

*The M'Nong Subgroups*

## CHAPTER 12. THE M'NONG

### SECTION I

#### INTRODUCTION

The M'ngong are one of the smaller Montagnard groups of the Republic of Vietnam. Divided into five distinct subgroups, the M'ngong inhabit the militarily important western sector of the mountainous Darlac Plateau adjacent to the Republic of Vietnam-Cambodia border. Of Mon-Khmer ethnic stock, the M'ngong speak a language related to that of the Ma and the Stieng, other highland groups that border on the M'ngong area.

The M'ngong are a matrilineal group and live in villages which, individually, form the highest level of political organization they have attained. The M'ngong have a subsistence economy based primarily on the slash-and-burn cultivation of rice, although some of the M'ngong subgroups engage in wet-rice agriculture. The M'ngong also engage in hunting, fishing, and a limited amount of trade.

The M'ngong are an intensely religious people who believe they live in constant interaction with animistic spirits. The M'ngong have a reputation for belligerence and until recently have remained comparatively isolated from outside influence.

#### Name and Size of Group

The M'ngong population has been estimated at between 15,000 and 40,000: South Vietnamese estimates tend toward the lower figure; North Vietnamese estimates, toward the higher. The discrepancy can perhaps be accounted for by the considerable number of M'ngong who live in Cambodia, believed by a recent source to be about 15,000.<sup>1</sup>

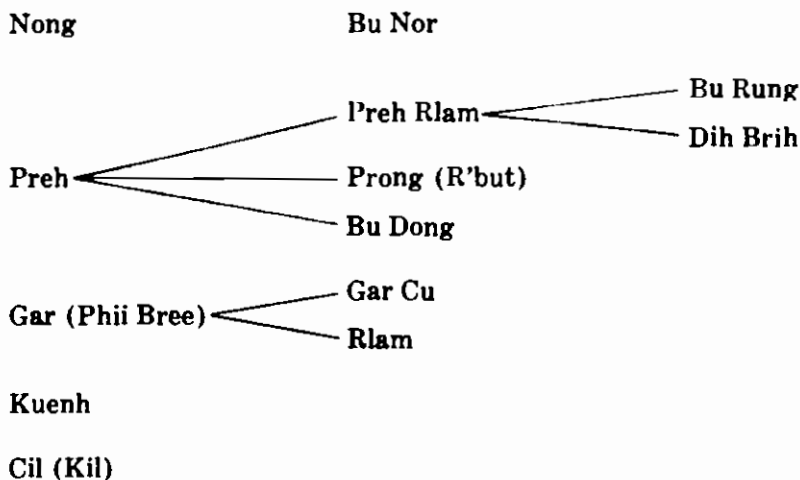
Although clear distinctions among M'ngong subgroups are difficult to establish, certain locales and tribal subdivisions have been fairly well identified. Anthropologists generally agree on five major subgroups of the M'ngong: the Nong or Dih, the Preh, the Gar or Phii Bree, the Cil or Kil,\* and the Kuenh.<sup>2</sup> Several of these major subgroups have further divisions within them.

The Bu Nor are related to the Nong. There are three related

\* The M'ngong Cil (Kil) are not to be confused with the Kobo group called Kil. See note on page 39 of chapter 10: The Kobo.

groups within the Preh subgroup: the Preh Rlam, the Prong, or R'but, and the Bu Dong. The Preh Rlam, in turn, comprise the Bu Rung and Dih Brih groups. The Gar contain two related groups: The Gar Cu and the Rlam. No subdivisions have been reported within the Cil and Kuenh.<sup>3</sup>

The M'ngong: Major Subgroups and Related Groups



Location

The M'ngong live south and west of Ban Me Thuot and inhabit parts of the provinces of Darlac, Quang Duc, and Tuyen Duc. A large number of M'ngong live across the border in southern Cambodia. There are also a few scattered M'ngong villages in the provinces of Phuoc Long and Khanh Hoa.

The villages of the Gar dot the banks of the Krong River, which flows westward from the Annamite Mountains through rugged mountain terrain and then into rolling hills. The Gar also inhabit the higher lands to the north and south of this area.<sup>4</sup> The Gar Cu inhabit the higher mountains near Lang Bian Mountain, north of Dalat. The Rlam group of the Gar occupy the swampy lowlands around Lake Daak Lak.

The Preh and Preh Rlam inhabit the area west of Lake Daak Lak. The Dih Brih and Bu Rung groups of the Preh Rlam are located west and southwest of the lake. The Bu Dong group of the Preh live in several villages in the Ban Don area near the Srepok River, northwest of Ban Me Thuot. The Prong live in the region of the High Donnai, east of Gia Nghia. The name High Donnai designates the upper reaches of the Dongnai River, which flows west from its source near Dalat, through Quang Duc Province, and then turns south toward Saigon.

The Nong and Bu Nor inhabit the area southwest of Lake Daak

Lak near the Cambodian border. The Kuenh subgroup is found in the Lang Bian area, southeast of the Rlam and east of the Gar.<sup>5</sup> The Cil inhabit an area northeast of Dalat, between the Lat subgroup of the Koho tribe and the northern Raglai.<sup>6</sup>

The M'ngong groups have as neighbors the Kpa, Ktul, K'drao, and Blo subgroups of the Rhade to the north; the Raglai to the east; various Koho groups to the south (the Ma, Tring, Lat and Rien) and the Stieng in the southwest. In the west, numerous Cambodian tribal peoples are the neighbors of the M'ngong.

#### Terrain Analysis

The numerous M'ngong groups are thinly dispersed over an area of high mountains, low-lying marshes and bogs, and verdant forests. South of the town of Ban Me Thuot is Lake Daak Lak, lying in a broad depression covered with marshes. Into this area flows the Srepok or Krong River from the Annamite Mountains in the east. The ample water supply to this flatland makes it suitable for irrigation and wet-rice cultivation.<sup>7</sup> South of Lake Daak Lak, the high granite and volcanic rock mountains of the Lang Bian area rise to an altitude of roughly 6,000 feet.<sup>8</sup>

South of the Srepok River, between Lake Daak Lak and the Cambodian border, is an area consisting mostly of tropical forest which extends south to the High Donnai. Averaging 1.6 persons per square kilometer, this forest area has few sections where the population density reaches seven persons per square kilometer. The more populated sections are southward, near the edge of the High Donnai, where the fertility of the land improves somewhat, especially in the valleys. The High Donnai itself is virtually uninhabited.

The monsoon forest of the M'ngong area is open and generally easily traversed during the dry season. Usually from November through March—the dry season—the vegetation turns brown, and the trees lose their leaves. Then, from about April through mid-September, the rainfall gradually increases, reaching a maximum during July and August. The southwest monsoon of the wet summer season then slowly gives way to the northeast monsoon of the dry winter months. Even during the summer, however, strong, dry summer winds may result in excessive evaporation.<sup>9</sup>

The soil in the M'ngong area is generally poor. As a result, except in the lowland marshes, the M'ngong practice the swidden, or slash-and-burn, method of cultivation. The term *mir* is used both for this type of cultivation and for the plots of land which are cleared by this method.\* After forest land has been cultivated and then abandoned by the M'ngong, small plants appear first, then bamboo

\* S. "Economic Organization," p. 507.

and wild bananas. Protected by the bamboo, seedling trees thrive in the dense undergrowth, and, within a few years, a new forest begins to develop. During the dry season, however, fires are frequent and both the number and kinds of trees are reduced; only trees most resistant to fire survive, and seedlings and saplings become increasingly sparse. In the mature forest, much of the undergrowth is made up of a tall, coarse grass (*imperata cylindrica*) called *tranh* in Vietnam. Animals graze on the grass when it is young; when it turns dry and yellow, the M'ngong use it to thatch their huts.

Although sparsely inhabited by human beings, these forests abound in animals—monkeys, rabbits, deer, tigers, and elephants. In the mountains of Lang Bian, tigers are especially numerous.<sup>10</sup>

There are few good roads in the territory of the M'ngong. Travel is easier during the dry season, but four-wheel-drive vehicles are almost a necessity. Even with a Jeep or Land Rover, secondary roads become impassible during the wet season.<sup>11</sup> Two national highways, Route 14 and Route 20, pass through the M'ngong area, but travel on these roads is often hazardous due to Viet Cong activities.

## SECTION II

### TRIBAL BACKGROUND

#### **Ethnic and Racial Origin**

The M'nong are grouped with the Mon-Khmer peoples by culture, language, and physical appearance. The Mon-Khmer ethnic stock is believed to have originated in the upper valleys of the Mekong River in Yunnan Province of southern China.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Language**

The M'nong language belongs to the Mon-Khmer language family. Mon-Khmer languages are also spoken by the Ma, Koho, Sedang, Stieng, Bahnar, and Jeh tribes in the Republic of Vietnam. The M'nong language is entirely different, however, from the Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken by the neighboring Rhade and Jarai tribes.<sup>2</sup>

Most M'nong subgroups have their own dialects, but these dialects are basically similar and mutually intelligible. The Gar is the only subgroup with a dialect not easily understood by the other M'nong groups.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the variety of dialects among the M'nong, they are understood, to a greater or lesser degree, by many neighboring groups with whom they trade. Others who know the M'nong dialects are Vietnamese Government officials who have been in the region, former officials of the French administration in the M'nong area, and some members of the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

The extent of their trade contacts determines the M'nong knowledge of other languages. Members of the Prong group, located near the High Donnai, are said to know some Koho dialects. The Rlam, neighbors of the Rhade tribe, can speak the Rhade language; many of them reportedly speak it almost as well as their own. Bu Dong tribesmen are said to be able to talk with members of the Jarai, Rhade Kpa, and Rhade A'dham and, to some degree, with bordering tribes in Laos and Cambodia. Some Stieng apparently can understand M'nong dialects.

