

Dividing the Delta:
Khmer-Vietnamese Relations from 1930 to 1954 in the Mekong Delta

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Composite Cochinchina in the 1930s.....	8
Background: Colonial life in Cochinchina.....	8
French colonial stereotypes.....	12
The rise of the Cao Dai church.....	16
Communist outreach in the 1930s.....	22
Extension of the Pacific Theater to Southeast Asia.....	26
Chapter 2: World War 2 - New Invaders, New Identities.....	28
Japan in the Delta.....	28
Vichy France: reformulating identities.....	33
Fragmentation, factions, sects.....	38
The Cochinchinese question.....	41
Chapter 3: Wartime Strategies.....	45
A precarious Cochinchinese state.....	45
Utilitarian violence.....	47
Communist invitations.....	55
Cambodians, Cambodia.....	62
Conclusion.....	67
Appendix.....	69
Bibliography.....	72
Primary sources.....	72
Secondary literature.....	72

Introduction

In November 2017, the Cambodian Supreme Court ruled to dissolve the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)—a watershed in the run-up to the 2018 general elections. Opposing the incumbent Cambodian People’s Party, which had ruled for over thirty-eight years, the CNRP was the only serious contender, deriving a significant part of its appeal from its anti-Vietnamese rhetoric. Prior to its dissolution, several members of the CNRP promised to reclaim “Kampuchea Krom” (literally “lower Cambodia”), a term designating the southern part of modern-day Vietnam, formerly the Cochinchina protectorate colonized by France.¹ A sizable, marginalized Khmer minority resides in the area, a presence that further fuels Cambodian claims to Kampuchea Krom. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese government rejected criticism of its alleged persecution of the Khmer minority on the grounds of its sovereignty over the region.²

Discord between the modern states of Vietnam and Cambodia over territory and the loyalty of the Khmer people dates back to the turbulent decolonization of Indochina. The division of Indochina into aspiring nation-states, according the March 6th, 1946 accord, belied the heterogeneity internal to these countries. Indeed, what is today the southern part of Vietnam had always been a region in flux. Located in the delta of the Mekong River, it had been a contested territory for centuries before the French arrival. The Khmer had long resided in the delta, to which the Vietnamese progressively immigrated. The two populations coexisted, but skirmishes nonetheless recurred.

¹ Alex Willemyns, “CNRP clings to anti-Vietnamese rhetoric,” *Phnom Penh Post*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cnrp-clings-anti-vietnamese-rhetoric>.

² Clothilde Le Coz, “The Plight of Cambodia’s Khmer Krom Community,” *The Diplomat*, October 30, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/the-plight-of-cambodias-khmer-krom-community/>.

At the end of the colonial era and during the First Indochina War, the region not only remained diverse along ethnic lines, but also became divided between political factions. A battleground for the French and the revolutionary communists, the Mekong Delta was also home to multiple sectarian groups that over two decades had grown in influence and size. The Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, two important sects, expanded their religions' reach in the 1930s and established their own administrations, often over regions of Cochinchina inhabited by Khmer and Vietnamese peasants. Communist units operated semi-autonomously in Cochinchina, adapting their strategies to local areas to challenge rival forces. Competing for power, all these factions not only struggled for control, but also sought alliances. As the competition for allegiances intensified, where did the Khmer situate themselves in the struggle?

My thesis investigates the history of the Khmer in Cochinchina from 1930 to 1954. By examining the Khmer's different relationships to Vietnamese-led political factions, I retrace the conditions under which collaborative or contentious interactions unfolded, and the ways in which the Khmer positioned themselves in these conflicts. Drawing examples from the specific provinces of Tay Ninh, Soc Trang, and Chau Doc, I focus on these sites in order to identify key actors and illustrate broader trends in the war. In short, I hope to restore the Khmer as active agents in the process of national reconfiguration unfolding in Cochinchina, rather than to place them as an excluded, monolithic ethnic minority in the future state of Vietnam.

My research project arose in response to a historiography that often overlooks the presence of ethnic minorities in its reconstruction of the modern state's history. Traditionally, questions about the relationship between the Vietnamese and the Khmer have been addressed through a state-focused lens. While this state-based approach inevitably touches on the non-negligible population of ethnic Khmer in Cochinchina (i.e. today's southern Vietnam), scholars

and political observers have limited discussion of its relevance to the formation of Cambodia and Cambodian politics, or to the relationship between the states of Vietnam and Cambodia. The anachronistic state-based grid of analysis has permeated through scholarship on the French colonial period, too. While scholars such as Christopher Goscha and Eric Jennings have addressed French racial classifications and their subsequent appropriation by indigenous populations, they mainly discuss French formulations of “races” and “nations” through the example of inter-protectorate competition and tension. The question of ethnic minorities within a protectorate (in this case, that of the Khmer within Cochinchina) remains largely unaddressed.

That said, scholarship which focuses specifically on the Mekong Delta does acknowledge the region’s diversity, citing both political and ethnic groups that populate its landscape. However, analyses of conflicts between sectarian groups in the Mekong Delta often neglect the place of ethnic minority groups such as the Khmer in these conflicts. The separation of discussions of sectarian conflicts and of ethnic conflicts obscures the diverse alignments within the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. The social history of the Mekong Delta is still written as a narrative of the conditions that progressed into a nationalist struggle of the Vietnamese—an approach that, while mentioning Khmer’s involvement, renders it peripheral.

I draw inspiration from works perhaps more ethnographic than historical, in particular those of Philip Taylor, who has studied the internal diversity of the Khmer in Vietnam. Taylor’s localized approach—specifying differences between groups of Khmer based on the places they inhabit—has influenced my own. I will focus on particular examples in Tay Ninh, Chau Doc, and Soc Trang, in order to portray the different permutations of the Vietnamese-Khmer relationship in the French colonial era and its immediate aftermath.

My own contribution relies heavily on French colonial archives. Archival files, often written by administrators, focus on organized political groups and overemphasize racial stereotypes, making scarce mention of the Khmer and their variable allegiances. However, by searching documents for mentions of the Khmer, identifying contradictions, and distinguishing localized patterns, I discern the multiple strategies the Khmer employ in the colonial years and especially during the war. While the archives reinforce the challenge of centering the narrative on the Khmer, they also confirm in indirect ways that the Khmer have never been unitary, but divided and multi-faceted as well.

In my thesis, I will show that as the colonial authority's grasp on Indochina became more tenuous, postcolonial states were increasingly conceived as ethnic-based nation-states, problematizing the place of the Khmer as a minority in Cochinchina. In the 1930s, despite differentiation between the two groups, Khmer and Vietnamese intermingled within both religious sects and revolutionary organizations. As the war began, however, the relationships between sectarian groups and the Khmer became increasingly opportunistic and situational, driven primarily by concerns with power or survival. The Khmer lived as inside-outsiders in Cochinchina, torn between ethnic ties to which the Cambodian state appealed and their status as unequal Vietnamese nationals.

Chapter 1: Composite Cochinchina in the 1930s

Background: Colonial life in Cochinchina

Indochine: the very name of France's colonial possessions in Southeast Asia conveyed its diversity and its divisions. Referring to two sources of cultural influence, Indian and Chinese, "Indochina" designated a colonized population grouped together by the colonizer, yet differentially shaped by two dissimilar civilizations.³ Formalized in 1887, it reunited three formerly distinct kingdoms and countless more ethnicities, sub-divided into five regions: Cambodia, Laos (which joined the union later, in 1889), Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina.⁴

Prior to colonial conquest, in the first half of nineteenth century, Vietnamese influence under the Nguyen dynasty spread over a zone that stretched from the south of China to the Mekong Delta, a unified zone of influence whose outline approximated Vietnam's borders today—a precursor to the current state. To the west stood the Cambodian kingdom, caught between the competing influences of the Siamese and Vietnamese monarchies.⁵ From 1858 and into the 1860s, French troops invaded and progressively took over provinces in the Mekong Delta, then moved into Cambodia.⁶ The area where French conquest had first begun became Cochinchina, and the remaining parts of the conquered Vietnamese kingdom were subsequently cut up into Tonkin and Annam. Eventually, Cochinchina would remain the only region placed under direct administration by the French, unlike the other territories of Indochina, which were governed as protectorates under which previous local monarchies maintained symbolic authority.⁷

³ Pierre Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: Découverte, 1995), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵ Keith Weller Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 398.

⁶ Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75–80.

Indochina remained primarily a colony for economic exploitation, rather than a settlement colony like French Algeria.⁸ The French population in Indochina was therefore small, but many other groups populated Cochinchina, speaking various languages and often moving there from elsewhere. After all, the region had a history as frontier, a place characterized by migration, exchange, and power struggle. While the Khmer had once been the majority residing in Cochinchina, the Vietnamese kingdom's "southward march" resulted in an incremental, but steady takeover by the Vietnamese.⁹ In centuries prior to the encounter with the French, nation-states and fixed borders had not existed, but a ruler's influence depended on expanding the geographical reach of his subjects' settlement. The Nguyen court thus encouraged Vietnamese to settle in the south and to create economic openings, by displaying a greater tolerance for dissidents and criminals who strayed from Confucian norms, rather than applying strict sanctions and measures to enforce compliance with the court's beliefs.

The immigration of Vietnamese of lower classes and of unconventional backgrounds to the south gave rise to a weaker Confucian tradition and greater cultural heterodoxy.¹⁰ In an ethnically plural Cochinchina, this was manifest, for instance, in the cultural syncretism resulting from the contact with the Khmer. Indeed, under the first Nguyen king, Gia Long, the Khmer who had been living in the Mekong Delta were not coerced into assimilating to Vietnamese culture, despite the influx of Vietnamese, and could practice their cultural rites as long as they did not disrupt the general order.¹¹ In addition to the Khmer and Vietnamese, several other groups also

⁸ Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1869-1960* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995), 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 9.

¹¹ Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 419.

inhabited the region: Chinese merchants, who were numerous and highly successful in business; Chams, a Muslim ethnic group; and Indians *chettys*.¹²

By the time France formally created the Indochinese Union, the Vietnamese had already become the most populous group in Cochinchina.¹³ But the Khmer maintained a strong presence, with a population of over 400,000 in Cochinchina as per French statistics. In many provinces, they represented a sizable minority. In 1929, Soc Trang counted 107,000 Vietnamese and 50,000 Khmer. In 1936, Tra Vinh, which neighbored Soc Trang, counted 156,000 Vietnamese and 82,000 Khmer. Chau Doc counted 168,000 Vietnamese, and 39,000 Khmer out of a total of 218,000 inhabitants.¹⁴ While fewer in numbers, the Khmer were still numerous enough to play a role in the society of these provinces.

The society of Cochinchina in the colonial era was highly unequal, marginalizing in particular the Khmer when it came to land ownership, a situation that was only exacerbated by the Great Depression's shockwaves in the 1930s. Land policy in previous decades had promoted an unequal distribution of land where small land ownerships were gradually disappearing and large estates dominated. Because of the Great Depression's effects, work conditions for tenants on these large estates became extremely harsh, as landlords regulated loans and debt more strictly and demanded more work, all of which contributed to a climate of social tension at the beginning of the decade.¹⁵

¹² Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, 99–103.

¹³ Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 25.

¹⁴ Reports on the provinces of Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Chau Doc, box 66280, Fonds du Gouvernement Général d'Indochine (hereafter, GGI) the National Archives of Overseas Territory in Aix-en-Provence (hereafter, ANOM). The documents are undated and do not report a precise year for statistics on Chau Doc, but based on other information in the report, numbers are for a year around 1936.

¹⁵ David A. Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 15.

In such a climate, the region witnessed the rise of new ideologies and new groups. The Indochinese Communist Party was founded in 1930, integrating smaller, local parties. Its regional branches had relative autonomy, and its committees in Cochinchina often worked alongside other leftist groups in the 1930s.¹⁶ The Cao Dai, a syncretic religion drawing from both Christianity and local traditions, came to existence in the early 1920s, and gained steam and followers at the turn of the decade. Given disaffection in the countryside, millenarian thought also facilitated the spread and increased familiarity with the Buu Son Ky Huong religion, a Buddhist sect premised upon the promise of an apocalypse that would “renew” the world. The Buu Son Ky Huong tradition would eventually give rise, at the end of the decade, to the Hoa Hao sect, which accumulated a strong base and became an authority to reckon with in Cochinchina. As these religious and political groups sought to gain a following in the 1930s, they had to find ways to contend with the ethnically plural society in the Mekong Delta, just as the French colonial administration endeavored to do the same.

