

VIETNAM CULTURE SERIES NO. 4

VIETNAM - POL. & GOVT.

**DEMOCRACY**  
**IN TRADITIONAL**  
**VIETNAMESE SOCIETY**

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL EDUCATION  
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM  
SAIGON 1960

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by  
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# DEMOCRACY

## IN TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

In the present crisis of modern democracy, it is interesting to look back to the political and social institutions of the countries which have recently gained independence.

There is indeed in all Asian countries in general, and in Vietnam in particular, an essentially democratic institution, namely the village or commune, which has persisted as the elementary social cell through all historical vicissitudes. We call democracy a system of government which comes from the people, serves the people's interest and in which power is held by the people. Then the village or commune, like the one existing in old Vietnam, is really a democracy of a particular type. It is most remarkable that this primary democracy which sprang up spontaneously and was autonomous had adapted itself to the extremely centralized system of the oriental absolute monarchies. Therefore, the Vietnamese nation was like a federation composed of numerous and small communal states in a super-state, as shown in the chart attached. From the Chart we can see that the social and political organization of Vietnam consisted of two opposing and superimposed systems. At the bottom there was a popular, autonomous and representative democracy ;

at the top was the absolute monarchy which was highly centralized thanks to its mandarin system. These two institutions which were fundamentally different co-existed for centuries through all the historical changes, in time of peace and national prosperity as well as in time of internal confusion and threats from outside.

To give some idea of the immanent principle which maintains the internal balance of this social structure, and its cohesive force, let us examine the organization of one of these typical villages.

A village was constituted by a group of patriarchal families whose members shared the same family name. This agnatic family which was similar to the Roman family was an organization based on kinship ties in which the father was both the religious chief and the head of the family. It was both an economic and religious community since all property was entrusted to the father during his lifetime and all members practiced ancestor worship. Thanks to the cult of the ancestors, the ties of kinship have persisted and the great patriarchal family has long resisted the desegration resulting from modern industrial life which tends to favor individualism. The Vietnamese family was based on the principle of unity of the *pater familias* authority and was strongly constituted due to the necessity of perpetuating the cult of ancestors ; it never admitted the instrument of the public powers and constituted a homogeneous unit in which the father of the family performed the role of a Chief, a priest and a magistrate. As the saying goes « The threads binding a book must be preserved, even if its leaves are torn up », which means that a line of descendants must preserve the customs of their ancestors. In short, the strength of the family lay in its unity, its independence from the public powers as well as the dependence of all its members on its chief.

The family was therefore the fundamental cell of the old Vietnamese society. It is most likely that, at the beginning, a number of families grouped themselves in order to protect themselves against incursion of pirates and to clear and cultivate the marshlands of the delta. As their collective life developed, these spontaneous groups whose relationship was based on their economic activities had to get organized administratively with a view to receiving from the central authorities their consecration as an autonomous social cell. Later on, after the establishment of the monarchy and its mandarin system patterned on that of China which had long ruled our country, the State never ceased to promote the establishment of communes for the colonization of the country and its expansion towards the South of the Indochinese peninsula. In a decree of the Emperor Minh-Mang of 1830 one can read « Wherever there are fallow lands, anybody has the right to cultivate them: He who succeeds in cultivating 20 « measures » of ricefields and recruiting 10 men can submit an application for the establishment of a new commune, and the Chief of his administrative district will forward it to the Ministry for approval ».

In any commune, all the inhabitants were equal. This was the fundamental principle of its organization, and it was difficult to classify the people without hurting their feelings. It is, however, necessary to distinguish between the group of individuals living in the village and the organized group in power representing the general interests of the collectivity. There were the notables or administrators and the administered or common people. The notables were elected and all the inhabitants were eligible provided they met the traditional requirements: respectability, age, education, registration on the roll of the commune.

The whole group of notables constituted the communal assembly, and the greatest ambition for the inhabitants of the commune was to hold a high position at the commune hall, to be member of the Council of Notables and to participate in the public festivities. The Commune was administered by this council which was composed of senior notables responsible for the supervision of the public affairs and the junior notables responsible for carrying them out.

The first notable of the village was the Chairman of the Commune Council. He was generally an honorable old scholar, in charge of the ritual ceremonies. He was the referee, the Justice of Peace and had charge of the private budget of the commune. This budget showing the distribution of expenditures and privileges among all the inhabitants of the commune was carefully kept away from the central authorities. Taxes levied by the central administration were divided among all the inhabitants. The properties of the commune which consisted of the inalienable common land were also divided among all. In addition to general expenditures due to the central administration there were expenses entailed by works for the community, individual contributions to the village ceremonies, the share deducted from agricultural produce for the executive agent of the commune. There were also the lots of common lands granted to families having members serving in the army and the share reserved for old people who could no longer work and for needy families. One can then say that unemployment and begging did not exist in old Vietnam since each village had to provide for all its inhabitants. All the members of the commune were placed under the supervision of the Council of Notables which was not only responsible for the good management of the public affairs, but also exercised a kind of general tutelage over the young people, the widows and the crippled, and by

doing so, preserved order and morality behind the bamboo curtain. Relations with the central administration were carried on by the Village Chief (Lý-Trưởng) who was, in fact, only a minor notable in the commune. He was the official agent between the central administration and the autonomous community. He was elected by the Council of Notables and his election was submitted to the approval of the mandarin. He was charged with transmitting all the requests from the commune to the central authorities and transmitting orders from the central authorities to the commune. He was held responsible if these orders were not carried out. He was in charge of the police and had to inform the higher authorities of the offenses perpetrated in his village. He was also responsible for collecting and paying the taxes owed by the village community.

