

The Raglai

## CHAPTER 14. THE RAGLAI

### SECTION I

#### INTRODUCTION

The Raglai live inland from the coastal cities of Nha Trang and Phan Rang in the Republic of Vietnam to the north and south of Cham settlements. They speak a Malayo-Polynesian language related to that of the Rhade and Jarai.

The Raglai have a matriarchal social organization and live in widely dispersed villages in mountainous terrain. All aspects of their social, political, and economic life are influenced by their strong animistic religious beliefs. The village unit is autonomous and represents the highest level of political organization among the Raglai.

#### **Name and Size of Group**

The Raglai, sometimes called "Orang Glai," or "Men of the Forest," are a tribal group numbering approximately 40,000 people; half are a northern group located in the mountains west of Nha Trang, and half a southern group who live to the west of Phan Rang.<sup>1</sup> On ethnographic maps the Raglai are usually divided into these two geographic groups.

#### **Location and Terrain Analysis**

The Raglai inhabit two separate areas near the coast of the Republic of Vietnam. The Northern Raglai area is in the mountains west of Nha Trang in Khanh Hoa Province. Some Northern Raglai villages are also found in eastern Tuyen Duc Province and northern Ninh Thuan Province. The Southern Raglai live in a long strip of mountainous land roughly paralleling the coast from Phan Rang in the north to Phan Thiet in the south.

The Northern Raglai region is bordered on the west and south by the Koho groups, including the Kil and Tring. The Rhade live to the north, and the M'ngong to the west, to the east are the settled, lowland peoples, including the Cham and the ethnic Vietnamese. The Raglai, like the Rhade and Jaria, have been influenced culturally and linguistically by the Cham.

The Southern Raglai area is bordered by the Koho groups on the west and the Cham and the ethnic Vietnamese on the east.

The areas inhabited by both Raglai groups are very rough and mountainous. The high mountains in the western portions of the Raglai areas (some peaks rise to 6,000 feet) isolate the Raglai from the neighboring Koho groups.<sup>2</sup> Some Raglai villages are on the floors of deep valleys, while others are perched on the sides of steep mountains. The villages are small and are linked by narrow trails cut through underbrush.<sup>3</sup>

The summer monsoon (May to mid-September) and the winter monsoon (November-March) provide a regular seasonal alternation of wind. These winds come mainly from the southwest in the summer and from the northeast in the winter. Agriculture is greatly dependent upon the monsoon-borne rain. Precipitation is high—averaging more than 80 inches in the lower elevation and more than 150 inches in the higher areas.

Temperatures vary by roughly 20 degrees between summer and winter. Actual surface temperatures average 60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit in winter (January) and above 85 degrees Fahrenheit in summer (July). These temperatures are lower than those of the coastal regions, and the Raglai complain about the warmer climate in the lowlands.<sup>4</sup>

The high and relatively evenly distributed precipitation gives this area two distinct belts of rain forest vegetation. At the higher elevations is the first belt, the primary rain forest, where the trees, with an average height of 75 to 90 feet, form a continuous canopy, with occasional breaks by trees 125 to 150 feet high. Below this canopy are smaller trees of 45 to 60 feet in height, and below this second layer is a fair abundance of seedlings and saplings. Orchids, other herbaceous plants, epiphytes, and woody climbing plants known as lianas are profuse. Little light penetrates this type of forest, and there is not much ground growth. During the dry season, this forest usually can be penetrated on foot with little difficulty.<sup>5</sup>

The second belt or secondary rain forest, which develops after land in the primary rain forest has been cleared and then left uncultivated, is more extensive in this area. In this forest the trees are small and close together, and there is an abundance of ground growth, lianas, and herbaceous climbers. Penetration is difficult without the constant use of the machete.

Before the present Vietnamese conflict, the Raglai traveled by raft down the numerous rivers to the coastal cities of Nha Trang, Phan Rang, and Phan Thiet.<sup>6</sup>

The road from Phan Rang to Da Lat passes through Raglai territory, following the general route of the inland railroad which

links these two cities. The north-south coastal highway, Route 1, skirts the edge of the Raglai regions and also parallels the main north-south railroad.

## SECTION II

### TRIBAL BACKGROUND

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

According to their language and culture, the Raglai may be grouped with the Malayo-Polynesian peoples in the East Indies. The Raglai language is similar to those of peoples on islands as widely separated as the Philippines and Sumatra, as well as those of the Rhade and Jarai tribal groups in the Republic of Vietnam.

Opinions vary about the geographic origin of the Malayo-Polynesian peoples in the Indochinese peninsula. Some authorities believe that they migrated from the Indonesian area to Indochina. Others think they originated in the Indian subcontinent, migrated eastward, and then spread from the Indochinese peninsula to Indonesia and the islands of the Pacific. Another theory is that the tribes migrated to Indochina from China proper and that the Polynesians were originally settled in the Chinese coastal region of Kwangtung before sailing south and east.

#### **Language**

The Raglai language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian language family and is related to the languages spoken by the Rhade and Jarai. Because of the isolation of their villages, the Raglai have some variations in dialect, but all the dialects are mutually intelligible. Because of the 6,000 foot barrier of the Annamite Mountains in the western part of the Raglai area, few Raglai have learned the dialects of the neighboring Koho groups. Some Raglai, however, understand French and Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup> The Raglai, as do most other Malayo-Polynesian tribal groups, have a special, sacred poetic language in which traditions, laws, and legends are chanted. Some scholars believe that this special language is the source from which the local tribal languages have been derived.<sup>2</sup>

Missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance have been developing a phonetic alphabet for the Raglai language and are translating both religious and secular works into the tribal language. These efforts have been hampered by local Viet Cong terrorism,<sup>3</sup> and it is not currently known whether or not the missionaries have completed their work to develop a written form of Raglai.

The following are samples of Raglai words which have been phonetically transcribed. To show the similarity of Raglai to another Malayo-Polynesian language—Rhadé—and their difference from a Mon-Khmer language—Koho—the words are given in all three tribal languages.<sup>4</sup>

<u>English</u>	<u>Raglai</u>	<u>Rhadé</u>	<u>Koho</u>
one	sa	sa	dul
two	dua	don	bar
four	pa	pa	puan
six	lonam	nam	prau
seven	tojuh	kjuh	poh
ten	sopluh	pluh	jet
fire	pui	pui	ous
rice	brah	braeh	phe
cooked rice	sei	esei	piang por

#### **Legendary History**

The oral tradition of the Raglai encompasses legends of the origin of the tribe, the spirits, and the world. Because they have had no written language of their own, the Raglai have passed down by word of mouth not only legends, but anecdotes about tribal members, proverbs, and traditional tribal laws. To preserve the traditions unchanged, the Raglai usually recount and chant them in verse form. These stories are told in the evening around the family hearth or are used as invocations during religious ceremonies.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Factual History**

After they were expelled from the coastal areas of Indochina, the Raglai moved to the Annamite Mountains into the area between Phu Yen and Binh Thuan Provinces. Their proximity to the more culturally advanced Kingdom of Champa resulted in considerable Cham influence on Raglai customs and language.

In the 15th century, as Annamese (ethnic Vietnamese) rule was extended and consolidated, the isolated Cham troops and settlers were forced to abandon the northern highland areas. The Cham set up bastions in Khanh Hoa and Ninh Thuan Provinces; they and their Montagnard allies, including the Raglai, successfully fought the Annamese for 200 years and maintained their territory in Ninh Thuan. Finally, however, the Cham gave up the struggle, and the Montagnards came under Annamese rule.<sup>6</sup>

The Annamese exacted heavy taxes and "gifts" of ivory, rhinoceros horns, and wood from the Raglai near Nha Trang. The abuses of local Annamese officials became so onerous that in the 19th century the Annamese Court of Hue issued an edict against such practices in order to discourage tribal violence and reprisals.<sup>7</sup>

The Court of Hue established a line of demarcation between the Annamese and the Montagnards. However, when the Annamese wanted to settle fertile land in Montagnard territory, the line was moved and military settlers were sent to guard it. In 1887 some of these military settlers, called Homo, established themselves in the mountains west of Phan Rang and recruited Raglai tribesmen to work in their ricefields. As a result the Raglai moved higher into the mountains.<sup>8</sup>

#### Settlement Patterns

The Raglai live in small villages in clearings on mountain slopes or on the floors of deep valleys. The village sites are generally near streams; villages are connected by narrow trails through the secondary forest growth that covers the hills.

The Raglai house is constructed of bamboo and elevated on pilings. The thatched roof is made of palm leaves. The house is divided into compartments: in the center is the reception or common room; on the right and left of the entrance are the sleeping rooms. The paddy (unhusked rice) is kept in a special section of the house. There is a garden enclosure in front of the house, where the family grows secondary crops such as bananas, papayas, tomatoes, and betel. Pigs are kept in a sty a short distance from the house.<sup>9</sup>

### SECTION III

#### INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

##### Physical Characteristics

The Raglai are a short, sturdy people with light brown skin. Their hair is blue-black. Normal height ranges from 5 feet 2 inches to 5 feet 4 inches, and the weight of the average adult male is about 115 pounds.<sup>1</sup>

##### Health

The health of the Raglai 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 principal disease among the Raglai is malaria—most tribespeople contract it at least once during their lifetime. Two common types of malaria are found in the tribal area. One, benign tertian malaria, causes high fever with relapses over a period of time but is usually not fatal. The other, malignant tertian malaria, is fatal to both infants and adults.<sup>2</sup>

The three types of typhus found in the Raglai area are carried by lice, rat fleas, and mites. Mite-borne typhus is reportedly rampant among all the Montagnard tribes.<sup>3</sup>

Cholera, typhoid, dysentery, yaws, leprosy, venereal diseases, tuberculosis, and various parasitic infestations are also found in the Raglai area.<sup>4</sup> Disease in the tribal area is spread by insects—including the anopheles mosquito, rat flea, and louse—or caused by worms—including hookworms. Some diseases are associated with poor sanitation and sexual hygiene.<sup>5</sup>

Nutritional diseases are widespread in this area. The intake of calcium and iron is satisfactory, but deficiencies in the intake of thiamine, riboflavin, and vitamins A and C have been reported.<sup>6</sup>

Dental diseases are common and severe, causing the teeth to fall out or become too loose to function.<sup>7</sup>

Some tribesmen near towns have been successfully treated in clinics or health centers, but they retain a strong belief in traditional healing techniques.<sup>8</sup>

The Raglai, like the other highland tribes, believe that illness is caused by the activities of evil spirits. Occasionally an illness may

be considered the just punishment of a tribesman who has violated a traditional law or taboo. Only the sorcerer can cure an illness; his function is to identify the responsible spirit and to conduct the appropriate sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> The sorcerer has no scientific knowledge but relies on a fixed ensemble of special, inherited traditions.