The provinces I choose to focus on (appendix 1), often group strongholds, attested to these encounters and confrontations and reflected the broader interactions between competing groups. Tay Ninh, situated on the borders with Cambodia, was home to the Cao Dai sect and the destination for numerous pilgrims. Chau Doc, also a border province, was the birthplace of the Hoa Hao sect under Huynh Phu So; both the sect and Communists were active in the area. Soc Trang was inhabited by a sizable Khmer population, who were active in politics and activism, allied with many different groups.

¹⁶ Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945 : Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and De Gaulle in a World at War* (Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications, 1991), 100–102.

French colonial stereotypes

In the absence of military conflict in the 1930s, ethnic divides did not become as salient in the eyes of the French as in the following decade. Yet, the French's conceptualization of the different groups they ruled had already demarcated essentialist differences. New stereotypes provided a new way of formulating differences in the colony, framing them as innate, oftentimes incompatible or oppositional, “[influencing] how the Asian colonized would come to view each other during the colonial period.”¹⁷

That said, unlike other instances of colonization, the French did not invent completely new differences and groups in the populace. Language, religion, allegiance had already prompted distinct self-identifications and distinguished Khmer and Vietnamese as separate groups in the past. While, at the end of the day, these categories remain malleable and constructed, the terms “Khmer” and “Vietnamese” in this essay would refer to two groups organized around distinct languages and heritages. The Khmer and Vietnamese languages are mutually unintelligible, although there have been reports that certain Khmer in Cochinchina spoke a hybrid of both.¹⁸ Heritage, in the context of the essay, refers to descent from a certain group of political subjects faithful to a monarch, as before the colonial era and the advent of “nations,” one's belonging was determined by one's devotion to certain rulers. The Khmer and Vietnamese, in the 1930s, were thus the descendants of two groups of people obeying to two different monarchs. Of course, a schematic definition cannot account for populations intermixing and cultures shifting, especially in a region like the Mekong Delta. Nonetheless, as some differences had already separated

¹⁷ Christopher E. Goscha, *Going Indochinese : Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012), 95.

¹⁸ Report on the Khmer minorities in Cochinchina, 30 October 1948, box F1-48, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt collection, National Archives Center II (hereafter NA2).

groups by the colonial era and continued to inform identities shaped by the colonizer, the use of “Khmer” and “Vietnamese” in the rest of this essay would be guided by these criteria.

The French drew indeed from these pre-colonial categories of differences to define the Khmer and the Vietnamese. Linguistic difference, for example, remained a measure of difference: When mapping Indochina, the French School of the Far-East, a French research institute in Indochina, delineated “ethno-linguistic” areas (see appendix 2).¹⁹ However, rather than seeing ethnicity as a construct resulting from a historical and political process, the French essentialized differences, seeing disparity as a result of innate character, and typecast individuals based on ethnicities.

In general, the Khmer, including those living in Cochinchina, were viewed as obedient and loyal to the French rule. A political report for the first trimester of 1927 in the province of Soc Trang described the province as calm, and explained this away with the presence of the local Khmer population: “Of a soft and docile character, and giving no attention to the agitation in neighboring lands, they exercise on the Annamese²⁰ population [...] an influence, which we should encourage.”²¹ The Khmer were thus deferential and compliant, a valuable quality in the eyes of the colonizer, but a corollary of their nature was their frailty and weakness against the craftier Vietnamese.

These narratives promoted the French colonizers as protectors. After all, the Vietnamese had been continuously encroaching upon Khmer lands when the French arrived: Had they not intervened, the Vietnamese would have expanded towards the west, onto what is today’s

¹⁹ Service géologique de l’Indochine, *Carte Ethnolinguistique de l’Indochine*, 1:2000000 (Hanoi, Vietnam: Service géographique de l’Indochine, 1949).

²⁰ The word “Annamese” here is synonymous to “Vietnamese”: individuals of Vietnamese ethnicity. “Annamese,” however, can also designate residents of the region of Annam, a subdivision of Indochina.

²¹ “Report on the political situation for the first trimester of 1927,” 20 April 1927, box 65505, GGI, ANOM.

Cambodian territory. The Indochinese project, by setting borders between Cambodia and Cochinchina, had already served to protect Cambodia from further encroachments by the Vietnamese.²² In addition to this, the French took on the mission of protecting the Khmer as a minority in lands where they coexisted with the Vietnamese, such as in the Mekong Delta. A report on the Governor of Indochina's visit to Cochinchina in 1937, passing by provinces inhabited by many Khmer such as Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Chau Doc, showed that the French saw themselves in a role similar to that of a teacher, looking to both protect and instruct, mediating between different ethnicities. Writing to the Governor of Indochina, the Governor of Cochinchina lauded the instructive nature of the former's visit: "The Annamese has observed that you paid attention not only to him. [...] He notes your solemn and grand visit to the Cambodian pagoda in Tieucan and the mosque of Chau Doc. [...] with his political logic and his somewhat overbearing dynamism, he understood the meaning and value of ethnic minorities." In opposition to the oppressed, docile Cambodian, stood the "overbearing" but "dynamic" Vietnamese, who nevertheless was more cerebral and possessed "political logic."²³

While colonial stereotypes were used to justify French paternalism vis-à-vis the Khmer, contradictorily, they were also employed to promote Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, undercutting the initial claim by French authorities of protecting Cambodians within Indochina. From Governor of Indochina Albert Sarraut's second mandate onward, a policy of Franco-Annamese collaboration encouraged Vietnamese to "build Indochina" in association with the French. Realizing that the colony's seamless operations required the recruitment of the local populace, authorities encouraged substantial Vietnamese immigration to Cambodia and Laos.

²² Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 96.

²³ Letter from the Governor of Cochinchina to the Governor of Indochina, 1 September 1937, box 65280, GGI, ANOM.

Perceived to be more intelligent, the Vietnamese stood on a higher rung in the racial hierarchy that the French had constructed in Indochina, and were deemed to be fitter collaborators.²⁴

This Franco-Annamese collaboration policy thus assigned the Vietnamese the governance of even Cambodian and Laotian provinces. This provoked the ire of many Cambodians and Laotians, inciting discord formulated in ethnic terms.²⁵ By “dividing and conquering,” the French not only reinforced the existing sense of difference among groups, but also made inter-group differences appear more antagonistic than ever before. Colonial stereotypes were internalized and became a vessel for political and social contest between groups.

Indeed, some Khmer in Cochinchina would recapitulate colonial stereotypes about themselves, perhaps because they had internalized it, but at the very least because these stereotypes proved helpful in dealing and obtaining favors from the French. A letter by a Khmer living in Tra Vinh, writing on behalf of the Cambodian population in the province, destined to the Governor of Indochina on his visit, insisted on the “Khmer’s perfect loyalty toward the Sovereign Nation [France], who has always considered them to be her most faithful subjects.”²⁶ The letter enumerated the measures the French administration had taken in favor of the Cambodian population, from the creation of Franco-Khmer school and the maintenance of pagodas to laws regulating the signing of debts, to which the Khmer had once fallen prey. The writer followed up his enumeration, never wavering in his honeyed tone, with a list of requests—more positions made available to the Khmer in the Cochinchinese administration, more scholarships and academic opportunities for the Khmer, more protection against usury. “It is

²⁴ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 24–26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 96–97.

²⁶ Letter from unnamed Khmer to the Governors of Cochinchina and of Indochina, 1937, box 66280, GGI, ANOM.

because we know of the spirit of justice that drives the authorities, and because we know ourselves to be the most loyal subjects in the French empire that we request you to consider our hopes and aspirations.”²⁷ By confirming the French administration’s stereotype about Cambodian’s docility and writing with a laudatory tone, the writer recited the French’s auto-perception of themselves as just protectors. At the same time, he requested favors often denied to the Khmer and granted to Vietnamese, such as positions in the administration and academic opportunities.

French essentialist categorizations of ethnic groups thus became a vessel for political and social claims and demands. Building upon existing distinctions between Vietnamese and Khmer, French administrators recapitulated these perceived differences as innate, essential points of divergence. By characterizing and treating the Vietnamese and the Khmer differently, the colonial authority not only solidified constructed labels, obscuring the artificiality of the tropes that described both groups, but also began to sow the seeds for later ethnic antagonism in wartime.

The rise of the Cao Dai church

In contrast with divisive colonial policies, on the ground in Cochinchina, different groups still continued to intermix. Given the Cambodians’ remarkable piety and docility in the eyes of French administrators, it was perhaps astounding to witness the travels of hundreds, at times thousands, of Cambodians to Tay Ninh monthly, coming both from Cambodia and provinces neighboring Tay Ninh within Cochinchina, to assist in the ceremonies of a new eclectic church: the Cao Dai church.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The Cao Dai religion was founded in 1919 by a Vietnamese civil servant. Leadership changes within the church led to control under Le Van Trung by 1926, a man deft at building alliances and recruiting followers, who posed as a papal figure in the religion. The religion drew from heterogeneous sources of inspiration, claiming to bridge divisions and combine Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—three distinct but important philosophical currents in Vietnamese society—with Christianity. Drawing inspiration from even secular figures, the religion attempted to conciliate tradition with the Western influence that had come with French colonization, sacralizing not only Jesus Christ, but also figures such as Victor Hugo or Joan of Arc. The divine figure of the Cao Dai (to be distinguished from Cao Dai as the name for the religion) corresponded to the Supreme Being that governed over the human world.²⁸

Tay Ninh represented an important center for the Cao Dai church, housing its biggest oratory, the Holy See. Medium-sessions, during which teenage mediums revealed the instructions of the Supreme Being, would attract thousands of pilgrims to the Holy See in Tay Ninh, among which many Khmer, from both Cochinchina and Cambodia.²⁹ The French authorities, anxious about the presence of Cambodians at these ceremonies, meticulously reported on the comings and goings to the Holy See pagoda. A table reporting on the number of visitors to the Cao Dai oratory in Tay Ninh in June 1927 showed that more Khmer than Vietnamese made their way to the Holy See, even though the Cao Dai religion remained a religion founded and run by Vietnamese men. Over half of the Khmer came from Cambodia, with the remaining Khmer coming from the province of Tay Ninh and Chau Doc. On a single day, June 15th, 1927, 233 Khmer and 86 Vietnamese made their way to the oratory.³⁰

²⁸ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 85–86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Status of individuals attending the Cao Dai pagoda during June,” 1927, box 65552, GGI, ANOM.

What about the Cao Dai religion drew the Khmer to it? Cao Dai proselytism spoke to worldly concerns that the Khmer shared with the Vietnamese. A report on May 1927, redacted by the French security service, detailed a rumor running among the Khmer that all taxes would be abolished and that the Supreme Being of Cao Dai would judge and bring happiness to the Khmer, on the condition that the entire Cambodian kingdom followed the Cao Dai religion.³¹ In the same year, the Governor of Cochinchina wrote to Le Van Trung, the Cao Dai “pope,” to request that the latter set Khmer tax evaders straight, as those Khmer had begun this behavior after having adhered to the Cao Dai religion.³² Another report in Tay Ninh noted that the Khmer were undertaking pilgrimage to the Holy See pagoda, upon hearing promises of free medicine. Concerns relating to livelihood and material improvement—medicine, taxes—made the Cao Dai’s promises alluring to the Khmer.³³ Though the church proved unable to provide what it had promised, this sort of discourse showed that its leaders recognized the social climate and tapped in the practical desires of its worshippers, both Vietnamese and Khmer.

The French authorities were highly suspicious of the Cao Dai religion, though they did not ban it outright in Cochinchina. Authorities frequently gathered intelligence about the religion and meetings in Tay Ninh, believing that leaders of the church employed religious sentiments as a cover-up for political scheming. Their intuition was not entirely inaccurate: Independence and subversion were on the Cao Dai leaders’ mind, if their speeches were any indication. In December 1931, Pham Cong Tac, one of the highest ranking dignitaries of the religion, who a few years later would replace Le Van Trung, was reported to have said: “While one man can’t kill an elephant, several men, bringing their effort together, would succeed. Brothers, let’s help

³¹ Letter from Inspector Girard to the Chief of Mobile Brigades, 17 May 1927, box 65552, GGI, ANOM.

³² Letter from the Governor of Cochinchina to Le Van Trung, 23 November 1927, box 65552, GGI, ANOM.

