

Some Aspects of Hill Tribe Life in Vietnam

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HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Introduction. From an ethnolinguistic point of view, the Indochinese peninsula is one of the most complex areas of the world. Generally speaking, however, the ethnic groups that occupy the area can be placed in one of two categories: those that live in the lowlands (the plains, valleys, and deltas) and those that occupy the highlands. More than a geographical distinction, the highland-lowland dichotomy plays an important part in contemporary problems of the area. Historically, the location of a given ethnic group has had significance for its development, for the advances of civilization in the Indochinese peninsula have been restricted to the lowlands.

The primary sources of high culture in the Indochinese peninsula have been India and China. As it spread eastward, the great tradition of India molded the civilizations of the Thai, Lao, and Khmer (the predominant ethnic groups of present-day Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) as well as of the Cham. (Although only an estimated 45,000 Cham survive today in central Vietnam, this once-populous group at one time dominated the kingdom of Champa, which declined as a result of wars with the Vietnamese that culminated in its defeat in 1471.) The great tradition of China is represented by the Vietnamese, who were sinicized during the thousand-year period of Chinese rule and who, since the tenth century, have carried this tradition southward in their expansion along the coastal plain to the delta of the Mekong River.

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The highland groups of the Indochinese peninsula, on the other hand, have remained relatively aloof from these great currents of history. This is not to say that they have been completely isolated from outside contact or that their societies have remained unchanged. Many groups have long had contact with their civilized lowland neighbors, who in many instances are related linguistically. Sometimes the contact has been marked by conflict, and sometimes it has been largely symbiotic, resulting in the borrowing of culture traits. Also, since the mid-nineteenth century, a number of groups, particularly those in the southern Vietnamese highlands, have had contact with the French. Essentially, however, the highland people (*montagnard*) have not become part of any of the great traditions that have touched them; they have not been "civilized."

Linguistically, however, there is considerable variation among the hill tribes. The Rhadé and Jarai speak closely related languages that belong to the Malayo-Polynesian stock, which includes Cham; the Mnong, Stieng, Bahnar, and Sedang languages belong to the Mon-Khmer stock, which includes Cambodian. This does not imply formidable linguistic barriers, however, as groups speaking different languages (whether of the same stock or not) but located in contiguous areas are sufficiently familiar with one another's languages to communicate with relative ease.

*A Brief Historical Sketch.*¹ Between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, the highland area of southern Laos and Vietnam is mentioned several times in accounts of the intermittent struggles between the kingdom of Champa (whose capital city of Vijaya was on the coastal plain of what is now central Vietnam) and the Khmer empire (whose capital was at Angkor, near the Tonle Sap in present-day Cambodia). In those struggles the area was a buffer zone, which often passed from the control of one side to that of the other. In times of peace trade between the two kingdoms was carried on over a highland route. Occasionally, highlanders participated in events of the period; in 1149, for example, an army composed of Cham, Vietnamese, and members

¹Except as noted, historical material on the highlanders comes from Bourotte (1955:1-133). This is the major historical source for the highlands of southern Vietnam.

of several highland groups fought an unsuccessful battle against an army of invading Khmer.

The year 1150 marked the beginning of a long period of Cham hegemony over most of the high plateau. This ended in 1471 with the defeat of the Cham by the Vietnamese, who then extended their authority to include some of the areas inland from the coastal plain. The greater part of the high plateau, however, remained ungoverned for several hundred years.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century Lao influence in the highlands as far south as the Boloven Plateau was increasing, and Khmer control extended over most of the Darlac Plateau. Accounts of this period mention the existence of the powerful Jarai sorcerer known as the Sadet of Fire, whom legend claims to be the guardian of the sacred Prah Khan saber of the ancient Khmer (see "The Sadets," below). In 1601 the King of Cambodia, the Sadet of Fire, and another Jarai sorcerer, the Sadet of Water, formed an alliance of friendship in which they pledged themselves to exchange gifts every three years. The exchanges continued until 1890, when Norodom became King of Cambodia, and have become the basis for a claim for "reunification" of the highlands with Cambodia (see below).

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a period of considerable inter-group warfare in the highlands, and new contenders for control of the area appeared. The Vietnamese, in continuing their southward expansion, reached the delta of the Mekong River, and the Nguyen emperors followed the pattern of extending their control to highland areas adjacent to the coastal plain. The Siamese were expanding eastward and, after struggling with the Lao, assumed control over the Boloven Plateau. According to one eighteenth-century account, many of the inter-group wars were concentrated in the Darlac Plateau. There the Jarai were said to be raiding villages of neighboring groups, notably the Bahnar, and carrying off slaves which they sold to the Lao, and the Sedang also were reported as fighting with their neighbors.

The first Westerners reached the highlands in 1843, when Catholic missionaries of the Société de la Mission Etrangère de Paris traveled into the interior from the coastal town of Tourane (now Danang). In 1849 the first mission was established near

present-day Kontum, and by 1851 there were four missionaries (three French and one Vietnamese) working in Bahnar villages. Because of the inter-group warfare of the period, the missionaries encountered great difficulties. The existence of the mission was temporarily threatened in 1862, when an epidemic struck down many of the Bahnar, whose sorcerers blamed the disease on the presence of the foreigners. The Sedang aggravated the situation by attacking Bahnar villages at that moment.