Sorcerers among the Raglai reportedly use the following healing technique. The sorcerer boils a certain leaf and looks into the pot to see whether the arrangement of the leaf fragments calls for a sacrifice of a chicken, pig, or buffalo. Then the appropriate animal is killed ceremonially. At night, after the sacrifice, the sorcerer lights hand-molded candles near the sick person and hangs bells over him. The sorcerer jangles the bells and chants:

Oh Spirits, may your evil natures be appeased. Give health, give strength, give adequate breath; become incarnate in me.<sup>10</sup>

The sorcerer then goes into a trance during which he is believed to visit the world of spirits where he discovers the outcome of the illness. When he recovers from the trance, he reports his findings to the assembled family, and further sacrifices are made.<sup>11</sup>

#### Psychological Characteristics

A missionary reported that the Raglai are a ferocious people.<sup>12</sup> However, another source says that the Raglai are innocent, capable of surprising frankness, and, above all, hospitable, receiving visitors with great courtesy and inviting them to partake in meals with the family.<sup>13</sup>

Still another source has noted that the Raglai are extremely industrious and willing to work hard, especially when the work is for some aspect of community betterment. The Raglai are also eager to learn and reportedly absorb new ideas rapidly. They learn best through the use of visual aids and by demonstrations which allow them to imitate the instructor's action.<sup>14</sup>

## SECTION IV

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Raglai social structure is organized along extended family lines and resembles that of the Jarai and Rhade tribes. The family name is transmitted through the female line, and all property is owned and inherited by the women.

Although the eldest female member of the family exercises control over property distribution, she is advised in other decisions by her eldest brother. Even though married and living in a separate household, this man retains a role in the affairs of his sister's family. His authority is not of the restrictive "police type," but commands respect for his position as the eldest male of the blood line. He is expected to interpret traditions and to apply them to problems requiring such judgments. In the Raglai language, the word for this maternal uncle is a special term expressing respect. The tribesmen also use this special term as a formal mode of addressing a superior or an aged man.<sup>1</sup>

#### Place of Men, Women, and Children in the Society

Labor is divided among the Raglai according to sex. Women care for the children, carry water, cut wood, husk rice, feed the animals, gather herbs and roots from the forest, plant rice, and weed the ricefields.

Men hunt, fish, clear and burn the forest to make the ricefields, and construct the houses. Children play and look after the animals and younger children.<sup>2</sup>

When old men can no longer engage in the strenuous physical activity involved in clearing the forest, they undertake other tasks in the village: they carve handles for the machete-like *coupe-coupes*; plait mats; braid carrying baskets; make pipes; appraise the value of animals, jars, and iron goods; and recount the oral traditions of the tribe.

Old men also fulfill the political function of elders and have positions as maternal uncles. The word of the old men in family or other discussions is considered the voice of wisdom. Even though women control all property, the elder man's advice is sought and carries authority.

### **Marriage**

Among the Raglai, courtship is initiated by the boy rather than by the girl, an unusual practice in a matrilineal society. After a couple has been courting for a period of time, the girl tells her parents that she wishes to marry. The two families then discuss the marriage arrangements, including the property the boy will bring into the marriage. Once agreed, the marriage is celebrated with a sacrifice and feast, the cost of which is borne by the family of the boy's mother.

After the marriage ceremony, the boy lives in the house of his wife's mother, and undertakes agricultural activities with other males of the family. The boy's connection with his own family is not ended, however, if he has sisters, because of the voice he has in the affairs of his sister's family.<sup>3</sup>

### **Birth**

As the time of delivery of his child approaches, the Raglai father goes into the forest to obtain certain roots and herbs to brew a tea for his wife. The herbal tea is used to ease labor and birth. The husband is not only present but assists in the birth. The event probably occurs inside the house.

Following the birth there is a period of taboo which may last for 7 days. During this taboo the wife is not permitted to leave the house, and only members of the family are allowed inside. This is a critical time for both the mother and the child, and the taboo may be interpreted both as a means of protecting the child and of permitting the mother to regain her strength. When the taboo is lifted, the mother returns to her regular tasks.<sup>4</sup>

### **Naming the Child**

Usually the mother and her brother immediately select a name for the newborn child. The name, however, is not revealed for about 6 years as the Raglai believe that the malevolent spirits cannot harm the child if they are ignorant of its name. The subterfuge is further complicated by the choice of an unattractive pseudonym to help conceal the child's identity and to protect him from evil influences.<sup>5</sup>

### **Childhood**

Infant mortality rates are high, and the children that survive are greatly loved and treated permissively. Children are never allowed to remain unhappy: if a child cries, he is immediately picked up and comforted. Small children are taught to look after younger children and to mind the animals. When a child is about 6, he learns about the cultivation of rice. This information can be given by the mother who, at the end of the dry season, places a drop of water on the child's ear and says:

Don't forget this moon [the one before the coming of the rains] which teaches us the cycle of rice cultivation; one can't stay at home anymore, one must now work in the fields. Remember this each year when the first rains begin to fall.<sup>6</sup>

### **Education**

Fixed traditions perpetuate the tribal standards of behavior. Boys and girls not only grow up learning the skills expected of their sex, but are immersed in the oral tradition of the tribe from an early age. Custom molds and bends the child, who learns to think within the limits of the legends, laws, proverbs, and traditional wisdom of his tribal group. The traditions of the tribe are comprehensive, covering every aspect of behavior. The authority of these traditions governs the tribesman; consequently, the Raglai's horizon and thinking are limited.<sup>7</sup>

### **Death and Burial**

When a Raglai dies, his fellow tribesmen cut down a tree to prepare a coffin. They section and split the tree, hollow it out, and use the split-off part as a lid. Poorer members of the tribe may be buried wrapped only in a blanket and tree bark.

Burials are accompanied by animal sacrifices. The ceremonies provide food and goods for the use of the deceased in the afterlife and keep away the spirits responsible for the death, thus preventing the spirits from causing another death.

The dead are interred in the ground, and the burial place is preserved for a certain period, during which sacrifices are conducted at the site. After a final ceremony, the grave site is abandoned.<sup>8</sup>

### **Daily Routine**

The daily routine of the Raglai begins in the early morning with the first meal. The women get up and pound the rice to remove the husk and prepare it for the first meal; they also feed the animals.

After the first meal, everyone goes to his tasks. The men leave to hunt or prepare the fields for planting; the women go to the forest in search of edible roots and herbs.

At noon a light snack may be taken, and in the evening the second full meal is eaten around the family hearth. This meal is usually prepared from leftovers from the first meal of the day. After supper members of the family tell stories, exchange news, and gossip about the events of the day. Everyone goes to bed about 10 o'clock.<sup>9</sup>

The daily pattern is frequently interrupted by events such as births, deaths, and religious ceremonies and varies somewhat according to the season.<sup>10</sup>

## SECTION V

### CUSTOMS AND TABOOS

Almost all Raglai activities are regulated by numerous customs and taboos. Prescribed methods and procedures govern everything from dress to the construction of houses, from the settlement of disputes to patterns of individual behavior. The Raglai have transmitted these prescriptions from generation to generation until they have attained the force of customary law. Believing that the world around them abounds in both good and evil spirits, the Raglai are constantly trying to avoid actions, activities, and contact with objects or animals which might displease the spirits. Tribesmen in regular contact with outsiders may not observe their customs and taboos as closely as tribesmen living in greater isolation from outside influences.

#### **Dress**

Raglai dress, like that of other highland tribes, is quite simple. Men wear a loincloth and have adopted such articles of western clothing as T-shirts and army surplus jackets. Christian Raglai men wear white shirts as a symbol of their adherence to the western faith. Women wear skirts wrapped around the waist. Ordinarily the tribespeople are barefoot. For protection against winter cold they wear a blanket over their shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Tribal Folklore**

The Raglai have a tradition of legends, proverbs, riddles, and humor. This material, transmitted orally from generation to generation, greatly influences the Raglai and his way of looking at the world.

Folk tales and legends are customarily told in the evening around the hearth: stories, narrated in long poetical form,<sup>2</sup> tell of the origin of the world, legendary heroes, human heroes, activities of the spirits, and animals (rather like Aesop's Fables).

#### **Folk Beliefs**

The Raglai have three general classes of taboos: taboos forbidding the saying of certain things; taboos which, if broken, require sacrifices to restore the normal order of things; and taboos which prohibit mixing certain things together.

A Raglai taboo forbids cutting into the ground with the iron cutting edge of the machete or coupe-coupe. This restriction probably applies to other metal cutting instruments as well, as the Raglai believe that spirits reside in the ground. Furthermore, the dead or sick must not be transported across cultivated fields. Firewood can be gathered only after the harvest is safe in the granary.

There are also taboos against placing a child's head on the basket which is used as a base for the cooking kettle, against serving food during the meal from pottery kitchen utensils, and against using borrowed utensils to prepare a meal. The family hearth and associated equipment are considered sacred because of their function in the preparation of mountain dry rice—a grain believed to be sacred.

Another taboo involves bathing: Raglai men may not bathe or wash in a stream if there are women bathing downstream.

#### **Eating and Drinking Customs**

The Raglai believe that rice, the diet staple, was given by the spirits, who taught them to cultivate and prepare it as a food. Other items in the diet include herbs and vegetables. Although the Raglai seldom eat meat and fish, they have the reputation, according to neighboring tribes, of eating very well.<sup>4</sup> Reportedly, the Raglai do not serve food from pottery utensils. The Raglai generally use bowls and dishes for their meals, but some groups eat from small woven baskets.<sup>5</sup>

Water is the usual Raglai beverage, but for ceremonial occasions, they drink rice wine brewed in antique pottery jars. The tribespeople drink the rice wine through long straws, taking turns in the order of their importance. All participants are obliged to drink, for the Raglai believe the spirits would be offended, and therefore the ceremony ineffectual, if anyone abstained.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Customs Relating to Animals**

The buffalo is considered the prime sacrificial animal, while pigs and chickens are adequate for lesser occasions. In the eyes of the spirits, during a sacrifice the buffalo represents man and the desires of the family, house, or village offering the sacrifice. Once sacrificed, the flesh of the buffalo (which is divided among the spirits, family, and village) represents a kind of communion uniting them all.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Customs Relating to Houses and Villages**

At particular times a house or village may be declared taboo so that no one may enter or leave. Such taboos may be applied to the entire village or to any individual dwelling on the occasion of sacrifice, illness, birth, or death. Taboos on entering or leaving a house or village may last as long as 7 days. The taboo is designated by

a barred village gate, a string across the gate, or perhaps a carved stick placed on or near the entrance to the house or village. These signs are subject to local variation, and one should not enter a village if there is any indication that such a taboo is in effect.

In or near the village there may be a small sacred grove which the tribesmen believe is inhabited by spirits. A rock or unusual natural formation may have a special religious significance. The tribesmen avoid such sites for fear of antagonizing the spirits.

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

The Raglai have been in contact with the lowland Cham and ethnic Vietnamese for many years. Before Viet Cong infiltration, some tribesmen came from the mountains to work at Nha Trang. They also brought goods down the rivers for trade with the peoples along the coast. By 1965, however, Viet Cong activities in their territory have prevented Raglai trading trips to the coast and have led to the flight of some Raglai to resettlement areas nearer the coastal cities.

Visitors in a Raglai village reportedly were received with great hospitality. But if the Raglai are offended by a visitor who violates a taboo, they reportedly become openly hostile. Few travelers enter the Raglai territory because the mountains are so rugged. The Vietnamese have not attempted to settle in the Raglai area because they prefer to live at lower altitudes. In the late 1950's missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance finally established limited contact with the tribe.