The M'nong had no written language before the arrival of Christian missionaries. The tribesmen have a legend to explain this. On e long ago, all peoples went to a certain place to get their written language. When the M'nong received their language, inscribed

on a buffalo hide, they returned to their village and left the buffalo hide hanging on the porch of a hut. That night, while they were asleep, some dogs came and ate the buffalo hide; thus, the M'ngong have no written language. Since the 1940's the M'ngong have had increasing exposure to a written language developed by missionary groups: The Christian and Missionary Alliance has translated parts of the Bible and some 50 to 60 hymns into a M'ngong dialect.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Viet Cong have prepared propaganda leaflets and other printed matter in the M'ngong language and distributed them among tribesmen.

#### **Legendary History**

As old tribesmen relate the M'ngong legend about the origin of the world, in the beginning, the world was covered with flat rock. There was nothing on the world but rock, and man and the other creatures lived under the rock. One day a man called Tum Nduu and his wife followed a dog chasing a wild animal through a long tunnel. They soon found themselves on the surface of the world; they looked at the flat rock and then returned to their home underground. There they scooped up some earth, gathered seven earthworms and a basket of seeds, and took them to the surface, where they scattered them on the rock before returning home again. Some time later they came back to the surface and found it covered with soil and vegetation; whereupon, Tum Nduu and his wife went home again, gathered together all the animals, and led them, two by two, to the surface of the world to live.\*

In those early days, the sky was very close to the earth—so close, in fact, that trees and bamboo could not grow very tall, and the moon was very close and hot. One day a tall man took a pole to pound the kernels from rice; while moving the pole, he accidentally pushed the sky up to where it now is.

Life was wonderful and perfect in those days. Men and animals lived together and talked with each other. Then a great catastrophe came; some say it was a huge flood. After that, men ceased living with the animals and talking with them; they have lived separately ever since.<sup>6</sup>

In the beginning of time there was only one country of dirt, the country of Nduu and Ndoh.

In the beginning of time there was only one country of earthworms, only seven crawled on it.

In the beginning of time there was only one country of bamboo shoots; a single clump of bamboo grew there.

In the beginning of time there was only one country with wild vegetables; they covered only one plot of ground.<sup>7</sup>

\* See "Religion," p. 564.

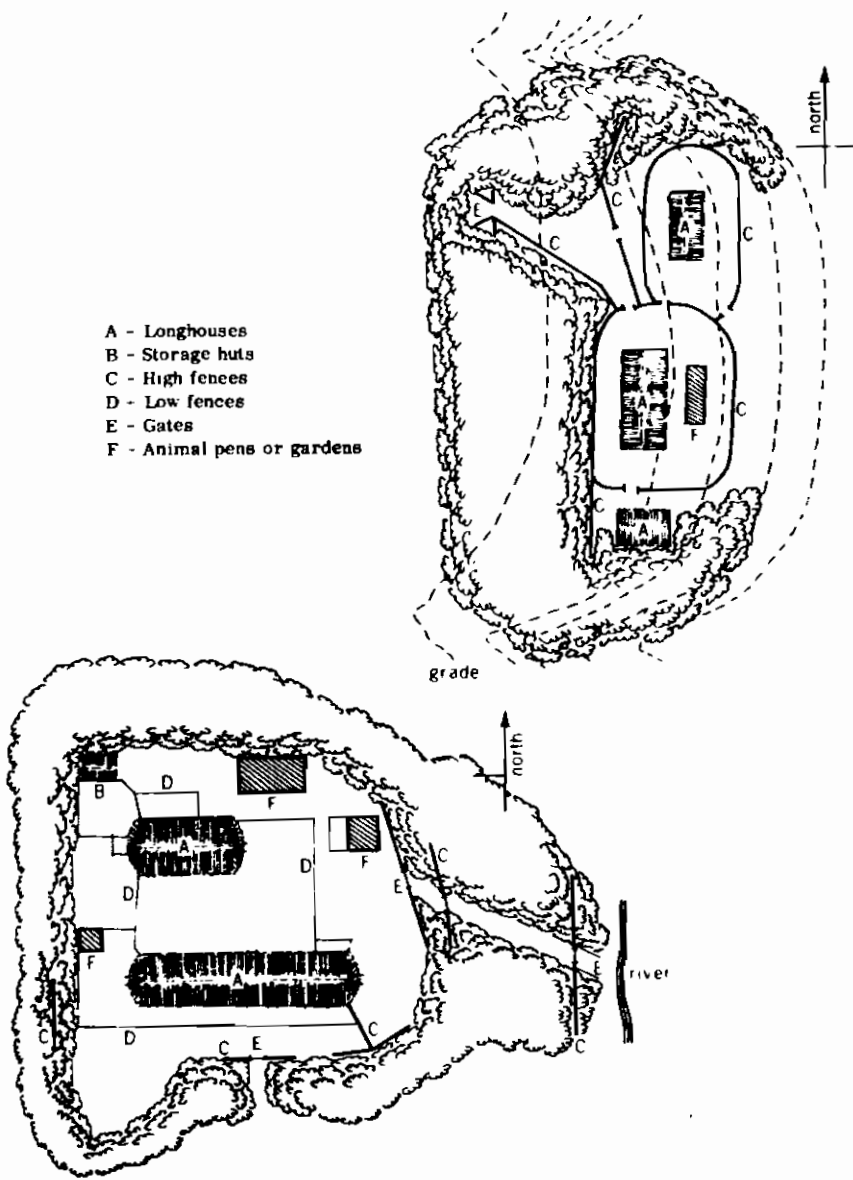


Figure 28. M'nong village layout.

### Factual History

Because of M'ngong isolation until recent years, there is little information about their history. They are reputedly fierce fighters and in the past, a number of European travelers were massacred in the M'ngong area. In the early part of this century, Hénri Maitre, the French explorer and ethnographer, and his escort of soldiers were attacked, killed, and beheaded, and their remains were thrown into a common grave.<sup>8</sup>

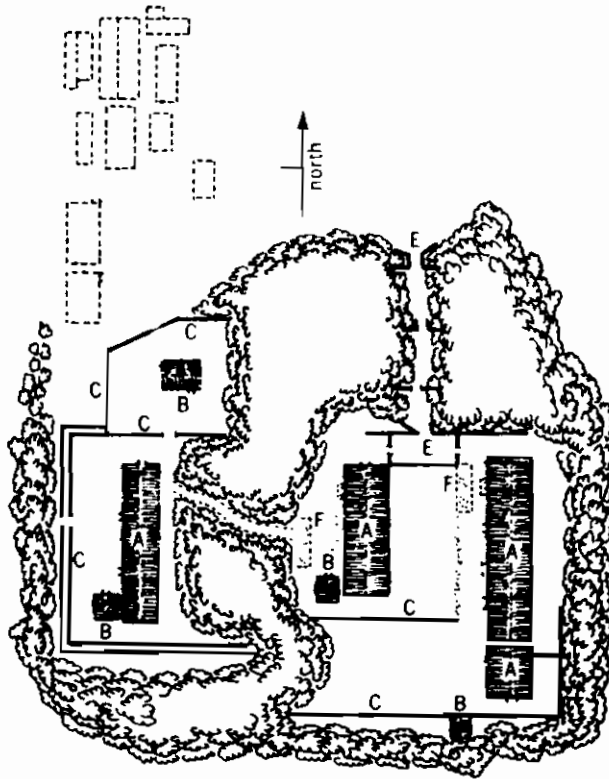


Figure 29. M'ngong village layout.  
(see key on page 481)

Generally, the French were able to pacify the M'ngong, and they even used the tribesmen as militiamen to pacify other tribal groups.<sup>9</sup> In the 1930's and 1940's the French placed some M'ngong in regional administrative positions. In 1943, for example, Truu-Hgu, a member of the M'ngong tribe, was appointed District Chief of the High Krong Kno region.<sup>10</sup>

### Settlement Patterns

In the course of their 20-year cycle of "eating the forest" by

shifting the mirs annually,<sup>\*</sup> the M'ngong move entire villages approximately every 7 years. The M'ngong place a claim to a particular village site by erecting statues of the spirit Prah Ba in front of their houses. When the village is moved, these statues are left behind to indicate that this particular piece of ground has been used by a particular village and that the village's rights regarding its use must be observed.<sup>11</sup>

Control of the annual move rests in the hands of village religious figures, who determine, according to the will of the spirits, suitable locations for cultivation and for the construction of villages. Omens appearing in dreams may also be a factor in these decisions.