When the French occupied the delta of the Mekong River in 1859, agitation spread to the groups in the adjacent southern highlands. (Some sources contend that much of it was stirred up by the Vietnamese.) The Stieng in the vicinity of Thu Dau Mot revolted against the French, as did the Chrau in the area east of Baria (now called Phuoc Le). In the period that followed, the Siamese, French, English, and Germans were bidding for control of the Mekong River, and the southern Laotian and Vietnamese highlands assumed new importance. To secure their claim on the area, the French organized several exploratory missions, the first of which was the Gautier Mission of 1881. The aim of the exploration was to reach Hue in central Vietnam from the Mekong Delta by following the Donnai River, continuing northward, contacting the Stieng, Mnong, and Bahnar, and ultimately crossing the cordillera to Hue. The mission failed to achieve this end, however, when, upon reaching the confluence of the Donnai and the Da Houe rivers, the guides refused to continue northward. In his account of the expedition Gautier mentions a "king of the mois," Tong Hen, a man of seventy-five who trafficked in slaves and was recognized as a leader by some of the smaller groups.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the Nguyen emperors began sponsoring *don dien*, or military colonies, in the upland areas adjacent to the coastal plain, where members of the army were given land so that they might settle these new territories. In addition to forcing many highlanders to move further inland, the Vietnamese settlers exploited those with whom they came in contact. The *quan truong*, or leader of the settlers, often demanded rhinoceros horns or slaves of the local highlanders, and in 1883 several serious incidents prompted restraining action by the French administrators. (In one instance, a highland

village headman was burned alive, and his wife slain, when he failed to supply the amount of *corvée* labor demanded by Vietnamese settlers.)²

The importance of the Darlac Plateau in the bid for control of the Mekong rose with reports in 1885 that the streams in the Sedang country contained gold and with persistent rumors of other mineral riches in the area. In 1888 the French administration organized an expedition to investigate the Sedang area and placed it under the leadership of Mayrena, a Belgian adventurer. On his arrival in the Sedang country, Mayrena made contact with Pim, a Sedang chief who had gained the support of many villages among the Sedang and Bahnar. Because of Mayrena's impressive appearance and his unusual physical feats, the Sedang leader concluded that he was a man of great *ae* ("mana" or "soul force"; see below, p. 758) and formed an alliance with him. Encouraged by the French missionaries, Mayrena attempted, through the leadership of Pim, to form a federation of ethnic groups in the area. The Jarai tried to resist Sedang hegemony, but without success, and, when several of the groups had bowed to Sedang leadership, Mayrena declared the area to be autonomous and named himself its ruler, "Marie I, King of the Sedang." He then sent notice of this new development to the French authorities and also asked their permission to transport minerals and other produce to the coastal towns for shipping. Should the French refuse, he added, he was willing to negotiate with the English, Germans, or Siamese. The affair was short-lived, however. When Mayrena went to Belgium in 1889, the French denied him permission to return to Indochina (Bourotte 1955; Dossier Mayrena).

In 1890-1891, a French exploratory expedition known as the Pavie Mission secured the rights of the French in Laos, expelling the Siamese from the highland towns they occupied east of the Mekong River. Accompanied by a band of Cambodians, Captain Cupet, a member of the Pavie Mission, traveled from Kratié in Cambodia to the highland towns of Ban Don and Kontum. The group encountered great difficulties, some of which had been provoked by a rumor among the Jarai that Cupet was responsible

² Vietnamese attempts to settle in the highlands and consequent problems for the hill tribes have continued up to the present day.

for suppressing the Cambodian king's gifts to the Sadet of Fire. Cupet, however, succeeded in impressing the Jarai (his compass was of particular interest to them), and they agreed to take him to the Sadet of Fire, who welcomed him cordially. Cupet noted in his account of the visit that the Sadet's followers seemed to pay him little deference. He also met the Sadet of Water and, although he had no gifts to offer the sorcerer, was able to form an alliance with him.

In 1900 there emerged another "king of the mois," Le Vo Tru. (Although the reports are not specific on this point, the name would indicate that he was either a Vietnamese or an acculturated highlander.) With a following of around nine hundred highlanders, Le Vo Tru raided the central coastal town of Song Cau, killing the French resident, his wife, and their guards. He and his band then assumed control of the area, until the Garde Indochinoise Provinciale arrived, captured the leader, and thus ended the venture.

During the first years of the twentieth century there was a marked increase in attacks on French military and missionaries throughout the highlands. In an attempt to restore order and gain the highlanders' support of the French, Odend'hal, a high French administrator, accompanied by a small unarmed band of Vietnamese (Odend'hal explicitly refused an armed escort), journeyed into the Jarai area. There he was welcomed by the Sadet of Fire, and the two men agreed to form an alliance. After they had shared a chicken, the Sadet prepared a special jar containing prescribed ingredients for a blood oath, and the Sadet drank from the jar. But Odend'hal refused, saying that he only drank water, apparently unaware of the import of such a refusal. The Sadet became angry and suspicious, and Odend'hal aggravated this by asking to be shown the sacred saber. Several days later a band of Jarai warriors slew the Frenchman and his assistants and burned their bodies.

In 1905 Darlac Province was shifted from Laos to Vietnam and a French Resident appointed. This increased French control and, according to Bourotte, diminished the power of the Sadets of Fire. Another "king of the mois" appeared during that year. He was Me Sao, of a poor Rhadé family that had known slavery. Me Sao and a small band of followers established themselves

in the heights between M'drac and Ban Me Thuot and conducted raids on villages of the area to capture slaves whom they then sold. The mandarins of Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa were reported to have aided Me Sao in his activities and shared in the profits. As more and more villages fell under his control, Me Sao became bolder, until finally the Resident of Darlac dispatched troops to the area. Me Sao was turned over to the troops by his own followers, and he later died in prison.