## SECTION VI

### RELIGION

Religion plays a dominant role in the lives of the Raglai. The animistic beliefs of the tribesmen involve faith in a large pantheon of good and evil spirits called *yang*. Understanding of these spirits and of the requirements for successful interaction with them through the use of appropriate rituals, ceremonies, taboos, and sacrifices is passed orally from generation to generation. Although specific details of the oral tradition may vary with each village, the fundamental beliefs and practices are similar throughout the Raglai area.

#### Principal Spirits

The Raglai pantheon includes a supreme being called Nhang. Companion spirits are associated with the sun, moon, earth, sky, thunder, and such terrain features as mountains, patches of forest, and prominent rocks. Spirits are also thought to inhabit animals, as well as wine jars, the family hearth, tools, and other inanimate objects. The Raglai do not construct temples or other buildings for the purpose of housing or worshipping the spirits. Some spirits are considered good, and others are considered evil, but all are believed able to cause misfortune in the form of accidents, illness, and death.<sup>1</sup>

Many Raglai travel to Bumong to offer sacrifices. Bumong is the traditional burial site of two legendary heroes. Together these two heroes are referred to as the spirit of Bumong, and their worship in the Raglai area may almost be considered a special cult.<sup>2</sup>

#### Religious Ceremonies

Sacrifices are the core of religious ritual among the Raglai and, depending on the occasion, apparently may be performed by almost anyone. Usually sacrifices affecting the village as a whole are conducted by the village elders, while family and personal rites are the responsibility of the family elders or the individual concerned.

Most sacrifices involve an invocation to the spirits, which invites them to the offering, and expresses to them the wishes of the person making the sacrifice. When the sacrificial animal (buffalo, pig or chicken) has been killed, its blood and flesh are ceremonially displayed in bowls with rice and other foods. Prayers are said

during the ceremony, and all the participants drink from wine jars. The tribesmen believe that the spirits partake of the offering in the bowls, just as the tribespeople partake of the rice wine and cooked portions of the sacrificed animal.

Sacrifices may be held on a grand scale involving a number of buffaloes and the participation of several villages.

Among the Raglai most sacrifices are held in the winter, from the end of the harvest in December to the beginning of planting in April. This entire winter period has been described as highly festive. The fresh harvest, of course, provides rice for the sacrificial wine. Individual sacrifices correspond with the harvest, the storage of the paddy, and the clearing and sowing of the fields.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Religious Practitioners**

While ceremonies of the agricultural cycle are conducted by the elders of families and villages, healing ceremonies are conducted by a sorcerer or *bojau*, who usually serves a group of villages in the vicinity of his own home. While in a trance he determines the nature of the illness, identifies the responsible evil spirit, and decides what sacrifices are appropriate for the cure.<sup>8</sup>

Reportedly there is a loose organization among the Raglai *bojau*. Apparently led by a *bojau* in the village of Choah, near Bumong, this organization appears to be associated with the worship of the spirit of Bumong. Every January the *bojau* make a pilgrimage to Bumong for a special sacrifice; at a time near the spring equinox (21 March) the *bojau* again make a pilgrimage for a lesser sacrifice. The *bojau* are also reported to honor hierarchical distinctions among themselves, but the nature of this hierarchy was not known.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Missionary Contact**

The Christian and Missionary Alliance sponsored several missionaries in the Raglai area in the early 1950's. The missionaries reached the Raglai through the conversion of a Raglai *bojau* named La Yoan, who himself conducted missionary activity in the region. Viet Cong operations in the Raglai area ultimately hampered the efforts of the missionaries, and the villagers with whom they were working were evacuated by raft to resettlement areas near the coast.<sup>6</sup>

## SECTION VII

### ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

#### Type of Economy

The Raglai have a subsistence economy based primarily on the slash-and-burn cultivation of rice by families on lands under communal village control. The ricefields, cleared by the slash-and-burn technique, depend solely on rainfall for irrigation. Briefly, this technique involves clearing the fields by cutting and burning all vegetation in the new area. The ashes produced serve as fertilizer which makes the soil rich enough for 3 to 4 years of crops. When the fields no longer support a crop, the village moves to a new area, allowing the old fields to return to jungle, and repeats the slash-and-burn clearing of the new area.

As secondary crops, the Raglai raise corn, manioc, cotton, giant squash, sugarcane, various vegetables, and fruit trees in their kitchen gardens. They also hunt and fish to supplement their diet.<sup>1</sup>

Little information was available concerning special arts or skills of the Raglai. They do engage in basket weaving and pottery making and they apparently make some cloth from locally grown fibers.<sup>2</sup>

#### Exchange System and Trade

The Raglai ordinarily use a barter system for trade among themselves. They have, however, engaged in money transactions when they trade with the Cham and Vietnamese in the coastal towns.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Raglai once brought goods on rafts to trade with the coastal towns, Viet Cong operations in their territory have almost completely stopped this trade. Military activities have likewise eliminated the itinerant Vietnamese who brought various goods (particularly salt) into the tribal area.<sup>4</sup>

#### Property System

All property is inherited, controlled, and disposed of by the women of the tribe. Before any item can be sold by a Raglai, the senior woman in the family must give her permission. Of all Raglai property (ranging from animals to jewelry) gongs and the antique jars used to brew rice wine are considered the most valuable.<sup>5</sup>

## SECTION VIII

### POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

#### General Political Organization

Like the other Montagnard groups of the Republic of Vietnam, the Raglai lack an overall tribal political organization. The largest political unit is the autonomous village. Sometimes neighboring villages connected by marriage will cooperate, celebrate buffalo sacrifices together, and lend each other rice in times of need. These informal relationships, however, do not constitute a formal organization.

Nor is there a central form of authority within the village political unit. Authority to dispose of economic assets belongs to the senior women of the extended families living in the village. Formal political authority rests in the eldest brothers of the senior women. These brothers make up the council of elders which meets informally to deliberate matters important to the village as a whole. Family problems are settled within the family itself by its eldest members. Tribal traditions, as interpreted by the family and village elders, serve as the basis of social control in the Raglai village.<sup>1</sup>

Under the colonial administration, the French appointed a village functionary or chief in addition to the customary council of elders. This official, selected from among the villagers, acted as a liaison between the French and the villagers; he collected taxes and relayed French wishes and decrees. The available information does not indicate if there are still appointed chiefs in Raglai villages.

With the Geneva Agreement of 1954 and the creation of the Republic of Vietnam, the problems of establishing a rapprochement between the Montagnards in the highlands and the more culturally advanced Vietnamese in the coastal areas became acute. The French Government had supported a policy of permitting the Raglai and other tribes to be separate administrative entities. Now, however, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam has taken measures to incorporate the highlanders into the political organization of the nation.

The Vietnamese Government administers relationships between tribal villages and has assigned an official to be responsible for groups of seven or eight villages. Above this level there are district and provincial chiefs. Through this administrative hierarchy,

the Vietnamese Government administers tribal affairs and transmits its orders to the village level.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Legal System**

Raglai laws are part of their oral tradition and are in the form of taboos and prohibitions. Because of their age, experience, and position, village and family elders interpret and apply these laws to specific cases. They also have the obligation to hand down the laws unaltered to succeeding generations.<sup>3</sup>

The Raglai believe that a broken law upsets the harmony of the world by disturbing the spirits. Harmony can be restored only when the guilty person makes the correct sacrifice to the appropriate spirit and pays a fine to the village (and to the family of the offended person, if the crime was against an individual). The Raglai do not imprison to punish.<sup>4</sup> There was no indication in the available information that trials by ordeal are utilized.

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 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 administration, 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 effort was connected with the Vietnamese program 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 law and tribunals. Under this new decree, there will be courts at the village, district, and province levels which will be responsible for civil affairs, Montagnard 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>9</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."

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

At the national 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**

Their isolation and marginal subsistence make the Raglai susceptible to Viet Cong subversive activities. Heavy Viet Cong infiltration in 1965 reportedly resulted in the flight of some tribesmen to resettlement areas nearer the coast, as well as an end to Raglai travel to coastal cities for trade.<sup>12</sup>

The primary objective of the subversive elements is to win the allegiance of the Raglai and to turn the tribesmen into an active, hostile force against the Government of the Republic of Vietnam.

Generally, the Viet Cong infiltrate a village and work to win the confidence of either the whole village or its key individuals. Usually a slow process, this is achieved by providing community services and medical aid and by adopting tribal mores and customs.

Once the villagers' suspicions are allayed and their confidence won, the next phase is an intense propaganda program directed against the Government of the Republic of Vietnam. Then individuals are recruited, trained, and assigned to various Viet Cong support or combat units.<sup>13</sup>

When propaganda and cajolery are not effective, the Viet Cong resort to extortion and terror, which usually results in passive resistance to the Government or active support for the Viet Cong.

## SECTION IX

### COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

The principal means of disseminating information in the Raglai area is by word of mouth. No information was available at this writing concerning Raglai familiarity with or access to radios. Any radios in operation in the Raglai area were probably brought in by military personnel.

Where feasible, short movies covering simple subjects and using the Raglai language might be effective in communicating with the tribesmen.

Written communication might have some effect on the Raglai. Although most Raglai are illiterate, some of the tribesmen can read French and Vietnamese. The literate tribesmen could be expected to communicate information in written materials to the rest of the tribespeople. Data about the successful use of printed materials are not available at this time.

Information themes to be used among the Raglai should be oriented around the principle of improving conditions in the tribal villages. The control of disease, the improvement of agriculture, and protection against Viet Cong harassment are possible themes for information programs.

## SECTION X

### CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

Any proposed civic action should take into account the religious, social, and cultural traditions of the Raglai. Initial contacts in villages should be made only with the tribal elders in order to show respect for the tribal political structure. The tribespeople should also be psychologically prepared to accept the proposed changes. This requires detailed consultation with village leaders, careful assurance of results, and a relatively slow pace in implementing programs.

Most Raglai tribesmen would probably respond favorably to ideas for change presented in terms of local, community betterment. Civic action proposals should stress improvement of village life rather than emphasize ethnic or cultural pride, nationalism, or political ideology. The reasons for innovations should be thoroughly explained; the Raglai resent interference in their normal routine if they do not understand the reason for it.

Civic action programs of the Vietnamese Government have included the resettlement of some Raglai tribespeople into new and larger villages, the control of malaria, medical aid programs, agricultural assistance, and the provision of educational facilities.<sup>1</sup>

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 Raglai 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 the 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 and animals.
  - c. Introduction of improved seeds and new vegetables.
  - d. Introduction of techniques to improve quality and yields of farmland.
  - e. Introduction of 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

Given the incentive and motivation and provided with the necessary training, leadership, and support, the Raglai can become an effective force against the Viet Cong. The tribesmen can serve as informers, trackers and guides, intelligence agents, interpreters, and translators. With intensive training and support, the Raglai can be organized to defend their villages against the Viet Cong; with good leadership, they can be organized into an effective counter-guerrilla combat unit.