Recently, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam moved the people of some M'ngong villages to newly constructed fortified areas, where the tribesmen would be secure from harassment by the Viet Cong. However, these new fortified villages were destroyed by the Viet Cong, and the M'ngong returned to their former mode of village life.<sup>12</sup>

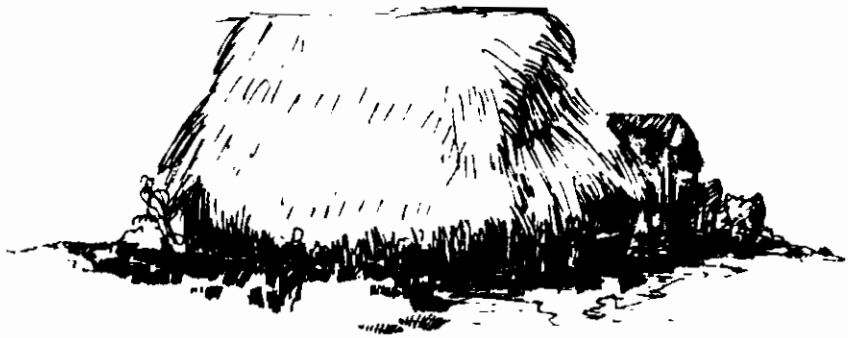
M'ngong villages take their names from their founders or from nearby rivers, waterfalls, vegetables, or animals. The settlements and the type of houses constructed by the M'ngong groups vary from one group to another depending upon the terrain, the climate, and the special customs of the group. Generally, the M'ngong construct long, rectangular houses situated on the ground instead of on pilings. The Rlam, however, who inhabit a low marshy area, build their houses on pilings.<sup>13</sup>

The first step in choosing a site for a M'ngong house is to find a place with no taboos. The head of the future house goes to sleep there; holding in his hands a figurine of the earth spirit, Nglar Nguac, hoping that the spirit will reveal its will in a dream. If the dream is unfavorable, he looks for another location.<sup>14</sup> If the dream is favorable, construction is begun by clearing a little area and planting clumps of a magic plant, called *gun*, taken from the previous village location. Associated with magical practices, *gun* is grown in a special area in each village.

At the site of the new house, a buffalo horn is placed in an east-west direction and fastened to the ground by forked branches cut from the *jirang* tree. The end of one of these branches is split; a tin bracelet and some leaves from the *gun* plant are fastened in the split. Again, the head of the new house retires in the hope that his dreams will convey a sign from the spirits. To dream of fruits, rice, a tomb, hunting, or swimming is considered a favorable sign; unfavorable signs include dreaming about a buffalo, a fish, or killing a deer. After 3 days, the head of the new

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<sup>\*</sup> See "Economic Organization," p. 507.



*Figure 30. M'nong Gar houses.*

house examines the area for signs from the spirits. If all is favorable, then construction begins in earnest.<sup>15</sup>

Inside each M'ngong house is a ledge, running the full length of the house, which is used for sleeping, sitting, and for storing goods. The house is divided into compartments for the various family groups of the house, and each compartment is accessible from a central passageway. These compartments are divided by partitions of woven bamboo. Each family has its own hearth, consisting of clay surrounded by a bamboo frame with three stones to support pots. The hearth is moved each time the family moves into a new house; it is a symbol of family solidarity. Hearths are sometimes arranged along the central corridor as well as in the family sections. Since there is no chimney in the roof to let the smoke out, the living quarters are always filled with smoke.

The interior of the house is fairly dark. Lighting is provided by fires in the hearths, light filtering in through the woven bamboo sides, and sunlight coming in through the narrow doors. There are no windows.

Rice wine jars are suspended in braided or net containers from the long crossbars connecting the rafters. Bigger jars are attached to the large columns supporting the roof. As many as 20 or 30 jars may be hung from the crossbars down the long passageway.<sup>16</sup> Crossbows are also hung from the roof supports in the common room near the entrance; the common room also houses gongs and large drums. A crossbeam in the rear of the house is sometimes used to support a little altar used in connection with buffalo sacrifices.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned, M'ngong houses vary from village to village; location of the entrance is one conspicuous variation. Among the Preh, the entrance may be on the long side, while among the Nong, some houses have two entrances.<sup>18</sup> Among some of the Nong and the Prong, houses are constructed on hillsides with one side on the ground and the other side elevated.<sup>19</sup> Influenced by the neighboring Rhade tribe, the Rlam build their houses above the ground on stilts. The orientation of these longhouses, however, is not necessarily north-south, as it is among the Rhade, nor are the M'ngong houses as long as those of the Rhade.<sup>20</sup>

At first glance, the Nong house (called *hih* or *jay*) looks like a long haystack approximately 15 or 18 feet wide and about 12 feet high. Varying with the size of the family living in it, the length of the house is rarely less than 30 feet and sometimes approaches 300 feet. The frame of the house is supported by round logs.<sup>21</sup> Since construction of a house has religious implications for the Nong, they choose their sites carefully: they avoid building



*Figure 31. M'nong Preh houses.*

houses near springs, waterfalls, and large forests, which they believe to be inhabited by spirits.

In the center of the mir, the Nong also build a guard hut, which is occupied night and day while the mir is being cultivated. The hut, of woven rattan, is constructed about 12 to 18 feet above the ground on bamboo poles. The height permits the hut to serve as a watchtower to alert the village to approaching danger, as well as to guard the mir against birds, boars, deer, elephants, and other animals. The guard hut also has several auxiliary purposes. It is used to store tools used in the mir and supplies for the defense of the village. The hut also serves as a temporary location for the village while a new village is being constructed. The mir, with the supplies stored in the guard hut, provides a reserve village in case of emergency.<sup>22</sup>

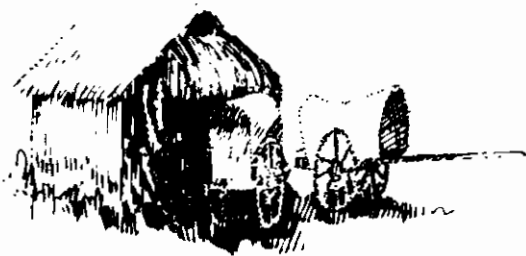


Figure 32. M'Nong hut.

In addition to guard huts on the mirs, the Nong also build little huts at other locations for use as temporary shelters while hunting and fishing; these huts are quite simple in construction.<sup>23</sup>

Traditionally, Nong villages were surrounded by high barricades of logs 7 or 8 feet high. A Nong village was often surrounded by three or four rings of barricades, one inside the other. The entrance to the fortified village was a narrow footpath which passed through a series of gates in the barricades. Some gates were heavy bamboo screens, while others were sharpened bamboo poles lashed together. The fortified villages also had underground exists by which the inhabitants could escape when necessary. After the French pacification of the tribes, a low fence became common. However, as a result of Viet Cong operations, the earlier fortification barricades may again be seen in the Nong area.<sup>24</sup>

The M'Nong clear paths through the forest undergrowth with machetes for travel to their fields, water source, and other villages. During the rainy season, it is necessary to maintain these paths, or the dense growth of vegetation, stimulated by the rain, greatly limits the mobility of the tribespeople.

The M'nong also construct simple bridges across chasms and streams. Some bridges are built by merely felling a large tree across a stream or ravine and adding siderails of bamboo. The M'nong have also built suspension bridges of woven rattan.<sup>25</sup>

## SECTION III

### INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

#### Physical Characteristics

There is little accurate scientific data on the physical measurements of the M'ngong. In 1941, however, 16 young Rlam military recruits from the Daak Lak area were measured. The average height of these young men was approximately 5 feet 8 inches, with the shortest 5 feet 1 inch. The average weight of the men in this group was 110 pounds; the lowest weight was 101 pounds and the heaviest, 143 pounds.<sup>1</sup>

In this group of Rlam tribesmen, the skin color on the parts of the body exposed to the sun could be termed brown with a red and yellow cast. The parts of the body not exposed to the sun were lighter, almost yellowish. The hair, black and wavy, was curlier than that of the Rhade,<sup>2</sup> and there was little body hair.

The eyes of the Rlam were generally dark brown, although there were some individuals with light brown eyes. The Mongolian or epicanthic fold on the eyelid is rarely seen among the M'ngong.<sup>3</sup>

#### Health

The health of the M'ngong who reach adulthood may be described as good, since they have survived in spite of a very high infant mortality rate and exposure to many endemic diseases. Village sanitation and the tribesmen's personal hygiene are rudimentary.

The tribespeople bathe in streams; the women usually bathe in one part of a stream and the men in another.<sup>4</sup> The soap with which the tribespeople wash themselves is a white substance prepared from the berries of the mpat tree. During the rainy season, when the forests are filled with leeches, the soap is used to wash leeches from the body. The M'ngong also sprinkle tobacco juice on the leeches to remove them.<sup>5</sup>

Women shampoo each other's hair by using water in which rice has been washed; locally, this is called a "M'ngong shampoo."<sup>6</sup>

Disease in the tribal area is spread by insects, including the anopheles mosquito, rat flea, and louse; some diseases are caused by worms, including hookworms; and some diseases are associated with poor sanitation and sexual contact.<sup>7</sup>

The following information on disease generally applies to most

tribal areas. Every member of the tribe has probably had malaria at least once during his lifetime. The two common types of malaria found in the tribal areas are benign tertian malaria, which causes high fever with relapses over a period of time, but is usually not fatal; and malignant tertian malaria, which is fatal to both infants and adults.<sup>8</sup>

Plague, carried by the rat louse, has appeared in many tribal areas and may appear from time to time in the M'ngong area.

The three types of typhus in this region are carried by lice, rat fleas, and mites. Typhus is reported to be especially frequent among the tribes.<sup>9</sup>

Cholera, typhoid, dysentery, yaws, leprosy, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, and smallpox are common in the tribal areas. Dysentery and yaws are significant causes of infant mortality.<sup>10</sup> Parasitic infections and various fungus diseases are also prevalent.<sup>11</sup>

The M'ngong believe that disease is caused by evil spirits stealing the soul of the sick person. They wear amulets to protect themselves from diseases, and they resort to religious practitioners for cures. Amulets, hung around the neck for protection against disease, include silver money, metal cylinders, various articles in small bags, and leaves of the gun plant, believed to have magical powers to ward off disease.<sup>12</sup>

Religious healers perform various rituals to cure their patients. One healing ceremony is called *mho'tok mong*, "to extract the splints." In this ritual the healer pretends to suck small splinters, believed to represent the arrows of evil spirits and to be the source of the pain, from the afflicted area.<sup>13</sup>

To treat an attack of malaria, a religious healer rotates a wicker pouch containing quartz stones eight times over the patient's head. Then he rotates a bowl, upside down, containing embers upon which there is a magical substance called "Resin of the Sky" (*cae troo*) over the patient. Finally, the healer applies a pinch of this resin to various parts of the patient's body—chest, back, elbows, soles of the feet. Each step of the healing ritual is accompanied by recitations of magic formulas.