The situation in Darlac Province improved considerably during the tenure of Sabatier, who was the Resident in the first quarter of the twentieth century. This energetic and intelligent administrator launched public works projects, improved the administrative services, and conducted systematic research on the ethnic groups of the province. Assisted by the able administrator Antomarchi, Sabatier founded a school system for highlanders as well as a medical service. The growing reputation of Darlac as an area of rich and fertile soil caused a land rush in 1925, and, within a period of a few months, over one hundred bids for land totaling 92,000 hectares were filed with the colonial administration in Saigon. Bidders were either individual planters or representatives of large French corporations interested in establishing extensive tea, coffee, or rubber estates in the area.*

To meet the demands of this new situation, the French administration undertook a study of the land question in the highlands, and in 1927 Sabatier issued two comprehensive reports, the first concerned largely with the land-tenure question and the second with recommendations for coping with the problems involved in developing the area.

The first report pointed out that, while some land was unclaimed, there were large areas carefully apportioned by individuals, families, clans, or villages. It emphasized also that land-tenure systems varied from one ethnic group to another. Specific information was given on the land system of the Rhadé, wherein, by the matrilineal rules of succession, rights to a given territory were vested in *po lan* (female proprietors), who held title for

* See "Documents de Colonisation Française en Territoires Non Soumis à la Jurisdiction et à l'Administration Annamites," Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, 1927 (manuscript in two parts). These are the reports prepared by Sabatier concerning the land-tenure situation in the southern highlands. They also contain recommendations for granting titles or leases to colonists.

their kin group. The limits of the territory were clearly defined, and the *po lan* was obliged by tradition to walk its boundaries periodically. She also was responsible for regulating swidden agriculture in the territory and prescribing punishments for offenses (including incest) committed within its limits (see Sabatier 1940).

The second report contained extensive recommendations for land settlement procedure. In essence, land unclaimed (*res nullius*) would be immediately available for colonization with the approval of the colonial administration, and title to the land could be granted. With land claimed by the highlanders, however, a colonist could only receive a *bail emphytéotique*, or ninety-nine year lease. In addition to the approval of the colonial administration, the bidder for a given piece of land would also need the approval of the highlander (or group of highlanders) claiming title to the land. For example, in parts of the Rhadé country it would be essential to have the accord of the *po lan* and headmen of villages within the territory concerned.

In addition, the report covered such topics as labor for the proposed estates. It strongly suggested keeping Vietnamese labor out of the highlands, pointing out that contact with the Vietnamese and Cham had always been deleterious for the highland people.

In addition to formulating the land policy in the highlands, the French extended to the entire area the administrative system established at the end of the nineteenth century for those portions then under their control. The largest administrative units were the provinces, and these were divided into districts, some of which were further divided into cantons. The villages were the smallest administrative units, and they retained their traditional leadership. Eventually, the whole highland area, designated as the Pays Montagnard du Sud (and usually referred to as the PMS), became a Crown Domaine (*Domaine de la Couronne*) directly under the control of the emperor.

Although the Rhadé cooperated substantially with the French administrators, other highland groups continued to resist their authority. In 1931 Gatille, chief of Snoul District, was killed by a group of Mnong while inspecting the construction of a new road designed to traverse the southern portion of the highlands.

Two years later Morere, the marshal of the local gendarmerie, was slain in the vicinity of Nui Bara. In 1934 and again in 1935 Camp Rolland, one of the most important military posts in the southern highland area, was attacked by a combined force of Muong and Stieng.

Between 1935 and 1938 there was also considerable agitation among highland groups further north, in the Pleiku and Kontum areas. Among the Bahnar and Sedang there is belief in *ya*—the incarnations of powerful spirits in human form—and in 1935 a rumor spread that a *ya* had appeared in Phu Yen. It was said to be the child of a man named Ma Wih and a python, and was believed to be the incarnation of Set, bearded son of Kok Glaih, the Spirit of Thunder. Among the Bahnar, Sedang, and Jarai the news caused a great stir; it was interpreted as a sign that the promised "age of gold" had come. Pilgrims began flocking to the house of Ma Wih bearing offerings, for which Ma Wih gave them small bottles of "magic" water as a powerful talisman. The Sedang openly expressed their opposition to the French administration and attacked French outposts. The Jarai abandoned their fields, in the belief that in this new age they would be provided for without having to work. The administration finally stepped in and arrested Ma Wih. Before the tribunal Ma Wih argued that he had committed no crime; he simply had given water to the curiosity-seekers to satisfy them so that they would leave him alone. The trouble, he contended, was caused by the Spirit of the Forest. Ma Wih was released, and the agitation subsided.

The take-over by the Japanese on March 9, 1945, ushered in a new period of trouble for the highlanders and of loss of prestige for the French. Some highlanders aided the Japanese, while others fought them. When the French regained control at the end of 1945, the Viet Minh were operating in the Darlac Plateau and encouraging the highlanders to "fight the colonialist oppressors." In the years following, highlanders fought both on the side of the Viet Minh and on that of the French. With the Geneva Agreements of 1954 most of the southern highlands came under the control of the government of South Vietnam. A large number (the exact figure never was reported) of highlanders who had fought with the Viet Minh went to North Vietnam.

