

*The Hoa Hao*

## CHAPTER 23. THE HOA HAO

### SECTION I

#### INTRODUCTION

The Hoa Hao,\* a militant sect and a variant of Hinayana Buddhism, was founded in 1939 by Huyen Phu So, a mystic from Hoa Hao village in An Giang Province.† So rapidly acquired a vast following of ethnic Vietnamese due to the simplicity of the reformed Buddhist doctrine he expounded. By 1940 the movement had taken on a clearly political—almost fanatically nationalistic—orientation. Alarmed by So's increasing power, the French attempted to curtail the activities of the Hoa Hao leader. So, in response to the French controls, went to the Japanese for assistance. Hoping to exploit So's influence for their own ends, the Japanese armed the Hoa Hao. Organized into small armed bands, the sect acquired a widespread reputation for terrorism, banditry, and murder, simultaneously gaining control of much territory.

After the defeat of the Japanese, the Hoa Hao collaborated with the Viet Minh against the French until 1947, when the Communists murdered So. Whereas the sect had been united by their almost single-minded devotion to their leader, So's murder split the Hoa Hao into several dissident groups, the most notorious of which was led by Ba Cut, the last Hoa Hao leader to be defeated by Ngo Dinh Diem in 1956.

After 1947 the Hoa Hao at least nominally supported the French against the Viet Minh in return for French arms and official recognition as a religious sect. Benefiting from the anarchy rampant throughout the countryside, as well as from their French weapons and training, Hoa Hao private armies carved out larger and larger territorial holdings. By the time Ngo Dinh Diem became Prime Minister under Bao Dai in June 1954, the Hoa Hao had reached their peak of influence. They controlled most of the territory south and west of Saigon, maintained private armies, collected taxes, and claimed a following of over a million.

Soon after assuming the post of Prime Minister, Diem initiated

\* P. pronounced WAH HOW. The full name of the sect is Phat Giao Hoa Hao.

† C au Doc Province, established in October 1964, consists of five districts formerly within An Giang Province, including Tan Chan District in which Hoa Hao village is located.

a campaign against the militant religious sects in an effort either to destroy them or to integrate them into the body politic. However, in the Vietnamese National Army crisis of September 1954, the Hoa Hao backed Army Chief of Staff Gen. Nguyen Van Hinh when Diem attempted to force Hinh's resignation. To smooth over the crisis, Diem was obliged to appoint Hoa Hao members to serve in his cabinet, a sufficient indication of the powerful influence of the sect. Shortly thereafter, with the termination of French subsidies to the Hoa Hao, the sect was forced to support, at least nominally, the government of Diem. Ba Cut, however, refused to submit to the new government and remained at large.

Meanwhile, in the countryside, the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects were fighting over land vacated by the Viet Minh. On March 5, 1955, the two sects signed a nonaggression pact and, with the Binh Xuyen, formed the United Front of National Forces, a coalition which requested Bao Dai to dismiss Diem and demanded the Prime Minister to liberalize the regime. Diem refused to comply with the request and renewed his determination to fight the sects to the finish. By June 1955 Diem had destroyed the power of the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, as well as the quasi-military group called the Binh Xuyen. Until the overthrow of Diem in the coup of November 1963, the Hoa Hao were politically and militarily impotent.

Since Diem's overthrow, however, successive governments have sought to conciliate the Hoa Hao in order to benefit from its influence over much of the Vietnamese peasantry. For the same reasons, the Communists have attempted to infiltrate the sect.

## SECTION II

### EARLY HISTORY AND STATUS DURING WORLD WAR II

The Hoa Hao sect was founded in 1939 by Huyen Phu So, the son of the president of the Council of Notables in Hoa Hao village in what was then An Giang Province (now Chau Doc). Born in 1919, So was infirm and languorous throughout his youth and seemed destined to lead an uneventful life. Hoping to cure his son's illness, So's father entrusted him to the care of Thay Xom, a Buddhist monk specializing in acupuncture (the practice of puncturing the body to cure disease or relieve pain), who was living in seclusion at Nui Cam in the Seven Mountains.<sup>1</sup> In the course of this confinement with Thay Xom, So was instructed in the principles of sorcery, hypnotism, Buddhist philosophy, and the works of Nguyen Van Quyen (better known as Phat Tay Tay An or Phat Tay), a Buddhist monk who preached in Cochin China during the reign of Minh Mang (1820-41). When Thay Xom died, So, still sickly, returned to his village, where he resumed his monotonous life. Suddenly, during a stormy night in 1939, he awakened in a state of nervous excitement, prostrated himself before the family altar, and discoursed for hours on the principles of Buddhist doctrine, finally declaring himself the apostle of Phat Tay charged with preaching a reformed Buddhism.

When So's health was immediately restored, the witnesses of this miracle became the first converts to Hoa Haoism.<sup>2</sup> The simplicity of the Hoa Hao doctrine and cult held great appeal for those accustomed to practicing a religion placing heavy economic demands upon its adherents.<sup>3</sup> So believed that the absence of a sacerdotal hierarchy, temples, and statues permitted the faithful to practice their religion at any place and at any time, thus promoting the establishment of a more profound communion between themselves and the Almighty.<sup>4</sup> In So's own words, "The cult must stem much more from internal faith than from a pompous appearance. It is better to pray with a pure heart before the family altar than to perform gaudy ceremonies in a pagoda, clad in the robes of an unworthy bonze."<sup>5</sup>

So's gift of prophecy broadened his appeal even further. Long before their occurrence, So predicted such events as the defeat of

the French, the occupation by the Japanese, and the arrival of the Americans.<sup>6</sup> Word of So's miraculous cure and religious mission spread rapidly. By the end of 1939, Hoa Haoism counted several thousand followers; an unknown number of others hastened to the village of Hoa Hao to see the apostle of Phat Tay, whose memory they still revered. In the minds of the peasants, So assumed supernatural qualities by curing the sick with acupuncture and herbal medicines, preaching the new doctrine, and foretelling the future.<sup>7</sup> In March 1940, So retired once more to Nui Cam, where he wrote his famous "Sam Gian" (oracles, prayers). Within a few months after his return, So had a following of more than 100,000 and had acquired the name of Dao Khung, or Mad Bonze, because of his hypnotic gaze.<sup>8</sup>

With the German conquest of France in June 1940, So's preaching acquired political aspects; he toured the countryside preaching the new religious doctrine while clearly displaying anti-French sentiments. So's converts, rapidly increasing in number, began calling him Phat Song, or Living Buddha.

When the French were sufficiently alarmed by So's activities and prophecies, they exiled him from his native village to My Tho and Cai Be. In these areas he acquired thousands of new converts, causing the French to confine him in a psychiatric hospital in Cholon in August 1940. When he succeeded in converting the psychiatrist in whose charge he had been placed, So was declared sane and in May 1941 was exiled to Bac Lieu (now called Vinh Loi). By now Hoa Hao followers considered So a martyr and made pilgrimages to see him. Hoping to terminate So's influence once and for all, the French colonial administration decided to exile the Hoa Hao leader to Laos.<sup>9</sup> The Japanese, believing they could exploit So's popularity to establish a nationalist regime in Cochin China, intervened in October 1942 and induced his release and return to Saigon as a protegee of the Kempeitai (the Japanese military police).<sup>10</sup>

Supplied with Japanese arms, the Hoa Hao began preparing openly for an armed conquest of the western part of Cochin China. In this period the sect acquired a reputation for banditry and murder. By early 1944, the Hoa Hao had created armed bands in anticipation of seizing power at the opportune moment. During the Japanese occupation, the Phat Giao Lien Hiep Hoi (United Association of the Buddhist Religion) was founded. Its territorial committees were linked to a Central Committee of Saigon, headed by Huyen Phu So and Le Cong Bo, another Hoa Hao leader.<sup>\*</sup> Meanwhile Hoa Hao followers, called the Dao Xen, were terrorizing the countryside.<sup>12</sup> The leaders of the Dao Xen were Tran Van Soai

<sup>\*</sup> Le Cong Bo was previously a wealthy landowner from Chau Doc Province. Believing he could benefit from So's popularity, he began to accompany the Hoa Hao leader on his proselytizing expeditions. Bo eventually became one of So's assistants.<sup>11</sup>

(also known as Nam Lua) and Hai Ngoan (also known as Lam Thanh Nguyen). By the end of the Japanese occupation in August 1945, Huyen Phu So and his Dao Xen controlled most of the territory south and west of Saigon<sup>13</sup> and the village of Can Tho became the Hoa Hao capital.

With the Japanese surrender, the Hoa Hao joined other nationalist groups in forming the United National Front to assume administrative functions from the Japanese. The Viet Minh, who had been consolidating their position during the Japanese occupation, represented themselves as a strong resistance movement enjoying Allied support and persuaded the Front to accept their leadership. On August 25, 1945, an independence demonstration took place in which practically every organized group participated.<sup>14</sup>

Differences between the Hoa Hao and the Viet Minh soon developed; armed clashes occurred in the countryside, culminating in a massacre in Can Tho on September 8, 1945. A band of 15,000 Hoa Hao bearing pikes and knives marched on Can Tho, where well-armed Viet Minh were garrisoned. In the ensuing clash, thousands of Hoa Hao died, and So's brother and Tran Van Soai's son were executed along with other Hoa Hao leaders; So and Hai Ngoan escaped. The return of the British and the French prevented further killings. Subsequently, however, the Hoa Hao, under Soai's command, wreaked vengeance by tying captured Viet Minh in bundles and drowning them in the rivers. An uneasy balance of power finally developed between the Viet Minh and the Hoa Hao in the delta region.

Seeking once more to unite the nationalist groups which they had begun to alienate, the Viet Minh attempted to establish a National Unified Front of all anti-French groups. At the same time, however, the armed forces of the Hoa Hao grouped themselves under Tran Van Soai and took the name of Ngia Quan Cach Mang Ve Quoc Lien Doi Nguyen Trung Truc (translation unavailable). This Hoa Hao group also initiated operations against the French Expeditionary Corps. The National Unified Front was dissolved by the Viet Minh in July 1946 when it became evident that the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai would not accept Viet Minh leadership.