³³ Report from the Administrator of Thai Binh to the Provincial Chief of Tay Ninh, 5 April 1933, box 65553, GGI, ANOM.

one another, work with courage to improve our general situation [...] to later recover our *independence*” [emphasis added]. The figure of the elephant recurred in several of Pham’s speeches; French administrators interpreted it to be a metaphor for France.³⁴

But throughout the political unrest and mass movements in Cochinchina in 1930-1931, when strikes and protests occurred following the spread of the Great Depression in the colonies, the Cao Dai appeared ambivalent. They incited peasants to revolt, but with not nearly as much ardor as the Communists or folk Buddhist sects, and they attempted to limit and stop rebellions when the peasants involved worked for landlords who belonged to the sect. In some ways, the Cao Dai actually took advantage of the unrest, going as far as to impose a layered bureaucracy on lands owned by the sect in Cochinchina (which extended beyond Tay Ninh), with subdivisions for different matters of governance (justice, police, education) and different levels of governance.³⁵ As of the early 1930s, the religion’s leadership appeared opportunistic rather than driven by a strong ideological yearning for independence, as they still attempted to avoid putting themselves in overt and direct opposition to the French.

In 1932, the Chief of Tay Ninh province, a French administrator, suspected that the Cao Dai was planning for an anti-colonial Asian front of oppressed people, based on a rumor that the Cao Dai intended to take on Hindus and Chinese in Cochinchina as dignitaries.³⁶ He was mistaken: Recruitment among Khmer was not driven by any pan-Asian ideology based on solidarity or anti-colonialism. In fact, the Cao Dai church would even exploit the faith of its Asian followers, putting many Khmer to unpaid labor performing deforestation and planting

³⁴ Provincial Chief of Tay Ninh to the Governor of Cochinchina, 26 December 1931, box 65553, GGI, ANOM.

³⁵ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 104.

³⁶ Provincial Chief of Tay Ninh to the Governor of Cochinchina, 16 February 1932, box 65553, GGI, ANOM.

rubber trees through the lure of unfulfilled promises of free medicine.³⁷ This contrasted with the impression that the Cao Dai pope, writing to the French Resident Superior in 1929, attempted to set, presenting the church as a protector of indigent Khmer, who were drawn to the material assistance.³⁸

The French administration would eventually ban Caodaism in Cambodia. Unlike Cochinchina, there was no freedom of religion even in name in Cambodia, as French authorities regarded Buddhism as state religion—a prerogative of the Khmer king, long rooted in tradition. Following the new policy, the police imposed a strict control on pilgrims and sanctioned them when needed, substantially reducing the flow of Khmer from Cambodia to Tay Ninh.³⁹ A note sent to the Governor of Cochinchina in 1937, however, showed that the policy did not completely eliminate Khmer presence at the Tay Ninh pagoda. The Khmer from Cochinchina continued to attend the ceremonies, but the numbers could no longer compare to those of the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁴⁰ The cultural-religious unity that the Cao Dai brought out in the early 1930s, nonetheless proved Kiernan’s point that “large numbers of Khmers did not view Vietnamese culture solely as something thrust on their ancestors during the Vietnamese invasion of the 1830s”—a point that would disprove French assessments of irreconcilable, hereditary difference between the two groups.⁴¹

When pilgrimages from Cambodia halted in the early 1930s, the Cao Dai sect was mired in schisms and internal divisions. Le Van Trung’s leadership lost prestige in 1933, as a scandal

³⁷ Letter from the Chief of the Mobile Brigade of the East to the Governor of Cochinchina, 17 June 1927, box 65552, GGI ANOM.

³⁸ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Letter from Provincial Chief of Tay Ninh to Governor of Cochinchina, 27 November 1937, box 65557, GGI, ANOM.

⁴¹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 6.

revealed that he had misappropriated the common funds of the sect. His death the following year led to “a crisis of succession” as the sect divided into several autonomous sub-groups. Pham Cong Tac finally took over the mantle as the most established Cao Dai leader and positioned himself at the head of the Tay Ninh branch, which became the biggest Cao Dai branch among the split up sub-sects.⁴²

Towards the end of the decade, the sect under Pham Cong Tac’s leadership was drawn to the Japanese Empire, seeing in it an Asian response to European imperialism. Pham Cong Tac threw his support behind the restoration to the throne of Prince Cuong De, a descendant of the emperor Gia Long, who had founded the last dynasty in Vietnam, the Nguyen, before the arrival of French colonizers.⁴³ As Pham expressed his support for Prince Cuong De, his speech also took on a much more unambiguously anti-colonial slant. While many of his speeches were to be kept confidential, the French authorities managed to retrieve notes from his followers in 1938, revealing statements such as:

*“Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina are outraged to see French sovereignty establish itself,
And the country of Annam will see the advent of a new era
The yoke that weighs over the Annamese will cease”*

The opposition to French colonization had become unequivocal.⁴⁴ That Pham spoke of the three provinces inhabited by the Vietnamese and mentioned the “Annamese” exclusively, however, showed that this project also took on a nationalist bent based on a Vietnamese national identity. Despite the adherence of so many Khmer less than a decade before to the religion, the

⁴² Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 87.

⁴³ Cuong De, however, was not part of the main line of the dynasty: King Bao Dai, the legitimate heir, would later side with the French. Jérémy Jammes, *Les Oracles Du Cao Dai : Étude d'un Mouvement Religieux Vietnamien et Ses Réseaux* (Paris: Indes savantes, c2014), 209.

⁴⁴ Report by the Special Police of Sadeq, 13 October 1938, box 65557, GGI, ANOM.

Cao Dai church's new nationalist project concerned the Vietnamese only, leaving aside the other ethnicities of Indochina that it had once sought out.

In the early 1930s, the Cao Dai religion had started out as an enterprise to accumulate wealth and power, under Le Van Trung's aegis, by taking advantage of the socio-economic climate without truly being anti-colonial in the early 1930s. Its wide outreach allowed Khmer and Vietnamese to intermix in Tay Ninh, contradicting stereotypes of ethnic divisions. As politics soured in the Old Continent and French authority diminished on the Pacific Front, and as Japan gained in power and prestige in Asia, the Cao Dai religion, under the leadership of Pham Cong Tac, took on a nationalist trajectory. When it did, however, it concerned itself only with the project of restoring a Vietnamese nation under a monarch, forgoing its outreach to the Khmer.

Communist outreach in the 1930s

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was founded in a four-day meeting from February 3rd to 7th, 1930, presided over by Ho Chi Minh (at the time known as Nguyen Ai Quoc⁴⁵). The birth of this new party unified three communist predecessors, with different names and different geographical bases. The choice to name the party with the word "Vietnam" delineated a new scope of action: Historian Christopher Goscha has pointed out that by choosing "Vietnam" over "Indochina," the new party would "lay out the type of postcolonial state ethnic Viet communism would strive to create."⁴⁶

This choice was no given. The French had created and governed over a multi-ethnic federation, in which Vietnamese-majority territories had been divided into three separate polities.

⁴⁵ Ho Chi Minh has had at least four different aliases over the course of his life; "Ho Chi Minh" itself is not his birth name.

⁴⁶ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 77.

The formulation of a Vietnamese identity attempted to overcome this French-made division. The word “Vietnam,” rather than “Annam,” also connoted a more assertive nationalism, as the latter, meaning the “pacified South,” bore the marks of the Chinese imperialism that had subjugated the old kingdom of Annam for over a thousand years.⁴⁷ The name choice appeared even more forceful for, as Goscha pointed out, the Comintern also instructed its followers to organize revolutionary parties such that their geographical scopes overlapped with the colonial state. The naming of the party as Vietnamese thus contradicted the orders of the Comintern. This boldness did not last long, however. In October of the same year, the party finally complied with Comintern’s instructions and issued a name change to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), adding a declaration asserting their commitment to internationalism and supporting Laotians and Cambodians, the other oppressed peoples under the French.⁴⁸

Despite the ICP’s new, ambitious scope, it was at first a heterogeneous movement within which power was diffuse. In Cochinchina in the 1930s, ICP members struggled to find a base like that of the Cao Dai or Buddhist folk religions, and often co-operated with other leftist groups in publishing newspapers and organizing. The years 1930-1931 saw disastrous harvests and mass peasant uprisings staggered across Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, but the ICP’s Central Committee did not manage to coordinate, and the lack of synchronization led to a quick repression.⁴⁹ ICP members in Cochinchina attempted to take charge, incite, and organize the revolts, but faced with harsh repression from French authorities, the movement was greatly weakened. French security services managed to intercept and arrest most members of the central

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁹ Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, 99–102.

and regional committees of the Party, eviscerating its apparatus in Cochinchina, and over the following years of the decade, the party had to rebuild itself.⁵⁰

In 1932, one such attempt resulted in the formation of the “Transbassac Committee,” a branch of the ICP based in the area of Soc Trang and its neighboring provinces of Tra Vinh and Rach Gia. In light of the ICP’s orientation since 1930 of supporting not only the struggle of the Vietnamese, but also that of the Cambodians and Laotians, the Transbassac Committee undertook activities that reached both Cochinchina and Cambodia. The area in which it operated had a sizable Khmer minority and it was there that the Committee had recruited the first Khmer party member. In 1934, a restructuring transformed and renamed the Transbassac Committee into the regional committee for western Cochinchina; the body also took charge for recruitment and revolutionary activity in Cambodia.⁵¹

Despite these moves to expand the base, the ICP remained dominated by Vietnamese members and continued to recruit primarily among the Vietnamese. A French police’s report on subversive activity in May 1935, recorded the activities of Communist agitators from Western Cochinchina, noting that agents in charge of “Cambodian affairs” were mainly recruiting members of Vietnamese ethnicity who lived in Cambodia.⁵² While the instructions of the Comintern since 1930 ensured that Cambodian (and Laotian) questions never remained far away from the minds of ICP members, the party apparatus was nonetheless dominated by Vietnamese members, whether in Cochinchina or Cambodia. That the borders between Cochinchina and Cambodia meant so little to ICP committees in Cochinchina, who considered their domain to encompass both of these areas, foreshadowed the confusion and ambiguity to come when it was

⁵⁰ Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 308–9.

⁵¹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 12, 16.

⁵² “Notice on subversive activities in Cochinchina from April 1st to May 31st 1938,” 1938, box 65484, GGI, ANOM.

tasked with delineating the Party's scope of action and identity. Was the party being inclusive by taking action in all territories of Indochina? Were they being nationally restrictive, recruiting mainly individuals of Vietnamese ethnicity? Could Vietnamese living in Cambodia be affiliated with Cambodian affairs? Could the Khmer recruited in Cochinchina be associated with Cambodian affairs?

For all of the ICP's clandestine activity crossing borders and organizing, 1936 marked a turning point. With the election of the *Front populaire* in France, a coalition of leftist parties that included the French Communist Party, the ICP changed strategy in Vietnam, in line with the Comintern's instructions. Rather than opting for violent anti-colonial struggle, the party shifted toward legal action, hoping for gradual, legal decolonization.⁵³ The same year, massive strikes occurred all over in Indochina. In Cochinchina, unrest hit not only city workers, but also rural peasants, who demanded fewer taxes, higher wages, and a fairer distribution of lands.⁵⁴ These movements greatly benefited the ICP, whose membership grew as popular opinion shifted in its favor.

Though unrest was clearly present in provinces of Western Cochinchina, such as Soc Trang and Chau Doc, where the Khmer were a sizable minority and especially hit hard by land dispossession, French reports did not note specifically the presence of the Khmer in the strikes and demonstrations. In fact, a letter from the Governor of Cochinchina to the Governor of Indochina in November 1937 described the Khmer as “[continuing] to live without political movement.”⁵⁵ Though ideologically, the ICP's leadership had drafted an Indochinese project and made theoretical space for the Khmer and Laotians in it, in reality, committees on the ground had

⁵³ Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë, 1858-1954*, 318–19.

⁵⁴ Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta*, 180–81.

⁵⁵ Letter from the Governor of Cochinchina to the Governor of Indochina, 16 November 1937, box 65505, GGI, ANOM.

trouble attracting and rallying the Khmer to the cause—even Khmer who lived within Cochinchina, a territory where many ICP committees were headquartered. The envisioned communist project, “three revolutionary states existing together within the political framework of an Indochinese Union or Federation,” contradicted the silence of the people that it implicated.⁵⁶ The postcolonial project for a Cambodian state remained unclear; what postcolonial states would mean for non-majority ethnicities within them was even more unclear.