If a healing rite fails to cure, the family of the sick person will send for a more professional healer, who will chew up some saffron and put it on the patient's forehead, throat, temples, on the top of his skull, and on his back. Then this healer will press his lips on the patient's forehead and inhale to break the noose with which the *caak* (demon) is strangling the patient. The healer spits into his hand what he has drawn off the patient's head; then, ordering everyone to get out of the way, he throws this thing into the fire.

Another healer may massage the patient to remove body dirt in a treatment called *proproh uuk* or *proproh kiek*. The M'ngong believe the mud came from the caak and is the cause of the illness. This treatment may continue for a long time.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Physical Characteristics Which Might Affect the Use of Weapons**

The small physical size of the M'ngong limits the size of weapons they can conveniently carry and use. If they were involved in mobile operations, the M'ngong are best qualified to handle lightweight, highly portable arms. On the other hand, in fixed emplacements, the M'ngong could handle heavier equipment.

#### **Psychological Characteristics**

The behavior of the M'ngong is often unpredictable: at times, they are overactive, excitable, and aggressive; at other times, they are calm and almost indolent.<sup>15</sup> This variation may stem from their agricultural routine, which requires great bursts of energy at certain times of the year and at other times involves a minimum of effort.

The M'ngong are group oriented and seldom approach tasks and problems as individuals. Their behavior is strongly influenced by the conformity required by their traditions and customs. However, there are individuals who strive to gain prestige and status by acquiring wealth and political power. Among the M'ngong, this status is symbolized by the Tam Boh, an exchange of sacrifices between parents and a married son.\* The most respected man among the M'ngong is the one who can afford to sacrifice the greatest number of buffaloes—this man wins the admiration of all the people. If a man is skilled in reciting the legends of the tribe and its spirits, he also is greatly respected.<sup>16</sup>

The M'ngong are generally considered to be less intelligent than the Rhade and Jarai.<sup>17</sup> They have been called mediocre in their ability to follow instructions.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Emotional Characteristics**

In a situation of great stress, the M'ngong will quickly disappear into the forest. This happened recently when a M'ngong group was moved from its lands and village into a new village constructed by the Vietnamese Government. Being away from their lands and spirits greatly distressed the M'ngong; at the first opportunity, they all moved out of the new village, disappearing into the forest to prearranged traditional hiding places.<sup>19</sup>

\* See "Religion," p. 504.

## SECTION IV

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The important social units among the M'ngong are the family and the village. Several families may live together in separate sections of the same house by virtue of kinship or friendship. The M'ngong are a matrilineal society, tracing their descent through the female line; the family name is that of the wife, and children are considered members of the mother's family. A family tracing descent and relationship through the maternal line forms a clan. Clan members are not allowed to marry or have sexual relations with each other,<sup>1</sup> and those of the same generation call each other "brother" and "sister."

Among the M'ngong, family structure rests principally on the *mpool* or clan. The *mpool* is the total number of individuals who claim descent from a common ancestor on the mother's side. The clan name and belongings are transmitted from mother to children. Members of the same clan are considered, in effect, brothers and sisters, if they belong to the same generation; and as fathers and mothers and children, or as uncles-aunts and nephews-nieces, if they belong to two successive generations; and as grandparents and grandchildren, if they are of two generations separated by a third.<sup>2</sup>

There is some class division among the M'ngong: There are the rich tribesmen, the ordinary tribesmen, and persons with skills, such as the power to heal. Position among the rich is secured through sacrifices, the most important of which is Tam Boh,\* offered by the members of a family. The more numerous these sacrifices, the greater is the prestige. A rich family may also show its wealth by ownership of fine and expensive jars and gongs; but the buffalo sacrifices are of greater importance. Ordinary tribesmen with the necessary means to make buffalo sacrifices can move into a higher social class.

With the exception of hunting and fishing, in which both men and women participate, labor is divided among the sexes: The men hunt, engage in warfare, clear the fields, prepare the ground for sowing, make baskets, and work with metal; the women spin,

\* See "Religion," p. 304.

weave, plant seeds, and gather edible leaves, fruits, and roots in the forest.<sup>3</sup>

### Marriage

Initiative for a marriage is in the hands of the girl. However, the M'ngong belief that incest is offensive to the spirits and a danger to the fertility of the land prevents her marrying anyone who is a member of her mother's family or clan, no matter how distant the relationship.<sup>4</sup>

The marriage ceremony itself is based on two traditions: *tam book*, or "bumping of heads," and *rbii baa*, or "caressing the paddy." In the former and more important rite, the person who handled the marriage arrangements places himself between the bride and the groom, takes hold of some hair of each and knots it together, unties the knot, and utters a prayer. Then, while counting to eight, he knocks the heads of the couple together.<sup>5</sup> *Rbii baa* is a custom in which the bride's father leads his son-in-law to the granary where rice for the young couple has been stored for the first time.

Gifts from the bridegroom to the bride at the wedding may include such items as a small neckless jar (*yang dam*), a basket of bamboo tubes (*ding paa*) filled with bamboo shoot preserves and corked with buffalo skin, a tin comb, a glass-bead necklace, a brass and tin bracelet, a small bottle, or a hen. The couple may also receive joint gifts, such as a hog or rice wine.<sup>6</sup>

Following the marriage ceremony, the newlyweds, now clearly identified by hairdresses made of pearls arranged in bands, move into the house of the bride's mother; however, if the girl's family is poor, the newlyweds may move in with the young husband's family temporarily.<sup>7</sup>

A second marriage is sometimes contracted—usually only among rich tribesmen. When a wife dies, the husband has the right to demand that his dead wife's family supply him with a replacement, ordinarily a younger sister of his deceased wife. A wife surviving her husband may similarly ask her husband's family to provide her with a spouse, generally a younger brother of the husband.<sup>8</sup>

### Birth, Child-Rearing Practices, and Education

The M'ngong refer to childbirth as "remaining near the fire." Before delivery, the woman lies on a mat near the hearth close to the granary, while the husband—joined in many cases by the wife's sister—gathers ashes and charcoal from the hearth and utters incantations, in which spectators may join. After the wife has given birth—in a kneeling position grasping a rope strung above her head—the afterbirth is buried in the ground outside the

house and is covered by a stone to prevent the demons from devouring it, thereby causing the newborn child to die."

Seven days after the child is born, a ceremony called "bringing out the child" (*njur koon*) occurs: the mother carries her baby for the first time, wrapped in a blanket on her back.<sup>10</sup>

The M'ngong allow their children complete freedom, treating them with a great deal of affection when they are very young. From the age of 12, however, boys are not permitted to joke in the presence of their parents, grandparents, or sisters. In the past, at puberty the upper front teeth of boys and girls were filed down and stained black, while the lower front teeth were filed to sharp points.<sup>11</sup> The puberty rite is apparently disappearing among the M'ngong.

The legendary history and myths of the tribe are taught to the children at home or at special social events. Children also learn skills necessary for daily life from their parents.

The M'ngong resist formal education; only a few have been educated in schools operated by the Government or by missionaries. In the missionary schools, the children learn to read and write in their own language; in the Government schools, instruction is wholly in the Vietnamese language. However, few M'ngong can read and write either language.<sup>12</sup>

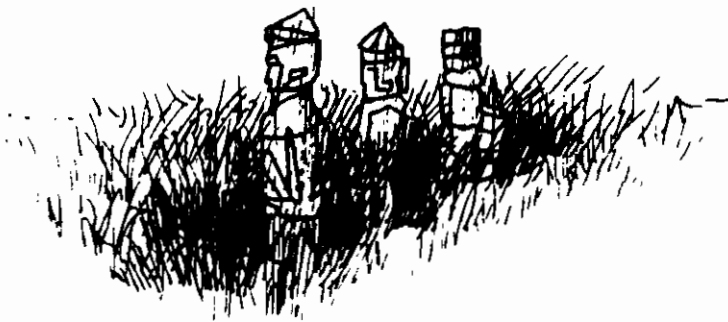


Figure 33. M'ngong tomb statues.