With the passing of the southern highlands to the Vietnamese, the PMS as an administrative unit was abolished, and the provincial administrations became directly responsible to the government in Saigon. Tribal hamlets were arbitrarily consolidated into villages for administrative purposes. Village chiefs were appointed by the district chiefs, subject to approval by the province chief.

Highland agents trained in North Vietnam manifestly began infiltrating the area in 1957, at a time when thousands of Vietnamese refugees from North Vietnam were being resettled in the highlands. By 1960 there were reported to be 51,695 Vietnamese settled on 21,186 hectares of land, most of it in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku. The highlanders have also been subject to forced resettlement programs. By 1963 three large regroupment centers were functioning for the highlanders. Since 1960 the highlands have again become a buffer zone, this time in the struggle between the Viet Cong and the government of the Republic of South Vietnam (Birou (1963:1-12; Hickey, 1956-1958).

Cultural Background: Economic Activities. Although there are many details of differences between the various highland groups, a number of similarities between them can be mentioned. Among the highlanders, the village is the most important economic unit. Whatever is needed by the people is produced in the village, and whatever is produced is consumed by village residents. All highland groups practice swidden agriculture (see below, pp. 765 ff.).⁴ Upland or dry rice is the staple crop, but all the groups cultivate numerous secondary crops in the swidden after the harvest and in kitchen gardens within the village.⁵

They also raise chickens, pigs, buffaloes, and goats, and both hunting and fishing are activities essential to the sustenance of the group.

⁴Swidden agriculture often is referred to as "slash-and-burn" or "shifting" agriculture. In both French and Vietnamese literature it is called *ray*.

⁵More recently, some groups, notably the Rhad6 and Sedang, have begun cultivating coffee plants in small estates, sometimes an individual effort, sometimes a group effort. See Dam Bo (Jacques Dournes) (1950:931-1208), the general source for most of the highland groups of South Vietnam. Feeling that the highland groups are too similar in their way of life to be separated, Dournes refers to them generically as "Pemsiens" (taken from the initials PMS, for Pays Montagnard du Sud).

Socio-Political Organizations. Politically, too, the village is the most important unit. Although the highland groups often are referred to as tribes, they have no tribal organization. Indeed, prior to the establishment of the French administration at the end of the nineteenth century, there was no political superstructure or recognized permanent leadership beyond the village. The present Vietnamese administrative system, similar in structure to the French, provides the only large-scale political organization in the highlands. Among the Bahnar, there are *toring*, or defined territories, collectively claimed by the villages within them, but these associations are designed to safeguard the villages' hunting, fishing, and farming rights, rather than to provide a political bond (Guilleminet 1949:383-384).

In the past there have been individual leaders who for a time gained political ascendancy over groups of villages, whole ethnic groups, and in some cases several groups, but the unions they achieved were short-lived. Notable among these leaders were some of the Sadets of Fire, powerful sorcerers who exercised considerable political influence among the Jarai and neighboring groups (see "A Brief Historical Sketch," above).

Normally, however, the highlanders' political activities are restricted to the village. The village political organizations of the various groups are quite similar, with political authority in the hands of the males. This authority is not diminished by the fact that the Rhadé, Jarai, and Mnong have matrilineal kinship systems, in which descent is in the female line, and the women own the houses, domestic animals, produce from farming, and gongs and jars (both prestige items) and also hold title to land (Hickey 1956-1958). Every village has a council of elder males, usually drawn from the household heads, and from among these elders the village headman is selected either by the council or by a consensus of adult villagers. Administration of the village, protection of the inhabitants, and organization of village rituals are the traditional responsibilities of the headman, assisted and counseled by the elders. After the arrival of the French the headman also provided liaison between the villagers and the district authorities.

Justice has traditionally been largely in the hands of the village headman and the council. Although family problems are

supposed to be resolved by the head of the family, other conflicts, including violations of village customs, are dealt with by the village leaders. In the village-centered society of the highlands, customs and moral codes are deeply internalized. Villages have a strong collective spirit, and everyone in them shares in the same style of life and subscribes to the same set of values. Because the village society is small, breaches of custom do not go unnoticed, and the sanction of the community is brought to bear on offenders. With the exception of the Stieng, who hold the entire family responsible for the wrongs of one of its members, guilt usually is treated as an individual matter, and the guilty party must make his reparations to the community according to custom. The French organized tribunals for most of the larger ethnic groups, using codified native customs and appointing indigenous judges, but these tribunals were only for the problems that could not be resolved at the village level. The Vietnamese government abolished them and tried to replace native with Vietnamese law. This decision has since been reversed (see below, "Recent Government of Vietnam Legislation for Montagnard Tribunals").

The one outstanding variation on this pattern of village-centered justice is found among the Rhadé, where a certain jural authority rests with the *po lan*, or "proprietors of the land," senior females who hold title to clan land by right of inheritance (see pp. 751-52). As guardians of these strictly defined territories (any one of which may encompass several villages), the *po lan* grant permission to farm within the territory, and, in addition, perform rituals honoring the souls of the clan ancestors who reside in the territory. Should the territory be violated in any way, as by the occurrence of incest within it, it is the *po lan* who demands the penalty (Sabatier 1940).