Extension of the Pacific Theater to Southeast Asia

From the 1930s onwards, Japan caught up to several European nations in playing the imperial game, annexing Manchuria, the Korean Peninsula, then China, joining the league of empires with its own expansionist project. Following World War II’s beginning in Europe in 1939, German occupation of France rendered French colonies in Southeast Asia highly vulnerable to a covetous Japan.⁵⁷

The Communists’ position was unequivocal: Both Japanese and French were respectively fascists and colonialists—both condemnable. Other groups with nationalist tendencies, like the Cao Dai or the Hoa Hao, or even some Khmer independentists, were drawn to Japan as potential liberators. While alliances and loyalties would continue to change as events and battles unfolded, the advent of war in Indochina, the first of many to come, however, permanently altered two things. First, the French’s prestige and authority had taken a damaging and irreparable hit. Second, with the racialist Vichy ideology and the growth of nationalist currents under these new power dynamics, modes of thinking about race, ethnicity, and nationality would take a new turn.

⁵⁶ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 90.

⁵⁷ Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë, 1858-1954*, 325.

The Khmer were about to become a more visible group, whose position French and Vietnamese-dominated groups would soon need to discern.

Chapter 2: World War 2 - New Invaders, New Identities

Japan in the Delta

War broke out in 1939 on the European front, and its rumblings were heard far and wide in Asia. Recruitment to support the metropole's war effort picked up in colonies. Men were recruited not only to serve as soldiers, but also to replace the drained European civil labor force. In this volatile atmosphere, a report in March 1940 by the police services in Cambodia disclosed that a Khmer from Cochinchina—a follower of the Cao Dai church—traveled around Cambodia to proselytize by promising tranquility and peace to those who would join the church. Another report from the secret services of Cambodia, two months later, revealed that eighteen Cambodians trekked to Tay Ninh to join the Cao Dai church, seeking a refuge from French recruitment of factory workers.⁵⁸ Taking advantage of the circumstances once again, the Cao Dai attempted to win over Khmer followers. Despite French efforts from the mid- to late-1930s to thwart the collusion of the Cao Dai and the Khmer, contact between the two—no matter how opportunistic from the Cao Dai's point of view—still existed.

If the European theater influenced the social climate in Cochinchina, the Pacific theater, too, was slowly expanding towards Indochina. The Empire of Japan had scarcely hidden its imperialist design, having annexed the Korean peninsula in 1910 and occupied Manchuria in 1931. From 1937, it became embroiled in the Second Sino-Japanese War, a conflict that prompted Japanese interest to drift south to Indochina and Southeast Asia, in order to obtain resources and cut off Chinese supplies.⁵⁹ While the Japanese military was divided as to the extent

⁵⁸ Letter from the Chief of police services of Cambodia to Provincial Chief of Kompong-Cham and report titled "Cambodia and Non-Specialized Workers", March 1940, box 66548, GGI, ANOM.

⁵⁹ Sachiko Murakami, "Japan's Thrust into French Indochina 1940 - 1945" (Ph.D., New York University, 1981), 544, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/303159186/abstract/6243AE007ABF4C74PQ/1>.

to which Japan should intervene in Indochina, wavering between greater expansion south or building up defense against the Soviet Union in Siberia, by 1941, Japan had subjugated France and occupied both northern and southern Indochina.⁶⁰ In the few years leading up to 1941, Japan intermittently exerted pressure over the French administration to obtain resources, station troops in Indochina, and have the French cut off resources supply to China.

In addition, Japan also fomented internal division to undermine the French. Contacting local groups under the guise of businesses seeking to make profits in Indochina, Japan would collaborate with some nationalist local parties as well as provide support to religious sects such as the Cao Dai, a support it would later intensify during its occupation.⁶¹ The Cao Dai church in Tay Ninh expressed its approval of Hitler and Mussolini as early as 1937 and regularly transferred money to Japan to support its war.⁶² For the groups that identified with Vietnamese nationalism, the refuge Japan provided for Prince Cuong De, who was part of the royal Vietnamese line (albeit not the main line), was another promise for a future installment of a nationalist monarchy.

More generally, Japan's appeal lay in its alleged Asianness: the Empire promoted the notion of pan-Asian solidarity and the idea of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, one where Asian countries would come together, under Japan's leadership, against Western colonizers.⁶³ While all of these concepts were only propaganda to advance Japan's own imperial design, the ideas did entice some Asians, among them Son Ngoc Thanh, "a founder of modern Khmer nationalism."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁶¹ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 124; Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 327.

⁶² Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 114.

⁶³ William L. Swan, "Japan's Intentions for Its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere as Indicated in Its Policy Plans for Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 1996): 139.

⁶⁴ Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975* (London: Verso, 1985), 21.

Son Ngoc Thanh was born in Tra Vinh and had family in Soc Trang; he then moved to France to study before going to Cambodia.⁶⁵ In 1942, during the Japanese occupation of Indochina, Son organized a coup to overthrow the French, counting on Japanese support, but French police forces quickly shut down the insurrection and jailed many of Son's allies.⁶⁶ The Khmer political prisoners were sent to Poulo Condore, where many Vietnamese communists were also detained. This first contact, setting up friendships and networks, would set up later collaboration between the two groups and a later recruitment in Cochinchina of Khmer for the cause of Cambodian independence.⁶⁷ The failed coup also proved how little commitment the Empire of Japan really offered their supporters.

Indeed, while the Japanese fed growing disobedience and dissent against the French in anticipation of war, they prioritized their own opportunity for entente with the French over local nationalist group. Despite the armed clashes and tense negotiations that had led to it, the eventual settlement in Indochina in 1941 between Japan and France ultimately proved quite smooth. Joint defense agreements, signed in July and December, stipulated that Japanese troops would hold the right to station and move through the colony, while ensuring that formal sovereignty over Indochina remained nonetheless in French hands. The agreement was a win-win, providing some relief to Decoux, the Governor General of Indochina while also satisfying Japan's goals.⁶⁸ Historian Eric Jennings argues that this arrangement allowed the Japanese to "[spare] valuable military and administrative resources for other more pressing missions."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁸ Murakami, "Japan's Thrust into French Indochina 1940 - 1945," 368–69.

⁶⁹ Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-44*, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 140.

Going further, Jennings emphasizes that “Vichy officials controlled the everyday administration of the region from the armistice of 1940 to March 1945,” a “basic fact” belied by the categorization of this period in Indochina by other historians as the “Japanese period.”⁷⁰ Although Japan had the final say, as it had subjugated France militarily, the understanding between Japan and Vichy France led to little Japanese intervention or discord when it came to the domestic politics of the region, to the point that the later Japanese deposition of French administrators in 1945 would come as a surprise.⁷¹ This meant that the Vichy administration had relatively free reign to quash dissent and insurrections, save for groups that Japan had decided to extend its protection over. Committees of the Indochinese Communist Party (IPC) in Cochinchina suffered a blow. As the ICP committees in the Cochinchina promoted uprisings in the region, a lack of coordination with committees in Tonkin meant that a northern notice to cancel the protests came all too late. French troops quickly decimated ICP’s agents in Cochinchina following the isolated demonstrations.⁷²

On the other hand, nationalist groups benefiting from Japanese support, such as the Hoa Hao, were shielded from the French administration and greatly expanded during this time. A religious group that began in the 1920s, the Hoa Hao was led by Huynh Phu So, a young man who claimed to possess special healing powers. Adhering to the tradition of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion, the group took its name from the small village where So originated, in the Chau Doc province. In the years leading up to the war, it attracted a sizable amount of followers as well as the ire of the French authorities.⁷³ The French decided to intern Huynh Phu So in a mental asylum, but he ended up converting his doctor to the Hoa Hao sect. The French then put

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷² Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 129.

⁷³ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 120.

him under house arrest, but the move drove hordes of pilgrims to the area. Finally, the Japanese, believing that the Hoa Hao would be an advantageous influence on the local population, intervened and put Huynh Phu So under their protection in Saigon. This effectively balked French efforts to crush the sect.⁷⁴

The Hoa Hao movement, and more largely the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition to which it belonged, irked the French by promoting a millenarian myth that seemed to incentivize the end of the colonial era.⁷⁵ Huynh Phu So's own take on the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition posited that he was a reincarnation of the figure of the Buddha Master, a prophet from Heaven would warn society of an imminent apocalypse, which would rinse the world and start it anew.⁷⁶ He exhorted ideals of frugality and hard work, and condemned urbanization and industrialization, which he considered to be corollary of the colonial regime. He was also a nativist, identifying with ethnic Vietnamese, a fact that stood out in contrast to the diverse population in the province of Chau Doc where he grew up, inhabited by large groups of Khmer and Chinese.⁷⁷ This may perhaps explain the Hoa Hao's lack of openness to "foreign" members, unlike the Cao Dai, whose syncretism sought to combine foreign and traditional influences. Certainly, it explained Huynh Phu So's hostile discourse about the West and France, one which did not please the authorities.

Japanese support for the Hoa Hao turned them into a powerful and popular group, a real contender for power in later years. The mere rescue of Huynh Phu So by the Japanese from the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 123–4.

⁷⁵ According to Tai, in *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, the Buu Son Ky Huong was a diffuse tradition in the Mekong Delta, dating back to the 19th century, and taken on by scattered communities which organized themselves around certain local apostles. Personal contact held an important in the tradition, as there was little institutionalization. The apostles would provide cures and spread prophecies, often apocalyptic and rooted in a millenarian worldview. Indeed, a central figure in the the doctrine of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion was the Buddha Master.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30; 145.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 151–155.

French conferred prestige onto him in the eyes of the general population. The Japanese also put him into contact with secular politicians. In return, the Hoa Hao contributed to the National Restoration fund, a pro-Japanese fund, a task the sect would be very efficient at, and urged peasants to cultivate rice to contribute to the Japanese economy. Indeed, most areas of rice cultivation were places where the influence of the Buu Son Ky Huong religious tradition was strong. While the Buu Son Ky Huong tradition had always been divided and highly localized, with followers organizing around a local figure of apostle, in 1943 Huynh Phu So consolidated his influence over most Buu Son Ky Huong communities in the Delta.⁷⁸ Under Japanese aegis, the Hoa Hao gained as many as one million followers by 1944.⁷⁹

The development of the sect was such that it “[took] over the administration of whole villages or even districts.” In areas where the majority of the population followed the Hoa Hao, the colonial administration was replaced by the sect’s organization.⁸⁰ With Japanese support, the Hoa Hao, alongside the Cao Dai and other sects and parties, developed their apparatus of power against the backdrop of a weakened French colonial administration, anticipating future conflicts and power struggles over the exercise of sovereignty.

Vichy France: reformulating identities

From 1940 to 1945, mirroring the politics in the metropole, the ideology and principles of the “National Revolution” set up in France by the Vichy governance were replicated, too, in Indochina. An ultra-conservative and racist regime, the Vichy government actively collaborated with Nazi Germany. Governing over a weakened France, Vichy regarded the French colonies as

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 125–127.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 126–7.

extremely important and sought in its empire the hope and reassurance of French power, which its subjugated and challenged position in the metropole afforded so little.⁸¹

The “National Revolution” exported to Indochina not only a cult of personality around Petain, the head of the Vichy government, but also its ideological framework. Decoux adapted Vichy’s essentialist and authoritarian ideology to the local context.⁸² Attempting to dissuade the local population from Japan’s messages of pan-Asian solidarity, Decoux’s administration drew parallels between the core tenets of Vichy’s National Revolution and the cultures of the colonized, now separated and categorized into Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian cultures. For example, the press began to draw parallels between the notion of the family within Confucian thought, associated with the Vietnamese, and the new Vichy slogan: “Work, Family, Homeland.”⁸³ As historian Christopher Goscha puts it, “Decoux stressed ‘Tradition’ and the idea of ‘discovering’ and ‘resurrecting’ the ‘True’ Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian patrimonies as part of a larger Indochinese one to be led by *la Mère Patrie*.”⁸⁴

Indeed, this new approach, predicated upon a strong essentialism and anti-assimilationism, emphasized separate identities more than ever among the groups that inhabited Indochina. The reformulated colonial project in Indochina stressed the idea of a federal bloc, within which “*petites patries*” (literally, “small homelands”) were supposed to coexist and thrive under colonial guidance of the “Motherland.”⁸⁵ Discourse and publications attempted to construct unified pasts and identities for the Annamese, Cambodian, and Laotian people. *Hymnes*

⁸¹ Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, 12–13.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 142–43.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸⁴ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 127. The word “Mère Patrie” means “motherland”; a term the colonial administration uses to designate the imperial metropole, seen as a parental figure to its colonies

⁸⁵ Sébastien Verney, *L’Indochine Sous Vichy : Entre Révolution Nationale, Collaboration et Identités Nationales, 1940-1945* (Paris: Riveneuve, c2012), 127.

et pavillons d'Indochine, a book published by the colonial government press, associated cultural symbols and even sovereigns with the three “*petites patries*,” in order to narrate an idealized history.⁸⁶ Fueling these local nationalisms, Vichy aimed to have local “monarchs” sway the population to regard the French positively.⁸⁷

In hindsight, it is not hard to imagine how this discourse might, against Vichy’s intentions, promote certain forms of anti-colonial nationalisms and budding identities hostile to the colonial Indochinese project. In fact, Decoux was the first French official to use the term “Vietnam,” thereby formulating a unified culture and population of Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina, when he declared: “Every mandarin must consider himself responsible for the destiny of Vietnam.”⁸⁸ Five years later, in 1947, as the First Indochina War raged on, it would become a forbidden word among the French forces, so as not to fan the fires of nationalism as promoted by the Communists. Additionally, historian Goscha posits that the instigation of Lao and Khmer nationalisms under Vichy when French officials employed Thai imperialism as a foil “must have triggered similar hostility towards the Viet.”⁸⁹ After all, Vietnamese imperialism had preceded French invasion, and in the preceding decades, under French aegis, the administration even in Cambodia and Laos was staffed majority with Vietnamese bureaucrats.⁹⁰

The coexistence of ethnic minorities with ethnic majorities became, then, a nexus of friction and conflicting claims, given the newly promoted sentiments of nationalism and unified ethnic histories. In fact, that ethnic minorities existed within territories seems to contradict the very idea of a unified identity and history, for they proved the existence of a divided territory.