In the past the Raglai were considered capable fighters, whether fighting offensively in raids against other groups or defensively within their villages. The Raglai were recently reported to be ferocious fighters, but no specific details are available to substantiate this assertion.<sup>1</sup>

No information was available at this writing which described the participation of Raglai tribesmen in modern military operations. Nor was there any information stating whether the Raglai have been trained by the French, Vietnamese, or United States military forces.

#### **Weapons Utilized by the Tribe**

Very little information was available about the weapons used by the Raglai. Their traditional weapons were crossbows, spears, and knives. An early account reported that the Raglai tipped their arrows and spears with virulent poison obtained from the upas (*antiaris*) tree. A strong preparation of this poison apparently caused death within minutes.<sup>2</sup>

## **SECTION XII**

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE RAGLAI**

Every action of the Raglai tribesman has specific significance in terms of his culture. One must be careful to realize that the Raglai may not react as outsiders do. The outsider should remember that a relatively simple course of action may, for the tribesman, require complex religious or social rituals.

A few suggestions for personnel working with the Raglai are listed below:

#### **Official Activities**

1. The initial visit to a Raglai 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 Raglai. 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 Raglai 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. Tribal elders and the village chief should receive some credit for civic action projects and for improved administration. Efforts should never undermine or discredit the position or influence of the local leaders.

#### **Social Relationships**

1. The Raglai 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 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 Raglai ceremony, festival, or meeting from the village elders or other responsible persons.
6. An outsider should never enter a Raglai 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 Raglai 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 mock Raglai religious beliefs in any way; these beliefs are the cornerstone of Raglai life.
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.

#### **Living Standards and Routines**

1. Outsiders should treat all Raglai 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. Learn simple phrases in the Raglai language. A desire to learn and speak their language creates a favorable impression on the Raglai tribespeople.

#### **Health and Welfare**

1. The Raglai are becoming aware of the benefits of medical care and will request medical assistance. Outside groups in Raglai 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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4. Dam Bo, *op. cit.*, p. 1088.
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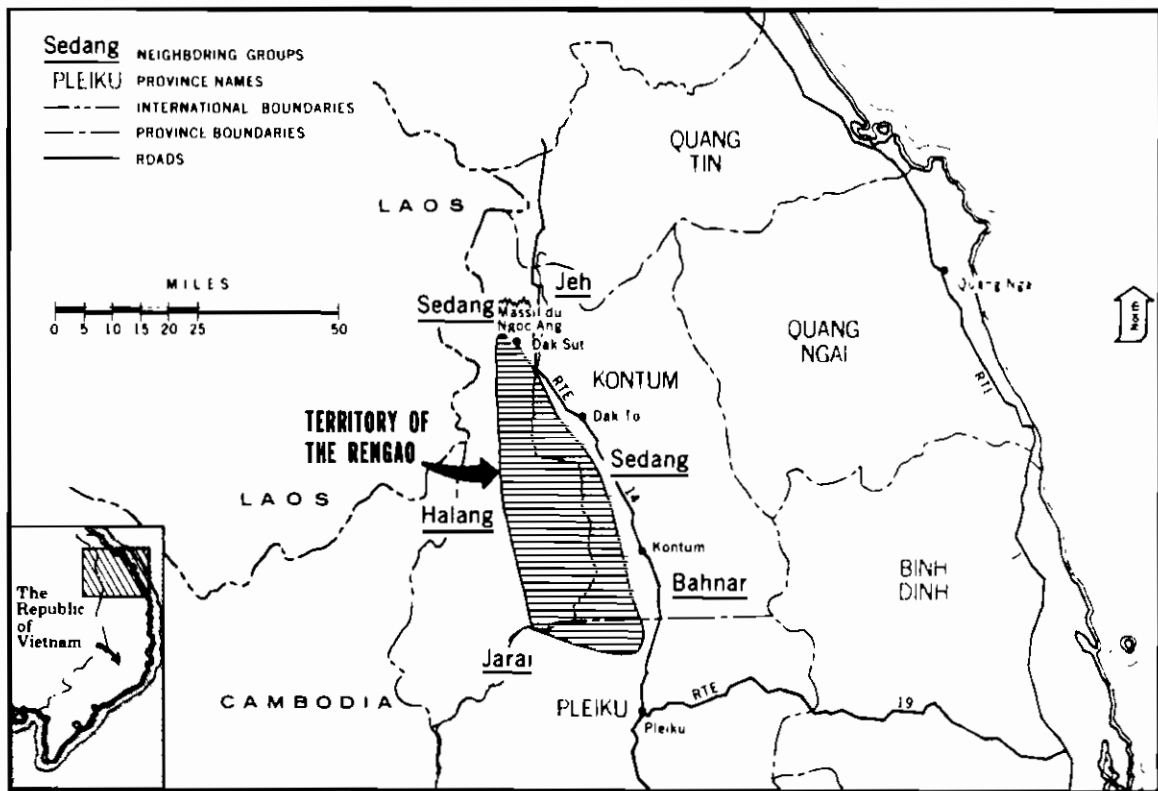
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*The Rengao*

## CHAPTER 15. THE RENGAO

### SECTION I

#### INTRODUCTION

The Rengao, one of the smaller Montagnard tribes of the Republic of Vietnam, inhabit a mountainous region west of the city of Kontum. They have long been known as one of the more belligerent highland tribes.

The Rengao are of Mon-Khmer ethnic and linguistic stock and speak a language related to that of the neighboring Bahnar. The village units of the Rengao form the highest political organization of the tribe. Religion plays an important role in the lives of the tribesmen: they believe that spirits and ghosts constantly intervene in human affairs.

#### **Name and Size of Tribe**

The name Rengao, variously spelled Reungao, Rongao, Ro-ngao, and Rangao, is a Bahnar word meaning "frontier" or "border."<sup>1</sup> This name was applied to the group when they were considered the westernmost subgroup of the Bahnar tribe.<sup>2</sup> Although there are no accurate records of the exact number of Rengao, it has been estimated that they number approximately 10,000 persons.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Location**

The Rengao live in autonomous villages scattered over a strip of land extending from the border of Pleiku Province in the south, through the center of Kontum Province, to the north near Dak Sut. The rugged Massif du Ngoc Ang, a compact group of mountains, dominates the terrain to the northwest.<sup>4</sup> Bordering the Rengao are the Halang on the west, the Sedang on the north and east, the Bahnar on the southeast, and the Jarai on the south.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Terrain Analysis**

In general, the region inhabited by the Rengao consists of rounded hills, some of which rise as high as 6,000 feet. Towards the north, the terrain is quite rugged, with granite outcroppings reaching 7,000 feet in height.<sup>6</sup>

The Bla and the Po Ko Rivers join in the Rengao area and flow south to form the Se San River, a tributary of the Mekong.<sup>7</sup>

The Rengao region is covered with a moderately heavy forest, which is generally easy to traverse, except during the summer rainy season. During the winter the forest turns brown, and many of the trees lose their leaves. Part of the undergrowth is *tranh* (*Imperata cylindrica*), a coarse, tall grass with which the Rengao thatch the roofs of their houses. When young, this grass provides grazing land for domestic animals. Bamboo growth is found in low, wet areas and in recently abandoned fields. The bamboo protects seedling trees, and eventually the forest again covers these areas.<sup>9</sup>

The climate of the Rengao area is influenced by two monsoon winds, one coming from the southwest in the summer (April to mid-September) and the other from the northeast in the winter (mid-September to March). Agriculture is greatly dependent on the summer monsoons, which bring as much as 150 inches of rain yearly and create local floods.<sup>9</sup> Temperatures in the region are approximately 15 degrees lower than those along the coastal lowland regions.

National Route 14, running northwest from Kontum, skirts the eastern portion of the Rengao area. Another route running west from Dak To to the Laotian border crosses the Rengao territory. An airfield at Kontum provides seasonal air accessibility to the region.<sup>10</sup>

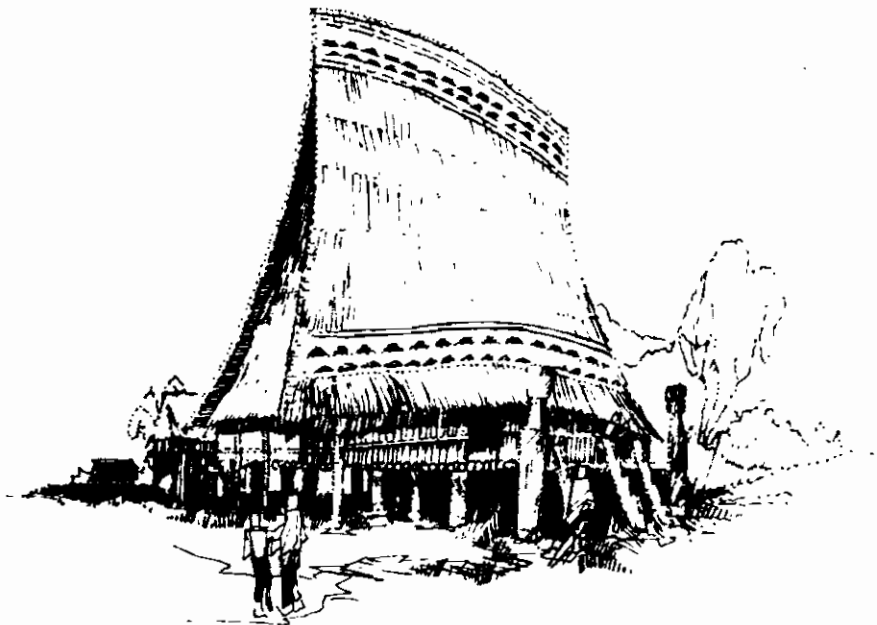


Figure 40. Rengao communal house.

## SECTION II

### TRIBAL BACKGROUND

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

In terms of language, customs, and physical appearance, the Rengao are classified with the Mon-Khmer ethnic grouping and are related to the Bahnar, Sedang, Stieng, Halang, and M'ngong tribes.<sup>1</sup> It is generally believed that the Mon-Khmer ethnic grouping originated in the upper Mekong valleys, from whence they migrated in many directions.<sup>2</sup>

Opinions vary as to the specific ethnic and social origin of the Rengao. Some sources maintain that the Rengao are a subgroup of the Bahnar; others, that they are a subgroup of the Sedang; and a few, that they are related to the Jarai and the Halang. The consensus seems to favor the belief that the Rengao evolved from intermingling of the Sedang and Bahnar. Because their language, history, and social organization seem more closely related to the Bahnar than to the Sedang, the Rengao have frequently been classified as a subgroup of the Bahnar.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Language**

Linguistically the Rengao belong to the Bahnaric grouping of the Mon-Khmer language stock.<sup>4</sup> There is no written Rengao language, and the few literate tribesmen learned the written form of the Bahnar language in missionary schools. A few Rengao have a knowledge of French or Vietnamese, obtained through military service or attendance at Government schools.