In the past, inter-village warfare has been common among the highlanders. The French abolished it in areas where their control was well established, but it continues to occur among some groups. Other kinds of inter-village conflict, short of war, remain widespread. Institutions such as the aforementioned *tor-ing* of the Bahnar, or clans among the Rhadé and Jarai which create inter-village kinship ties, serve to diminish wars and conflicts between villages. But among all the groups the favored

means for avoiding conflict are the alliances. Through the father-son alliance or the "great xep" blood oath, for example, villages can prevent or end wars and other conflicts and can force bonds of cooperation. By the same token, of course, such alliances can be a means of gaining allies with whom to carry on a war more effectively. And families or clans can ally themselves so as to be able to carry out vendettas. One such instance occurred among the Mnong Gar as recently as 1949 (Condominas 1957).

There is some similarity in the social stratification of highland groups. Most villages have several wealthy families, who constitute a socio-political elite. Among some groups, such as the Rhadé and the Mnong, these families tend to intermarry, thereby perpetuating their elite roles. Sorcerers have high status in the highlands, and in some village societies they exercise political as well as religious influence. Although the French administration officially did away with slavery, there continue to be instances of it, particularly among the Stieng, Mnong, and Sedang.

Religion. The different highland groups share a great many religious beliefs and practices. All have origin myths concerning the beginning of their "race," by which they mean their own ethnic group. Usually the myth has an ethnocentric touch in that it presents the group's ancestors as the first humans to appear on earth. (A number of the highland groups refer to themselves as "the people.") The pantheon of spirits (called *yang* by all groups, regardless of language variations) is extremely large; there are spirits associated with the elements, with inanimate objects, with the dead, and with animals and plants. Though some of the spirits are good, most are malevolent. The Rhadé have a hierarchy of deities, the highest of which is the Lord of Heaven (*Ae Die*); the Sedang believe in a pantheon of gods who die as men do.

All the highlanders live in the shadow of the spirits, which are believed to affect human destiny. Illness and misfortune are attributed to the spirits, and only the sorcerer can treat them. The usual method of propitiation is the ritual sacrifice of an animal. First, the victim will sacrifice a chicken, then, if that has no effect, a goat, and finally a buffalo. By such means of curing illness, more than one highlander has depleted his livestock.

The life of the highlander is accompanied by many diverse

rituals and governed by a myriad of taboos. The rice-planting cycle includes a system of rites designed to guarantee a good crop, and such things as house construction have their own series of fixed rituals. Families and clans abide by food taboos and obey interdictions against hunting certain animals or consuming certain plants. Villages sometimes are taboo to non-residents, as are houses on certain occasions. Another concept shared by all highlanders is *ae* ("mana" or "soul force"), which everyone is thought to have, but in varying degrees. Though the amount of *ae* that an individual has is intrinsic, it may be enhanced by the favor of the spirits. The degree of *ae* is manifested in a variety of ways. Unusual physical characteristics such as a powerful physique or a full beard, as well as such attributes as an extraordinary ability in hunting or other skills, are regarded as signs of such *ae*. A person so endowed enjoys great prestige among the highlanders, and a manifestly large degree of *ae* is essential for anyone who aspires to be a leader.

There are sorcerers among all highland groups, and at least one is found in most villages. Because they are believed to be capable of contacting the spirits, their services are much in demand, and in some villages the sorcerers exercise as much influence in village affairs as the headman and council. Their ability to determine the source of witchcraft makes them personages to be feared. In 1949 the vendetta among the Mnong Gar alluded to earlier involved a sorcerer who had informed one family that it was being bewitched by another. Similar incidents in Jarai villages in 1957 prompted the district chief to collect all the sorcerers into one village so as to be able to control their activities.

The Sadets. Recent works by French ethnologists agree that there are at present a Sadet of Fire, a Sadet of Water, and a Sadet of the Wind. As already mentioned, early accounts about the highlands tell of a powerful Jarai sorcerer known as the Sadet of Fire. In the seventeenth century, this sorcerer and his confrere, the Sadet of Water (the two are never supposed to meet, for a meeting would bring great calamities), entered into an agreement with the King of Cambodia to exchange gifts every three years. Legend has it that, at some unspecified time long ago, a bond was established between the Sadet of Fire and the Khmer

rulers. When a Cham king recovered a glimmering object from beneath the waters of a river, it turned out to be the Prah Khan, a sacred saber of Khmer royalty. While the Khmer came to possess the scabbard, for which King Jayavarman II (A.D. 802 to 854) is said to have constructed a magnificent reliquary, the Jarai obtained the saber itself, and it was entrusted to a sorcerer of Plei M'tao village, who became known as Master of the Saber or Sadet of Fire (Bourotte 1955).

According to Jarai tradition, the Sadet of Fire as keeper of the sacred saber derives his unusual powers from the host of spirits associated with the saber, which are believed to live in the Sadet. In addition to giving the Sadet unconquerable strength in battle, these spirits endow him with special power to dispel epidemics through ritual sacrifices. Students of highland ethnology vary somewhat in their accounts of the Sadets and in their views on the influence of these sorcerers on the Jarai and neighboring groups. Jouin (1951:73-84) contends that the last powerful Sadet of Fire was a Jarai named Y Thih, who lived in the village of Plei M'tao during the last half of the nineteenth century and that his successors are incorrectly referred to as "Masters of the Saber," whereas they should be called "Guardians of the House of the Saber" (*Ae Buom*) because they are not true Sadets. Other scholars maintain that Sadets such as the one responsible for the death of Odend'hal, and also the current Sadet, are true successors to the guardianship and consequently to the title (Ezzaoui 1940:169-174; Lafont 1963).