#### Death and Burial

When a M'ngong dies, the body is placed upon a low platform in his house, and the feet are bound together at the ankles and the big toes with two solid bands of cotton thread. The body is then wrapped in a blanket. Offerings are placed alongside the body, and some coins may be placed on the chest. Members of the family of both sexes surround the body, weep, and utter lamentations. People of the village come with offerings and join in the lamenta-

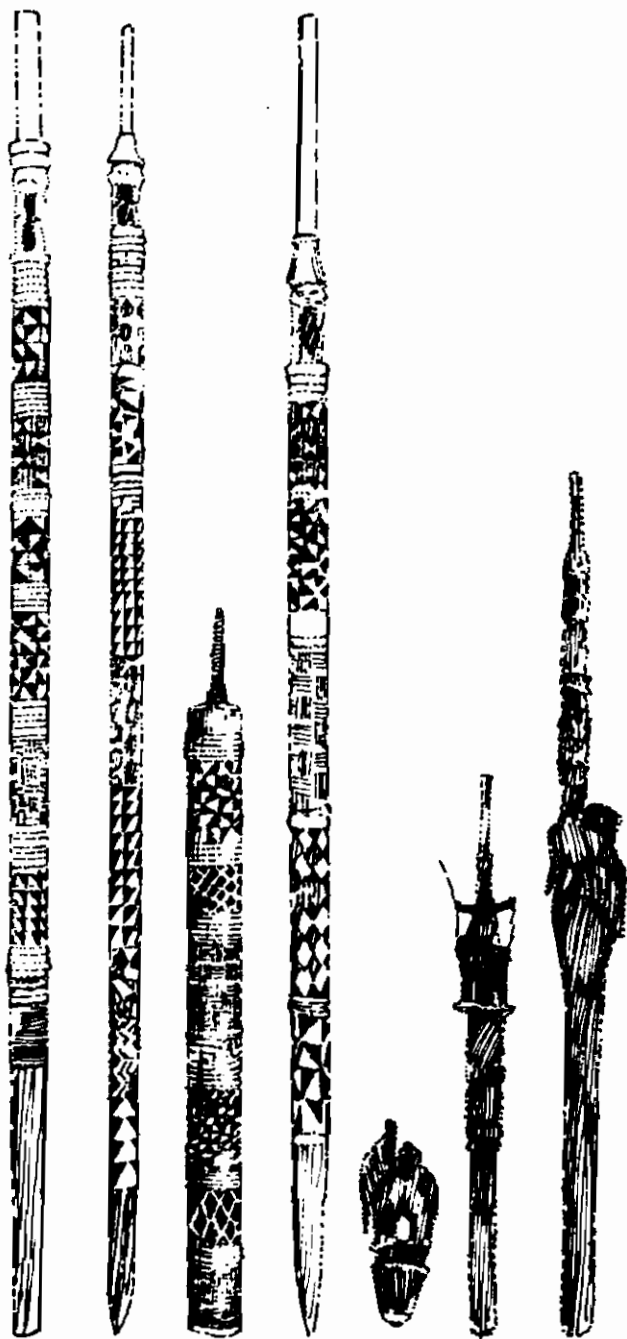


Figure 34. Prong tomb ornaments.

tions for the deceased. Conversation deals with the dead person, his malady, and other cases of a similar nature. Women take turns weeping during the entire night. A chicken is sacrificed, its blood is spread on the chest of the body, and a jar of rice wine is opened and drunk by those present. The hearth of the deceased is destroyed, and a dummy kitchen is set up near the body for use in the afterlife. The pipe and tobacco pouch of the deceased are placed near his head. Sticks are placed upright at the head and feet of the corpse, and a string made of bits of red and white cotton is stretched between the bamboo uprights. At first light of day, the corpse is covered with a shroud.

In the morning a group of villagers goes to the forest and selects a tree to be made into a coffin. After a sacrifice to the spirit of the

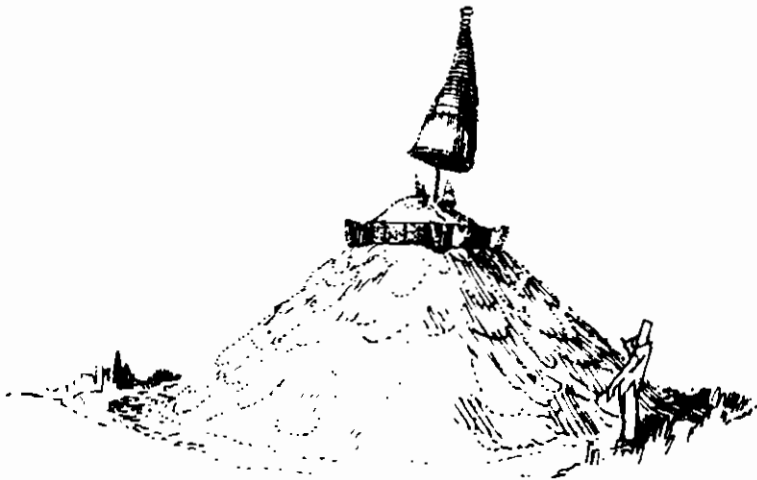


Figure 35. *M'nong Rlam* burial mound.

tree, it is cut down, cut to length, split, and hollowed out to form a coffin. The body is wrapped in matting and put in the coffin with offerings. The cover is put on the coffin, and the crack along the edge of the lid is sealed with a glue of sticky rice. The coffin is tied with three rattan cords, and on the lid are placed the deceased's belt, pipe, tobacco pouch, and knife. All who participated in the making of the coffin purify themselves by washing in the river.

That evening, upon the return of the men who made the coffin, the *njat*, a sacrifice and libation, is offered to the deceased. Jars of rice wine are arranged in a line in the entrance hall of the deceased's house, and a number of animals are sacrificed. Villagers and members of the family join in weeping and offering funeral chants. The mourning on this second evening takes place over the

coffin, not the body as during the previous night. Then rice wine is drunk by those present.

The next morning the coffin is carried outside the house and opened; then the face of the deceased is uncovered for a final viewing. Some charcoal is placed in the coffin next to the corpse. The face of the corpse is covered with a white cloth, and the lid of the coffin is again sealed and bound with rattan cords fastened in geometric designs. The coffin is then attached to a pole for the trip to the graveyard, where the men dig the grave with its long axis lying east-west. The coffin is placed in the grave, and the hoe and machete of the deceased are put in the grave next to the coffin. The grave is filled and mounded; jars are put on top of the mound; and a string attached to the coffin comes out of the mound. A fence is built around the grave, and a roof is placed over the mound. All who attended the funeral then go to the river to purify themselves and return home.<sup>13</sup>

## SECTION V

### CUSTOMS AND TABOOS

Almost all M'ngong activities are regulated by customs and taboos. There are prescribed methods and procedures governing everything from dress to construction of houses to the settlement of disputes and individual behavior. Having had no written language, the M'ngong have transmitted these prescriptions by word of mouth from generation to generation, and they have gradually attained the strength of customary law. Believing that the world around them abounds in both good and evil spirits, the M'ngong are constantly on guard to avoid actions, activities, and contact with objects or animals that they believe might be displeasing to the spirits. Customs and taboos vary from subgroup to subgroup, village to village, and family to family.

#### Dress

Among the M'ngong, clothing is personal and is never sold or given away. The Gar men wear a loincloth called the *suu troany*. A long piece of cloth, decorated in front, the loincloth is passed between the thighs and around the loins, leaving the legs and buttocks bare. The *suu troany* is usually the only article of clothing worn during the day. Occasionally, a short sleeveless tunic, sometimes made of bark, is worn with the loincloth. In the evening, a blanket is added to the costume. M'ngong women wear rectangular skirts, the flaps of which are secured by belts in front. They either leave their chests bare or wear tunics with long sleeves. Children generally wear no clothes at all until they are 6 years old; their heads are completely shaved except for a small lock of hair left on the top.

Currently, readymade clothes are being worn more and more by the M'ngong. Women like to buy cotton bodices and skirts; and the men like jackets, shirts, topcoats, and overcoats. M'ngong men show little interest in shorts or trousers.

Both men and women once wore their hair in knots, but younger men now cut their hair short. Normally the head is left bare. However, for festive occasions men may wear white turbans woven by their wives; rich men wear black satin imported turbans. The M'ngong also like to wear imported berets, usually inside out to ex-

hibit the manufacturer's label. When M'ngong men go to war, they wear peacock or white hen feathers in their hair.

Both men and women wear bracelets and necklaces. Women wear strings of pearls in their hair, and men wear wooden, tin-coated combs. Men and women have pierced earlobes; through these the men place ivory plugs, and the women, wooden discs. As the pierced part of the earlobe tends to stretch, the discs are gradually replaced by larger and larger ones; consequently, older women often have earlobes which reach almost to their shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Tribal Folklore**

M'ngong folklore contains many legends about their history, heroes, and even about animals. The tiger, for example, is believed to have special powers, and its activities are recounted in great detail. Legends and stories are told in the evening, when the day's work is done.<sup>2</sup>

Other legends tell of the history of M'ngong sacrifices. One poem tells how man first tried to perform sacrifices, but was unsuccessful because he tried to sacrifice plants instead of animals. Man learned to make effective sacrifices, say the M'ngong, from two legendary heroes, Mot Dlong and Mot Dlaang, during the time of the great flood. When it seemed as if the rain would never stop, Mot Dlong and Mot Dlaang sacrificed a dog, a crocodile, and an iguana to stop the rain; however, these sacrifices were ineffective and the rain continued to pour down. Mot Dlong and Mot Dlaang sat in the rain and pondered, wondering what had gone wrong. Then they had an inspiration: they decided to sacrifice buffaloes. They captured some buffaloes and had their servants prepare the animals for the sacrifice. A great sacrifice was held, and Mot Dlong and Mot Dlaang prayed for the rains to stop. The sacrifice was successful, and the rain stopped; since that time, buffaloes have been the preferred sacrificial animals among the M'ngong.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Folk Beliefs**

Believing that trees, rocks, and animals—in fact, all their surroundings—are inhabited by spirits, the M'ngong are always on guard against evil spirits; they avoid committing offenses which might anger them. The M'ngong believe that spirits make their wishes known through dreams and omens. For example, during the selection of a house site, it is considered a good omen if the owner of the new house dreams about fruit, rice, a paddy, a tomb, hunting, or swimming. If the dream is about buffaloes, killing deer, or the breaking of teeth, it is considered a bad omen.<sup>4</sup> Seeing flames devour the loincloth of a person in a dream predicts the person's death.<sup>5</sup>

Because of their fear of spirits and demons, the M'ngong will not build their houses near certain waterfalls, forests, and plateaus.<sup>6</sup>

A violation of the taboo of sexual relations between members of the same family through the maternal line can precipitate disaster: the crops may fail or torrential rains may fall.<sup>7</sup>

Some actions are believed to precipitate an attack by tigers; for example, if rice is scraped from a pot with a knife, tigers are sure to come.<sup>8</sup>

#### Eating Customs

Although rice is the basis of their diet, the M'nong also eat corn, bananas, beans, eggplant, manioc, taro, yams, sugarcane, cucumbers, oranges, mangoes, limes, papayas, red chili peppers, ginger and mushrooms. After ceremonies involving sacrifices, the M'nong eat the meat of the sacrificed animals; they also eat wild animals, fish, and plants collected from the forests.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 36. M'nong Gar taboo signs.