#### **Legendary History**

Legends explaining the tribal origin, the spirits, and world are part of the larger oral tradition of the Rengao, which also includes tales of legendary heroes, anecdotes about tribal members, proverbs, and traditional tribal laws. To preserve the traditions unchanged, they are usually chanted in verse form, most frequently in the evening around the family hearth or as an invocation to a religious ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

According to legend, the Rengao believe that rice was given to them by the goddess Yang Xo'ri. One day while Yang Xo'ri was on her way to participate in a Rengao sacrifice, she saw some tribesmen digging roots to eat. She took pity on them and gave

them rice seeds to plant. Henceforth, rice was the basic Rengao crop and the chief staple of their diet.<sup>5</sup>

### **Factual History**

In view of the limited and fragmentary data available, it is extremely difficult to present an historical account of individual Montagnard tribes. Consequently, the recorded history of the Rengao has to be treated in most instances as an integral part of overall Montagnard history, which itself appears mostly in unpublished reports of French colonial administrators.

The written history of the Montagnards is considered to begin with the arrival of the French in the mid-1800's. Under French rule, the High Plateau became a *Domaine de la Couronne* directly under the authority of the Emperor. While Annamese (ethnic Vietnamese) settlers were excluded from this area, the French were permitted to exploit the economic resources of the *Domaine*.

At the end of the 19th century, the French established an administrative system which divided the High Plateau into three provinces: Pleiku, Kontum, and Darlac, each with a French administrative unit, the province, was in turn divided into districts and cantons.<sup>7</sup> The village remained as the smallest administrative unit and retained its traditional leadership.<sup>8</sup> Under this administrative system, Montagnards were selected to serve as assistants to the provincial administrators and as officials at the district and canton levels.<sup>9</sup>

The Rengao are specifically mentioned only in the accounts of the French pacification of the highland area. To consolidate their influence in the highlands, the French in 1888 sent a soldier, David Mayrena, to Kontum. With the help of the Catholic mission in Kontum and Father J. B. Guerlach in particular, Mayrena was able to form a confederation of the Bahnar, Rengao, and Sedang. He proclaimed himself Marie I, titular King of the Sedang.<sup>10</sup> He then committed so many dishonest acts, such as the illegal sale of titles and lands, that he was exiled from French Indochina and died shortly thereafter.

In 1893, a treaty between the French and the Siamese marked the end of Siamese claims to territory east of the Mekong River; the highland area was then part of the French Annamite protectorate.<sup>11</sup> The French began to consolidate their authority in the area and attempted to contain the widespread intertribal warfare. In 1897, when the Jarai attacked a supply convoy en route to the mission at Kontum, Father Guerlach called upon the Bahnar to come to his assistance. They sent 1,200 men, the largest body of Montagnards ever to put themselves under the command of one man. The Jarai were defeated, and after peace was concluded, the

missionaries arranged an alliance between several Bahnar subgroups and the Rengao.<sup>12</sup>

In 1923, the French Government issued a policy manifesto governing the Montagnards. It was agreed that the social structure of the tribes, whether patriarchy, matriarchy, or clan, would be respected by the government. Certain zones were to be closed off to alien settlement; the trading of goods—salt in particular—was to be regulated. The heads of the provinces were to codify tribal laws and collect data on tribal customs, superstitions, and folklore.

#### Settlement Patterns

Rengao villages are composed of the houses inhabited by family groups, a communal house located in the center of the village, cattle pens, chicken coops, and granaries for paddy (unhusked rice). Each village is enclosed by a fence, *jih*, designed chiefly to prevent the animals from wandering. Until recently, Rengao villages were fortified.

The Rengao family house is rectangular in shape, measuring 30 to 40 feet long and 10 to 15 feet wide.<sup>13</sup> The houses are built on pilings above the ground and are oriented in an east-west direction. The house varies in size according to the number of occupants. Woven bamboo screens divide the interior into compartments and sleeping quarters for the occupants. The parents and very young children sleep in the east wing; the left or west wing is reserved for the boys, or for servants if the family is wealthy; the center is generally reserved for the older daughters. On the western side additions to the house may be built for married sons and daughters. An annex also may be constructed to accommodate a second wife, if the husband takes one. Each house contains one or more hearths, square wooden frames filled with soil. Variations on this form of house may be devised for local reasons.

The communal house, *jong*, is in the center of each village and is distinguished by a very high roof shaped like an ax blade. The communal house serves as the sleeping quarters for boys from the age of puberty until marriage, a meeting room for the village elders, a reception hall for strangers, a marketplace, and a site for sacrifices.

Generally the village *jong* is set off from the family houses by an open space and is oriented in a northeast-southwest direction. Built above the ground on strong pilings (7 on the lateral sides and 2 on either end), the communal house is usually about 25 to 45 feet long and 12 to 15 feet wide.<sup>14</sup> In front of the entrance, usually on the southwest side, is a wide platform supported by small pilings. The floor of the interior is made of crushed bamboo planking supported by four large beams, designed to prevent lance thrusts from underneath. The sides of the communal house are

made of braided bamboo, with the long sides slanted slightly outwards. On the long sides there are small windows which can be sealed shut by sliding panels.<sup>17</sup>

## SECTION III

### INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

#### Physical Characteristics

There is considerable variation in physical appearance among the Rengao. Generally, however, they are short, about 5 feet 4 inches to 5 feet 6 inches,<sup>1</sup> well proportioned, with smooth reddish-brown skin varying from light to dark, depending upon the amount of exposure to the elements. Both men and women wear their long black hair in a chignon. The face as well as the body is usually hairless, and beards are rare. However, beards and mustaches are greatly esteemed, and a few Rengao tribesmen manage to grow a sparse goatee or a thin mustache.<sup>2</sup>

Although neither men nor women tattoo themselves, they do scarify their chests at funerals of relatives.

Filing down the front teeth of boys and girls when they reach the age of puberty is no longer customary.<sup>3</sup>

#### Health

The Rengao have an average life expectancy of approximately 37 years.<sup>4</sup> Infant mortality is high, but the health of the tribespeople reaching adulthood may be described as good: early exposure to the many endemic diseases eliminates weak and sickly infants and children.

Young men and women put oil on their hair and comb it carefully; they also clean their teeth with a wooden splinter. As the tribespeople grow older they do not usually practice these grooming habits as regularly.

Religious beliefs, rather than considerations of sanitation, dictate the place and method for performing bodily functions. The living area is not allowed to become unclean, and there is a strict prohibition against contaminating the water supply.<sup>5</sup>

Many diseases in the Rengao area are carried by insects, including the anopheles mosquito, the rat flea, and the louse. Other diseases are caused by hookworms, poor sanitary conditions, and lack of sexual hygiene.<sup>6</sup>

Malaria is common in the area: many tribesmen have contracted it at least once during their lifetime. The two common types of malaria are the benign tertian malaria, which causes high fever

with relapses, but usually is not fatal; and the malignant tertian malaria, which is fatal to both infants and adults.<sup>7</sup>

The three types of typhus present in the Republic of Vietnam are carried by lice, rat fleas, and mites. Mite-borne typhus is reported to be especially prevalent among the tribes.<sup>8</sup>

Cholera, typhoid, dysentery, yaws, leprosy, venereal disease, tuberculosis, and various parasitic infestations are also found in the Rengao area.<sup>9</sup>

The Rengao believe that disease is caused by the activities of evil spirits and that cures are effected only by spirits. To cure disease, sorcerers called *bojau* determine the number of blood sacrifices necessary to appease the spirits. Once the proper sacrifices to the spirits are made, the Rengao believe that the sick person will recover. The *bojau*, who can be either a man or a woman, can prescribe herbal remedies, remove spells, and find lost *po'hngols*.<sup>10</sup> The Rengao believe the *po'hngol*, the essence or soul of man, resides just behind a person's forehead. While a person sleeps, the *po'hngol* presumably leaves the body to ask the spirits for advice. The human being receives this advice in the form of dreams. If the *po'hngol* cannot find the way back to its body, the body loses its strength and the person dies.

#### Endurance and Manual Dexterity

The Rengao can easily cover 40, and sometimes as much as 70 to 80, kilometers a day over difficult mountainous terrain carrying a 20 kilogram load. The tribesmen prefer to transport articles strapped to their backs, so that they may have free arm movement.<sup>11</sup>

The Rengao are skilled in the use of tools and can build a house using only a knife and a machete. They also engage in a variety of handicrafts, including the weaving of cloth and fibers.<sup>12</sup>

#### Psychological Characteristics

The psychological basis for the behavior of the Rengao is their involvement with the spirits and with each other as members of families and villages. Seemingly simple actions may involve complex family, religious, or traditional relationships and obligations. A decision may not be made immediately or independently by an individual tribesman. Only after he has consulted with members of his family, village elders, or a sorcerer will a Rengao make a decision. The sorcerer provides an indication of the attitude of the spirits to the proposed course of action.

When a Rengao makes a promise, he will carry it out and he expects others to do likewise.<sup>13</sup>

## SECTION IV

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The social organization of the Rengao centers around the family and the village.\* Authority rests in the hands of the father within the family, and the family name is passed along the male line. Kinship relations, however, are reckoned on both the male and female sides of the family. The extended family among the Rengao consists of those persons who are related by blood to each other on the maternal or paternal side. The nuclear family, or near family, consists of father, mother, and offspring.<sup>1</sup>

#### Place of Men, Women, and Children in the Society

Among the Rengao there exists a normal division of labor between the sexes. Men clear the land for planting, hunt, fish, build houses and tombs, and carry on trade. Women carry water, gather wood and edible roots and fruits from the forest, cook, husk the rice, make wine, weave, and do light work in the garden plots and rice-fields.

Young children are raised permissively and allowed a great deal of freedom. Sometimes they are given small tasks to perform, such as looking after the domestic animals. Older children learn the family trade by assisting their parents.

Bachelors living in the communal house make tools, traps, nets, pipes, baskets, and bamboo storage tubes for water, salt, and tobacco. Although the bachelors make these articles, many are used exclusively by the women.<sup>2</sup>

#### Daily Routine

Women rise at dawn, open the chicken house, and prepare the first meal of the day after husking the rice. The men get up after the women and let the animals out of their pens. Generally the men approach their morning's work in a leisurely manner. The main meal of the day is eaten between 7 and 8 o'clock. The tribespeople do not like to miss this morning meal and will halt at the customary time to eat if they have made an early start on a trip.

After this meal, the members of the household disperse to their various tasks. At noon, a light, informal meal is eaten. In the

\* For discussion of the village, see "Political Organization," p. 632.

evening, the family members gather together around the hearth for a third meal, and generally are in bed by 10 o'clock.<sup>1</sup>

In the winter when the Rengao do not have to work in the fields, the routine varies. Much time is spent socializing with friends and neighbors, repairing tools, and occasionally hunting.<sup>4</sup>

### **Marriage**

The Rengao rarely remain unmarried: it is considered unnatural to stay single.<sup>5</sup> There are several prerequisites for marriage: the young people should be 15 or 16 years of age, be able to cultivate their own field, have parental consent, and be members of different extended families. When a young man is old enough to cultivate his own field, he starts courting. Romantic love is an important factor in choosing a marriage partner.<sup>6</sup>

Marriage arrangements are handled by intermediaries, who act as witnesses to the marriage and offer prayers for its success. Marriage ceremonies involve a chicken sacrifice and a drinking ritual in which the couple sip wine from the same bamboo straw. The two families involved in the marriage ceremony contract a friendship alliance—a ceremonial or religious agreement—pledging that they will not harm one another. The expense of a marriage may be borne by either family or both, depending upon their wealth.<sup>7</sup>

It is customary during the first few years of marriage, usually until the birth of the first child, for the young couple to live alternately with the parents of the bride and then with the parents of the groom.<sup>8</sup>

### **Divorce and Second Marriage**

Divorce, considered a very serious step, is permitted if reconciliation attempts directed by village elders have failed. Divorce may be initiated by either the husband or the wife but may not be granted if one party is in prison or absent.