All ethnologists agree that it is traditional for kinsmen of the Sadet of Fire to slay him when he has grown old, but there are two versions of the method by which the new Sadet is chosen. According to one, the Sadet, prior to his death, throws his copper bracelet into the pool where the residents of Plei M'tao bathe, and whichever male emerges with the bracelet on his arm will be the new Sadet. Another version is that, after the death of the Sadet, young warriors of the Siu clan (from which the Sadet traditionally is selected) gather to sleep in the same communal house. While they are asleep, one of the elders demands, "Who will be Bok Redau?" and when one of the warriors answers in his sleep, "It is I," a cotton bracelet is placed on his wrist as a symbol of his new role (Bourotte 1955; Ezzaoui 1940).

The Sadet of Water, according to all accounts, functions more as a sorcerer than as a leader. He resides in the village of Plei M'tao Ea in Darlac Province, where he receives visitors who bring prescribed gifts, and he frequently travels about the area visiting villages to perform rituals that are intended to prevent or dispel epidemics due to droughts. Elderly Rhadé recall that on several occasions a Sadet of Water came to the town of Dan Me Thuot, remaining on the outskirts of the settlement as is the custom, and throughout the Jarai areas older villagers recall having seen him. Several recent sources report that there also is a Sadet of the Wind, who, although he plays no political role, has considerable mystical power (Condominas 1959; Lafont 1963).

Of the three, however, the Sadet of Fire appears to be the only one ever to have wielded political power. Although Captain Cupet on his 1890-1891 expedition recorded (as mentioned above) that the then Sadet's followers paid him little deference, various historical accounts credit other Sadets of Fire with considerable political influence on the Jarai and neighboring groups, and the Odend'hal affair in 1905 would indicate that the Sadet of Fire of that time was a leader to be reckoned with. Recent French ethnologists disagree on the role of the current Sadet of Fire. Father Dournes, a member of the Société de la Mission Etrangère de Paris who has spent a number of years among the Jarai in the Cheo Reo area, believes that the Sadet of Fire continues to have considerable influence; Lafont (1963) denies that the three Sadets enjoy the prominent roles today that they had at the time the French explorers visited the highlands.

THE PRESENT SITUATION OF THE VIETNAMESE HIGHLANDERS

Introduction. The situation among the highlanders is in a state of basic change now (May 1965). Since the rebellion in September 1964 the government has attempted to satisfy some of the desires of the highlanders in the hope of getting them to rally behind the government. First they held a conference at Pleiku in October, and the highlanders present represented most tribes, although as delegates some were simply civil servants from province and district offices, while some were real leaders—people who had been jailed after their uprising in 1958. Most of

these were Rhadé, Jarai, and Bahnar. Missing was Y Bham, the Rhadé leader who spurred the 1958 revolt, was jailed, and had been released in February 1964. He was involved in the September rebellion, but either went voluntarily or was forced to go to Cambodia where he now appears to be a captive of a movement that calls itself The Front for the Protection of the Oppressed Races. This movement does not put out the Viet Cong line, but rather something that sounds like the Cambodians being excessively nationalistic (see below).

The leaders of the highland group (Rhadé, Jarai, and Bahnar for the most part) compiled the "aspirations" of all the groups represented and presented them to the Vietnamese authorities. These concerned giving the highlanders more (and stronger) representation in the central government, more role in the administration of their own areas, land titles (a very sore point with those whose land had been taken by the land development schemes initiated in 1957 when the Diem government began resettling northern refugees and central Vietnamese in the highlands—the government's attitude then was that the government owned all the land in the highlands), acceptance of more highlanders in secondary schools, universities, and the School of Administration. They also wanted their own army, direct American aid (i.e., not to go through Saigon), more schools, and medical facilities, and they wanted reinstituted their native tribunals, which had been suppressed by the Diem regime (see below). They also wanted their own languages taught in the primary schools along with Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese discussed these things with them, then General Khanh came to meet them. The Vietnamese would not agree to the army or direct American aid. There had been a rather vaguely organized Bureau for Montagnard Affairs organized in March 1964, and General Khanh announced that it would become a directorate and appointed Colonel Ya Ba as director. He agreed to most of the other things and began turning the wheels to get something done about it, but left office late in October. Mr. Huong was sincere, but was too beset and besieged by the Buddhists and students to do anything. There were rumblings of another revolt in the highlands, and the Vietnamese quickly appointed a number of highlanders to the Non-Commis-

sioned Officers' School at Nhatrang and fifteen to the Officers' Training School at Thu Doc. The Ministry of Education announced a plan for expanded education in the highlands and a scheme whereby highlanders would get special consideration for their application to schools of higher education (the acceptance grade would be lowered 10 percent for them). In March 1965 a group of twenty-two highland leaders met with various ministers in Saigon. The tribunals were reinstated, the intention of granting land titles was made known, and a scheme for surveying land announced. So it can be seen that the situation is in a state of flux.

The Viet Cong and the Highlanders: Vis-à-vis the Viet Cong, there has been a marked change. Whereas in 1958 the Viet Cong propaganda was well done (things like hammering away at the mountaineers' fear that the Diem government was going to depose them of all land), in the past several years the Viet Cong have used terrorism, forced recruitment and labor in hill tribe villages, demand for rice and food, and direct attacks on resettled hill tribe villages resulting in considerable death and destruction. The highlanders now almost invariably describe themselves as "in-between." They do not want to support the Viet Cong (and are afraid of them), but they still are not lured by the government.