Many M'nong groups have dietary prohibitions, some permanent, some temporary; for example, one M'nong group may not be allowed to eat deer, while other groups are allowed to do so. Some dietary prohibitions are enforced only in connection with certain religious ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> However, sacrifices are always times of great celebration, with much eating and drinking of rice wine.

There are also restrictions for eating certain foods at special times. After the filing down of his teeth, for example, a person is prohibited from eating chicken or the vegetable *khoi* for 8 days.<sup>11</sup>

When relaxing, M'nong men smoke their pipes. When they do not have their pipes in their mouths, the M'nong put them in their hair knots. The tribesmen also chew a bamboo rod, the ragged end of which they insert into the bowl of their pipes to absorb the tobacco juice; usually, one of these bamboo rods is also stuck in their hair.<sup>12</sup>

### Drinking Customs

Water is stored between the joints in sections of bamboo or in pitchers made of dried gourds.<sup>13</sup>

Rice wine is a special beverage usually drunk at religious ceremonies and when receiving visitors from outside the village. Rice wine is prepared in a jar by fermenting rice flour (*ndrii*) to which bran has been added. The ferment, prepared by the women, is made of roots and rice flour<sup>14</sup> and looks like small porous white cones.

Rice wine is prepared in and drunk from jars (*yang*) which may be grouped into four classes: first, small common jars for ordinary family circumstances; then, the new, large, ornamented jars, used by ordinary families for religious ceremonies; the third group

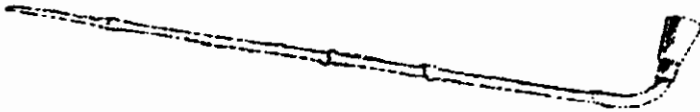


Figure 37. M'ngong Gar pipe.

consists of old, rare jars used by rich families for religious ceremonies; and the fourth class consists of jars of very exceptional value which are treated almost like people. The owners recite the history and heritage of these valuable jars which are believed to be inhabited by good spirits. Ownership of the valuable jars enhances a family's position considerably.<sup>15</sup>

After the rice wine has been fermented, a jar is opened and some of the rice wine is poured into a bowl for anointing and drinking during prayers. Then, when the drinking is about to begin, the jar is filled to the top with water. Rice wine is drunk through a long drinking straw or hollow reed inserted in the top of the jar;<sup>16</sup> the jar must never be touched with the lips, since various spirits live in the wine jars.<sup>17</sup> Also, one must not shake his head when drinking.

### Customs Relating to Animals

The M'ngong raise pigs, dogs, ducks, cats, goats, horses, elephants and buffaloes.<sup>18</sup> Buffaloes are raised for sacrifices; buffalo sacrifices are believed to be the most effective means of propitiating the spirits. Members of the Rlam subgroup in the lowland marshy area raise buffaloes to sell to other M'ngong groups for sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> It is a ceremonious occasion when the people go out of their village to buy a sacrificial buffalo from another community.<sup>20</sup>

To the M'ngong, the tiger has a supernatural significance and is as-

sociated with the spirits. The M'nong do not like to hunt tigers, which some believe can become invisible.<sup>21</sup>

Some taboos and practices are associated with animals and animal refuse. For example, if a dog steps over a newly born infant, the dog must be sacrificed at once, then cooked and eaten by the people who attended the delivery of the child.<sup>22</sup> A swallow caught outside the house may be eaten; if a swallow is caught inside a house, eating it is taboo. The tribesmen examine the birds for evil signs; and if any evil signs are found, the house is purified with a sacrifice of a dog and a jar of alcohol. There is also a taboo on touching animal dung; the M'nong believe lightning will strike a person who does—the exception is touching animal dung used as fertilizer for the fields.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Customs Relating to Warfare**

The M'nong have traditionally been warriors; until recently, intervillage warfare was common. In the past, M'nong villages were encircled by fortifications consisting of three or four strong wooden barricades, one inside the other, with specially contrived gates through the barricades. To permit exit from the village, tunnels were built to bypass the barricades.

Traditional weapons of the M'nong included crossbows, lances, sabers, and knives. The M'nong customarily wore all his clothing into battle as a shield for bodily protection.

Certain events signify war or preparation for war. For example, an apparent lack of rice in a village near the end of the harvest (when it should be plentiful) might mean that rice is being stored in the mir hut or in huts in the forest as part of a general preparation for war.<sup>24</sup> Also, if the most precious jars of a house suddenly disappear from their usual places, this may indicate that preparations for fighting are underway in that particular tribal group, for it is customary to hide valuable jars in the forest before beginning hostilities.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Customs Relating to Outsiders**

Although visitors to a M'nong village are politely and hospitably received, the tribesmen are suspicious of strangers and will be on the alert to determine the outsiders' motives. They also watch for signs indicating that the presence of the strangers offends the spirits. Generally, outsiders are not permitted inside a M'nong village when a taboo is in effect; usually a cord will be stretched across the village gate, or some sort of barrier will be erected, to prohibit entrance. If the village expects a visitor, the tribesmen will go out to warn the outsider that the restriction is in effect.<sup>26</sup>

Although an isolated stranger might be in danger among the M'nong if he breaks one of their taboos, an outsider recognized by

the tribesmen as a member of a powerful group, such as the Vietnamese or American military, would not be subject to reprisal for an inadvertent violation of M'nong customs. Repeated violations of tribal customs by an individual outsider, however, may cause the tribespeople to generalize about the mistakes, and they may become increasingly suspicious of all visitors from that outside group.

## SECTION VI

### RELIGION

The M'ngong have an animistic religion; they believe that spirits inhabit all parts of their world—the trees, the streams, the animals, and the land. In addition, spirits are associated with mythical birds and mythical heroes. The M'ngong live in constant interaction with these spirits; life is a constant struggle to thwart the evil



*Figure 38. M'ngong altar to the spirit Nduu.*

spirits. Illness, crop failures, and many other misfortunes are attributed to the evil spirits.<sup>1</sup> The M'ngong believe that their ancestors have an existence after death, and they, too, watch over human beings and help them in their relationships with the spirits.<sup>2</sup>

#### Principal Deities and Spirits

The most important spirit in the M'ngong religion is Nduu, who

represents the soul of the rice (fertility) and is also the mythical or legendary hero who started the human race.\*<sup>3</sup> This spirit is called *Tum Nduu* by the Gar and *Prah ba* by other M'ning groups.<sup>4</sup>

Next in importance are the spirits of the elements: earth, fire, water, and sky. The spirit of the earth or land, *Nglar Nguéc*, plays an important role in the selection of sites for fields and houses. The name *Nglar Nguéc* means, literally, "Bird of the Rock Crystal."<sup>5</sup> There are several sky spirits of the rain, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and there are also subsidiary land spirits—for example, spirits of topographical features and streams. Moreover, there are spirits connected with the village and its houses—for example, spirits of the village gate, of the columns of the house, and of the hearth.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the various spirits, the M'ning also have demons believed to be responsible for illness.† These demons, called *caak*, are believed to steal the souls of the tribesmen, thereby causing illness.<sup>7</sup>

#### Principal Religious Ceremonies

Prominent among the religious ceremonies performed by the M'ning are the rituals for the purification of a field when incest is suspected, for healing the sick, for preserving or improving the crops, for the burial of the dead, and for cementing alliances between parents and children or between tribal groups.<sup>8</sup>

The ceremony of greatest importance is the *Tam Boh*, the exchange of sacrifices between parents and a married son. The parents offer a sacrifice *boh sur sreh puh*, to publicly show their satisfaction with a son and to add to the prestige of both themselves and the son. Once the parents have offered a *boh sur sreh puh*, the son is bound to reciprocate the honor, even if this is done many years later. The *Tam Boh* can take place between unrelated people; in this case it is called *tam boh jook kuang*, and it forms an alliance between them.

The *Tam Boh* ceremony is the most important ceremony for all M'ning men—through this ceremony a man gains power, prestige, and, eventually, a political role in the village. The *Tam Boh* is repeated as often as possible, for the number of these ceremonies performed determines a man's status.

Some of the agricultural feasts are celebrated as follows: °

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\* See "Legendary History," p. 480.

† See "Health," p. 489.