At this juncture, Huyen Phu So decided to enter politics publicly as the leader of an independent political movement.<sup>15</sup> On September 21, So, aided by Nguyen Van Sam, created the Dan Chu Xa Hoi Dang or Vietnam Social Democratic Party (known by the shortened name of Dan Xa) in an effort to reunite all nationalist groups existing before the Japanese defeat. The Dan Xa Party, which was identified with So's Hoa Hao movement, was both anti-Communist and anti-French.\*

\* After So's death, because the Hoa Hao divided into several factions, the Dan Xa lost much of its influence. While the party continued to exist, it did not represent a united Hoa Hao movement.

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh named Huyen Phu So Special Commissioner of the Executive Committee of the Nam Bo.† Despite this appointment, relations between the Viet Minh and Hoa Hao were becoming increasingly strained. Memories of the 1945-46 massacres were still vivid and contributed heavily to the prevalent feeling of mutual distrust. Additionally, the separatist tendencies of the Hoa Hao were beginning to alarm the Communists. By December 1946 the Dan Xa showed evidence of becoming more anti-Communist than anti-French; So, fearing his life threatened by the Viet Minh, fled to Duc Hoa.<sup>18</sup>

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†The Nam Bo was the Provisional Executive Committee for South Vietnam set up by the Viet Minh. The Nam Bo had nine members, six of whom were Communists.

### SECTION III

#### STATUS DURING THE INDOCHINA WAR

In March 1947, Tran Van Soai (alias Nam Lua), following the example of the Cao Dai, joined the French, bringing with him his wife \* and 2,000 armed followers. Soai established headquarters at Cai Von, the terminus of the ferry across the Bassac River to Can Tho and an important location for boats carrying rice to the Saigon-Cholon area. The following month, Huyen Phu So, en route to a "conciliation meeting" to which he had been invited by the Viet Minh, was ambushed by the Communists and condemned to death. So's detention caused the rest of the Hoa Hao to turn against the Viet Minh and to support the French. When the Communists murdered So in Long Xuyen, the assassination was hushed up; although the Hoa Hao chieftains knew of So's death, the faithful followers were informed that their leader had withdrawn and would return at a future date.<sup>1</sup>

On May 18, the French Command signed a military convention with Tran Van Soai (on whom had been conferred the nonexistent rank of a one-star general) whereby the latter would collaborate with local authorities to evict the Viet Minh from the Hoa Hao zones.<sup>2</sup> These negotiations placed the Hoa Hao in a seemingly ideal position. Having received official recognition as a religious sect, they were free to engage in their cult ceremonies; supplied with French weapons, they could now defend themselves against Viet Minh reprisals.

Soai and his well-trained army embarked on an all-out campaign against the Viet Minh. The areas they cleared of Communists were called Mat Tran Hoa Hao or Hoa Hao Front. Members of the Hoa Hao still inhabiting Viet Minh-controlled areas soon fled to the cleared zones, thus enlarging and consolidating the quasi-feudal domains of the Hoa Hao.<sup>3</sup>

However, the strength and cohesion of the Hoa Hao movement had emanated from the devotion of the faithful to Huyen Phu So. The news of the death of their spiritual leader and the absence of

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\* Soai's wife, Le Thi Gam, encouraged her husband to assume nominal command of the Hoa Hao armed forces after their divergence from the Communists. She commanded a Hoa Hao Amazon Corps and intelligence service, controlled the sect's budget, and occasionally arranged for the assassination of her husband's rivals.

a successor created personal rivalry among the Hoa Hao chieftains. Lacking strong religious unity, various military leaders allowed their personal ambitions to prevail; they soon challenged Soai's position as commander in chief of the Hoa Hao.

The first to sever relations with Soai was his own former second-in-command, Hai Ngoan, a Sino-Vietnamese whose fief was centered in Chau Doc Province. Hai Ngoan opened hostilities by attacking French units as well as all boats trespassing on his domain. In retaliation the French, in January 1948, induced Soai to initiate operations against Hai Ngoan.<sup>4</sup>

Another military leader, Ba Cut (alias Le Quang Vinh) with headquarters in Thot Not, chose to exploit this intrasect rift by attacking Soai and seizing land at the expense of the other chiefs. Motivated by no particular loyalty, Ba Cut fought alternately against the Viet Minh, the French, the Vietnamese Government, and other Hoa Hao groups.

A third leader, Nguyen Giac Ngo, onetime commander of the sect forces and overlord of the Cho Moi region in what is now An Giang Province, chose to remain neutral in the ensuing conflicts, forming a peaceful splinter faction called the "Lying-down Hoa Hao." Of all the leaders, Ngo alone remained faithful to the spiritual tenets of the sect.<sup>5</sup>

Soai's popularity with the sect leaders declined further when his negotiations with the Cao Dai Ho Phap,\* whom the Hoa Hao distrusted intensely, were revealed. In January 1948 Soai and the Ho Phap signed a mutual nonaggression pact which promised support to Bao Dai.† The French reluctantly approved the pact, which aimed at unity and independence for Vietnam. (In fact, after the agreement was signed, the French appended the words "within the framework of the French union."\*) Fearing that the interests of the sect had been compromised, the Hoa Hao political party, the Dan Xa, encouraged desertions and provoked internal rebellions. When operations against the dissident Hai Ngoan were renewed with the assistance of a French liaison mission, Soai ended his negotiations with the Ho Phap. Several dissident leaders, including Ba Cut, were disarmed; as a result, they joined the French, at least temporarily.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Hoa Hao solidarity was shortlived: by the end of 1948, the Hoa Hao were once more operating as several distinct groups. So's father, Huong Ca Bo, designated to assume spiritual leadership of the sect until his son's "return," joined with Nguyen Giac Ngo in attempting to organize a Hoa Hao "Third Force." Ba Cut also resumed his guerrilla activities. Further jealousies de-

\* The Ho Phap is the highest office in the Cao Dai administrative hierarchy.

† Despite this alliance, however, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao continued to clash, offering neither strong nor dependable support to Bao Dai.

veloped when the French, who had selected Soai as the leader of the Hoa Hao, began delivering arms exclusively to him, and when Bao Dai appointed So's father as a member of his Privy Council.<sup>8</sup>

In February 1949, Hai Ngoan—and his private army of 500—renewed his alliance with Soai. By June, Soai, with Ngoan's assistance, had recovered a measure of his former influence, and Cai Von was now recognized as the capital of the Hoa Hao country. Meanwhile Nguyen Giac Ngo and Ba Cut were fighting each other in the region of Cho Moi.

Soai's efforts to unify the sect were again thwarted in 1950 when Nguyen Giac Ngo negotiated a direct alliance with Bao Dai's government. On February 25, 1950, Ngo made a declaration of submission to Bao Dai, but Soai ordered the occupation of Ngo's fief in an attempt to keep it in Hoa Hao hands. The French later induced Soai to relinquish control of Ngo's area, and an agreement to this effect was signed in April 1950. Subsequently, Soai continually tried to regain this area.<sup>9</sup> On August 25, 1950, Ba Cut, now in control of the region of Thot Not between Can Tho and Long Xuyen, rallied directly to the French Command. Meanwhile, Hai Ngoan severed relations with Soai and returned to the Chau Doc region with the rank of colonel. Once again the sect, numbering over a million followers, was divided into four factions, each jealous of its independence. Whatever unity remained could be ascribed to the religious precepts of the sect, represented by Huyen Phu So's father, who was now leading the life of an ascetic and engaging in charitable activities. Eventually, So's father rallied to Soai, thus providing a degree of unity for the sect.<sup>10</sup>

On January 1, 1953, the French promoted Tran Van Soai to the rank of division general in recognition of his loyalty to the regime. Shortly thereafter, it became evident that the Vietnamese authorities, on the heels of the Franco-Vietnamese accords, were extending their sphere of influence by transferring territory to the Vietnamese National Army. Seeing their privileges and autonomy threatened, and knowing that weakness lay in disunity, the sect leaders—with the exception of Nguyen Giac Ngo—agreed to put aside their personal disputes and reunite under the leadership of Huyen Phu So's father.

The Vietnamese National Army on June 1, 1953, seized the provinces of Dinh Tuong and Vinh Long, initiating a series of clashes between the sects and the Army. In protest, on the night of June 25, Ba Cut and his troops deserted after burning buildings in their charge and seizing all available weapons. To stabilize the deteriorating situation, the Vietnamese authorities called a meeting on July 29 to evolve a method to reach an accord with the Hoa Hao leader; before transferring the provinces of Long Xuyen (now part

of An Giang Province) and Chau Doc and part of Vinh Long Province to the government's civil administrators.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh reversed its policy of hostility toward the Hoa Hao to a policy of professed friendship. By curtailing the military operations hitherto directed against the Hoa Hao, the Viet Minh hoped to exploit the sect's greatest fears—the loss of its autonomy and local economic control—and to turn the Hoa Hao leaders against the Franco-Vietnamese authorities. Although the Hoa Hao hatred of the Viet Minh had not diminished, their desire to safeguard their sovereignty in the face of government interference was, at this time, of more immediate concern. By mid-1953 it seemed possible that the Hoa Hao might accept the extended hand of the Viet Minh.

On July 3, 1953, the French Government issued a declaration of its readiness to grant complete independence to Vietnam, provided that the latter settled its claims in the economic, judicial, military, and political spheres. Already displeased with Bao Dai's conduct of affairs, the various nationalist groups foresaw the negotiations ending without regard for their interests. Since the groups were too divided to defend their interests, Ngo Dinh Nhu grasped this opportunity to organize an unofficial Front of National Union to promote the candidacy of his brother Ngo Dinh Diem for the premiership and to show how united the Vietnamese were in their demands for national independence. Among the leaders supporting this project were the Catholic Apostolic Vicar of Vinh Long; Pham Cong Tac (the Cao Dai Ho Phap); Le Van Vien (the Binh Xuyen leader); and Tran Van Soai. The national congress in support of national union and peace met semiclandestinely on September 5. The congress was forced to break up when the delegates began indicting the French authorities and Bao Dai. Although Soai and Vien later wired expressions of loyalty to Bao Dai, the damage had already been done.