Grounds for divorce include bigamy, repeated adultery, refusal to have sexual relations with the marriage partner, repeated brutality and sexual aberration, refusal to care for aged parents-in-law, and refusal to treat a venereal disease.<sup>9</sup>

### **Pregnancy, Abortion, and Birth**

Pregnant women are not allowed to perform certain tasks, such as digging and filling up holes, or tying knots.

Abortion is rarely practiced among the Rengao.<sup>10</sup>

An unmarried girl gives birth outside the village in order to prevent the spirits from bringing harm to the village. A married woman gives birth in the house near the family hearth in which a fire is kept burning. Delivery is aided by a midwife. The husband and young children may remain in the house, but adolescent boys

of the household remain in the communal house from the time the woman begins labor pains until the baby is born.

#### **Childhood**

Newborn infants are immediately named, so as to drive away evil spirits who give the children names which would bring bad luck. Rengao names do not indicate family relationship or sex and traditionally are not duplicated within the village.<sup>11</sup>

Boys and girls play together without any restriction. At 5 or 6 years of age children take care of the poultry yard; when they are a few years older they look after the larger animals. The boys begin helping their fathers, and the girls their mothers.<sup>12</sup>

Traditionally, when children reached puberty, both boys and girls had their teeth filed down and stained black—a custom which has generally been abandoned.<sup>13</sup>

When boys have reached the age of puberty, they are considered able to help their fathers effectively, and they sleep in the communal house until marriage. During this period they continue to eat their meals in their parents' house and to sleep there when they are sick.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Death and Burial**

When a person dies, the tribespeople present at the time begin to weep and utter lamentations, while the rest of the villagers come to offer condolences. Formerly, tribesmen cut themselves and pounded their heads against the columns of the house in their grief, but this custom is dying out.

Burial occurs at nightfall about 20 or 30 hours after death. A funeral cortege accompanied by gong players takes the body to the burial place, where it is lowered into the grave, and jars, baskets, crossbows, or other articles are placed on it. During the burial, ceremonial animals are sacrificed and the next day all work is forbidden in the village. During the mourning period, which lasts from 6 months to 2 years, small sacrifices are made at the tomb. At the end of the mourning period, a religious ceremony held at the tomb marks the end of mourning, the abandonment of the grave, and the termination of the sacrifices for the deceased.<sup>15</sup>

## SECTION V

### CUSTOMS AND TABOOS

#### **Tribal Folklore**

The tribal folklore of the Rengao contains stories of legendary history, love, and warfare, which are usually related in the evening after the day's work has been done. These stories often reflect ideals of physical beauty, describing men and women with smooth white skin, long limbs, and slender waists.

#### **Dress**

Generally, the men of the Rengao tribe wear a loincloth, and the women wear a skirt. In cool weather, men also wear a blanket, and the women put on a cotton sleeveless blouse. The cotton used for some of their clothes is purchased from the Jarai.

The Rengao wear strings of glass beads, silver bracelets, and silver collars. They have recently begun to wear some Western readymade clothes which they purchase from the ethnic Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Folk Belief**

Like other tribes of the Republic of Vietnam, the Rengao live in constant awareness, and often dread, of the various spirits they believe surround them. The tribesmen believe nothing happens by chance. Good luck, success, failure, dreams, and accidents are signs of the pleasure or anger of the spirits. Hence, much time is spent interpreting the meaning of these signs and in attempts to ward off misfortune, to placate angry spirits, and to keep the favor of friendly spirits.<sup>2</sup>

Many customs are associated with dreams. A bad dream, signaling the coming of misfortune or failure, is confided to some dirty or commonplace object, such as a doorway or a piece of firewood. In this manner, the tribesmen attempt to so disgust the spirit responsible for the dream that it will not exert its evil influence.<sup>3</sup>

Some omens and restrictions are associated with certain activities. For example, it is considered bad luck to meet a widow or a widower when going hunting. The tribesmen avoid working in the fields after dark for fear of the evil spirits.

The Rengao fear strangely shaped trees, or trees with unusually large limbs. They also fear the tiger—not only for the physical

danger but also for a mysterious power supposedly associated with it.

#### Folk Beliefs Associated With Agriculture

The extent to which the Rengao live in a world of superstition is nowhere more evident than in their complicated agricultural routine. To insure the success of a crop, the clearing, burning, and sowing processes are accompanied by the most serious efforts to interpret the intentions of spirits and to create auspicious circumstances. During these rites, the activities of the tribespeople are restricted.<sup>4</sup> Before clearing the land, for example, the Rengao consults the birds. He sets out in the morning for a walk through the forest, on his back a sack of provisions—cooked rice, a whetstone, a billhook, a pipe, and a flint. About a hundred yards from the village, he begins calling the birds.<sup>5</sup> As he proceeds through the forest, he listens attentively to the sound of every bird and interprets the cries. Generally, a bird call on the left or from behind is a good omen; a call on the right is a bad one, possibly a sign of death. A call from the front is bad—it portends harm from falling trees and bamboo. No bird calls—silence—mean a skimpy harvest. Preferably, a bird is heard first on the left and slightly to the rear, then later again on the left; this “confirmation on the left” portends no accidents from billhooks or falling trees, no fever or sickness in the household, and a bountiful harvest. A confirmation is absolutely necessary before clearing new land, but is of less importance when clearing a plot for the second successive year.

To receive favorable bird calls may require many days in the woods. When confronted with bad omens, the cultivator returns home, takes off his pack, and smokes his pipe. Although he can repeat the process five or six times a day, punctuated by the smoking session, he is required to stay at home every third day. This continues until the birds deliver a favorable message. When appropriate signs fail to result, the tribesman may resort to another rite to speed the approval of the spirits.<sup>6</sup> He takes a branch of dead bamboo, lays it across the path and says with great determination: “I absolutely wish to clear this corner of the forest. Hurry up and sing! I have put this piece of bamboo here for you.”<sup>7</sup>

During the rite of consulting the birds, the cultivator is restricted in other ways: He is forbidden to speak of marriage, send or receive merchandise, borrow, pay debts, replenish provisions from the granary, and speak to strangers or bring them into his house.

The actions of deer are also considered omens. If a deer crosses the tribesman’s path from the right, things will go well; but if the deer crosses from the left, hard times are ahead.<sup>8</sup>

Having received the benediction of the spirits, the Rengao is at

last ready to farm. The method of clearing the forest, called *muih*, involves clearing the underbrush with a billhook and cutting the trees down with an ax. The whole first day of clearing is devoted to certain rites to assure a successful harvest." In one of these rites a piece of bamboo is split and a transverse piece set into the open fork. This is called *cho ha* or "open dog's mouth." The bamboo is placed with the open end away from the future field to frighten away any deer or birds which might interrupt the work. Next, the cultivator simulates the clearing work in miniature in a plot about 5 feet square. Several other rituals follow, including a game of heads-or-tails with pieces of bamboo, more consultation with the birds, and the planting of magic roots. There are numerous variations on these ceremonies among villages.

After the underbrush has been cleared, the second stage of clearing is begun with the sacrifice of a chicken and the offering of a prayer. The workers wash their feet in chicken blood and wine to calm the spirits of the trees and then begin to cut the trees.

Land clearing ends with the *chi long* or "gathering of the wood." The head of the household gathers part of the last tree cut and carries it home, where he sacrifices a chicken and anoints the wood, his ax, and his whetstone with the blood. When the new land is to be burned, the household head takes this piece of wood to the village forge, lights it, and blows the fire vigorously with the bellows—thus insuring a good fire on the new field.

At noon the field itself is set on fire. Holding green branches to keep the fire from spreading, men are stationed around the field. At possible danger points *cho ha* are set to confine the fire to the land to be planted. The head of the household lights his firebrand, throws salt on the trees which have been cut, offers another prayer of dedication to the spirits, and lights the field of fallen timber in 20 places.

At night, after the fires are lit, a drinking feast begins. The head of the household goes out on his doorstep, beats his drum, turns to his field, and calls to the spirit Abinos, who sows wheat and weeds: "Oh Father Abinos, do not sow seeds in our field. If you have to sow, sow this evening in order that your seeds will be burned tomorrow." <sup>10</sup>

While the field is burning, women are not permitted to weave or spin, because the fire may become thin, like cotton thread, and not burn the timber.

When the field is burned, the ashes and debris are gathered in piles and burned again. Then the field is ready for the planting of rice, banana trees, pineapple plants, or sugarcane.

Planting is accompanied by equally rigorous ceremonies and taboos. Seed for various fields must be kept in separate baskets.

If the supply of seed rice carried to the field is depleted before the field is completely sown, the supply cannot be replenished from the granary that same day. The *ding ho'noi*, a bamboo implement used by the women to cover the seed rice with earth, is considered sacred. It should not be knocked against wood or struck so that it sounds like a gong. Yang Xo'ri, the goddess of rice and the hearth, would hear the sounds and think she was about to receive a buffalo sacrifice; the deception would anger her.

During the first 2 days of sowing, eating acid fruits or drinking in the field is not permitted; the tribesmen believe that the animals might be tempted to eat the newly sown seed. Speaking to strangers on the road to the field is also prohibited. For the duration of the planting season, the cultivator may not stretch out while relaxing or sleeping. To do so might weaken or relax the rice and cause the crop to fail.<sup>11</sup> Children must refrain from playing with *pli keng*, a round fruit from a mimosa-like tree, and young girls must not beat on their *ding but*, a musical instrument made of a series of hollow tubes. Such sounds of levity are believed to be displeasing to the goddess Yang Xo'ri.<sup>12</sup>

#### Customs Relating to Outsiders

The Rengao are reportedly reserved and taciturn, especially before strangers, although they greet guests courteously. A representative of the village usually goes out to meet a guest and invites him to talk with other villagers in the communal house, where alcohol may be served.

Traditionally, when a stranger wished to settle in a Rengao village, he had to live in a house at the edge of the village, just inside the surrounding fence. Since a stranger's presence might anger the spirits and bring sickness or crop failure, the villagers watched for any signs that the spirits were displeased. After a stranger had lived in the village for 2 or 3 years with no evil results, he was allowed to settle nearer the center of the village.<sup>13</sup>

Visitors with beards appeal to the Rengao because beards fit the tribal ideal of masculine power. Fair skin and rosy cheeks also appeal to them.<sup>14</sup>

#### Eating and Drinking Customs

The basic food of the Rengao—rice—is husked every morning by the women. The tribespeople believe that dry rice is a sacred crop, and rice itself is sacred. Therefore, it is the custom to grind it the same day as it is eaten to show respect for Yang Xo'ri, the goddess of rice. Along with rice, the tribesmen eat a variety of vegetables and plants, including edible leaves, grasses, bamboo shoots, sweet potatoes, corn, eggplants, cucumbers, pumpkins, and mushrooms. Although animals such as buffaloes, pigs, and chick-

ens are raised by the tribesmen primarily for sacrifices, after the offering has been made the remains are cooked and eaten. Pigs, chickens, and goats are sometimes slaughtered for food.