*Agricultural Ceremonies and Feasts*

<i>Feast</i>	<i>Time of Year</i>
Feast of the Blood Unction of the Paddy (A harvest feast)	Late November
Feast of the Posts (To retain the soul of the rice in the field and thereby insure a good harvest)	Late September
Feast of the Pincers (To give strength to the growing rice)	Summer
Feast of the Planting of the Rice Field	April/May
Feast of the Soil (To generally strengthen the fertility of the land)	Time of year varies; apparent- ly held every few years

**Missionary Contact**

The Gar in Sar Luk were first exposed to missionary activity in the 1940's, when they were visited by three Rhade evangelists, sent by the pastor of Ban Me Thuot. Speaking in the Rhade language, an evangelist told his audience about his religion: "You are still obeying the evil spirits who are voracious and exact sacrifices. I have come today to tell you of a good god who asks no sacrifices. He is of concern to all of us—French, English, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cham; all believe in him. He has created the world and all the beings in it." As the evangelist gave a summary of sacred history from Genesis through the New Testament, one of the Gar translated it, adding splendid embellishments; the story of the creation of the world, the flood, a man swallowed and spat out by a monster, the sea engulfing an entire army, and a Son of the Spirit offering a feast to a whole crowd with only a few cakes.<sup>10</sup> Since then, missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance have been active in the M'nong area.

## SECTION VII

### ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

#### Type of Economy

The M'ngong economy is based on slash-and-burn agriculture. The slash-and-burn technique used by the M'ngong involves the cutting and burning of trees and underbrush in a chosen area, called the mir. The mir is cleared during the winter dry season, usually in February or March. The ashes are left in the mir to fertilize the soil. The mir is then planted before the spring rains begin. As M'ngong lands are poor, mirs must be cleared each year. After each harvest the mirs are allowed to become reforested for 20 years. The cultivation of the mirs on a 20-year cycle is practiced by all the M'ngong except the Rlam, who live in a marshy lowland area, grow wet or irrigated rice, and maintain permanent fields.

In order to stay near the mirs, the M'ngong, except for the Rlam, move their villages periodically; this results in a slow migration within the tribal area. The M'ngong call this movement "eating the forest."<sup>1</sup>

Although rice is the primary crop of the M'ngong, the tribesmen also grow vegetables (corn, beans, eggplant, manioc, yams, cucumbers, chili peppers), fruits (bananas, oranges, limes, mangoes and papayas), and sugarcane. Some tobacco and cotton are also grown in the M'ngong area.<sup>2</sup>

#### Special Arts and Skills

The M'ngong, chiefly farmers, are also adept at hunting, fishing, and basketmaking. Various M'ngong groups engage in ironwork and pottery making.<sup>3</sup> In the lake area, four villages have potters who furnish pots for the region, as well as for trade with the Rhade. The Gar and Rlam are adept at ironwork, though the Rlam have fewer forges than the Gar.

Each M'ngong can repair his own tools, and every village has two or three men famous for their skill at forging sabers, machetes, lances, and hoes from bars of imported iron. Other members of the community buy these implements from them.<sup>4</sup>

#### Tribal Monetary/Exchange System

Commerce among the M'ngong involves a complex system of exchange. Each item of merchandise is priced and sold according to

numerous criteria of value: an item is valued in jars, pigs, skirts, and, for the most expensive goods, buffaloes. In addition, the Vietnamese piaster is in general circulation.

#### **Trade**

Market centers near the M'ngong are found in Da Lat and Ban Me Thuot. In these towns, the M'ngong purchase salt, imported dry goods, new jars, and other items from Vietnamese and Chinese merchants.<sup>6</sup>

Trade between the M'ngong subgroups and with neighboring tribes takes place on a local or village level.<sup>6</sup> The M'ngong Rlam are completely dependent upon neighboring groups of woven material; their women do not know how to weave, and both men and women engage in trade with the Gar and Rhade for their clothing requirements. The Rlam barter with their neighbors for clothing, all kinds of rattan cane, and tools; in exchange, they trade buffaloes, rice, drinking straws, and pottery (especially with the Rhade).<sup>7</sup>

#### **Property System**

The tribal lands are under supervision of three or four influential men of the village, "the Sacred Men of the Forest and the Village," who are responsible for the land and its use. They determine where the mirs will be located and where the villages are to be built. Except for property acquired jointly by a husband and wife through marriage, all other property is generally controlled by the women of the tribe.

If a spouse dies, the property he or she brought into the home is returned to the family from which it originally came. Goods acquired after marriage are divided between the children and the family of the wife on the one hand and the sisters and mother of the husband on the other.

## SECTION VIII

### POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

#### General Political Organization

The village is the highest unit of political organization attained by the M'ngong. Leadership is held by a group of elders, called the "Sacred men of the Forest and Village," and a headman, *me-dong*. The elders are selected by the villagers from the wealthier and more influential men in the village. The elders, in turn, select the headman, with due consideration for the opinions of the villagers at large.<sup>1</sup>

The M'ngong headman is chosen, above all, for his knowledge of M'ngong traditions and his sense of justice; but his personal prestige (for example, his reputation as a great hunter) contributes to his eminence and adds force to his decisions. When the headman dies, the elders, with the consensus of the villagers, designate the man to succeed him. The authority of the headman is particularly important in the area of customs and manners. In political terms, the authority of the headman varies greatly from village to village. Most headmen show themselves to be truly adept judges and conciliators. The authority of some M'ngong headmen reportedly extends to neighboring villages, but this probably means influence rather than real political power.<sup>2</sup>

The "Sacred Men of the Forest and Village" exercise the real political and economic power within the M'ngong village; they determine such things as the use of a particular plot of land, the user, the moving of the village to another location, and the time to perform various religious rituals. These elders also serve as judges and arbitrators for village-level disputes. The relative position of the headman and the elders may vary considerably from village to village.

The M'ngong have also been known to have another type of village leader who becomes important only during periods of intervillage strife. This leader, called the Captain of War, is chosen because of his reputation as a warrior. The Captain of War leads M'ngong war expeditions and heads the defense of the M'ngong village.

During the period of French occupation, the colonial government trained, instructed, and employed a limited number of the M'ngong in administrative posts and in the French Army. The French codi-

fied the laws and formalized the political structure of the highland tribes. The French also superimposed a higher political structure upon the tribes and protected the tribesmen and their territory from Vietnamese invasion. The M'ngong developed a respect and affection for many of the French; this is reflected in the fact that some of the M'ngong can speak French and have adopted French modes of dress and some other French customs.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Legal System**

M'ngong law is essentially religious law. When a religious law or taboo has been broken, the "Sacred men of the Forest and Village" intervene and require the performance of specific sacrificial ceremonies to satisfy the spirits. For example, when a young couple from the same clan engage in sexual relations, they have committed incest, a grave crime; the "Sacred Men of the Forest and Village" will specify the exact sacrifices to be performed and will determine the fate of the guilty couple.

On the village, district, and provincial levels, a special system of courts was established under the French to adjudicate matters concerning the various tribal groups. In the village, a village court decided the sentences. These sentences could be reviewed on the district level. Three district court members were assigned to each ethnic group in a district jurisdiction, and these members handled only tribal matters. The district court officials selected a president to preside over the district court, which met in the house of the district chief.<sup>5</sup>

Under the French, those cases that could not be resolved on the village level were sent to the Tribunal Coutumier, which convened for the first 7 days of every month. In judging the cases brought before the tribunal, the chief judge relied on traditional tribal law and customs.<sup>6</sup> The tribunal dealt only with cases in which both parties were tribespeople. Cases involving Vietnamese and tribespeople were the responsibility of the province chief, but provincial authorities tried not to interfere with the operation of the tribunal.

The legal system instituted by the French still governs the Montagnard tribes, but steps have been taken by the Vietnamese Government to revise the legislative code in the tribal areas. Under the Diem regime, an attempt was made to substitute Vietnamese laws for the tribal practices. This attempt was connected with Vietnamese efforts to integrate the tribespeople politically into the Republic of Vietnam.

In March 1965, the Vietnamese Government promulgated a decree restoring the legal status of the tribal laws and tribunals. Under this new decree, there will be courts at the village, district, and province levels which will be responsible for civic affairs, Mon-

tagnard affairs, and penal offenses when all parties involved are Montagnards.<sup>7</sup>

Village customs law courts, consisting of the village administrative committee chief aided by two Montagnard assistants, will conduct weekly court sessions.<sup>8</sup> When a case is reviewed and a decision reached by this court, it will be recorded and signed by the parties involved. This procedure will eliminate the right to appeal to another court. If settlement cannot be determined, the case can be referred to a higher court.<sup>9</sup>

District courts, governed by the president of the court (the district chief) aided by two Montagnard assistants, will hold bimonthly court sessions. Cases to be tried by the district court include those appealed by the village court, "all minor offenses," and cases which are adjudged serious according to tribal customs.<sup>10</sup>

At the province level, a Montagnard Affairs Section will be established as part of the National Court. This section, under the jurisdiction of a Montagnard presiding judge and two assistants, will handle cases appealed from the Montagnard district courts and cases beyond the jurisdiction of the village or district courts. It will convene once or twice a month depending upon the requirements.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Subversive Influences**

Viet Cong subversive methods range from acts of terrorism to subtle propaganda. Christians, Government officials, and tribesmen who have cooperated with the Government are ostracized, ridiculed, harassed, and occasionally murdered. Viet Cong coercion is particularly evident in their intense enmity toward the few Christian converts among the M'ngong.<sup>12</sup> For the Viet Cong, the principles of the Christian ethic are hostile obstacles; missionaries and converts are isolated, persecuted, driven from the villages, or assassinated.

When faced with opposition, the Viet Cong resort to the ruthless elimination of their opponents. Without effective Government protection, the tribespeople find they must cooperate with the Viet Cong to protect themselves, their families, and their villages.