Hill Tribe Nationalism: Y Bham and the Front for the Protection of Oppressed Races. Y Bham, a leader of the Rladé tribe from South Vietnam, has gone to Cambodia, where he is working for the formation of a United Front for the Protection of Oppressed Races (French abbreviation: FULRO) to be composed of the peoples of the South Vietnamese and Cambodian highlands. Though this movement has been widely reported in the public press, it is too early to judge the effectiveness of Y Bham's attempt to build a nationalist movement among the highlanders, who are now, as has been the case for centuries, caught in a struggle between their more powerful neighbors.

Legal Status of the Highlanders: History. Traditionally among the highlanders reconciliation of disputes and punishments for violations of customs were the affairs of family and village. Prior to the arrival of the French, the tribal laws were unwritten; they were expressed in terms of taboos and sanctions which all mem-

bers of the societies knew and respected. There was a well-defined moral order, with well-defined retributions and punishments for those who breached it.

The French administration allowed the traditional jural systems to continue, and some administrators began recording tribal laws with a view to organizing native tribunals (hill tribe customs are codified in Gerber 1951; Guilleminet 1952; Lafont 1963; Sabatier 1940). Tribunals were established in the province capitals of the high plateau. Hill tribe judges were appointed, and the *coutumiers* (codified customs) served as a basis for adjudication. Cases brought to the tribunals were those which could not be resolved on the village level. The procedures of these courts were relatively simple. At Ban Me Thuot, for example, the judge, an elderly respected man from Ban Don, would hold sessions for the first five days of every month. The sessions were held in a small room simply furnished, with a table behind which the judge sat, and a few benches. The plaintiff and his party sat on one side while the defendant and his group were on the other. After each side had presented his case, witnesses were heard, and the judge would refer to the pertinent law. The case usually was resolved through discussion.

Recent Government of Vietnam Legislation for Montagnard Tribunals. In response to the highlander request for the organization of "Customs Law Courts in the highlands and a Law Protection regime" (formally submitted at the Convention for Administrative and Military Affairs held in Saigon in March 1965), the Government of Vietnam has promulgated a decree aimed at "reorganizing Montagnard Common Law Courts in the Central Vietnam Highlands." The new courts are to deal with civil affairs, "montagnard affairs," and penal offenses when both parties are highlanders. Crimes and offenses committed by hill tribe servicemen, crimes against the nation, or those involving lowlanders (ethnic Vietnamese) will be brought before the National Courts.

The law provides for courts at the village, district, and province levels. The Village Customs Law Court is presided over by the Village Administrative Committee Chief, assisted by two highlander assessors. Early in December each year, the chairmen of village administrative committees and residents of the villages prepare a list of twelve notables elected by the population. From

each list the district chief concurrently acting as Justice of the Peace will select two regular assessors and two deputy assessors for every village court. At least one weekly session is held if necessary. When a case is resolved, the decision is recorded and signed by the contesting parties, thus negating the right to appeal to another court. Right of appeal to a higher court is possible when the case remains unreconciled.

At the district level, the courts will be presided over by a President of the Court, who will be the district chief, and he will be assisted by two hill tribe assessors. There will also be a clerk-interpreter. The assessors will be selected from lists of hill tribe notables elected by the district residents. Sessions of the court will be held at least twice a month at district headquarters. Cases within the jurisdiction of the district court include those appealed from the village courts, lawsuits on civil and commercial matters involving more than 1,500\$VN and less than 1,500\$VN, all kinds of minor offenses, and cases considered traditionally as serious ones, such as offenses against religions and creeds, viz. desecration of graves, insults uttered during a ritual ceremony, disturbance of an oath-taking ceremony and offenses against deities."

A Montagnard Affairs Section of the court will be organized at the provincial level. This section will be under a Montagnard Presiding Judge, assisted by two hill tribe assessors, a national clerk who keeps the records, and an interpreter. The assessors, like those of the other courts, will be drawn from a list of elected notables. The Montagnard Affairs Section will sit once or twice a month, depending on demands. This court is competent to pass judgment on appeals from the montagnard district courts and actions which do not fall into the realm of the village or district courts.

This legislation restores the legal status of the native laws and tribunals which had been lost by the highlanders under the Diem regime as a part of the policy of total assimilation which resulted in an attempt to replace hill tribe social institutions with Vietnamese ones. This policy caused considerable resentment among the highlanders, who felt that their way of life was threatened, and this fear was seized upon by the Viet Cong in their propaganda. This was one of the bases of a strong appeal by the Viet

Cong, who could cite favorably the example of the autonomous zones in North Vietnam.

Although the new laws seem to be a step in the right direction, the overall effect may have been to structure hill tribe law in terms of the Vietnamese system. The highland villagers, like the Vietnamese villagers, will probably prefer to settle their own difficulties without recourse to outside authority.

AGRICULTURE AND LAND TENURE

The government of the Republic of Vietnam is currently preparing a program of distribution of land titles to the mountaineers. Other than problems associated with shifting of villages due to the war (none of the highlanders normally could be considered nomadic people—they may shift their fields but prefer to keep their villages in the same location), there are matters concerning highland agricultural techniques and land-tenure systems which I believe would be well to consider in formulating such a program.