⁸⁶ Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, 154.

⁸⁷ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 127.

⁸⁸ Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, 168.

⁸⁹ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 134–36.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

What did Vichy's visions of identity, patriotism, and colonial regime mean for ethnic minorities within each federated region of Indochina—in particular, for the Khmer in Cochinchina?

A discussion of French officials about King Sihanouk's planned visit to Cochinchina revealed the effects of Vichy's policies on ethnic relations. Propped up by the French administration, Sihanouk reigned over Cambodia in name; the Khmer population in Cochinchina, however, remained outside of his sovereignty. Vested, too, with Buddhist authority associated with Cambodian kingship, Sihanouk expressed the desire to visit Cochinchina and speak to the local Khmer population, in the context of a "religious visit." A concerned Governor of Cochinchina wrote to the High Commissioner of France in the Pacific, noting the risks that such a visit would reinforce the "particularistic sentiment of the Khmer of Cochinchina, who already tend not to recognize the authorities of Annamese functionaries." He also feared that the Annamese would interpret the visit as the French condoning moves to "associate, politically and territorially, Cochinchina to Cambodia."⁹¹ This exchange revealed French fears of the Khmer population being attached to Cambodia, despite their juridical status as subjects in Cochinchina.

Furthermore, the Governor warned, the visit would make "the Annamese functionaries feel attacked in their authority and prestige, vis-à-vis their administered Cambodian subjects." Indeed, the Governor of Cochinchina noted that "the administrations in [Cochinchinese] provinces [including Soc Trang Tay Ninh, Chau Doc...] are, save for some exceptions, taken on by the Annamese."⁹² This appeared to clash with Vichy's broader vision of a federal union with local patriotisms: giving each ethnicity a sense of empowerment and pride, by formulating a unified history and culture, all while ensuring a mutually beneficial coexistence within the

⁹¹ Letter from the Governor of Cochinchina to the High Commissioner of France in the Pacific, 24 June 1942, box F1-51, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

⁹² *Ibid.*

federal project of Indochina led by France. It confirmed that power had been distributed unequally among ethnic groups in Indochina—as it always had been. The Annamese functionaries remained possessive of their power. This situation within Cochinchina recalls Goscha's broader argument concerning the limits of Vichy's federalist vision through all of Indochina: "Decoux was suddenly asking Vietnamese allies to reverse, almost overnight, their formerly aggressive vision of Indochina, which had rarely included the Lao, Khmer, or ethnic communities, in order to work in 'solidarity' with their newly found western and highland brothers in the pursuit of a larger Indochinese Family."⁹³

Indeed, it was hard to promote the Khmer's coexistence in Cochinchina with the Vietnamese, when old divisive stereotypes about both groups still influenced the French's reinvented essentialism. Vichy's conceptions of ethnic groups thus contradicted the new political project of harmonious federalism, by providing grounds for budding antagonism. A series of reports on the provincial Vichy administration in Tay Ninh following recurrent inspections revealed how pre-existing French stereotypes categorized Khmer and Vietnamese. Dating to March 1944, the inspection report, composed on by inspector Renou, noted that the "Cambodian population in Tay Ninh [...] remains as it has been before the arrival of the Japanese: calm and perfectly indifferent to politics." A follow-up inspection in June 1944 described the Khmer in Tay Ninh as "uneducated, incapable of comprehending rules that are too complicated," and possessing a "simple mentality."⁹⁴

The Khmer continued to be conceived of as simple-minded, but politically obedient, in contrast with the Vietnamese who were cleverer, but also more susceptible to the sway of the

⁹³ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 133.

⁹⁴ Inspection reports, March 1944 and June 1944, box 12 HCI 13, Fonds du Haut Commissariat de France pour l'Indochine (here after HCI), ANOM.

Japanese. While the inspector also criticized some of the Vietnamese administrators for being corrupted and incapable, others were deemed excellent. From his analysis, he concluded that the bureaucratic organization in which the Vietnamese participated “is not made for [the Khmer].” The report recommended that, rather than subjecting the Khmer to the same training as the Vietnamese to become administrators of communes, the rules were bent and simplified for these less developed individuals.⁹⁵

These remarks recall the inequalities inherent in the Indochinese project, wherein Vietnamese were preferred as administrators and collaborators over other groups, even in Laotian or Cambodian-dominated territories.⁹⁶ These inequalities became salient as Vichy started preaching new local nationalisms that put all the groups within Indochina on equal grounds. Attempting to prevent pan-Asian collusion inspired by the Japanese, Vichy ended up kindling the flames of nationalistic sentiments, divisive and threatening to the federal Indochinese project.

Fragmentation, factions, sects

The meddling of the Japanese countervailed Vichy France’s “National Revolution.” Several local groups, religious and political, vied for power in the Mekong Delta. From 1943 onwards, as the tides of World War II began to turn against Japan, the tumult and conflict in Cochinchina took on an increasing intensity.

The Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, alongside a third local militarized group, the Binh Xuyen, began to arm themselves.⁹⁷ The arms race accelerated as groups stocked up on arms, supplies,

⁹⁵ Inspection report, June 1944, box 12 HCI 13, HCI, ANOM.

⁹⁶ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 25.

⁹⁷ Kevin Li, “Partisan to Sovereign: The Making of the Binh Xuyên in Southern Vietnam, 1945–1948,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (November 1, 2016): 140–87, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2016.11.3-4.140>. The Binh Xuyen is often described in older scholarship as a “criminal group,” but Li’s argument, which reflects the current

and means of transportation, preparing for an eventual struggle with the others.⁹⁸ Support from Japan meant that the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao could operate openly, whereas the ICP cadres had to maneuver through clandestine operations. The Communists had substantially fewer followers relative to the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, as reprisals on Communist-organized uprisings had crushed the Party's following, and as the process of converting peasants and re-convening old cadres met many hurdles. In Soc Trang, the lack of Khmer-speaking cadres hindered the Communists from reaching out to the Khmer, whereas Vietnamese peasants had already all converted to the Hoa Hao or the Cao Dai.⁹⁹ While the endeavor to convert Khmer peasants in Soc Trang proved that the Vietnamese Communists had considered the Khmer and the question of their inclusion, the practical failure in outreach demonstrated the lack of appeal to local Khmer.

The competition for power saw a sudden twist in 1945. After the Allies had liberated France, Japan unseated the French from Indochina on March 9th, 1945 in an attempt to prevent the return of Indochina to the hands of an Allied France. Disarming French troops, Japan granted formal independence to the states of Indochina. Emperor Bao Dai, the Vietnamese monarch that the French had previously endorsed, was put at the head of the throne of a Vietnamese government, but elections were up for grabs. As Indochinese politics dissolved into a new power vacuum, groups struggled even harder for access to power. The ICP organized itself into the Viet Minh front, a coalition of different parties dominated by Communists. The Hoa Hao and the Viet Minh even formed an alliance for a short while, but tension flared frequently.¹⁰⁰

understanding of the group, posits that the Binh Xuyen approximates a “partisan” group in Carl Schmitt’s definition—a group of political actors that resists and opposes the state.

⁹⁸ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 130.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 132–33.

In August, a short five months later, Japan surrendered as World War II came to an end. Swiftly, the Viet Minh took control, their troops entering Hanoi, followed by Saigon, then taking over rural areas. Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam on September 2nd, 1945 and formally created the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in an attempt to assert the Viet Minh's legitimacy as the one political force embodying the Vietnamese people. The Hoa Hao and Cao Dai had no choice but to combine their alliance, the United National Front, with the Viet Minh. Cooperation was difficult: Within the Viet Minh, the Communists maneuvered as to have the main say and to assign themselves the most important decision-making positions. In certain areas, members of the other groups saw their weapons confiscated, and some members found themselves arrested and incarcerated.¹⁰¹ The alliance with the Communists dissolved and sectarian warfare ensued, as the Hoa Hao began to retaliate.¹⁰²

The French returned in September 1945, however, attacking Saigon and forcing a Communist retreat. They found help from Chinese and British troops, who intervened and occupied respectively the north and south of the newly created Vietnam, further undermining the Viet Minh's authority. Nonetheless, the Viet Minh had stood out as the most powerful political group in Vietnam, a status that guaranteed them a seat at the negotiating table with the French and Chinese governments, the latter playing mediator. The negotiations resulted in an agreement on March 6th, 1946, in which France recognized a unified Vietnam—incorporating the previous colonies Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina—as a “free state” that nonetheless remained a part of

¹⁰¹ It appears that the violence from 1945 to 1947 by certain Communists in Cochinchina against rival groups was not always ordered or endorsed by ICP leadership in the north. The loose structure of the ICP/Viet Minh front meant that centralization was difficult and that the group was far from monolithic. Christopher Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army,” in *Naissance d'un Etat-Parti: Le Viêt Nam Depuis 1945 = The Birth of a Party-State: Vietnam since 1945*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2004), 343–45.

¹⁰² Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 137–38.

the Indochinese Federation.¹⁰³ In spite of this agreement, France created a provisional government of the Republic of Cochinchina, where they banned the Viet Minh.¹⁰⁴

This policy forced the Viet Minh to ally themselves with other groups, such as the Hoa Hao, in order to operate in the Delta. This move put a hold on hostilities among factions, if only for the short while.¹⁰⁵ As the Hoa Hao continued to arm itself, however, tension rose again and the Delta found itself mired in violence once more.

The Cochinchinese question

Despite the factional fights and fragmentation, marking a tumultuous ending to World War II in Indochina, the period also saw the nascent construction of contemporary Southeast Asian states. While *de facto* multiethnic, it would seem that these new states strove to delineate themselves as nation-states, based on a homogenous identity. The new Vietnam unified the previously divided regions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, where a majority of the population were Vietnamese. While the French's attempt at separating Cochinchina from the rest of Vietnam hindered this project, French documents reveal that the French also drew upon the notions of nation-states, ethnic identities, and self-determination to justify their intervention.

A note for the High Commissioner of France for Indochina on the question of ethnic minorities, published in April 1946, identified several ethnic minorities in territories dominated by the Khmer, Lao, or Vietnamese, including the Khmer who inhabited Cochinchina. The note brought up the notion of self-government, in order to criticize the hypocrisy of the newly founded states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: "The principles that Annamese, Cambodians,

¹⁰³ Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 347.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹⁰⁵ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 141.

and Laotians invoke to claim the right to govern themselves do not authorize them, however, to administer peoples that they have more or less subjugated.” At the same time, the document did not recommend that these states extend rights of self-government to the subjugated peoples within them, but rather that they “wait” for these minorities to reach a “necessary level of civilization to take their fates into their own hands.”¹⁰⁶

What would this waiting entail? In the opinion of the Judiciary Counselor who penned the note, the solution while waiting on minorities to become civilized would be a re-installment of French authority, for “only France seems qualified to [...] arbitrate fairly the racial conflicts that may arise.”¹⁰⁷ The note thus employed the idea of self-determination to argue that minority ethnic groups should not be governed by groups other than themselves—unless their rulers were to be French. Using this new concept of self-determination, which gained increased prominence after World War II, the French colonial administration defended a new, more progressive version of their civilizing mission and justified their return to Indochina.