Hoping to smooth over the impression of popular discontent created by the unofficial congress, Bao Dai called an official National Congress in October. The Hoa Hao were allotted 15 seats (in addition, 17 were given to the Cao Dai and 9 to the Binh Xuyen), more than the number reserved for the professional groups, the Buddhists, or the ethnic minorities. The purpose of the National Congress was merely to inform Bao Dai of the desires of the Vietnamese people in regard to future relations with France "within the framework of the French Union" and to elect representatives to assist him in the negotiations. Instead, the feverishly nationalistic delegates approved a motion (later amended) in support of "total independence for Vietnam."<sup>12</sup>

At the signing of the Geneva Agreement, the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai,

and Binh Xuyen controlled over half of southern Vietnam. The Hoa Hao fiefs represented extremely profitable economic entities. Soai, for example, as director of his own rice-marketing corporation, controlled much of the rice industry in the Bassac River area.<sup>13</sup> Soai would buy paddy from the farmers at below market prices, store it until prices were high at the end of the season, then sell it for vast profits.\* Like the Binh Xuyen, the Hoa Hao also derived huge profits from the operation of gambling concessions or from protection money exacted from the operators of these establishments.<sup>14</sup> Hoa Hao administrative committees called Ban Tri Su governed the faithful; Bao An or self-defense groups ensured the public security in Hoa Hao territories. Various other Hoa Hao chieftains collected taxes, directed land reform programs, and rendered justice. By the end of 1954, the Hoa Hao armed forces, charged with extending the Hoa Hao domain and warding off the Viet Minh, were officially estimated at 12,500,† however, if those of the Bao An are included, these forces may have exceeded twice this number. Hoa Hao followers numbered over a million; they were influential in the provinces of Chau Doc, Long Xuyen (now part of An Giang), where they made up the majority population), and Vinh Long, and the regions near the towns of Rach Gia, Ben Tre (now Truc Giang), My Tho, and Bac Lieu (now Vinh Loi). The Hoa Hao would not relinquish so vast a claim without a struggle.<sup>17</sup>

\* At the end of August 1953, when rice was priced far above normal in Saigon, Hai Ngoan was holding 20,000 tons, and Soai, who had already sold 12,000 tons, was reserving 40,000 tons for future sales.<sup>14</sup>

† According to one source, the Hoa Hao armed forces were divided as follows: Tran Van Soni, 7,000; Hai Ngoan, 2,500; Nguyen Giac Ngo, 1,500; Le Quang Vinh, 1,000; and Ba Ga Mo or Vo Va Dia, 400.<sup>16</sup>

## SECTION IV

### STATUS DURING THE DIEM REGIME

The anticipated clash between the Vietnamese Government and the religious sects began on September 11, 1954, when Ngo Dinh Diem (then Prime Minister under Bao Dai), ordered the resignation of the Army Chief of Staff, Gen Nguyen Van Hinh, whom he suspected of disloyalty. Hinh refused to step down; instead he barricaded himself with tanks in his headquarters. Diem, fearing a coup d'etat, withdrew into his palace, which was protected by Binh Xuyen police. For weeks, anarchy prevailed throughout Vietnam; Diem was powerless. Supported by the sects, who believed that a strong army linked to Diem would spell their own demise, Hinh could easily have executed a coup d'etat; however, he chose to temporize while showing his defiance of the Prime Minister.

On September 16, the sect leaders met to determine the policy to adopt for the deteriorating situation. In a manifesto drawn up during this conclave, the sects declared their opposition to Diem and their support for a democratic and representative government, "capable of reforming the regime, liberating the country from foreign domination, and improving the lot of the people by the enactment of measures to combat the prevalent poverty and illiteracy."<sup>1</sup> Seeking to appease Hinh, Diem appointed Hinh's friend Gen. Nguyen Van Xuan to the Ministry of National Defense. Hinh, pleased with the appointment, agreed to postpone immediate action against the regime. In addition, when it became known that a military coup d'etat would automatically end foreign economic and military aid, the general was finally dissuaded from undermining Diem's government.<sup>2</sup>

Bao Dai, who had been following the preceding events with growing concern, summoned the Binh Xuyen leader, Le Van Vien, and charged him with the task of forming a coalition government with the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders who had signed the manifesto. Negotiations for the coalition broke down when the Cao Dai leader and Tran Van Soai stipulated terms unacceptable to Le Van Vien. The Binh Xuyen leader then accused the other two leaders of selling out to Diem. Indeed, 5 days later the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao each accepted 4 seats in Diem's new government. The Hoa Hao's Tran Van Soai became Diem's Minister of State. Thus, Diem suc-

ceeded in avoiding the conflict—at least temporarily. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao joined the Diem government because they needed a source of money for the wages of their private troops, a force necessary to retain control over their feudal fiefs. Although members of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao held important positions in the government, the loyalty of the sects was far from assured,<sup>3</sup> because the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders were accepting the positions largely to insure their own control in certain territories.

When the French terminated their subsidies to the religious sects early in 1955, Diem's Information Minister announced that the sect armies—25,000 Cao Dai and 20,000 Hoa Hao\*—would be integrated into the National Army.†<sup>5</sup> Heretofore, the sectarian troops had been autonomous auxiliaries in the French Expeditionary Corps. Unable to support their troops without the subsidies, the sect leaders had the choice of either awaiting the desertion of their unpaid troops or forming a government more sympathetic to their needs.

On January 14, 1955, Soai's chief of staff Nguyen Van Hue and Maj. Nguyen Than Day (alias Tu Day) joined Diem, bringing with them 3,500 and 1,500 men, respectively.<sup>7</sup> By the end of February, Nguyen Giac Ngo also supported Diem. Ba Cut, who refused to join Diem, had withdrawn (for the fifth time since 1947) into the Ca Mau region with his 3,000 ‡ followers, precipitating a clash between Hoa Hao irregulars and units of the Vietnamese National Army. The latter launched an abortive attack—Operation Écaille—against Ba Cut to reduce his power. The failure of the operation was ascribed to the rebel leader's receiving details of the plan in advance, presumably from Soai, a member of the National Defense Committee. In retaliation, Ba Cut attacked a government battalion near Long Xuyen.<sup>9</sup> A few months later, Ba Cut's troops had increased to approximately 5,000 and, with the help of the Hoa Hao cabinet ministers, were well equipped with arms. Indeed, rumor was rife that Soai himself had urged Ba Cut to defect, suggesting that the Hoa Hao forces be united under his command.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, there was chaos throughout the southwestern Vietnamese countryside. The Viet Minh had retreated, leaving behind a power vacuum in the Plaine des Joncs and the Transbassac region. Rivalry for control of this territory resulted in repeated clashes between the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai. The Hoa Hao had the distinct advantage, since Ba Cut and his troops were already firmly entrenched in the area. Despite the anarchy in the region, govern-

\* *The New York Times* (September 25, 1954) estimated the Hoa Hao military forces at between 20,000 and 30,000, including regulars and irregulars.<sup>4</sup>

† In the same announcement, the minister called the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao officers good fighters, implying criticism of the National Army officers.<sup>6</sup>

‡ One source claims Ba Cut had 1,000 followers.<sup>8</sup>

ment troops began to occupy the Ca Mau Peninsula, and Diem visited the area officially on the 19th of February.

Bao Dai, concerned that hostilities would weaken the sects, forcing them to yield to Diem's demands, sent his cousin to Saigon to persuade the sects to unite. Accordingly, on March 5, 1955, the sects and the Binh Xuyen gang signed a nonaggression pact and formed a United Front of National Forces, a loose coalition designed to "protect the country and serve the people."<sup>11</sup> The sects and the Binh Xuyen also agreed to merge their troops \* into one national army (no reference was made to the existing National Army) after a government of national union had been formed and to continue their allegiance to Bao Dai. Officially headed by the Cao Dai Ho Phap (Pham Cong Tac), the Front demanded a strong, democratic government composed of honest men, with extensive power for the sects; in addition, the Front sent a mission to Bao Dai requesting the dismissal of Diem. However, Bao Dai reaffirmed his support of Diem.

Prior to receiving Bao Dai's reply, the Front leaders (including Tran Van Soai and Ba Cut for the Hoa Hao) sent Diem an ultimatum on March 21, 1955, allowing him 5 days to form a national union government. Refusing to accede, Diem on March 25 invited the Front leaders to discuss their grievances with him. † On March 26, the four Hoa Hao and four Cao Dai ministers resigned from Diem's cabinet. Now the Front made a second proposal requesting the transfer of executive power from Diem to a five-man council in which Diem would be merely a member. Again Diem refused to comply.

Factionalism within the sects prevented the immediate outbreak of hostilities. The Hoa Hao, who controlled the ferries and river traffic, expressed their disapproval by merely blocking the food supplies bound for Saigon-Cholon. The Binh Xuyen entrenched themselves in various buildings, commandeered in anticipation of a confrontation with the Vietnamese National Army.<sup>13</sup> Shortly before the conflict, the Cao Dai and the smaller Hoa Hao groups, accusing the Binh Xuyen of drawing them into a showdown with Diem, withdrew from the impending clash.<sup>14</sup> Fighting broke out March 28, when Diem ordered his troops to attack the Security Service building occupied by the Binh Xuyen. The French intervened, claiming that the lives of French citizens were being endangered. Hostilities between the Binh Xuyen and the government forces were resumed on the night of March 29, resulting in

\* According to *The New York Times* (March 5, 1955), these troops would include 16,000 Cao Dai, 5,000 Hoa Hao, and 4,000 Binh Xuyen regulars.<sup>12</sup>

† It is interesting to note that 5 months after Diem assumed power the sects and the Binh Xuyen still controlled over half of southern Vietnam.

some casualties on both sides. Again the French arranged a cease-fire, much to Diem's annoyance. The Prime Minister accused the French of giving tactical advice to the Binh Xuyen, especially since the French had refused to supply the Vietnamese National Army with fuel and ammunition. Following the cease-fire, a junta composed of Diem, his brothers Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Luyen, and their nephew by marriage, Tran Trung Dung, assumed the leadership of Vietnam.<sup>15</sup>