Techniques used to prepare food include roasting, boiling, steaming, and smoking. The tribesmen preserve meat, fish, and bamboo shoots for periods ranging from 3 to 6 months. Women do the cooking. At festivals men prepare certain meats for cooking, but the meat is cooked by the women.

Certain foods are prohibited. Specific food prohibitions vary from village to village. Pregnant women are subject to food prohibitions, but not their husbands; young children are not subject to any food prohibitions.

The ordinary beverage of the Rengao is water. At sacrifices, they drink a fermented rice beverage through long straws. Customarily, sacrificial wine is offered to all assembled guests in the order of their rank, age, and wealth.

#### **Folk Beliefs Associated with Animals and Plants**

The Rengao consider the tiger endowed with magical qualities. He is **king** of the earth, as thunder is king of the sky and the dragon is king of the waters. The Rengao believe that if ill words are spoken of the tiger, he will hear and never forget. The tiger can imitate the cry of any animal or change into any animal form: he may even speak the language of men.<sup>15</sup>

The wildcat and the civet, cousins of the tiger, are reputed to bring luck in hunting small game, while possession of an elephant offers protection against external enemies.<sup>16</sup>

The Rengao also attribute beneficial qualities to dreams about certain plants such as the bamboo *kram* the *jorri*, and the sycamore. Dreams of the bamboo *kram* are particularly revered because it has a life span of approximately 100 years.

## SECTION VI

### RELIGION

The Rengao divide the universe into three worlds.<sup>1</sup> The first world is the earth, inhabited by living man and his soul. The second world, inhabited by the dead, is the world of dreams. The third world, heaven, is inhabited by great spirits; there events destined for the other two worlds occur first—6 months in advance.

Intercommunication exists between these worlds.<sup>2</sup> At night while the body sleeps, dreaming allows the soul to enter into the second world and converse with the dead and with spirits who may be visiting from the third world. The spirits of the third world can also visit the first world: they take the form of thunder, streams, mountains, and other natural objects; they collect offerings and receive invocations.

#### Principal Deities

The spirits inhabiting the third world are both masculine, *yang*, and feminine, *ya*, although the word *yang* is used to signify spirits in general. All spirits are married; thus when the *yang* are invoked during sacrifices, their wives are automatically included.<sup>3</sup>

Of all spirits, the most powerful and deadly is Bo Brok, the god of thunder, rain, and war. As the god of rain, he is invoked in agricultural sacrifices; as the god of war, he is appealed to before any battle.

The most beloved spirit is Yang Xo'ri, the goddess of rice and the hearth. Agrarian sacrifices are addressed to her by her priestess, who is the mistress of the house. Sickness occurring during fieldwork is attributed to her displeasure with some action of the tribespeople.

The Rengao believe innumerable lesser spirits exist, including Yang Mrai and Yang Ngut, who inhabit Mom Ray (Nang Mrai) and Kong Ngut, high mountains in the area. The Rengao also believe that the storms that occur from August to November are, in reality, battles between these spirits. Yang Mrai and Yang Ngut share with Bo Brok the prerogative of being honored as gods of war. Thus, when the Rengao celebrate a victory, these spirits are venerated and offered a sacrifice on behalf of the village.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes objects such as jars, gongs, and drums are regarded

as fetishes and considered to be the thrones of powerful spirits. These objects are considered valuable only after a villager's dream reveals that they are inhabited by a potent spirit.<sup>5</sup> Such jars are usually not touched except at ceremonies, when they are filled with sacrificial wine.

#### Principal Religious Holidays and Rituals

As the Rengao are basically an agricultural people, their principal religious rites and sacrifices center upon such agricultural activities as clearing fields, sowing, and harvesting crops.\*

One ritual, the "Rite of Sprinkling the Rice," is practiced by the northern villages at the time of sowing and by the southern villages as a distinct ceremony after the first hoeing. In this ceremony a small basket, which contains a smaller basket filled with heavy gravel or earth, is suspended from the fork of a bamboo "open dog's mouth." The farmer and his wife recite: "Txu! I hang this sand in order that my rice will not compress itself more than the gravel and sand, and that its kernel may be as heavy as the sand and gravel."<sup>6</sup> A chicken and a pig are killed by having their throats cut. The farmer takes the chicken by its legs, drags it in a circle five times over the rim of a wine jar, and asks the chicken to predict the success of his crop. He then hurls the chicken before him. For a good omen the head of the chicken should fall with its beak facing him and its neck straight, lying neither too much to one side nor the other. This ceremony is repeated until a favorable response is obtained. Then the chicken is plucked and the pig is skinned for a feast which is held in the home.

There are various sacrifices to the spirits involving the liver of an animal and a jar of wine. Except for rice sacrifices, when only rice wine may be used, the wine may be made from any grain—millet, sorghum, or corn. The spirits are invited to partake of the food and drink, followed by the principal participants and the other villagers.<sup>7</sup>

#### Missionary Contacts With the Rengao

In 1883 Father Guerlach of the Kontum mission estimated that there were 1,500 Bahnar and Rengao who had been converted to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> By providing medical aid to the tribespeople, the Kontum mission was able to further its missionary efforts. For example, in 1893 the mission procured vaccine from Saigon to halt a smallpox epidemic in several villages.<sup>9</sup>

The Kontum mission, with the Christian tribespeople as a nu-

\* See "Folk Beliefs Associated With Agriculture," p. 621.

cleus, was able to form a defensive alliance between the Rengao and Bahnar in response to Jarai aggression in the late 1890's.\*<sup>10</sup>

#### **Religious Practitioners**

There is no hierarchy of priests who conduct sacrifices for the Rengao to the spirits. Rather, the tribesmen deal directly with the spirits, conducting the sacrifices and offering appropriate prayers.<sup>11</sup> For example, a sacrifice on behalf of a village is conducted by the elders, and a sacrifice on behalf of a household is conducted by the man and woman who head the household. Sacrifices involving individuals are conducted by the individual concerned.

It is only with respect to curing disease that the tribesmen resort to practitioners called bojau who determine the amount of blood sacrifices necessary to appease the spirits, prescribe herbal remedies, and find lost po'hngols.†

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\* See "Factual History," pp. 3-4.

† See "Health," pp. 6-7.

## SECTION VII

### ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

#### **Type of Economy**

The Rengao have a subsistence economy based upon agriculture and supplemented by hunting, fishing, and limited trade. The village is the basic economic unit.

The primary occupation of the Rengao is the cultivation of upland rice by the slash-and-burn technique. A plot of land is farmed for a given period of time and then, when its fertility declines, is left fallow while its cultivators move to another field. A field is usually farmed for 3 or 4 successive years before being abandoned; several years later the tribesmen may return to recultivate the overgrown plot. These fields are not necessarily near the village; they may be located some distance away due to the exhaustion of nearby soils.

In choosing a plot of land for cultivation, the Rengao try to stay close to streams and near other cultivated land. They avoid places where anyone has been killed because they believe To'riang, the spirit of violent death, resides there. New sites for *rays* (fields cultivated by the slash-and-burn method) are chosen by the headman, usually together with village elders and a sorcerer, acting according to rules and interpretation of traditional signs.

Early in the dry season or late in the wet season the forest is cleared. First the brush is cleared with a billhook, then the trees are felled by ax, leaving stumps of 1 to 2 feet. The cut vegetation is allowed to dry and is burned about a month before the next heavy rains. The field is burned under prescribed conditions to prevent the fire from spreading and with rituals to placate the spirits. When the field has cooled, the family clears the debris, leaving only boulders and stumps. Then, before sowing, the charred debris is gathered in small piles and burned again. The layer of fine ash is subsequently washed into the soil by the rains.

First, banana trees, pineapple bushes, sugarcane, and other plants are planted, preferably along a path and around the hut constructed in the fields as a resthouse for the workers.

When the first rains loosen the soil, the Rengao begin planting. The fields are weeded, usually by the women, just before or during the planting and once again during the growing season. Rice sow-

ing begins in May and continues to the middle of July. The men make holes for the seed rice with a long dibble stick, *xo'rang*. The women follow with seed sacks; they place the seeds in the holes, tamping the earth over the hole with the ding ho'noi, the sacred piece of bamboo.

Upland rice is the most important and the preferred crop. Secondary crops, such as gourds, cucumbers, beans, and sorghum, are planted in alternate rows with the rice. Sesame and cotton are sown in special sections of the fields.

In addition to the food obtained from farming, the women gather edible roots, shoots, leaves, fruits, tubers, and herbs. With the help of dogs, the women catch lizards, rats, snakes, squirrels, and birds. Pitch gathered from trees is used as a fuel for illumination.

The Rengao like fresh meat and soups made from the entrails and blood of animals. Formerly they depended much more upon hunting than they do at present. Many of the Rengao areas originally abounded in game but are now nearly barren. Only Rengao men engage in the hunt; most tribesmen can track and stalk game with great skill.

The Rengao raise buffaloes primarily for sacrificial purposes. Pigs, chickens, and goats are also raised for use as blood sacrifices, especially for agricultural ceremonies; however, they are occasionally slaughtered for food. Usually the children are given the responsibility of caring for the livestock.

The Rengao also fish. A method frequently used involves drugging the marine life by placing a narcotic in the water. The entire village participates in this type of fishing. Another method, catching and scooping up the fish in baskets, is used only by the women and children.<sup>1</sup>

#### Special Arts and Skills

The Rengao engage in several crafts, skillfully using simple, even crude, tools. Basketmaking is the chief craft and is carried on to some degree in every village. The well-designed baskets are made of very thin strips of rattan.

Bamboo, rattan, palm leaves, and wood are made into matting, light walls, traps, pipes, nets, weapons, and containers for water, salt, and tobacco. Bachelors in the communal house, joined by other male adults, make many objects, but some things, such as pestles and certain fishing baskets, are made only by the women. Only the men may build tombs, coffins, and boats. Some Rengao are skilled blacksmiths.<sup>2</sup>

The women weave coarse, colorful cloth of cotton, ordinarily using four sets of threads shuttled through a light weaving loom simply constructed from several pieces of wood. The fiber provid-

ing the thread for the weaving is seldom grown locally but is obtained in trade from the ethnic Vietnamese.

Many of these local handicrafts are declining because of the availability of imports.<sup>3</sup>

#### Exchange System and Trade

Although they have recently become acquainted with money, the Rengao still depend heavily upon a barter system of exchange. Prices are often fixed in terms of buffaloes, jars, gongs, weapons, clothes, and other objects.

The Rengao actively barter with neighboring tribes and with the ethnic Vietnamese. The Rengao trade various animal and forest products, especially those supposed to be aphrodisiacs, for salt, metal goods, cotton, and highly prized gongs and jars.<sup>4</sup>

#### Property System

Individual property among the Rengao includes goods such as weapons, implements, traps, kitchen utensils, jars, gongs, houses, and granaries. Livestock, poultry, game, fish, honey, and crops planted on the land as distinct from the land itself, are also privately owned.<sup>5</sup>

Each spouse in a marriage retains title to his personal goods and their use. The products of the joint effort of the married couple are considered to be common property.