In other documents, the French administration also propped itself up as a supporter of minority groups who sought self-determination, using it to justify their hold over Cochinchina. In a study on Indochina in 1946 published by French administration (unclear by which figure exactly), the writer stated that “a strong movement arose in Cochinchina, in favor of autonomy,” adding that “the Cochinchinese feel very close, in their aspirations, to their brothers of the race of Vietnam; yet they are also somewhat skeptical about the men of Hanoi, of a communist education, who might see in the rich provinces of the Mekong a potential colony to be exploited.” The language, underscoring the idea of a “race of Vietnam” close but separate from

¹⁰⁶ “Note for the High Commissioner of France for Indochina: Protection of Ethnic Minorities, Creation of an Autonomous Moi Territory,” 2 HCI 146, HCI, ANOM.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

“the Cochinchinese,” framed the inhabitants of Cochinchina as a distinct group whose self-determination France protected: “The Cochinchinese, thanks to France, will dispose of the full liberty to decide of their own fate”—whether it be to join Vietnam or to exist as a standalone state.¹⁰⁸

At the same time, the document identified Vietnam as a nation-state, organized around an ethnicity defined by language: “The term ‘Vietnam’ can be geographically defined as the territories where the majority of the population is of the Annamese-speaking race.” In light of the existence of ethnic minorities in great numbers in Cochinchina, there were potential difficulties in reconciling this definition of Vietnam with the idea of a Vietnamese Cochinchina. The document further highlighted the demands of a newly formed Cambodia, which, allegedly, was “hostile to any integration of Cochinchina into Vietnam” and “requested [France] to continue to defend them against [...] ‘Vietnamese imperialism.’”¹⁰⁹ When state formation was predicated upon the concentration of a homogeneous ethnic group, areas like Cochinchina, shared by a Vietnamese majority with an important Khmer minority, became problematic. The macro-political jostling between the states of Cambodia and Vietnam, with conflicting territorial claims, would have repercussions at the provincial and local level where these abstracted notions of belonging were confronted with practical factional fights for power.

From 1945 to 1946, the end of World War II segued into a war of decolonization that would last nearly a decade, and Vichy’s colonial and racial ideology dissolved into new postcolonial constructs of nation-states in Indochina. What did this mean for minorities like the

¹⁰⁸ Report on ethnic minorities in Indochina, box HCI 2, HCI, ANOM.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Khmer within Cochinchina? Claims for integration with one state or another emerged based on the presence of certain populations, and ethnic identities became more linked than ever to citizenship.

The events in Indochina during World War II, which included the intervention of the Empire of Japan, meant that by 1945, several armed groups—Communists, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai—were in fierce competition to exert sovereignty over the lands of the Mekong Delta. As the First Indochina War unfolded, these localized struggles for control, requiring the recruitment and involvement of local population, would intersect with ethnic-based notions of belonging in places like Chau Doc, Soc Trang, and Tay Ninh.

Chapter 3: Wartime Strategies

A precarious Cochinchinese state

Recurrent clashes between French and Viet Minh forces gradually wore down the accord of March 6th, 1946.¹¹⁰ Although talks between the two sides continued as the two delegations met in Fontainebleau, prospects for a final agreement became increasingly slim. To the Viet Minh's anger, the French about-faced: The High Commissioner, Thierry d'Argenlieu, organized a separation negotiation at Da Lat with Cochinchinese separatists. The move shattered the possibility of renewing talks with the Viet Minh, who interpreted the French's discussion with separatists as violating provisions in the March 6th accords that stipulated a unified Vietnam.¹¹¹

Realizing that it was now impossible to come to an agreement with the Communists, French politicians moved instead to negotiate with Bao Dai, the inheritor of the monarchical lineage of Vietnam. In 1948, assenting to Bao Dai's requests, France sponsored the creation of a Provisional Government of Vietnam, which became the State of Vietnam in 1949, headed by Bao Dai.¹¹² The proclamation of the new political entity produced new allegiances and hostilities, as groups fighting one another would realign with or against the Bao Dai's French-backed state.

The incipient conflict—the First Indochina War, to be followed by two more—operated on multiple levels. In the diplomatic field, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Government of Vietnam (later State of Vietnam) competed for exclusive sovereignty over Vietnam. On the ground in Cochinchina, the war involved many more belligerents. Armed

¹¹⁰ William M. Waddell, *In the Year of the Tiger: The War for Cochinchina, 1945-1951* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 21.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

¹¹² Brett Reilly, "The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945-1955," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3-4 (November 1, 2016): 103-39, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2016.11.3-4.103>.

groups fought off one another for control over parcels of lands, exerting sovereignty *de facto*, as “each group collected taxes, maintained armies, and operated moneymaking ventures separately from one another.”¹¹³

The Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao constituted two such groups. The Cao Dai had enjoyed protection from the Japanese over the course of World War II, but now found itself weakened compared to the pre-war era. In 1941, the French exiled Pham Cong Tac, the leader of the biggest Cao Dai sub-sect, to Madagascar on account of his support for the Japanese, thereby depriving the sect of crucial leadership. After the departure of Japanese forces, the Cao Dai, like most other local groups, allied itself with the Viet Minh in fighting the French. French forces overwhelmed the sub-sect previously led by Pham Cong Tac, however, and the latter opted to sign an agreement in June 1946. As the First Indochina War picked up, they served the French as auxiliary forces, in exchange for the return of Pham Cong Tac from Madagascar in August.¹¹⁴

As for the Hoa Hao, while their alliance with the Viet Minh in the first few years after World War II had been uneasy, it broke down irreconcilably after the assassination of Huynh Phu So. In 1947, the Viet Minh arranged a meeting with Huynh Phu So to discuss the numerous clashes between the two groups in the Mekong Delta. However, the meeting failed to reach a productive conclusion, and during So’s return to his home, the Viet Minh abducted him. Sparing little mercy, they tried him, cut his body in several pieces, and buried it in different places. A month later, So’s second-in-command, Tran Van Soai engaged the French in an alliance, lending the Hoa Hao troops as auxiliary forces.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Biggs, *Quagmire*, 130.

¹¹⁴ Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism : Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven, Conn. (Box 13A, New Haven 06520): Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, c1981), 43–44.

¹¹⁵ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 143–44.

In the first few years of the war, the tides thus shifted against the Viet Minh in Cochinchina. The French-backed government's new allies heightened the competition for territorial control, but driven by material interest, they forwent ideological goals. Only Viet Minh cadres and the French-backed authorities, preoccupied with the question of ideology and post-colonial political authority, sought to appeal to the Khmer populace with intention. This chapter will examine three provinces in Cochinchina, Tay Ninh, Chau Doc, and Soc Trang, as sites reflecting this wide variety of wartime strategies.

Utilitarian violence

While the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai originated as religious groups, and although the boundaries between the religious and the secular were never sharply distinct in Cochinchina, shifting alliances prompted increasingly utilitarian violence from the two groups. Not only did both religious organizations splinter into several sub-groups, especially after the deaths of a unifying leader (Le Van Trung in 1933 for the Cao Dai; Huynh Phu So in 1947 for the Hao Hao), but these smaller groups, which sometimes had widely divergent orientations, also fought one another as they sought to ensure their military and economic interests. No longer unifying followers around a religious leader, the two religious organizations passed instead under the control of military commanders during wartime, who focused more than ever on controlling power and resources.

Indeed, the number of Cao Dai troops increased over the course of the First Indochina War.¹¹⁶ The Cao Dai organization was however more concerned with protecting its own economic interests than consolidating military strength. The group's wide control over territories

¹¹⁶ Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism*, 44.

allowed it to funnel funds from the population, feeding new projects such as the construction of temples and financing officers' expenses. Corruption was rampant, but the administration of villages by the Cao Dai also ensured the continuous operations of social institutions, providing schooling and hospitals. This would prompt exodus toward Cao Dai-controlled areas, especially in Tay Ninh, the most holy center of the religion, where the population "almost doubled."¹¹⁷

This immigration to in Tay Ninh, however, rendered all the more glaring the emigration of the local Khmer population, who was marginalized while the province remained under the control of Cao Dai troops. A French report on Khmer in Tay Ninh, published in November 1948, showed that though there were 13,000 Khmer in the province in 1943, only 8,000 remained in 1948, a decrease of well over a third.¹¹⁸ While the welfare provided by Cao Dai institutions attracted a great number of peasants (presumably Vietnamese or Chinese), it did not seem to have the same effect on the Khmer. A letter from the provincial chief of Tay Ninh to the Government of South Vietnam in 1949 reveals that many Khmer had fled to forests, abandoning their old lands.¹¹⁹

In contrast with most peasants living in Cao Dai-controlled territory, who had their welfare provided for, the Khmer encountered many challenges, one of which was land ownership. The provincial chief of Tay Ninh noted that many administrative records were lost in the troubles, exacerbating the Khmer's situation, who possessed few written records of their land ownership. Following the war, the remaining records were primarily Vietnamese, for small land possessions. The lack of documentation, compounded by the insecurity and the takeover of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 46–47.

¹¹⁸ "Tay Ninh Province: Report on the Khmer minority of the province," November 1948, box F1-51, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹¹⁹ Letter from the Provincial Chief of Tay Ninh to the Governor of South Vietnam, 6 September 1949, box F1-51. Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

villages by soldiers, meant that many Khmer had to leave their lands and found themselves without property.¹²⁰

The provincial chief expressed confidence that the situation would fix itself. “Due to the overcrowding of Cambodians, the Vietnamese would leave this region by their own initiative—once peace and order is established,” he wrote, proposing no real solution to include the Khmer, no immediate compensation, nor any effort to accord them protection of their rights in the future. “The Cambodians making claims will retake their land, without any difficulty; or rather, they will resume the occupation without a title of the domains in their villages.”¹²¹

He also blamed the Viet Minh for the Khmer exodus, for their fight against the French and their auxiliary troops in the province. The provincial chief accused the Viet Minh of committing pillages against the Khmer when the Communists took control of sections in Tay Ninh and cut off contact between the Provisional Government of Vietnam’s central government and local provincial chiefs. However, his remark that the Khmer were reluctant to return to villages in Tay Ninh, “distrustful” of Cao Dai, was telling of a bad relationship between the Khmer and Cao Dai as well. “They [the Khmer] knew they could not ask for protection from the Cao Dai,” the provincial chief wrote, hinting that the Cao Dai committed violence against the Khmer.¹²² A big shift had taken place in Tay Ninh since the 1930s, when the Cao Dai oratory was renowned for proselytizing Khmer followers. The First Indochina War thus prompted the Cao Dai to privilege the use of armed forces over religious proselytizing to maintain power. The Khmer, once potential followers of the sect, now became collateral damage in the conflict.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Similarly to the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao transformed into a French-backed militia that was driven by its self-interest rather than a religious ideology. The death of Huynh Phu So ushered in an era of sectarian power struggles within the group, where different leaders commanded different factions and competed with one another. Violence escalated, as “none of the military leaders were interested in anything but their own self-aggrandizement, and none of the civilian leaders possessed Huynh Phu So’s ability to give them guidance or preach moderation.”¹²³

The province Chau Doc, the sect’s very place of origin, exemplified the brutality of its activities. Allied with the French, the Hoa Hao nonetheless went against their patrons’ recommendations by pillaging villages. A report penned by the provincial chief of Chau Doc took note of such pillages over March and April 1948. The chief noted that the damage reflected badly upon the French-backed government for their alliance with the Hoa Hao, an opportunity that “the Viet Minh did not miss to exploit.” The same report described the Viet Minh carrying out propaganda and persuading Khmer to join them or to join their allies, the Issaraks.¹²⁴ Founded in Bangkok in 1940, the Issarak unified “Cambodian bands that operated autonomously,” driven by their nationalistic opposition to the French but also by opportunities to make profits off of banditry.¹²⁵

The violence of the Hoa Hao factions was not restricted to Chau Doc, nor did it discriminate between Khmer and Vietnamese. The Hoa Hao would cross borders, going into villages in Cambodia to rob and loot. In some places, the local Khmer reacted by enrolling in the

¹²³ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, 164.