During their negotiations as a United Front the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen had maintained a semblance of unity. However, by the end of March, the latent factionalism characteristic of the sects was once more evident. Gen. Nguyen Thanh Phuong, Cao Dai commander in chief and an unenthusiastic participant in the coalition, joined Diem's junta, agreeing to integrate his troops into the Vietnamese National Army.<sup>16</sup> Encouraged by this triumph, Diem now tried to isolate the Binh Xuyen by gaining the support of the Hoa Hao through bribery. The Hoa Hao leaders Soai, Ba Cut, and Hai Ngoan refused the bribe of 100 million piastres, in the name of the United Front.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the month of April fighting either prevailed or appeared imminent both in the countryside and in Saigon itself. From the southwestern part of Vietnam came reports of clashes between the Hoa Hao dissidents and government forces.\* At the same time, negotiations were in progress between Hoa Hao Gen. Hai Ngoan and government officials. The Diem junta was attempting to persuade the general, who was believed to be only halfheartedly supporting the sect's opposition to the regime, to join them.<sup>20</sup> At the end of April, fighting raged between the government troops and the Binh Xuyen until resistance of the Binh Xuyen was broken, and the group was evicted from the Saigon-Cholon area.<sup>21</sup>

Having driven the Binh Xuyen out of the twin cities, the Diem junta renewed its efforts to reduce the power of the Hoa Hao. Government officials again offered a considerable sum of money to Tran Van Soai for his support. However, having anticipated this move, the Hoa Hao leaders had already agreed not to accept bribes, at least openly, and to resist the government at all costs. When the sect learned of an impending government military operation against them, the Hoa Hao set fire to their huts and stores, abandoned their bases, and on May 25 withdrew to the countryside. The anticipated offensive occurred on June 5, 1955, when units of the army, commanded by Duong Van Minh, staged an amphibious

\* On April 3, government troops launched an attack on Hoa Hao rebels commanded by Ba Cut in the My Tho area.<sup>18</sup>

The *New York Times* (April 7, 1955) reported the near capture of Ba Cut by government forces. A 100-man commando team surrounded the rebel leader's camp and took 20 prisoners but failed to snare Ba Cut, who escaped by motorized skiff.<sup>19</sup>

attack on Hoa Hao forces in the Can Tho area. The attack resulted in the surrender of five Hoa Hao battalions and in Nguyen Giac Ngo's joining the government.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Tran Van Soai had moved his headquarters from Cai Von to the Seven Mountains, where Hai Ngoan had food and war supplies to meet the emergency. On May 29, 1955, Soai and Ngoan announced their readiness to surrender, but by then Diem was prepared to eliminate the sects once and for all.<sup>23</sup> Now demoralized by lack of regular pay and military supplies, the Hoa Hao troops staged a brief resistance, too weak to stave off the government offensive. By June 18, Soai's troops had been either eliminated or they had defected.

On June 19, Soai, with Vi and Hinh (former commanders in chief of the Vietnamese National Army who had joined Soai and Ngoan in the Seven Mountains), fled to Cambodia, and Ngoan surrendered to Diem. Only Ba Cut continued to hold out until he was arrested in April 1956. In July he was guillotined at Can Tho.<sup>24</sup> Thus by mid-1956 Diem had scored his first victory in his efforts to consolidate his position by crushing the power of the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen.

By 1960 Diem and his junta had greatly improved the economy of the Republic of Vietnam but, in doing so, had become increasingly dictatorial. Diem's critics, growing more and more outspoken, now submitted a number of requests to Diem to democratize his regime. Among the non-Communist opposition groups petitioning for liberalization of Diem's government was the Committee for Liberty and Progress (Khoi Tu-Do Tien-Bo). This bloc, also known as the Caravelle group, comprised 18 politicians and professional men formerly identified with the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, the Greater Vietnam (*Dai-Viet*) Party, the Vietnamese People's Party, and dissident Catholic groups.<sup>25</sup> In the name of the bloc, Dr. Pham Huy Quat posted a manifesto to Diem on April 26, 1960, in which he "condemned the undemocratic elections of 1959, the continuing arrests which had filled the gaols to overflowing and the suppression of the freedom of the press and of public opinion," and demanded reform of the administration. Diem halfheartedly promised to liberalize the regime: "when the rebellion had been subdued and the people had gained more experience in democracy." Two later petitions issued by the bloc vainly demanded official recognition as a political party.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the government cautiously supervised Hoa Hao activities—particularly in Vinh Long Province—and prevented the sect from gathering for religious or other ceremonies. On April 5, 1960, however, the Hoa Hao were permitted to celebrate the Buddhist Memorial Day, Thanh Minh, in the cemetery of their war

dead. Although the memorial day is usually an occasion for worshipping one's ancestors, in 1960 the government altered the nature of the ceremony, making it a memorial only to those who died in fighting for independence from the French or against the Viet Cong. The Hoa Hao, who had suffered casualties in both causes, were therefore permitted to gather. In Minh Thuan village, 500 Hoa Hao (a minor part of the total Hoa Hao population) gathered at the Hoa Hao war cemetery. More Hoa Hao would have come had their district chief notified them soon enough of their permission to attend. Those who assembled brought offerings and placed them on the tombs.<sup>27</sup>

On June 10, when local authorities observed members of the Hoa Hao in the cemetery preparing for another celebration, the anniversary of the foundation of the Hoa Hao religion, the authorities ordered the Hoa Hao to remove the pavilions and decorations for the celebration. The total amount of the contributions collected for the celebration was rumored to be 30,000 piastres. The cancellation of this ceremony by the government and the amount of money collected by the Hoa Hao point up the degree of animosity which existed between the Hoa Hao and the local authorities during the Diem regime.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of 1961 the National Liberation Front (NLF), formed in December 1960, replaced the Viet Minh and resumed the Viet Minh's anti-Hoa Hao policy. The sect was again caught in the middle—between the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong, both of whom were seeking to eliminate it. In May 1962, Truong Kim Cu's Hoa Hao Battalion 104 was trapped and demolished in a simultaneous drive by the ARVN and Viet Cong Battalion 510.<sup>29</sup> The Hoa Hao, whose strength and numbers were greatly diminished, were still anti-Diem and anti-Communist.

While both the Government and the Viet Cong attacked the Hoa Hao militarily, Diem's regime also sought to eliminate the sect on moral grounds. On May 24, 1962 the highly controversial Law for the Protection of Morality was passed which outlawed "spiritism and occultism" (Article 6), presumably a direct stab at the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. Refusing to be intimidated, a large number of Hoa Hao gathered on June 20 at the birthplace of Huyen Phu So in Viet Cong-infested Chau Doc Province (formerly part of An Giang) to honor the founder's mother, who survived him.<sup>30</sup>

## SECTION V

### STATUS SINCE THE DIEM REGIME

After the overthrow of Diem in the coup of November 1963, the new military junta headed by Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh initiated a widely publicized campaign to win the allegiance of the dissident Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects. Two reasons motivated this campaign: first, the sects maintained small armies (the Hoa Hao claimed they had nearly 1,000 soldiers in two battalions and several units of provincial irregulars) which the junta wanted to integrate into the government forces; second, the junta was seeking the support of the Vietnamese peasants by working through the sects. According to *The New York Times*, the Hoa Hao claimed more than a million followers, primarily in the provinces along the Cambodian border.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the accuracy of this figure, the Hoa Hao evidently exerted considerable influence over the populace, especially as a number of Hoa Hao were serving as province and district chiefs. In January 1964, the campaign to win the military support of the Hoa Hao had encountered serious difficulties and only a modicum of success.\*

The Hoa Hao leaders still remembered that General Minh had been prominent in the operations leading to Ba Cut's capture and death; for the most part, the Hoa Hao leaders insisted on keeping their units intact. Some Hoa Hao units—civil guard companies—did, however, join the government; a newspaper article reports that several of these units were recruited and sent to Vi Thanh for anti-Communist training and that four other units were to be deployed in embattled An Xuyen Province. Lt. Col. Ly Ba Phamm, the Hoa Hao chief of Chuong Thien Province, also requested 500 Hoa Hao soldiers to reinforce his troops.<sup>2</sup>

Gen. Nguyen Khanh, who assumed power January 30, 1964, continued his predecessor General Minh's campaign to win the allegiance of the religious sects. He appointed a Hoa Hao (Dr. Nguyen Cong Hau) and a Cao Dai to serve as ministers in his cabinet. In February 1964 General Khanh paid an official visit to Long Xuyen,

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\* The same *New York Times* article also reported a clash between the Hoa Hao and regular ARVN troops in a street brawl in Vi Thanh (now Dua Lang), capital of Chuong Thien Province, in which a civilian was killed and two soldiers wounded. The fracas was discounted by some as meaningless, but others considered it another example of the historical antagonism between the Hoa Hao and Government forces.

a center of Hoa Hao power, to receive public thanks for appointing members of the sect as provincial and district chiefs. Further proof of General Khanh's policy to conciliate the Hoa Hao was provided by U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara's visit to Hoa Hao village and his meeting with Huyen Phu So's aged mother.<sup>1</sup>

Premier Pham Huy Quat, who assumed power in January 1965, also favored a policy of conciliation with the sects. Two representatives each from the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai were included in the 20-member National Legislative Council, and a Hoa Hao and a Cao Dai were appointed to serve in the new cabinet.<sup>4</sup> To remove any stigma attached to the Hoa Hao during their persecution by Diem, the Vietnamese National Police announced in March 1965 that to clear the name of Ba Cut—who was beheaded in 1956—a new trial would be held. A new trial would also be held for anyone else falsely arrested at that time who desired to clear his name.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile the Hoa Hao were continuing their campaign against the Communists. In the words of Lt. Col. Tran Van Tuoi, military chief of An Giang Province, "We are Hoa Hao here. Hoa Hao are anti-Communist. When my people see Viet Cong, they kill them or drive them away."<sup>6</sup> By April 1965 An Giang was reportedly one of the few provinces where the Viet Cong had been driven out, and, for the most part, kept out. This extraordinary situation was ascribed to the fact that the local population, under Hoa Hao protection, refused to cooperate with or be coerced by the Viet Cong forces.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, and various Catholic groups accused Premier Quat of being "too soft on Communism" and threatened to stage demonstrations.<sup>8</sup> Pressure from these and other groups brought Premier Quat's resignation in June; Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky was appointed to head a new military government. In July 1965, Marshal Ky conferred juridical recognition on the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, indicating that his administration is placing even more importance upon conciliation between the religious sects and the Vietnamese Government.<sup>9</sup> Although it is too soon to evaluate Marshal Ky's policy toward the sects, experience has proven that no government can afford to ignore them.

