia and abroad, also intone their prayers and Eucharistic liturgy based on the tones of their respective languages. Because of historical evangelization and regional proximity, Vietnamese chanting probably influenced these two ethnic groups. But few scholars, if any, have attempted to re-

search or publish texts on the musical correlation among Catholics in these three cultures.

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deacon, lector, or the whole assembly) is exempt from intoning the prayers or dialogues, because they believe they are “not singers.” That all engage in *đọc kinh* is the cultural norm. Note in the YouTube clip that the lector intones “The Word of the Lord,” and the rest of the assembly automatically responds in *đọc kinh*. Most presiders will chant all the orations and the Eucharistic Prayer in *đọc kinh*. Watch how effortlessly the priest in the third Mass clip segues during the prayer over the offerings from recitation to chanting. For Vietnamese Catholics, chanting prayers is a totally unreflective act. *Đọc kinh* is part of their blood and bones, instilled since childhood with home devotional practices and reinforced with every experience of liturgy.

It is worth noting that the Fujianese, an ethnic group in China, intone their prayers, especially the recitation of the rosary in the Fuzhou dialect. Perhaps other Chinese dialects also chant using the tones of their native language, but again, almost no research has been published in English on this topic.

This raises the question of the origin of tonal chanting. Why do the Vietnamese (influencing the Lao and Hmong) and some Chinese intone prayers, while others do not? Thai, Cantonese, and Taiwanese are tonal languages, but any tourist to Bangkok, Hong Kong, or Taipei who attends Catholic Mass in the native language will not hear the Order of Mass intoned. Since Portuguese and French missionaries did not intone their prayers when they arrived in Vietnam, surely they did not instill this practice. What could be the origin of *đọc kinh*?

The answer is found in non-Christian and regional practice. In both Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, ancient scholars never *read* poetry; it was chanted. Whether for the Veneration of the Ancestors at Lunar New Year or at solemn civic proclamations, special texts were always intoned. In Buddhist temples, the monks use a form of heightened speech, based on the tones of the local language, to proclaim teachings, poems, and prayers for ceremonial usage.

Some researchers have postulated that tonal chanting became popular in Vietnam during the Chinese occupation (111 BCE to 938 CE). While the Chinese were trying to suppress local culture, the Vietnamese memorized their poetry and literature as a technique of oral preservation. Chanting the texts served as a memory aid. Even today, in both Buddhism and



Mass during a national Vietnamese youth gathering in the United States

Christianity, chanting continues to be used in various Asian cultures as a retention device and especially as a technique used by children to memorize catechism and prayer texts. So from the beginning, when the Gospel first arrived in Vietnam, the Vietnamese were chanting devotional prayers and their catechism—a practice that continues to this day. When the Mass was allowed in the vernacular after Vatican II, it was natural for the clergy and faithful to utilize a *đọc kinh* technique for honoring the ritual texts with this centuries-old cultural practice.

### Further Explorations and Pastoral Questions for Today

This article is a mere introduction to the multifaceted topic of monophonic chanting in Vietnamese Catholicism. (Note that even this use of the term *đọc kinh* would be confusing to most Vietnamese Catholics. Ethnic use of the term usually refers to the act of engaging in devotional prayers, not the designation of a performance practice.) Omitted from this overview has been any comparison between *đọc kinh* and Vietnamese folk poetry and folksongs. In the Catholic realm, we have made no exploration of the relation between *đọc kinh* and *đọc sách* (devotional meditative reading) or *ca vãn* (devotional singing). Numerous articles and essays have been published in Vietnamese exploring different melodic formulas (called *cung đọc kinh*, *cung đọc sách*, or *cung sách*) that are a style of cantillation based on the tonal language. The selection and use of these formulas (two-note, three-note, four-note, and five-note) depend on the language tones used in a specific diocese (that is, regional variation), sometimes on the kind of prayerbook being chanted, and mainly on the liturgical season. Examination of these topics would eventually point to an entirely new arena of discussion: the relationship between the Vietnamese tonal language and their Catholic hymns, itemizing a composer's frequent use of modes as dictated by the rising and falling pitch of the Vietnamese lyrics.

Before concluding, however, it is worth reflecting on how an awareness of Vietnamese chanting can be of service to mainstream—primarily English-speaking—American Catholics. Those involved in intercultural celebrations, especially at the diocesan or national conference level, often default when considering a Vietnamese contribution to the liturgy to a procession of young girls or women in traditional dresses, presenting the gifts to be offered in the Eucharist. Consider, instead, inviting members of the Vietnamese community to chant some prayers in *đọc kinh* as a prelude, or perhaps ask them to lead the psalm or a post-Communion song in this chanting technique. This contribution will expose the other members of the assembly to the unique sonic landscape of this Asian culture.

Attendance at a Lao, Hmong, or Vietnamese liturgy will instill in seminarians and deacons in ministry formation a comprehension that such liturgy is foundationally lyrical.

These communities demonstrate that ritual dialogues are often most successfully performed a cappella. For clergy and music directors, the consistency of the same *đọc kinh* chant Sunday after Sunday is a reminder that repetition of the chanted Order of Mass and sung dialogues fosters assembly participation, which stands in tension with the American cultural value placed on newness and continual change.

“Vietnamese Catholicism”: Few Americans living in the United States ever encountered a Vietnamese before April 30, 1975, but now they exist in communities across the United States, from Seattle to San Diego and from Washington, DC, to New Orleans. *Đọc kinh* is just one of their many gifts waiting to be discovered by all American Catholics.

### Vietnamese Chanting on YouTube

**Learning Vietnamese Pronunciation—Tones.** Numerous clips are available explaining the six tones of the Vietnamese language. One example in which a teacher speaks samples of the same word for each tone can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/Viettones>

**Vietnamese Chanting: Catholic Mass—Đọc Kinh.** Here are three clips created for this article giving examples of *đọc kinh* chanting (Southern Accent) from a liturgy in Vietnam. One can hear samples of the dialogues between the priest and the rest of the assembly, the lector intoning the ending of the reading, extended chanting of the Nicene Creed, and a chanted Preface:

Part One: <http://tinyurl.com/VietMass001a>

Part Two: <http://tinyurl.com/VietMass002>

Part Three: <http://tinyurl.com/VietMass002a>

**Vietnamese Chanting: Hail Mary—Đọc Kinh.** A clip created for this article, in which the words of the prayer are first spoken and then chanted in the typical *đọc kinh* style (Southern Accent), allowing the listener to comprehend the correlation between the spoken and intoned text, is here: <http://tinyurl.com/HailMarydockinh>

**Fujianese Catholics Chant the Hail Mary.** Fujianese Americans are based, for the most part, in New York and the East Coast of the United States. Compare the chanting of the Hail Mary in *đọc kinh* style (Southern Accent) with this intonation of the prayer by a Catholic family originally from Fujian, China, living in Silver Spring, Maryland: <http://tinyurl.com/Fujianesehailmary>

**Hmong Episcopalians Chant the Hail Mary.** Although Hmong membership in the Episcopal Church is small, this video shows Hmong Episcopalians from a church in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Roman Catholic Hmong, based mostly in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, use the same Marian text and intonation heard on this clip. Both Hmong and Lao Catholics use their tonal language to chant their prayers and the Mass texts in ways similar to and probably influenced by Vietnamese Catholics: <http://tinyurl.com/Hmonghailmary>