¹²⁴ Letter from the Provincial Chief of Chau Doc to the Director of Political Affairs, 28 October 1948, box F1-51, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹²⁵ The Issarak not only functioned as a nationalist militia—they are described to be similar to “local outlaws” in certain areas. Sometimes, it was the appeal of the latter aspect that drew recruits to the group, rather than its anti-colonial leanings. See Shawn McHale, “Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757-1954,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 380–81.

Hoa Hao movement, as a way of ensuring their survival and the protection of their property.¹²⁶ In others, the Cambodians who inhabited these areas, finding this plundering untenable, formed auto-defense groups to strike the Hoa Hao upon their entry.¹²⁷

The indiscriminate, profits-driven violence of the Hoa Hao thus produced a variety of strategies among the Khmer to respond pragmatically to local fighting and ensure their livelihood. The aforementioned situation in Chau Doc, where the Viet Minh found local support as a result of the Hoa Hao's brutal behavior, demonstrated the strategic disadvantage that the Hoa Hao brought about for the French, in a war that required maximizing one's alliances. As the splintering of religious sects into aggressive militia groups reflected negatively on their patrons, the French found themselves searching for ways to ensure relative peace between the fractured groups in Cochinchina, in order to legitimate their rule.

Mollifying the minorities

Pacifying and diminishing needless conflicts was a priority for the French. A letter in March 1946, from the Army's General Leclerc to the Political Counselor of the Federal Government, assured the latter that "the military Leadership devotes all efforts to stop the pillages and exactions. Appreciable results have already been noted, and incidents between Annamese and Cambodians are much less frequent."¹²⁸ Indeed, in the chaos of the return of the French, the Khmer not only were victims of violence, but some also committed massacres and pillages in late 1945 and early 1946 in certain areas against Vietnamese villagers, regardless of political orientations. The violence, according to historian Shawn McHale, stemmed from a

¹²⁶ Le Van Bay, "Report on my tour around Loeuk Dek and Kas-Thom", 8 July 1947, box 2 HCI 87, HCI, ANOM.

¹²⁷ "Notice – Hoa Hao Activities in Kandal, Cambodia," 17 November 1947, box 2 HCI 87, HCI, ANOM.

¹²⁸ Letter from the Army's General to the Political Counselor of the Federal Government, 16 March 1946, box 2 HCI 15, HCI, ANOM.

“concentration of localized grievances, partly linked to the French reoccupation of the delta”; there was for instance a correlation between Khmer tenancy and violence.¹²⁹ Seeking to regain control over the delta, French forces thus preoccupied themselves with reestablishing order, trying to contain violence and enlist the Khmer on their side, just as their rivals did the same.

In Chau Doc, to counteract the Viet Minh’s and Khmer Issarak’s propaganda and to the offset the disastrous publicity that resulted from the Hoa Hao’s violence, the provincial chief recommended the appointment of a Khmer administrative delegate in the region, “from the south of Vietnam, and if possible from the region itself.” His recommendation acknowledged the need to recognize and include the local Khmer in governance, in order to earn their allegiances when faced with competition from the Communists. Prioritizing the recruitment of Khmer, the chief even admonished a judge who had remarked on a “minimal gambling issue” about the current administrative delegate, a Khmer from the region. “It would be difficult to erase the disastrous effect [of these comments],” the chief wrote.¹³⁰ The chief’s dismissing of charges against key local Khmer illustrated the importance of earning favors from local Khmer, even if this meant overlooking these individuals’ misconduct.

The Soc Trang-Tra Vinh area, animated by Khmer militants and particularly prone to political competition during the war, provided yet another telling example of the French’s accommodation of the Khmer. Not only home to Son Ngoc Thanh, “a founder of modern Khmer nationalism,” Soc Trang also saw other Khmer activists partaking in political causes.¹³¹ As Son Ngoc Thanh’s reputation remained strong among Khmer in the area, his brother took up the mantle and advocated for the rights of the Khmer minority via the Party of the Khmer

¹²⁹ McHale, “Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations,” 373–77.

¹³⁰ Letter from the Provincial Chief of Chau Doc to the Director of Political Affairs, 28 October 1948, box F1-51, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹³¹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 21.

Minority.¹³² Local Khmer established the Party in Soc Trang and partook in its leadership, but French authorities also provided support. This official support constituted a channel of influence over the Party, as the government set boundaries and conditions: A report on the Khmer population in Soc Trang by the French-backed State of Vietnam, published in 1949, specified that the State of Vietnam would preserve the culture and beliefs of Khmer, but stipulated that any political action of the Khmer must happen under the aegis of the government of Vietnam and that the Khmer must contribute to the development of the state.¹³³ In other words, the Khmer of Soc Trang, and of Cochinchina, more generally, were to become Vietnamese citizens and must not promote Cambodian irredentism, a threat to the sovereignty of the nascent State of Vietnam.

The support of the government for the Party of Khmer minority thus encouraged greater political participation of the Khmer by giving them a voice in the governance of the new country. Indeed, the Party could issue suggestions and recommendations to ensure greater representation and rights for the Khmer. But this support also doubled as co-optation, a means to control the Khmer and to prevent any reform of the borders inherited from the French colonial empire, according to which Cochinchina constituted Vietnamese territory rather than Cambodian. The Khmer population was to blend into the population of the State of Vietnam, coexisting peacefully with others and promising loyalty to the State.

To prop up this project of bringing the Khmer population into the citizenry of the nascent state, the authorities also made efforts at political inclusion, creating “Khmer committees.” These committees operated at two administrative levels, province and village. They were assigned the

¹³² Handwritten note on Khmer political activities in Chau Doc, box F1-46, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹³³ “Report on the Khmer population in the Soc Trang province,” 1 February 1949, box F1-51, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

missions of “ensuring harmony between Khmer and Vietnamese,” “participating to the making of the future status of the country,” and “maintaining spiritual and cultural relationship with Cambodia.”¹³⁴ While the last mission gestured at the attachment that the Khmer population might feel towards the state of Cambodia, the committees’ main purpose was to ensure coexistence and stability within the State of Vietnam, as the first two missions showed.

These strategies to pander to the Khmer population prompted different reactions from local Khmer and Vietnamese population, shedding light on feelings of tension and rivalries. A French-written report on the Khmer minority in Cochinchina described the Khmer committees as building up “an administration truly independent of the Vietnamese administration.”¹³⁵ Despite the goal of “harmony,” the groups did not collaborate, but maintained separate operations. In trying to create an institution that would ensure the interests of the Khmer, the French ended up creating committees that dissociated the Khmer from their coexistence with the Vietnamese. While the report added that committees resulted in a “modus vivendi” between Vietnamese and Khmer, underneath the respite in violence lay tension and jealousy: Vietnamese individuals consulted by the study expressed concerns that the Khmer “were not apt to govern themselves.”¹³⁶ The committees in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh were finally dissolved by 1948.

As the local Vietnamese pushed back on Khmer-led committees, the Party of the Khmer Minority pressed for more rights and benefits. Taking advantage of its position as a mediator between the government and the Khmer population, it initiated negotiations. In a letter from the Party President to the provincial chief of Soc Trang, the Party President claimed that security conditions around the fields were worsening, leading to food scarcity, and requested

¹³⁴ “Study on the Khmer minority in Cochinchina,” 30 October 1948, box F1-48, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

reinforcements to bolster security. He weaved a warning into the stated grievances, expressing his desire to avoid a situation where the Khmer would have “no choice but collaborate with subversive actors,” i.e. the Viet Minh.¹³⁷ The word choice in the letter is deferential, presenting the Khmer as subordinate and awaiting the help of the government, but the ultimatum prescribing collaboration with the Viet Minh hinted at a threat. Trying to pressure the government for support, the Party President played up the rivalry between the Viet Minh and the State of Vietnam. The attempt ultimately failed: The study of the Khmer in Cochinchina under the Provisional Government of Vietnam dismissed the Party President’s claim of a possible “necessary collaboration” with the Viet Minh as an empty threat, when the majority of Khmer appeared indifferent politically.¹³⁸ The very inaccuracy of the threat, however, confirmed the intention of the President of the Party of Khmer Minority to bargain by exaggerating the threat of Communist competition, taking advantage of the proliferation of competing groups.

Indeed, just as the French created room for negotiations by including and co-opting Khmer populations in different provinces, the Communists were similarly aware of the need to build alliances to consolidate control. Posing a threat to the French, the Viet Minh thus became a bargaining chip for the Khmer in Soc Trang—an alternative on a competitive battleground.

Communist invitations

The ICP—the real face of the “Viet Minh,” in name a coalition of parties but in reality dominated by the Communists—was marked by two contradictory tendencies. On one hand, its internationalist credentials meant the organization ultimately targeted the liberation of the entire

¹³⁷ Letter from the President of the Party of Khmer Minority to the Provincial Chief of Soc Trang, 5 October 1948, box F1-46, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹³⁸ “Study on the Khmer minority in Cochinchina,” 30 October 1948, box F1-48, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

colony of Indochina—comprising all three states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. On the other, logistically speaking, the organization was dominated by Vietnamese members, and its main terrain of action remained Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, the federated regions that came to constitute Vietnam.

Due to its proximity to Cambodia, Cochinchina was a meeting place of revolutionary Vietnamese and Khmer, and the Viet Minh helped create several Khmer Issarak committees in Cochinchina as to promote Khmer membership and collaboration. These committees, following sufficient training, were supposed to move to Cambodia and replace Viet Minh troops in taking revolutionary action there.¹³⁹ That said, the tension between these attempts at recruitment and the reserved Khmer support in Cochinchina for the Viet Minh would hinder its goals of an internationalist, multi-ethnic front.¹⁴⁰

Events in Cambodia did however promote Khmer-Vietnamese collaboration in Cochinchina at the beginning of the war. As they had done in Vietnam, the Japanese put an end to French rule in Cambodia and put native politicians into power. Son Ngoc Thanh was made Prime Minister, but the reality of an independent Cambodia was short-lived. In October the same year, the French returned, removed, and exiled Son Ngoc Thanh, and put King Sihanouk on the throne. While Son Ngoc Thanh was arrested, several of his close allies successfully fled to Cochinchina and joined forces with the ICP.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Security Services for the High Commissioner of Indochina, “Note on the Political and Administrative Organization of the Viet Minh in Cambodia,” December 1952, box 65493, GGI, ANOM.

¹⁴⁰ While the paper uses the singular designation “the Viet Minh,” it evaluates not a monolithic organization, but a loose structure of groups organized around the same ideological leanings and goals. Its top-down, ideological orientations (such as multi-ethnic internationalism) are implemented through semi-autonomous, localized committees and units. The Viet Minh not only lacks coordination between northern and southern committees, but within forces in Cochinchina, units also function fairly autonomously. See discussion of Nguyen Binh in Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army,” 336.

¹⁴¹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 51.

One such figure was Pach Chhoeun, who had been Son Ngoc Thanh's Minister of the Economy. Accompanying Son Ngoc Thanh's wife, he met with Viet Minh cadres in Soc Trang. With their help, Pach Chhoeun created a Khmer Issarak committee, seeking to recruit the Khmer in Cochinchina to provide support for revolutionary activities directed at Cambodia. By April 1946, only a few months later, Pach Chhoeun was discouraged by the difficulties of confronting the French, who expanded their control in Soc Trang, and abandoned his endeavor. He was also disenchanted with Viet Minh cadres, sensing that they were unenthusiastic about investing in an offense in Cambodia.¹⁴² Other Cambodians took up the mantle, however; as of 1950, as a monthly French report on Soc Trang specified, a majority of indigenous administrators in the province sided with the Viet Minh, persuaded by the propaganda of "many" Issarak committees.¹⁴³

That the Khmer Issarak committees drew from Viet Minh help and recruited from the Cochinchinese population of Khmer, showed that the Viet Minh looked to the Khmer population in Cochinchina to organize a revolution in Cambodia. An ethnic link was thus drawn between the population of Khmer ethnicity—even if they were inhabitants of Cochinchina—and the state of Cambodia, indicative of a Cambodia conceived as a nation-state in the eyes of the ICP, a nation-state to which the individuals of Khmer ethnicity held a privileged relationship. This contrasted in some ways with the French approach in pandering to the Khmer in Cochinchina. While aiming to provide and honor "cultural traditions" of the Khmer, the French made a point of assigning Vietnamese citizenship to the Khmer population in Cochinchina, in an act that bound them to the State of Vietnam.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 51–52.

¹⁴³ Security Services of the High Commissioner of South Vietnam, "Monthly Report," 26 November 1950, box 14 HCI 34, HCI, ANOM.