Hoa Hao adherents—recently estimated to number between 450,000<sup>10</sup> and one million<sup>11</sup>—are concentrated in An Giang and Chau Doc provinces and are also influential in the provinces of Ba Xuyen, Bac Lieu, Chuong Thien, Kien Giang, Kien Phong, Phong Dinh, and Vinh Long. Given proper leadership, the Hoa Hao could easily regain their former position of power.

## SECTION VI

### HOA HAOISM AS A RELIGION

The widespread appeal of Hoa Haoism, one of the four principal Vietnamese religions, is attributed to the simplicity of its doctrine. The founder, Huyen Phu So, as a disciple of Phat Thay Tay An, the Hoa Hao Buddha, preached a reformed Buddhism. The Living Buddha, as So came to be known, advocated a return to basic Buddhist precepts. Without sacerdotal hierarchy or special temples or pagodas, the faithful are free to practice their religion whenever and wherever they please. The absence of intermediaries is believed to enable the faithful to commune more deeply with their Maker. In contrast with the elaborate burial ceremonies practiced by other Vietnamese religions, So preached that "the . . . body . . . should be interred simply and without great ceremony so that its decomposition should not incommode the living. Why spend lots of money under the pretext of materializing feelings of filial piety, fidelity and friendship towards the dead, when it would have been greatly preferable to show them such feelings when they were alive?"<sup>1</sup>

Those interested in becoming followers of Huyen Phu So, the Master, are not asked to undergo any public ceremony of initiation, but are merely obliged to observe So's teachings: to abide by the Four Ordinances and the Eight Points of Honesty, and to recite four prayers a day. The four prayers are prescribed as the following: "the first to Buddha, the second to the 'Reign of the Enlightened King . . . when the world will know peace' . . . the third to living and dead parents and relatives. The fourth, to the 'mass of small people to whom I wish to have the will to improve themselves, to be charitable, and to liberate themselves from the shackles of ignorance.'"<sup>2</sup> These prayers are said before an empty table covered with a red cloth as a symbol of universal understanding.<sup>3</sup> The cloth is red because the Vietnamese consider red the all-embracing color. Four magical Chinese characters, "Bao Son Ky Houg" ("a scent from a strange mountain"), adorn the cloth.<sup>4</sup>

The four precepts of the Hoa Hao religion are: 1) to honor one's parents; 2) to love one's country; 3) to respect Buddhism and its teachings; and 4) to love one's fellow man.<sup>5</sup>

The only physical offerings sanctioned by the Hoa Hao sect are

water (preferably rainwater) as an indication of cleanliness, local flowers as a sign of purity, and small offerings of incense to chase away evil spirits. Prayers and offerings are made only to Buddha and Vietnamese national heroes, not to the genii or deities recognized by other Vietnamese religions.<sup>6</sup>

On the moral level, Huyen Phu So preached virtue: children should obey their parents; bureaucrats should be good and just toward their constituents; spouses should be faithful to one another. To reform and to simplify the practice of Buddhism without altering the basic doctrine, So imposed interdicts on his followers. The Hoa Hao faithful are forbidden to drink alcoholic beverages, smoke opium, participate in games of chance, or eat ox or buffalo meat. In addition, they may eat neither meat nor other greasy foods on the 1st, 14th, 15th, and 30th days of the lunar month.<sup>7</sup>

Present-day Hoa Hao presumably still follow So's teachings, as pictures of the founder appear in the homes of the faithful, generally above the table reserved for the practice of the cult. Thus, although the Hoa Hao are divided politically and militarily, their belief in So's teachings provides some measure of unity to the sect.

## FOOTNOTES

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No footnotes.

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15. *Ibid.*
16. Savani, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
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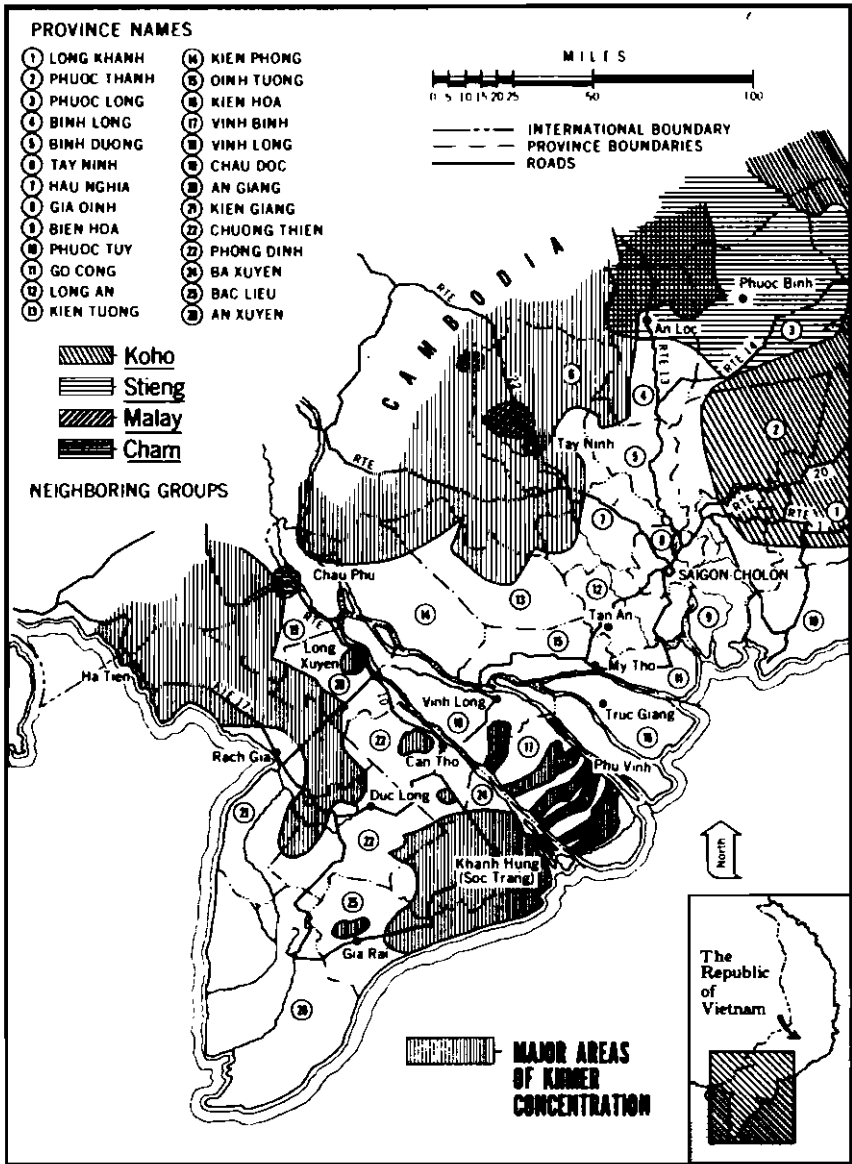
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2. *Ibid.*; Savani, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
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*The Khmer*

## CHAPTER 24. THE KHMER

### SECTION I

#### INTRODUCTION

The Khmer, a people of Cambodian descent, form the second largest ethnic group in the area formerly known as Indochina. In the Republic of Vietnam, these remnants of a vast, ancient empire now number between 400,000 and 600,000 and are scattered throughout the Mekong Delta area.

The Khmer language belongs to the Mon-Khmer language family and is related to the M'ngong and Bahnar tongues. Khmer social organization is patriarchal, but the women wield considerable influence in the household and in divorce and inheritance proceedings.

Like the Cham minority group, the Khmer were influenced by Indian civilization in their early history and have retained cultural elements which reflect this tradition. Whereas the Vietnamese practice Mahayana Buddhism, the majority of the Khmer adhere to Theravada Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

Principal economic activities consist of irrigated rice cultivation, fishing, fruit and vegetable farming, and weaving.

#### **Name of Group**

According to legend, the Khmer kings were descended from the great hermit and seer, Kambu Svayambhuva; "Kambuja," translated by the French to "Cambodge" and by the British to "Cambodia," is a derivative of his name. Early Chinese inscriptions contain the word "Kambudjadesa" or "sons of Kambu."<sup>2</sup> The name Khmer refers to the dominant population of Cambodia and differs from the term "Cambodian," which encompasses other groups in addition to the ethnic Khmer and also designates any national of the country of that name. In the Republic of Vietnam, the names Khmer, Khmer Krom, and Cambodian are used interchangeably when speaking of the people descended from the ancient Khmer of the Empire of Funan.

#### **Size of Group**

Population figures for the Khmer in the Republic of Vietnam, which are little more than informed estimates, range between

400,000 and 600,000. In 1957, the largest concentrations of Khmer were located in the following provinces: Chau Doc (then called An Giang), 40,978; Ba Xuyen, 118,328; and Kien Giang, 42,022.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the ethnic Khmer, the total group numbering about 2,600,000, inhabit Cambodia in the Tonle Sap region; smaller groups have settled in Thailand and Laos.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Location**

The Khmer are located in settlements throughout the Mekong Delta, particularly around Khanh Hung (formerly Soc Trang) and Vinh Loi (Bac Lieu) in Ba Xuyen Province; Rach Gia and Ha Tien in Kien Giang Province; Phu Vinh (formerly Tra Vinh Province); Can Tho in Phong Dinh Province; and in the Provinces of Tay Ninh and Chau Doc. Scattered Khmer settlements are also found near the towns of Long Xuyen, Cholon, Vinh Long, Tan An, and Bien Hoa.<sup>5</sup>

The Vietnamese are the principal neighbors of the Khmer. In Tay Ninh and Chau Doc, the Cham and Malays live in small settlements adjacent to the Khmer and maintain a harmonious relationship with them despite religious differences. The Stieng tribe, the closest Montagnard group, inhabits Binh Long Province near the Khmer of Tay Ninh Province.