The North Vietnamese have influenced the M'ngong to the extent that they reportedly have provided some tribesmen with technical education in North Vietnam. They may also have some influence upon the Viet Cong policies regarding the tribal peoples.<sup>13</sup>

## SECTION IX

### COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

In general, the principal means of communication among the M'nong is word of mouth; M'nong have few if any radios, and their familiarity with movies or other means of modern communication is slight. Few M'nong can read, making the effectiveness of written communication extremely limited. The M'nong have no storytellers, minstrels, or criers as such. Legends and news are told or discussed by all tribesmen; however, the key communicators and primary opinion formers are the village elders and prominent tribesmen (*kunag*).<sup>1</sup>

Tribal folklore is part of the M'nong culture and religion, providing not only an evening's relaxation, but also a means of maintaining tribal identity. Among the M'nong, folklore is intimately bound up with religion and ritual.<sup>2</sup>

## SECTION X

### CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

Any proposed civic action should take into account M'ng religious, social, and cultural traditions. All initial contacts should be made only with the tribal elders because of the M'ng political structure. The M'ng should be psychologically prepared to accept the proposed changes. This requires detailed consultation with village leaders, careful assurance as to results, and a relatively slow pace in implementing programs.

Though the M'ng prefer to remain isolated in their traditional way of life, they would probably respond favorably to ideas for change presented in terms of local community betterment. Civic action proposals should stress the resulting improvement of village life rather than emphasize ethnic or cultural pride, nationalism, or political ideology. The reasons for an innovation should be thoroughly explained; as evidenced by their reaction to resettlement schemes, the M'ng resent interference in their normal routine if they do not understand the reason for it.

The following civic action guidelines may be useful in the planning and implementation of projects or programs.

1. Projects originating in the local village are more desirable than suggestions imposed by a remote Central Government or by foreigners.
2. Projects should be designed to be challenging but should not be on such a scale as to intimidate the villagers by size or strangeness.
3. Projects should have fairly short completion dates or should have phases that provide frequent opportunities to evaluate effectiveness.
4. Results should, as far as possible, be observable, measurable, or tangible.
5. Projects should, ideally, lend themselves to emulation by other villages or groups.

#### Civic Action Projects

The civic action possibilities for personnel working with the M'ng encompass all aspects of tribal life. Examples of possible

projects are listed below. They should be considered representative but not all inclusive and not in order of priority.

1. Agriculture and animal husbandry
  - a. Improvement of livestock quality through introduction of better breeds.
  - b. Instruction in elementary veterinary techniques to improve health of animals.
  - c. Introduction of improved seeds and new vegetables.
  - d. Techniques to improve quality and yields of farmland.
  - e. Insect and rodent control.
  - f. Construction of simple irrigation and drainage systems.
2. Transportation and communication
  - a. Roadbuilding and clearing of trails.
  - b. Installation, operation, and maintenance of electric power generators and village electric light systems.
  - c. Construction of motion-picture facilities.
  - d. Construction of radio broadcast and receiving stations and public-speaker systems.
3. Health and sanitation
  - a. Improve village sanitation.
  - b. Provide safe water supply systems.
  - c. Eradicate disease-carrying insects.
  - d. Organize dispensary facilities for outpatient treatment.
  - e. Teach sanitation, personal hygiene, and first aid.
4. Education
  - a. Provide basic literacy training.
  - b. Provide basic citizenship education.
  - c. Provide information about the outside world of interest to the tribesmen.

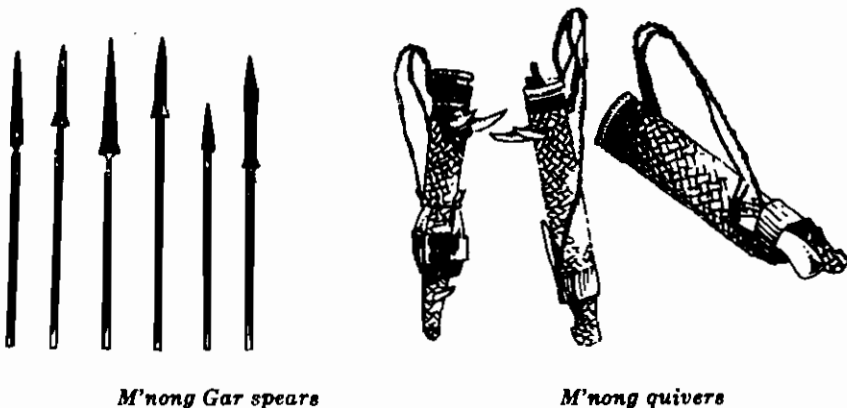
## SECTION XI

### PARAMILITARY CAPABILITIES

A tradition of both aggressive and defensive warfare points to the likelihood that the M'nong will take up arms readily. Until recently, their raiding activities were common, showing they had no reservations about fighting. The M'nong will fight both aggressively and defensively. The Bu Dong subgroup has been particularly feared in battle; these tribesmen live on the Srepok River near the Cambodian border, and their main occupations have traditionally been hunting and fighting.

The traditional weapons of the M'nong include sabers, knives, lances, and crossbows. The M'nong learn to use these ancient weapons at an early age. Some tribesmen received military training in the use of modern weapons from the French and are now receiving some training from the Vietnamese Government.

The M'nong are accustomed to armed conflict but not for extended periods of time. Traditionally they have engaged in attacks and raids, but these were of short duration.



*M'nong Gar spears*

*M'nong quivers*

*Figure 39*

## SECTION XII

### SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE M'NONG

Every action of the M'ngong tribesman has specific significance in terms of his culture. One must be careful to realize that the M'ngong may not react as outsiders do. The outsiders should remember that a relatively simple course of action may, for the tribesman, require not only divination but also a sacrifice.

A few suggestions for personnel working with the M'ngong are listed below.

#### **Official Activities**

1. Initial contact with a M'ngong village should be formal. A visitor should speak first to the village chief and elders, who will then introduce him to other principal village figures.
2. Sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness are essential in dealing with the M'ngong. Promises and predictions should not be made unless the result is assured. The tribespeople usually expect a new group of personnel to fulfill the promises of the previous group.
3. Outsiders cannot gain the confidence of M'ngong tribesmen quickly. Developing a sense of trust is a slow process requiring great understanding, tact, patience, and personal integrity.
4. An attitude of good-natured willingness and limitless patience must be maintained, even when confronted with resentment or apathy.
5. Whenever possible, avoid projects or operations which give the tribesmen the impression they are being forced to change their ways.
6. No immediate, important decision should be asked of a M'ngong. An opportunity for family consultation should always be provided; if not, a flat refusal to cooperate may result.
7. Tribal elders and the appointed village chief should also receive credit for projects and for improved administration. Efforts should never undermine or discredit the position or influence of the local leaders.

### **Social Relationships**

1. The M'ngong should be treated with respect and courtesy at all times.
2. The term *moi* should not be used because it means savage and is offensive to the tribesmen.
3. Outside personnel should not refuse an offer of food or drink, especially at a religious ceremony. Once involved in a ceremony, one must eat or drink whatever is offered.
4. A gift, an invitation to a ceremony, or an invitation to enter a M'ngong house may be refused by an outsider, as long as consistency and impartiality are shown. However, receiving gifts, participating in ceremonies, and visiting houses will serve to establish good relations with the tribespeople.
5. Outsiders should request permission to attend a M'ngong ceremony, festival, or meeting from the village elders or other responsible persons.
6. An outsider should never enter a M'ngong house unless accompanied by a member of that house; this is a matter of good taste and cautious behavior. If anything is later missing from the house, unpleasant and unnecessary complications may arise.
7. Outsiders should not get involved with M'ngong women. This could create distrust and dissension.
8. Teachers should be careful to avoid seriously disrupting cultural patterns.

### **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

1. Do not touch or otherwise tamper with M'ngong tombs.
2. Do not enter a village where a religious ceremony is taking place or a religious taboo is in effect. Watch for the warning signs placed at the village entrances; when in doubt, do not enter.
3. As soon as possible, identify any sacred trees, stones, or other sacred objects in the village; do not touch or tamper with them. The M'ngong believe these sacred objects house powerful spirits. For example, if a sacred rock is touched without due ceremony, the village may have to be moved or expensive sacrifices may have to be made.
4. Do not mock M'ngong religious beliefs in any way; these beliefs are the cornerstone of M'ngong life.

### **Living Standards and Routines**

1. Outsiders should treat all M'ngong property and village animals with respect. Any damage to property or fields should be promptly repaired and/or paid for. An outsider should

avoid borrowing from the tribesmen. Animals should not be treated brutally or taken without the owner's permission.

2. When trading with the M'nong, outsiders should always allow time for family conferences, as the individual M'nong is obliged, by tradition, to consult his family before selling anything.
3. Difficult, rigorous work should be done early in the morning, from dawn to 10:30 or 11:00 a.m. A nap during the middle of the day is customary, and light work is done in the afternoon.
4. Learn simple phrases in the M'nong language. A desire to learn and speak their language creates a favorable impression on the M'nong.

#### **Health and Welfare**

1. The M'nong are becoming aware of the benefits of medical care and will request medical assistance. Outside groups in M'nong areas should try to provide medical assistance whenever possible.
2. Medical teams should be prepared to handle, and should have adequate supplies for, extensive treatment of malaria, dysentery, yaws, trachoma, venereal diseases, intestinal parasites, and various skin diseases.

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## X. CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

No footnotes.

## XI. PARAMILITARY CAPABILITIES

No footnotes.

## XII. SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE M'NONG

No footnotes.

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