Several communes joined to form a canton. Each canton was headed by a Canton Chief elected by the notables of the communes and approved by the provincial representative of the central power. The canton chief, representing the population had, like the village chief, the charge of defending the interests of the canton before the central administration and of ensuring that the administrative orders were carried out. He was also the natural referee in those affairs of common law which the family chiefs or village chiefs could not solve. He was a referee who judged according to the local customs to which as the saying goes, the royal decrees must yield.

The political freedom of the people did not go beyond the canton in the old Vietnamese society.

The village or commune was thus the real political, economic and social cell of the society. This was also a religious cell. As each family had its altars devoted to the cult of ancestors, each village had its Đình

or temple for the worship of a tutelar god which was the very impersonation of Earth as shown in the Chinese name of « Village » (composed of *god* and *earth*).

This cult constituted the official religion of the villagers  
A proverb says :

« Each village had its own tutelar god as each river has its own ». This cult of personified natural forces created among the inhabitants of the same village a powerful solidarity which was yet strengthened by the cult of ancestors in the family. In all times, the Vietnamese peasants have been attached to their native land by a magic power.

A Western observer has noted rightly that « the commune presents a particularly interesting mechanism and one can understand that such a complex and democratic organization, having been in existence since time immemorial and in which a notable can never act alone, must not be changed, otherwise the country might fall into confusion. The instrument is old but it is good ; it suits the people ».

At the present time when throughout the world, the individualistic democracy born of free industrial competition is regressing, it is interesting to study this democratic communal organization based essentially on the peasant community, which has drawn its vitality from a spiritualist socialism.



A.— AUTHORITATIVE MONARCHIC SYSTEM

Administrative Division	AUTHORITIES		WORSHIP, ALTAR	Master of Ceremonies		
<p>The nation The capital</p>	<p>The Sovereign The Court, the government The four great ministries The Privy Council The Chancery The Ministry of the Royal family Are appointed by the king</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="234 694 534 1010"> <tr> <td data-bbox="234 694 384 1010"> <p>Civil mandarins 9 degrees 6 ministries 1 Office of Annals 1 Academy 1 Imperial College</p> </td> <td data-bbox="384 694 534 1010"> <p>Military mandarins 9 degrees 5 generals</p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p>Civil mandarins 9 degrees 6 ministries 1 Office of Annals 1 Academy 1 Imperial College</p>	<p>Military mandarins 9 degrees 5 generals</p>	<p>Cult of Nature Altar of Spring Altar of Heaven and Earth Altar of Mountains and Rivers Cult of the genie Altar of the genie of Frontiers Altar of Agriculture Pantheon Protecting genie of the State Cult of Confucius Temple of Literature Temple of War Temple of Medicine Cult of the Wandering souls Altar of the Wandering souls.</p>	<p>The Emperor</p>
<p>Civil mandarins 9 degrees 6 ministries 1 Office of Annals 1 Academy 1 Imperial College</p>	<p>Military mandarins 9 degrees 5 generals</p>					
<p>Province</p>	<p>1 Governor 1 Administrator 1 Judge</p>	<p>1 general 1 colonel 1 major</p>	<p>Altar of Spring Altar of the genie of Frontiers Altar of Agriculture Pantheon Temple of the Protecting Genie Temple of Literature Temple of War Altar of the Wandering souls</p>	<p>The Governor of the province</p>		
<p>District</p>	<p>1 Prefect 1 Teacher</p>	<p>Captain Lieutenant Sergeant</p>	<p>Altar of Literature</p>	<p>Prefect Sub-prefect</p>		

B.— DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

Administrative Unit	AUTHORITIES		CULT, ALTAR	Master of Ceremonies
Canton	<p>The Body of Notables is elected by the inhabitants</p> <p>Canton-Chief Deputy Canton Chief Administrative Clerk</p>		<p>Head of militia His assistant</p> <p>Altar of Literature</p>	<p>Canton Chief</p>
Village of Commune	<p>Notables — First notable — Teacher elected by the notables — Assistant to Village Chief — 1 Clerk</p>		<p>Head of militia and of village police</p> <p>Altar of the Tutelar God The village pagoda Altar of Agriculture Altar of the Wandering souls</p>	<p>The village Chief</p>
Hamlet	<p>— Notables of the hamlet — Assistant to Hamlet Chief — 1 Clerk</p>			<p>Assistant to the Hamlet Chief</p>

C.— FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

Family	Eldest Brother		Altar of the Ancestors	Head of the family
	Head of the eldest branch	Religious and family Chief	Altar of Household gods	
	Head of Junior branch			