#### **Terrain Analysis**

The region inhabited by the Khmer consists of a continuous plain no higher than 3 meters above sea level, dissected by several rivers which drain into the South China Sea. This locale may be subdivided into three areas: the delta of the Saigon and Dong Nai Rivers, the Mekong Delta, and the Ca Mau Peninsula. The first region comprises ancient alluvial soils or "gray" lands and, in some areas, red basaltic soil. The French established numerous plantations in this area because of the fertile soil, the absence of dense forest, and the close proximity to Saigon.<sup>6</sup> The lower reaches of this delta region are broken up by small river tributaries and are for the most part overgrown with mangroves. The Song Soirap receives the waters of the Vaico Occidental River and is navigable for small boats.

The Mekong Delta is dominated by two branches of the main river: one, which has five channels, retains the name Mekong; the other, formerly called the Bassac, is now called the Song Hau Giang. Extensive drainage projects and special methods for the utilization of marshy ground have facilitated intensive cultivation of the region. Mangroves and sand dunes are limited to small areas along the coast.<sup>7</sup> South of Chau Doc, steep granite hills reach a height of 614 meters above the low-lying plains. The hills themselves are barren and unpopulated, but ethnic Khmer, attracted by

the market town of Tri Ton, have settled in villages at the base of the cliffs.<sup>9</sup>

The Ca Mau Peninsula, unlike the other two regions, is sparsely populated due to extensive areas of mangrove or dense forest swamp. The *tram* (*Melaleuca leucadendron*), which reaches a height of 15 to 20 meters, is the predominant form of vegetation in these forests. No major rivers traverse the peninsula, but several secondary rivers drain into the Gulf of Siam. Sediment transported by offshore currents from the mouth of the Mekong is deposited along the shore of the peninsula, causing the southwest portion of the coast to extend into the sea at a rate of from 60 to 80 meters a year.

The rail line running northwestward from Saigon to Loc Ninh is inoperable. No railroads run south of Saigon, the terminus of the Trans Viet-Nam line. The network of secondary roads in the delta is often subject to Viet Cong interdiction. Although many good secondary or provincial roads serve the Mekong Delta region, no national routes extend into the area. Few roads exist in the coastal portion of the Ca Mau Peninsula due to frequent floodings. The chief means of transportation in this area is by water, along the numerous navigable canals.<sup>9</sup>

## SECTION II BACKGROUND

### **Ethnic and Racial Background**

The modern Khmer, or Khmer Krom, are a heterogeneous people who represent centuries of cultural and racial fusion. Their precise origins are obscure, but the Khmer are believed to have migrated prior to 2000 B.C. from the northwest, possibly Tibet, into present Cambodia and the Mekong Delta. In the beginning of the Christian era, the Khmer encountered peoples of Indonesian stock inhabiting Cambodia and drove them into the mountains.<sup>1</sup> Despite this direct contact with primitive tribal groups, the Khmer have refused to acknowledge any common origin or cultural affinity with them.<sup>2</sup>

Hinduization of the Khmer began in the third century B.C., when small groups of Hindu traders, attracted by the riches of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula, migrated to Cambodia and to the present Republic of Vietnam and established states modeled after Hindu kingdoms. These waves of migration, reaching a peak in the ninth and tenth centuries, were accompanied by a blending of races and cultures. Incursions of Indo-Malays from Java in the eighth century and Thai invasions from the 10th to the 15th centuries produced a concomitant mixing of races. More recently, the Khmer have intermarried with Vietnamese, Chinese, and Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

### **Language**

Khmer belongs to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family, which includes such distant languages as the Mon and Khasi languages of Burma, the Wa-Palaung tongues of the Shan states, and the Munda languages of India.<sup>4</sup>

At one time, Khmer was spoken throughout the Mekong Valley—present-day Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and the part of the Republic of Vietnam formerly known as Cochin China. As a result of the invasions and occupation by the Thai and Vietnamese, the territory inhabited by the Khmer-speaking population was considerably reduced. Today, Khmer-speaking groups are located in Cambodia, parts of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Many Montagnard tribes, such as the Sedang, M'nong, and Stieng have languages related to Khmer.<sup>5</sup>

Khmer is an atonal language and the position of the words in the sentence determines their grammatical function.<sup>6</sup> Khmer words have monosyllabic and disyllabic roots with a system of prefixes and infixes for forming words of more than one syllable. In all other instances, words are invariable in form; there are no declensions, conjunctions, or genders. Plurals are indicated by auxiliary words meaning many, numerous, group, or crowd.<sup>7</sup>

Contact with the Indians brought many linguistic changes, as Sanskrit words were borrowed to describe newly adopted Indian administrative, judicial, and religious systems. Many Pali words entered the Khmer vocabulary in the 15th century when Theravada Buddhism replaced Brahmanism and Mahayana Buddhism.\* The Khmer continue to adopt Pali words to fill the gaps in the technical and metaphysical lexicon.<sup>8</sup>

Less complex than Vietnamese, the Khmer language may nevertheless pose problems to the outsider. Not only must he understand purely linguistic nuances, but he should also know how to distinguish between the language of the common people and that of "noblemen." One vocabulary is used to address older persons and monks and another is spoken by the younger common people. This is not a matter of speaking well or elegantly, but a rigid social obligation among the Khmer; an infraction is considered serious enough to result in sanctions or refusal of audience. The Khmer do not, however, expect outsiders to know and observe these linguistic rules of etiquette. Personal pronouns in Khmer are similarly hierarchic. These words are important, even for outsiders, and are not difficult to memorize. Faulty usage may be interpreted as a lack of deference.<sup>9</sup> The speaker does not designate himself by the same "I" or "me" when speaking to an inferior, an equal, a superior, or a monk.<sup>10</sup>

The Khmer believe that most emotions—with the exception of anger—may be freely displayed as long as they are honest; emotions are reflected by facial expression and intonation. Any sign of exaggeration or melodrama is considered an affectation and is generally avoided. An increased tempo of speech and a raised voice express displeasure; a low grumbling sound indicates sorrow and sympathy.<sup>11</sup>

The Khmer appreciate conversational witticisms and humorous repartee. Despite their mild natures, they are prone to make caustic, tongue in cheek remarks; but their sensitivity to criticism prevents them from appreciating irony or bitter satire. The ability to improvise and versify, facilitated by the rhythmic patterns of Khmer speech, is considered extremely desirable and socially rewarding.<sup>12</sup>

\* See "Factual History," p. 7, and "Religion," p. 1089.

Khmer conversation is often replete with allegorical reference, with meanings too ambiguous for the outsider to grasp; a number of linguistic cues assist the Khmer to respond appropriately. The outsider, however, unable to read these linguistic cues accurately, is seriously hampered in understanding Khmer behavior.

Pali and Sanskrit are generally employed only in Buddhist religious communities. Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism, used in religious texts and incantations, is understood by some Khmer, but only those dedicated to permanent monkhood are able to write it. Although Sanskrit is usually confined to religious scholarship, it is being used more and more, together with Pali, for the formation of technical and scientific terms in the Khmer tongue.<sup>13</sup>

Vietnamese serves as the secondary language for most Khmer, but the degree of fluency depends on where they live and how they earn a living; that is, how much contact they have with the Vietnamese. In areas comprising large Khmer enclaves, the Vietnamese and Chinese inhabitants in the area speak Khmer, as do any neighboring Montagnard tribesmen.

Khmer script is based on a corrupted form of Sanskrit writing imported from southern India in the early Christian era. Written phonetically, from left to right, Khmer comprises 40 consonants and 17 vowels. Two forms of printing characterize the style of writing; *chrieng*, described as cuneiform or wedge-shaped, is employed for administrative texts, books, journals, and formal announcements; *mul*, cursive or rounded in form, once limited to the transcription of Pali texts, is now used for the capital letters of a title page, for the italicized words in a *chrieng* text, and for inscriptions on public buildings.

Efforts to romanize the Khmer language have largely failed due to the resistance of the Buddhist clergy. The monks fear that romanization would weaken the import of sacred teachings and thus reduce the control of the Buddhist clergy over the people.<sup>14</sup>

The decorative and artistic Khmer script commands respect even among the uneducated and illiterate Khmer who believe that anything written originates from a sacred source and wields magical powers; spirits, they believe, obey written inscriptions. The poorest peasants are so enamored of the well-drawn letters that they often take pieces of paper inscribed with a simple word and place them near the statue of Buddha in their houses.<sup>15</sup>

#### Legendary History

The Khmer in Cambodia explain their origin and evolution in a number of legends having some basis in historical fact. The Khmer in the Republic of Vietnam, as a marginal group of the Cambodian Khmer, may also subscribe to the facts contained in these legends.

Since the second Bronze Age, the Khmer have distinguished between the "river" and the "mountain" men, who have clashed relentlessly through the centuries. Each group was reportedly divided into factions that derived a livelihood from either the mountain or the river. This dualism characterizes the early social organization of the Khmer. The mountain chiefs and sorcerers, who commanded fire and lightning, were descendants of the divine bird Garuda. The rulers of the waters and the rains, the river chiefs and sorcerers, were descendants of the divine fish or the serpent Naga.

The foundation and expansion of Indian civilization in Cambodia are echoed in the following legends. Huen-Tien (Hun Chen/Kaundinya),\* a Brahman prince from India or the Malayan Peninsula, prompted by a dream in which a god gave him a divine bow and told him to go to sea in a trading vessel, embarked on a voyage. A change in the course of the wind caused Huen-Tien to reach Funan, the earliest Hindu Kingdom, corresponding roughly to present-day Cambodia and former Cochin China. His arrival was greeted by the sovereign, Queen Lieu-ye, who came in a boat to plunder the vessel. The prince shot an arrow which pierced the queen's boat, frightening her into submission; thereafter, Huen-Tien ruled the country. According to some, Huen-Tien and Lieu-ye married, and the prince taught the semisavage Funanese the elements of Brahmanic belief and otherwise civilized them.<sup>16</sup> This version of the arrival of Indian civilization is essentially that taught in Cambodian schools today.<sup>17</sup>

A variation of the legend recounts that the king of Aryadesa, named Kambu Svayambhuva, was wandering in the desert of Cambodia when he entered a cave and was confronted by huge snakes speaking in human voices. Kambu grew to like the snakes, or Nagas, who could assume human shapes, and married Lady Neak, the daughter of the Naga king. The King, imbued with magical powers, converted the arid land into a fertile region and Kambu ruled over the kingdom, named "Kambuja" after him.<sup>18</sup>

#### Factual History

Until the cession of Cochin China to France in 1862 and the proclamation of Cochin China as a French colony in 1867, the recorded history of the Khmer in the Republic of Vietnam is essentially that of the Khmer in Cambodia. Early Khmer history is commonly divided into four periods: Funan, from the early first century A.D. to the middle of the sixth century; Chen-La, to 802 A.D.; Kambuja or Angkor, 802-1432; and Transitional Cambodia, 1432-1758.