Upon the death of a husband or wife, his or her personal property is used to defray the cost of burial and the closing of the tomb. The remainder is divided first among any descendants and second among blood relatives who are the same age or older than the deceased.<sup>6</sup>

The common property is also apportioned when a spouse dies. One half of all the goods comprising the common property goes to the surviving spouse. The other half is apportioned primarily among descendants and secondarily among relatives the same age or older.

Land ownership is reckoned by *toring* associations, an arrangement under which the territory of several villages is collectively administered. A *toring* controls the farming, hunting, and fishing rights of the villages within its territorial boundaries; however, the *toring* does not serve as a political unit. Outsiders, whether Rengao or not, are expected to obtain the approval of the elders of the association before engaging in any activity governed by the *toring*.

Although land is not owned by individuals or families, cultivators of a particular field—whether the field is currently in use or fallow—are recognized by the villagers to have a preemptive right to that specific area. These rights are well known and respected within the *toring* association.<sup>7</sup>

### **Distribution of Wealth**

Although money is becoming increasingly important to the tribesmen, wealth is usually measured in terms of buffaloes, gongs, and jars. Most villages have several wealthy families who constitute the sociopolitical elite. The wealthy may employ servants and agricultural workers. Servants receive food, housing, clothing, and a small sum of money, and agricultural workers are paid a portion of the harvest.<sup>8</sup>

## SECTION VIII

### POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

#### General Political Organization

The village is the highest level of political organization among the Rengao. Although they were once a part of an informal Bah-nar union, that union disintegrated during the latter part of the 19th century and the Rengao now have no tribal political organization.

A Rengao village is best described as a group of extended families, having common interests and often interrelated. Beyond the village, a loose association among several villages, called the *toring*, appears to function largely for administration of fishing, hunting, and farming rights, with no apparent political implication.

Violations of village customs, conflicts between families, and conflicts between villages are handled by a village council, chosen by the male household heads. The council is headed by a *kra*, or village headman, who represents the elders in affairs outside the village. The position of *kra* is normally handed down from father to son with the consent of elders and villagers.

The traditional responsibilities of the council include the administration of the village, the protection of its inhabitants, and the organization of village rituals.<sup>1</sup> The authority of the council is limited within the village by the power and influence of the eldest males of the various extended families.

Representatives of the Vietnamese Government supervise relations between villages; one representative works with a group of seven or eight tribal villages. The villages in turn are represented by their village headmen.

#### Legal System

The traditional tribal laws, expressed by taboos and sanctions, are known and respected by all tribal members. There is a strong communal spirit in each village; the sanction of the community acts as a deterrent to violators. Disputes and punishments for transgressions are the concern of both family and village.

Under the French, a special system of courts was established on the village, district, and provincial levels 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>2</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>3</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 tribal practices. This was part of Vietnamese efforts to integrate the tribespeople politically into the Republic of Vietnam. In addition, the Vietnamese have long considered tribal justice harsh.

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 civil affairs, Montagnard affairs, and penal offenses when all parties involved are Montagnards.<sup>4</sup>

Village customs law courts, consisting of the village administrative committee chief aided by two Montagnard assistants, will conduct weekly court sessions.<sup>5</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. However, if settlement cannot be determined, the case can be referred to a higher court.<sup>6</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>7</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>8</sup>

### **Subversive Influences**

The main objective of Viet Cong subversive activity in the Rengao area is to divert tribal support and allegiance from the Vietnamese Government to the Viet Cong. Another important Viet Cong objective is to maintain supply lines through the Rengao area.

Viet Cong subversive elements generally infiltrate a village and attempt to win the confidence of the whole village or its key individuals. The Viet Cong use a thorough knowledge of tribal customs to further their aims.

Once the villagers' suspicions are allayed and their confidence won, the Viet Cong proceed with an intense propaganda program directed against the Vietnamese Government. Tribesmen are recruited and trained for various support or combat missions with the Viet Cong.

When propaganda and cajolery are ineffective, the Viet Cong may resort to extortion and terror. The Viet Cong often coerce the Rengao into refusing to cooperate with the Vietnamese Government, or the villagers may be compelled to give the Viet Cong active support as laborers and sources of materiel.<sup>9</sup>

The Rengao are subject to varying degrees of pressure and influence from several countries.<sup>10</sup> North Vietnam has long been attempting to gain the support of the tribesmen in insurgent activity against the Government of the Republic of Vietnam. Communist China and other Communist-bloc countries that may be supplying men, materiel, and training to the Viet Cong also have some effect upon the Rengao.

## SECTION IX

### COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

In the Rengao area the principal means of disseminating information is by word of mouth.

No information is available concerning the number of radios and the degree of Rengao familiarity with them. However, radios are probably no less rare among the Rengao than among other tribal groups in the Republic of Vietnam. Any radios in the Rengao area could pick up broadcasts from Saigon and provincial radio stations. Where feasible, short movies covering simple subjects and using the Rengao language might be an effective means to communicate with the Rengao.

Written communication might have some effect. Although the Rengao have no written language, some tribesmen can read Bahnar, French, or Vietnamese and could pass on information to the other tribesmen. Information concerning the use of printed materials was not available at this writing.

Information themes planned for the Rengao should be oriented to the principle of improving village conditions and should be couched in terms familiar to the tribesmen. If the tribesmen believe that a particular program is not explicitly for their benefit, they will not cooperate. The control of disease, the improvement of agriculture, community development, and protection against Viet Cong harassment are possible themes for information programs.

## SECTION X

### CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

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

Because they are village-oriented, the Rengao respond favorably to ideas for change when they are presented in terms of 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: the Rengao resent interference in their normal routine if they do not understand the reason for it.

Civic action programs by the Vietnamese Government have included the resettlement of the Rengao into new and larger villages, the control of malaria, and education of the Rengao tribesmen. These programs have not been wholly successful because of the isolation of the tribesmen, their disinclination to change their traditional ways, and interference by the Viet Cong.

The following civic action guidelines may be useful in planning and implementing projects or programs.

1. Projects originating in the local village are more desirable than suggestions imposed by a remote Central Government or by outsiders.
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 Rengao 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 the 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. Introduction of 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 rudimentary vocational training.
  - c. Present information about the outside world of interest to the tribesmen.
  - d. Provide basic citizenship training, particularly with reference to common Republic of Vietnam and United States objectives, policies, and programs.

## SECTION XI

### PARAMILITARY CAPABILITIES

Reportedly, the Rengao are skilled and effective fighters both in offensive and defensive combat. The Rengao are capable scouts, trackers, and guides; if given intensive modern training, support, and leadership, they could become exceptionally effective in jungle warfare.

#### **Hostile Activity Toward the Tribe**

Proximity to the city of Kontum, an important highland population center, makes the Rengao territory militarily significant. In the early 1960's, the region was crossed by Viet Cong supply routes and served as a refuge area for Viet Cong military units.

Under threat of terror and reprisals, the Rengao have been forced to give the Viet Cong support in the form of food, finances, and labor. When the tactics of subversion and propaganda do not result in gaining the support of the tribespeople, the Viet Cong resort to murder and other brutalities.

#### **Organization for Defense**

By tradition, a Rengao village is organized against surprise attack. The communal house in the center of the village, normally used as the sleeping quarters for bachelors, serves as a stronghold for defense in terms of warfare conducted with lances, knives, and crossbows. Formerly villages were surrounded by stockades, but in recent years these have been replaced by fences. Due to increased military activity within the area, more secure perimeter defenses may now be employed.

#### **Weapons Utilized by the Tribe**

The traditional Rengao weapons are spears, swords, and crossbows, with poisoned arrows. The Rengao are familiar with the use of traps, pits, and spiked foot traps (concealed sharpened sticks). Some Rengao who have had military training from the French, Vietnamese, and Americans know how to use modern weapons.

Their relatively small physical size makes Rengao tribesmen more comfortable and adept with small, light weapons. They can handle larger weapons that are quickly assembled and disassembled.

bled. Traditionally the Rengao take good care of their weapons: if they can carry and handle a weapon conveniently, they will generally use it well.

The Rengao are less proficient in the use of the more sophisticated weapons such as mortars, explosives, and mines, because of difficulty in understanding the theoretical and technical aspects of timing and trajectory.

**Ability to Absorb Military Instruction**

The Rengao learn more readily from actual demonstration of techniques and procedures than they do from standard classroom methods. Tribesmen with military service under the French are an asset in training the younger tribesmen.

## SECTION XII

### SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE RENGAO

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

A few suggestions for personnel working with the Rengao are listed below.

#### **Official Activities**

1. Initial contact with a Rengao 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 Rengao. 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 Rengao 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 Rengao. An opportunity for family consultation should always be provided: if not, a flat refusal to cooperate may result.
7. Tribal elders and the village chief should receive some of the 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 Rengao 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 should eat or drink whatever is offered.
4. A gift, an invitation to a ceremony, or an invitation to enter a Rengao 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 Rengao ceremony, festival, or meeting from the village elders or other responsible persons.
6. An outsider should never enter a Rengao 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 Rengao women.
8. Outsiders should help the Rengao learn new techniques, methods, and concepts; however, teachers should be careful to avoid seriously disrupting traditional cultural patterns.

### **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

1. 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.
2. As soon as possible identify any sacred trees, stones, or other sacred objects in the village; do not touch or tamper with them. The Rengao 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.
3. Do not mock Rengao religious beliefs in any way; these beliefs are the cornerstone of Rengao life. Pay particular attention to Rengao beliefs concerning bird omens.

### **Living Standards and Routines**

1. Outsiders should treat all Rengao 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 Rengao, outsiders should always allow time for family conferences, as the individual is obliged by tradition to consult his family before selling anything.
  3. Learn simple phrases in the Rengao language. A desire to learn and speak their language makes a favorable impression on the tribespeople.

#### **Health and Welfare**

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

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6. *Ibid.*
7. Gerald C. Hickey, "Montagnard Agriculture and Land Tenure" (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, OSD/ARPA R & D Field Unit, April 2, 1965).
8. Guilleminet, "La Tribu bahnar," *op. cit.*, p. 522.

## VIII. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

1. Hickey, "Montagnard Agriculture." *op. cit.*
2. Donoghue, Whitney, and Ishina, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.
3. Hickey, *Preliminary Research Report, op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.
4. Gerald C. Hickey, "Comments on Recent GVN Legislation Concerning Montagnard Common Law Courts in the Central Vietnamese Highlands" (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation Memorandum, June 8, 1965), p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Malcolm W. Browne, *The New Face of War* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 121-43.
10. Frederic Wickert, "The Tribesmen," in *Viet-nam: The First Five Years*, edited by Richard W. Lindholm (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1959), pp. 126-35; Bernard B. Fall, "Commentary on 'The Tribesmen'," *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, edited by Richard W. Lindholm, pp. 135-40.

## IX. COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

No footnotes.

## X. CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

No footnotes.

## XI. PARAMILITARY CAPABILITIES

No footnotes.

## XII. SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE RENGAO

No footnotes.

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