Highland Agriculture. Swidden agriculture (also sometimes referred to as shifting or slash-and-burn agriculture) is traditional among the highlanders and continues to be practiced by most groups. Where there is available bottom land with water sources, the hill tribes usually practice paddy wet-rice agriculture, using techniques similar to those of the Vietnamese (and probably learned from them). Such fields can be seen along river banks throughout the highlands, in volcanic depressions such as those in the vicinity of Pleiku, and in level areas around Kontum town. In the area of Phu Bon there are also some extensive paddy fields belonging to the Jarai, and the Churu in the valley of Dran cultivate paddy using the Cham plow and water buffalo (they are supposed to have learned the techniques from the Cham centuries ago). Finally, in the Valley of the Winds inland from Quang Ngai, the Hrê have terraced paddy fields similar to the terraces of the Vietnamese along the coast.

Generally speaking, there are basic similarities in the swidden technique employed by mountaineers. Among most (if not all) groups it is a system of rotating agriculture wherein a plot is farmed for a given period—usually between one and three

years—and then is left to lie fallow while the cultivators move to a series of other fields, returning to the overgrown plot in due time. The cycle seems to be fairly consistent with all groups. The fallowing period usually depends on the type of flora that predominates the area; if there is an abundance of fast-growing bamboo, for example, the fallow period probably will only be three or four years, while in areas where the growth is slower it may be eight to fifteen years.

To prepare the fields, first vegetation is cut, and usually all but the large trees are felled. After the brush and wood have dried sufficiently, fires are set and controlled as much as possible. The rubble is cleared, and the soil is raked. The men make holes with dibble sticks, and women follow, planting the seeds. During the growing period some weeding is done. Both men and women assist with the harvest, and the yield is stored in individual family granaries. Various secondary crops are planted in the swiddens, sometimes in alternating rows with the upland rice and sometimes after the harvest. Kitchen gardens and fruit groves usually are cultivated in the village near the house.

The Brâu, a group located in the vicinity of Ke Sanh, near the Lao border inland from Quang Tri, usually farm their fields one year (three years if there are large trees, which are thought to indicate good soil). When there is new mature vegetation on the field lying fallow—from five to eight years—the plot can be recultivated. One year is the normal planting for swiddens used by the Jêh, a group found near the Dak Pek area, northwest of Kontum. Their fallowing period is ten years.

In the vicinity of Phu Bon (Cheo Reo), the Jarai who practice swidden agriculture cultivate their fields for three years, and the Jarai to the east, in the Plei Mrong area, farm their swiddens for as long as five years, leaving the field for five to eight years before clearing and burning them again.

Selecting the site for a new swidden field usually involves inspecting the vegetation to determine whether the kinds of plants supported by good soil abound. This also may be accompanied by some type of divination; the Rhadé, for example, look for certain birds in the forest because they are an omen of fertility, while the Cheo Reo Jarai construct a shelter on the proposed site, and if the occupants dream of fish or deceased kin or ac-

quaintances, it is a sign of fertile soil) while dreams of goats or dogs indicate the reverse.

It is often assumed that swidden agriculture is destructive. In his detailed study of swidden agriculture among the Hanunóo of Mindoro Island in the Philippines, Conklin (1957:154-155) warns against making negative judgments on this form of agriculture without realizing the variations that exist in it and without examining it objectively. Other anthropologists and agricultural economists such as Pendleton (for example, N.D.:33-52; 1962) have been doing research on the efficiency of using swidden agriculture in certain physical ecologies. In areas like the uplands of Thailand (similar in many respects to the highlands of South Vietnam) most farming is done on slopes, and the rains are torrential. Using the swidden method has the advantage of leaving the tree roots in the soil, which helps to retain the structure, and the dibble stick does minimal harm to the structure. If a plow were used in these circumstances, there would be grave danger of having the top soil wash away.

Land Tenure. When highlanders cultivate wet rice in paddys, ownership is well defined, as the limits of the land usually correspond to the extent of cultivation. Among the H're, for example, everyone knows which family owns particular terraces, and these are passed from generation to generation.

The traditional land-tenure systems of groups practicing swidden agriculture vary somewhat between the different groups. The most complicated appears to be the *po lan* system of the Rhadé (described above, pp. 752 ff.). It is related to the matrilineal clan system wherein clan name, mobile goods, and land are passed down through the female line. The sub-clan has claim to a given territory, and title is vested in the *po lan* (literally "proprietor of the land"), usually an elderly female of the senior line. According to recent Rhadé sources, this system has been changing, particularly in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot.

Among the Bahnar there is the *toring*, a territory in which several villages collectively control hunting, fishing, and farming rights. Outsiders, whether Bahnar or not, must have the approval of the villages' elders (*kra*) in order to enter and carry out any of the above activities.

Research thus far indicates that most of the other hill tribe

groups have village territories in which the residents farm. In some instances it is a very well-defined area; among the Jch, for example, the *sal ja* is a village territory, and while outsiders are free to hunt or fish in the *sal ja*, they cannot dam a stream or farm without permission of the village leaders. With other groups the territory is less well defined; it simply is an area surrounding the village, where the residents farm, hunt, fish, and cut wood. It is in the order of things that villages respect one another's rights.

Among all hill tribes, each family cultivating a cycle of swiddens is recognized as owner of these fields. Villagers all know which fields lying fallow belong to fellow villagers, and their rights are respected. The rule seems to be that the first occupier of the soil has unwritten title to it.

Finally, there is an erroneous notion that the hill tribes claim all of the land in the highlands. The land-tenure systems noted above embrace only a portion of the area. The remainder is land *res nullius*, unclaimed by anyone.

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