*The Funan Period: The Contact With India.* The Funanese oc-

\* See "Factual History: The Funan Period," p. 1057.

cupied the lower Mekong region in the first century A.D. together with two other politically independent peoples, the Cham and the Khmer. By the third century, the Funanese had conquered the Cham and the Khmer, and by the end of the fifth century Funan was at the height of its power.

According to two Chinese envoys who visited Funan, an Indian Brahman named Hun Chen conquered the territory held by Queen Willow Leaf (Lieu-ye), married the sovereign, and founded the first Kaundinya dynasty. The last ruler of the dynasty, Pan-Pan, placed the cares of government on his general, Fan-man or Fan Che-man, who, after the king's death, was elected king by the people (c. 200 A.D.). Funan owed its greatness to this king, who established a powerful navy, conquered the adjacent maritime countries, and extended his domain to include Siam, parts of Laos, and the Malay Peninsula.

At the end of the fourth century or beginning of the fifth century, the second and final stage of Indianization began under the rule of a Brahman named Kiao-chen-ju, who had reportedly just arrived from India. He extended and strengthened the worship of the Indian deities (introduced by the earlier Kaundinya), especially the state worship of the Siva-Linga.\* In addition, the laws of Manu (a Brahmanic legal code) and a central Indian alphabet were introduced and enforced at this time.

By the sixth century, the essential elements of Hindu culture were well established in Funan. The three principal religions of India—Sivaism, Vishnuism, and Buddhism—were being practiced in Funan. Indian philosophy, art, language, and literature flourished; even the Indian caste system prevailed.

The chief vassal state of Funan was Chen-La, located in the upper Mekong region. In the middle of the sixth century, Funan became a vassal of Chen-La, and in the seventh century, it was annexed by that country.

*The Chen-La Period: Birth of the Khmer Kingdom.* The 250-year period when Chen-La (Chinese for Kambuja) ruled over Funan †—from 535 to 802 A.D.—was characterized by territorial expansion of the empire (to the boundaries of present-day China), civil strife, and subjection to and later independence from Malay rule.

Chen-La was inhabited by the Khmer people after they migrated from the north, separated from the Mon,‡ and defeated the Cham on the Mekong. From the fusion of Funan and Chen-La was born the

\* The Brahman god Siva, worshipped in the form of a linga, or stylized phallus, representative of the creative energy of the god.

† As the successor of Funan in the genealogy of the Khmer Kingdom.

‡ The Mon settled in the Sittang-Irrawaddy Delta in present Burma and in the Mekong-Menam Delta in Thailand.

Khmer Kingdom. The name Kambuja originated at this time. The legend concerning the river people and the mountain people is partially substantiated by the historical facts of this period. At the beginning of the eighth century, following a series of civil wars in the delta region. Chen-La split into two parts, referred to by the Chinese as Water Chen-La and Land Chen-La. Maritime Chen-La formed the center of the future Khmer Empire; upland Chen-La, probably denoting a kingdom in the northern part of Cambodia or Laos, remained separate until the early part of the ninth century. An extensive and powerful state, upland Chen-La maintained diplomatic relations with China and India.

*Kambuja or Angkor Period: Consolidation of the Khmer Empire.* The accession of King Jayavarman II early in the ninth century marked a new era in the history of Kambuja. Jayavarman II revived the tradition of Kambuja by claiming descent from Kambu rather than from Kaundinya, the ancestor of the Funanese kings. He began the task (continued by Jayavarman III and Indravarman) of reuniting the empire, which comprised a series of principalities. In this period of consolidation—802 to 1432—the Khmer Kingdom included all of central Indochina and extended to Yunnan in southern China. Jayavarman II is also credited with initiating a massive construction program which reached its climax in the 12th and 13th centuries, when Kambuja replaced Funan as a center for the proliferation of Hindu culture into the rest of Southeast Asia.

Under Indravarman and his seven successors, a period of a century and a quarter (877–1001), the consolidation of the Khmer Empire was completed. Kambuja maintained suzerainty over all of Laos, Siam, the Menam Valley, and the northern part of the Malay Peninsula. Foundation of the Angkor civilization occurred in this period.

The next two centuries were characterized by internal rebellion and recurring hostilities with the neighboring kingdoms of Champa and Annam. In 1177, the Cham sent a naval expedition up the Mekong River, sacked the Kambuja capital of Angkor, and returned home laden with booty.

In 1190, Jayavarman VII conquered and annexed the Champa Kingdom. Under this last great king of Kambuja, the Khmer Kingdom reached its greatest territorial limits, including all of Southeast Asia, with the exception of Upper Burma, Tonkin, and the southern part of the Malay Peninsula.

With the death of Jayavarman VII the disintegration of the Khmer Empire began, brought on by the country's impoverishment and exhaustion resulting from the long war with the Annamese and the Cham and the increasing pressure of Thai invasions. Finally, in 1430–31, after a series of Thai-Khmer wars, assisted by treach-

ery within the Khmer capital, the Thai seized Angkor and precipitated the downfall of the Khmer Empire. Although the Khmer later recaptured Angkor, they abandoned it as a capital because of the change in state religion from Brahmanism to Theravada Buddhism and because of the enormous cost of maintaining temples no longer essential to the life of the people.

*Transitional Cambodia: 1432-1758.* During this transitional period, the Khmer continued to resist the aggression of their neighbors. Thailand and Annam each seized territory and vied for suzerainty over the Khmer for the next 260 years. Thailand gained land in the north and west; Annam won land in the east. The latter region, seized in the early part of the 18th century, was the domain of the Khmer of Cochin China, now the southern part of the Republic of Vietnam.

Weak kings governed Thailand and the Khmer in Cambodia in the 17th century, while the powerful Nguyen rulers of southern Annam were appropriating the Donnai-Mekong Delta. The Anamese established prosperous settlements in Cochin China, and the Khmer had to recognize Anamese titles to the land and pay tribute to Annam. Anamese seizure of the most fertile land resulted in widespread poverty. By the end of the 17th century, the Anamese had absorbed all the lower delta east of the Mekong and organized it into administrative units. The year 1758 marked the completion of Anamese expansion, occupation and fortification of the delta, and the end of Khmer domination of Cochin China.<sup>19</sup>

Since 1758, the Khmer of Cochin China have been a minority group. During the French occupation (1862-1954), the Khmer, as members of the rural populace, had to shoulder the economic burdens created by the ambitious public works programs of the French.

#### Settlement Patterns

Whereas the Vietnamese live clustered in cohesive village units, the Khmer do not appear to prefer any one type of settlement pattern and generally live isolated in small groups amid groves of coconut palms. The nature of the terrain seems to dictate the physical pattern of Khmer settlements; along the Mekong, for example, the houses are pressed closely together and line the river banks.

The term village does not apply to the Khmer settlements, where houses are either isolated one from another or are gathered haphazardly into groups of two or three houses. In the latter type of settlement, one house belongs to the father, the others to the married daughters. When the number of sons-in-law reaches three or four, the settlement is called a phum. Communal life is notably absent from the phum where no common house exists, and the temple serves as the only meeting place. The existence of a phum does not presuppose the presence of a temple; some have none, others

have one, two, or three. Larger Khmer settlements, numbering 20 to 100 houses, more rarely 200 to 300, have also been reported.<sup>20</sup>

Khmer houses or *pteah* are of several types: wood with tile roofs, *pailote* (palm leaves), or woven bamboo with either a *pailote* or thatched roof. Pilings of wood, generally of *sokram* (*Xylea* species) or of *pchek* (*Shorea* species), measuring from 2.5 to 3 meters in height, support the house.\* Pilings provide such obvious advantages as protection from floods, from animals both large and small—boars and tigers and rats—as well as, so the Khmer believe, from invisible spirits living on or under the earth. In addition, according to one source, the Khmer preference for the pile-type dwelling is characteristic in areas where wood is plentiful.<sup>22</sup> †

Entrance to the house is by way of a ladder which has an uneven number of rungs and which emerges onto a veranda decorated with flowerpots. Traditionally, for religious reasons, the rectangular-shaped house was always oriented toward the east, and the entrance was on a short side. However, this tradition is apparently dying out; houses are not always oriented to the east and the entrance is occasionally on a long side. Houses of poor Khmer consist of only one room; houses of the well-to-do may be divided into two buildings. The interior arrangement sometimes varies, but usually includes a reception room in front and two compartments on the sides, each divided by partitions of wood or sugar palm leaves into smaller rooms for the family members. The kitchen is located either on the veranda or in a separate shed connected to the rear of the main building by stairs or a passageway. The family's cart, loom, pirogue, and tools are stored beneath the house. The thatch or sugar palm roof is very steep at the top and levels off to cover the veranda.<sup>23</sup>

The temple compound is located close to the houses and near a grove and a pond. Buildings of two categories are contained within the compound; the first includes small huts, usually on piles, reserved for the monks and novices; the other category comprises buildings open to laymen, includes the temple proper (*vihia*), various *sala* (structures with roofs but no side panels) reserved for the activities of the community, such as instruction and reception of guests. The compound also includes some tomb monuments called *stupa* or *chetdey* (literally: tomb that has life in it), shrines dedicated to the *neak taa* (local spirits), ‡ residences for the aged (in larger monasteries), and a huge wooden drum with a buffalo skin head for calling the monks to the services of the day.<sup>24</sup>

\* According to a returnee, Khmer exposure to Vietnamese influence has resulted in their adoption, in some areas, of houses built directly on the ground rather than on piles.<sup>21</sup>

† Similarly, the Vietnamese and Chinese have, by tradition, built houses directly on the ground, a practice which originated in the steppes of northern China, a region devoid of trees.

‡ Literally: "the spirits of those who have been dead for a long time."

The temples, closely resembling those of Cambodia, consist of a large wooden building raised on a platform, surrounded by a gallery, and surmounted by several roofs. Beneath the elegant cornice, which prolongs the angles of the pinnacles, sculptured wooden gables, either gilded or painted, enclose subjects drawn from Brahmanic iconography rather than from the legend of Buddha. Often visible on the roofs of the temples are motifs of Chinese origin, reminders that the Khmer of the Republic of Vietnam are a marginal group exposed to the artistic influence of neighboring peoples.

The interiors of Khmer temples are soberly decorated compared with the luxurious temples of the Chinese and the Vietnamese. Mats spread on the floor are used by the monks during their prayers. On the main altar rests a large statue of Buddha, often surrounded by other statues or figurines.

The altar murals recount the life of Buddha, especially stories called *jataka*, which relate episodes of Buddha's life after his death and before he entered Nirvana. Also illustrated are episodes of the *Ramayana*, an epic poem written by the Indian poet Valmiki. Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, is one of the incarnations of the Brahman god, Vishnu, who has provided a source of inspiration for much of Khmer art. The legend of Indra<sup>25</sup> may also be depicted in altar murals. In its tolerance of other religions, Theravada Buddhism has preserved the Hindu gods, making of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Yama, and Indra figures of worship and defenders of Buddhism. Brahma and Buddha are frequently confused in artistic representation, for example, in temples and statues. Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva share the three forces of the universe: creation, preservation, and destruction. Indra, known by his green face, rules over heaven, and Yama, over hell.

## SECTION III

### INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

#### Physical Characteristics

The Khmer are a heterogeneous people with characteristics derived from several racial types. Taller than the Vietnamese, the average height of a Khmer male is about 5 feet 5 inches. Chests and thighs are muscular and make the Khmer appear more robust than the Vietnamese; they have slightly receding foreheads, prominent cheekbones, and short chins. Khmer noses are generally large, straight, fairly wide, and slightly upturned at the end. Their dark brown eyes are normally straight; slanted eyes may also occur, but a true Mongolian fold is usually absent. The mouth is large, with full, incisively modeled lips. The Khmer have black, wavy or curly hair. The men wear their hair closely cropped; the young women wear their hair long, but married women and old women sometimes shave their heads.<sup>1</sup>

#### Health

A survey in mid-1962 showed that health and sanitary conditions in the Republic of Vietnam were deemed grave enough to constitute serious social problems.<sup>2</sup> The conclusions drawn from this study doubtless apply to the Mekong Delta regions inhabited by the Khmer. In these areas, health conditions are closely related to the question of water supplies. Malaria-bearing mosquitoes breed in the water and water-borne diseases frequently reach epidemic proportions. Control of these diseases is hampered by the use of irrigation ditches for drinking purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The Khmer have no bathhouses, but each family, or possibly two or three families, owns a pool of water for bathing. They bathe several times a day and wash their clothes almost daily. Bathing serves as a social occasion; men and women of the same age bathe together. When older people are bathing, the young Khmer stay away and vice versa. Once or twice a week the women, in groups of three or five, go outside the village to bathe in the river.<sup>4</sup> If they have engaged in hard work, the Khmer wash themselves entirely before eating; after the meal, they wash their hands again.<sup>5</sup> In the morning and after the evening meal they clean their teeth, using the index finger and no toothpaste.<sup>6</sup>

The Khmer housewife presumably lays great stress on the cleanliness and upkeep of her home. Traditionally, the Khmer girl owes her good fortune in life to the maintenance of her kitchen; when her kitchen is neat and clean, it is thought she will make a good wife. Before proposing marriage to a particular girl, the young Khmer man reportedly visits the girl's kitchen for assurance that he will have a well kept home.<sup>7</sup>

The Buddhist monks, whose living habits are considered exemplary, are also required to clean and straighten up their individual quarters, to sweep, and to maintain the temple every day. They must bathe daily; they must wash their mouths and brush their teeth thoroughly after eating, to eliminate any trace of food.<sup>8</sup> These customs are practiced primarily for religious reasons, but they may also involve personal hygiene considerations.

Problems of sanitation among the Khmer are compounded by the Buddhist taboos against killing. Disease-bearing flies, mosquitoes, lice, and rats cannot be harmed with impunity. The monk, particularly bound by this rule, may not work in the fields for fear of accidentally killing a worm or an insect.<sup>9</sup>

Several types of diseases afflict the people living in the Mekong Delta; many diseases are spread by flies, water, food, and filth. The housefly, most prevalent during the rainy season, helps spread yaws, trachoma, and skin infections. Water used for cooking and drinking is drawn from the rivers, canals, and pools which are also used for bathing, laundering, and watering animals. This water often carries amoebic and bacillary dysentery and typhoid fever. Intestinal parasites, such as hookworm, are contracted from inadequately refrigerated or insufficiently cooked food, or by working barefoot in the flooded rice paddies.<sup>10</sup> Nutritional diseases, particularly goiter, resulting from iodine deficiency, are evident in the delta, especially in the Can Tho and Khanh Hung areas.<sup>11</sup>

Other diseases prevalent among the Khmer are malaria, leprosy, and tuberculosis. The incidence of malaria is lower in the delta than in the Central Highlands, largely because the species of mosquito prevalent in the former prefers animal to human blood; but malaria still poses a threat, particularly after the rainy season.<sup>12</sup> Leprosy is quite extensive; the cases in isolation are believed to represent only a fraction of those afflicted. Tuberculosis, passed from person to person, is abetted by malnutrition and, in the towns, by overcrowded living conditions.<sup>13</sup>

Illness among the Khmer has two aspects: first, the recognition that certain ailments stem from physical disorders which can be treated by modern or folk medicines; and second, the belief that some diseases may in addition have "moral" or "spiritual" causes due either to the patient's having offended a spirit or having been

less devout than required. The latter type of illness is cured by offerings made to the spirits and/or to Buddha. Diseases are thus treated according to both traditional and modern medical practices.<sup>14</sup> Belief in the power of sorcerers is widespread; any person in the community is considered capable of causing illness or death by possessing any object, or merely the name, of the victim. Preventive medicine involves wearing amulets and making sacrifices to shield the body from the penetration of evil spirits. Benevolent spirits who are very sensitive and powerful must also be propitiated, for when offended they may also inflict punishment in the form of disease.<sup>15</sup>

Departure of a spirit from the body can only be induced by sorcerers—called *kru* or *kruv*—and monks reciting incantations and conducting rites. Traditional therapy employed by the monks is varied and includes such remedies as herb teas, oils, and potions made from excrement (said to combine symbolic, magical, and medicinal properties).<sup>16</sup>

Rice forms the staple of the Khmer diet. In some areas of the delta where the use of polished rice is prevalent, dietary deficiencies rank as an important health problem. When rice is milled by modern mechanical means, the outer layers and the germ containing the protein and vitamins are removed; after this process, little nutriment other than starch remains. When vitamin B<sub>1</sub> is removed and the diet consist mainly of starch, such diseases as beriberi may develop. Some Khmer in the rural areas, however, still husk and pound their own rice by hand, thus retaining most of the food values.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Manual Dexterity**

Excellent artisans, the Khmer are capable of making chased weapons and jewels; the women weave and dye their own cloth. They make all their kitchen utensils, tools, carts, pirogues, and most of their own clothing. Despite this artistic skill, the individual Khmer is usually reluctant to make items not designated for his own personal use.\*<sup>18</sup>

The Khmer are excellent boatmen and are adept at handling a craft even in dangerous rapids.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Psychological Characteristics**

A knowledge of Theravada Buddhism and the Theravada conception of life facilitates an understanding of the Khmer psychology.<sup>†</sup> According to Buddhist doctrine, a person passes through many lives, and what one accomplishes in one life determines the nature of the following life. This view of life is paradoxical: on

\* See "Social Structure," p. 1068.

† See "Religion," p. 1089.

the one hand the Khmer are fatalistic; on the other hand, they believe that everything has a moral foundation. On occasion the Khmer ignore the future and abandon themselves to their immediate concerns. This improvident side of their character explains their ability to dissipate a year's earnings in one night of gaming.<sup>20</sup> Yet they believe that by leading their present lives virtuously, though they may not reach Nirvana, they can assure themselves of a better life in the next world. However, the Khmer consider the European way of life inconsistent, appearing to operate by a double standard. A man, they feel, cannot be moral in public office and immoral as a private individual.<sup>21</sup>

The gentle, optimistic, joyous nature of the Khmer is reflected in their generally smiling countenances. They are tolerant and long-suffering, either through good nature or apathy. But when goaded beyond endurance, outbursts of anger are terrible though short-lived. The women sometimes engage in violent quarrels in which they scratch, bite, pull each other's hair, and throw one another into the water; a few minutes later they are the best of friends, laughing and chatting together as though nothing had happened.<sup>22</sup>

The Khmer are passive and peace-loving and appear to be unambitious. As long as they can cultivate enough food for daily needs, they are usually content to leave commercial profit and economic control of the country to the Vietnamese and Chinese.<sup>23</sup> With a great sense of independence, the Khmer seldom feel bound by secular contracts. For this reason, it is difficult to find and keep Khmer laborers; they are easily diverted from their work and feel free to leave their jobs after earning enough to fill their immediate requirements.<sup>24</sup>

The nuclear family, or at most the phum, forms the basic unit of the Khmer social structure and defines the limits of the average Khmer's horizon. Anything beyond this group usually fails to arouse the Khmer's curiosity. Itinerant traders form the sole link with the outside world.<sup>25</sup> Each member of the nuclear family expects to assist the others in time of trouble, to share income and produce, and to cooperate in agricultural and domestic work. The individual retains his identity within the nuclear family by bearing only a given name, with no surname. When several related nuclear families must share a house because of low income, each nuclear family maintains its individuality by keeping its finances separate or by living in a separate part of the house.<sup>26</sup>

The Khmer are naturally hospitable, although unpleasant experiences with strangers have made them suspicious of outsiders. Once the stranger has gained the confidence of the people, he is

treated as graciously as the family means will allow.<sup>27</sup> If he trusts someone, the Khmer will outdo himself in personal devotion and loyalty.