While the outreach of different Viet Minh units to the Khmer population in Cochinchina was effective enough to pose a threat to the French's rule and aspirations of pacifying and assembling all of Cochinchina's population, by no means were the Khmer in the Mekong Delta unanimously loyal or even sympathetic to the Viet Minh's cause. After all, surviving came first. This sometimes meant collaborating with whichever faction dominated in a region. Furthermore, Viet Minh cadres' attitude toward the Khmer did not always align with their ideology of Indochinese fraternity. Pach Chhoeun's decision to abandon the Issarak committee, for instance, was based at least in part on his perception of tepid support from the Viet Minh.¹⁴⁴

More generally, several reports from French forces gave accounts of violence by Viet Minh soldiers in order to pressure the Khmer in Cochinchina to join the Communist side. Two separate French studies on rebel movements in Cambodia divulged that violence was particularly intense in early 1947 in Cochinchina due to the Viet Minh's recruitment efforts, forcing some Khmer peasants to "enlist in the rebellious ranks while others go to seek refuge in Cambodia."¹⁴⁵ This aroused resentment and vengeance from the Khmer side. In Soc Trang, while the Communists took control as early as 1945 following Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence and regained a firm footing and re-established a network of influence by 1950, French troops returned and controlled a number of villages in 1946.¹⁴⁶ During this period of French control, as narrated by an report on the Khmer population in Soc Trang published in 1949 by the French, the Khmer engaged in substantial violence against Vietnamese in 1946, regardless of political affiliation: "They redirected to *all* Vietnamese the resentment that they had been harboring

¹⁴⁴ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 52.

¹⁴⁵ Security Services for the High Commissioner of Indochina, "Note on the Political and Administrative Organization of the Viet Minh in Cambodia," December 1952, box 65493, GGI, ANOM.

¹⁴⁶ Security Services of the High Commissioner of South Vietnam, "Monthly Report," 26 November 1950, box 14 HCI 34, HCI, ANOM.

against the Viet Minh; we had to severely repress the excesses of this violence.”¹⁴⁷ French officials accused the Viet Minh of having perpetrated violence against the Khmer (burning pagodas, killing bonzes) in 1945.

In addition to the violence, another problematic element in the relationship of the Viet Minh to the Khmer was the callous eye with which certain Vietnamese Communist cadres saw potential Khmer recruits and the Khmer population as a whole. The aforementioned French study on rebel movements in Cambodia quotes the language allegedly used in Communist reports to speak about the Khmer, taking a jab at the contradiction between the disdain felt by the Communists and their outreach to the Khmer: “the ‘inertia’ and the ‘incapacity’ of the Khmer, their ‘incomprehension’ with regards to revolutionary ideals and techniques.”¹⁴⁸ While not always declared explicitly, this condescension towards the Khmer was also implied by the composition of the leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party, which did not improve from the last decade and remained predominantly Vietnamese.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, even when the ICP dissolved into national communist parties for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in 1951, the number of Vietnamese members outnumbered that of Khmer members by three within the Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party.¹⁵⁰ From 1951 onwards, as discovered by the French, educational committees were organized in Cochinchina where Khmer Party members were “educated,” then sent to Cambodia for their mission. The very organization of this training, under the leadership

¹⁴⁷ “Report on the Khmer population in the Soc Trang province,” 1 February 1949, box F1-51, Phủ Thủ hiến Nam Việt, NA2.

¹⁴⁸ Security Services for the High Commissioner of Indochina, “Note on the Political and Administrative Organization of the Viet Minh in Cambodia,” December 1952, box 65493, GGI, ANOM

¹⁴⁹ Security Services for the High Commissioner of Cambodia, “Study on Rebellious Movements in Cambodia, 1942-1952,” 10 August 1952, box 65498, GGI, ANOM.

¹⁵⁰ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 82–83.

of Vietnamese Viet Minh cadres, and located in Cochinchina rather than Cambodia, suggested a hierarchy in revolutionary understanding between the Khmer and the Vietnamese.¹⁵¹

That said, Viet Minh members and the French authorities remained the only groups who acknowledged the existence of the Khmer in Cochinchina during the war, and thought about appealing to them in order to forge alliances. Despite the Viet Minh's at-times strained relationship with the Khmer, documentation also showed internal protocol regulating cadres' behavior towards Khmer cadres, which suggested that certain Viet Minh units prioritized the maintenance of good relationships. French troops discovered and translated a Viet Minh guide titled "Approach to the Khmer in Soc Trang" and dated July 7th, 1951. The document proposes measures that Vietnamese Communists were to undertake in order to appeal and recruit more Khmer cadres, such as "improve the lives of Cambodians," "define a consistent line towards Khmer cadres," and "show Cambodians the real face of our enemy." Analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the current Viet Minh strategy, the author underscored that "95% of all Khmer [in Soc Trang] are peasants," which facilitated the Viet Minh's appeal to their "revolutionary spirit." He also referred to the "just politics of solidarity between the Khmer-Vietnamese peoples adopted by [the] Party" as a reason for the "trust" that the Khmer had in the Party.¹⁵² By highlighting the points of commonality between Vietnamese cadres and the Khmer, the guide offered a strategy for the Viet Minh to court the Khmer residents of Soc Trang.

The language of the guide itself, however, distanced the party from the Khmer: the use of the pronoun "we" to designate Party members contrasted with the large denominator of "the Cambodians," at no point referred to in the collective "we." The only exception was a section of

¹⁵¹ Security Services for the High Commissioner of Cambodia, "Study on Rebellious Movements in Cambodia, 1942-1952," 10 August 1952, box 65498, GGI, ANOM.

¹⁵² French translation of "Approach to the Khmer in Soc Trang," 7 July 1951, box 728, HCl, ANOM.

the guide addressing internal party protocol with regards to Khmer cadres, when both Vietnamese and Khmer cadres were spoken of in the third person, as cadres distinguished by their ethnicity. The rest of the guide spoke of the Khmer as a third party—while the Vietnamese, implicitly, identified with the writer.

The guide's first section opened with five remarks from the Southern Central Direction of the Viet Minh, with regards to the Khmer in Soc Trang. These five remarks mostly addressed strategic advantages in including and recruiting the Khmer: their proportion in the province, their situation in French-controlled zones, and their residence in strategically advantageous locations. Combined with the distancing language of the guide, it appeared there was a strong utilitarian bent to the recommended strategy towards the Khmer in Soc Trang—one that underscored the strategic advantages of courting the Khmer, rather than the ideological grounding in Khmer-Vietnamese solidarity, mentioned all but once in the guide.¹⁵³

Furthermore, though the document addressed the population of the Khmer residing in Soc Trang in particular, it sought to mobilize this Khmer population for the cause of Cambodia's independence. "The liberation movement in Cambodia have stimulated their patriotic love and their racial spirit," the author wrote about the Khmer when enumerating the advantages the Viet Minh had relative to the French in appealing to the Khmer.¹⁵⁴ The Viet Minh author considered the Khmer residing in Soc Trang, a province of Cochinchina, as affiliated instead with the state of Cambodia. The terms "patriotic love" and "racial spirit" appeared to confirm that the author conceived of an ethnic nation-state in Cambodia. Contrary to the French authorities in Cochinchina, who sought to consolidate the Khmer in Cochinchina as citizens of the State of

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Vietnam of Khmer ethnicity, Viet Minh committees in Cochinchina did not hesitate to tug at the Khmer's sense of ethnic belonging and the projection of Cambodia as an ethnic nation-state to draw them to the cause.

Cambodians, Cambodia

Indeed, the issue of national belonging for the Khmer in Cochinchina became thornier than ever over the course of the First Indochina War. Belligerents were not merely fighting for allies and territories during the military conflict; they also fought to defend projects for statehood, supporting the State of Vietnam, or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Governments claimed the Khmer were or were not bound to them, in a bid for power and subjects.

Several high-profile politicians affiliated with the Cambodian kingdom called attention to the Khmer population in Cochinchina to oppose the unification of Cochinchina with Annam and Tonkin to form Vietnam, as per the agreement of March 6th, 1946, and to justify instead the incorporation of Cochinchina into Cambodia. Son Ngoc Thanh, who had been removed by 1947 by the French authorities as Prime Minister of Cambodia, nonetheless composed a note to defend the rights of Cambodia over Cochinchina. Narrating an ancient history of Khmer settlement in the Mekong Delta, he portrayed Cambodia as the rightful inheritor of the land, and warned of a potential, Vietnamese-driven “expulsion of Cambodians in Cambodia [...] as it had been in Europe with the Hungarians.” “This is a question of life and death for the Cambodians in

Cambodia,” he asserted, before emphasizing one last time that Cochinchina should be returned to the Cambodian state and that the March 6th, 1946 agreement should be revised.¹⁵⁵

Similarly, the Cambodian Head of State, King Sihanouk, lent his support to the irredentist cause of reclaiming Cochinchina. In a letter from his representative to the Minister of France of Overseas Territory in 1949, the writer claimed, like Son Ngoc Thanh had done before him, that “Cambodia has as many, if not even more rights than Vietnam over [the territory of Cochinchina].” Bringing up the topic of the Khmer in Cochinchina, Sihanouk’s representative implicitly affirmed the links between the state of Cambodian and these Khmer when he claimed that “the Khmer minority [...] will be exposed to a slow but certain death” were Cochinchina to be incorporated into Vietnam. The letter continued to present the Cambodian state as the rightful defender of the Khmer in Cochinchina. The writer noted that these Khmer had always been loyal to France, but by France’s “betrayal” by signing the March 6th, 1946 accord, which took away protection for these minorities, the Khmer in Cochinchina now found themselves forced to collaborate with the dangerous Viet Minh.¹⁵⁶

Despite the requests, pleas, and even threats for reconsideration of the March 6th, 1946 agreement by representatives of the Cambodian state, France dismissed these demands. Backing Bao Dai’s government of the State of Vietnam, France sought instead to accommodate the Khmer in Cochinchina as subjects of this government. A study produced under the High Commissioner of France for Indochina in 1946 proposed the creation of an autonomous status for ethnic minorities within the new-founded states of Indochina: For the Khmer in Cochinchina, this status would warrant respect by the administration for the Khmer’s specific mores, distinct

¹⁵⁵ Son Ngoc Thanh, “Note on the rights of Cambodia over Cochinchina,” 16 June 1947, box 2 HCI 85, HCI, ANOM.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from the Representative of the King of Cambodia to the Minister of French Overseas Territories, 15 March 1949, box 2 HCI 286, HCI, ANOM.

from the majority's, for the hierarchy within Khmer societies, and for the employment of the minority in administrative positions. Their citizenship would remain Vietnamese.

A note under the High Commissioner's office in 1949 seemed to confirm the implementation of what had been suggested in the aforementioned study. The author affirmed that the Khmer residing in Vietnam were "equal" to the Vietnamese, citing their employment in local councils. If anything, according to the author, the few distinctions between Vietnamese and Khmer worked in the latter's favor: They disposed of access not only to Vietnamese-language schools, but also special Khmer-language schools, and their pagodas were specially funded.¹⁵⁷ This rosy portrait of the equal legal status of Khmer and Vietnamese within Vietnam was often course belied by incidents such as the aforementioned dispossession of lands of the Khmer in Tay Ninh.

While it is impossible to survey how the Khmer in Cochinchina, as a large and diverse group, felt about their belonging and status, drawn between several state-building projects, at least a few members of the group felt drawn politically to Cambodia. In 1951, a group of Khmer living in Tra Vinh, where Buddhist pagodas had been attacked and pillaged by a Christian troop, wrote a complaint directed at the government of Phnom Penh. That the Khmer in Cochinchina reached out to the Cambodian government rather than the Vietnamese authorities (be it the French-backed State of Vietnam or the proclaimed Democratic Republic of Vietnam, represented by the Viet Minh) indicated that they considered themselves Cambodian subjects despite living outside of it, maintaining a relationship to their extra-territorial sovereign via the links of their ethnicity. This incident was far from exceptional, as the Cambodian government frequently

¹⁵⁷ "Note on the current situation of Cambodians in South-Vietnam," 14 September 1949, box 2 HCI 146, HCI, ANOM.

addressed the State of Vietnam about the Khmer of Cochinchina suffering various ill treatments, demanding the protection of its “nationals.”¹⁵⁸

Time and time again, the French-backed State of Vietnam would reject these demands and remind the Cambodian government that the Khmer of Cochinchina were Vietnamese, not Cambodian nationals. Towards the end of the war, it would seem that the Cambodian government had somewhat given up on the cause, daunted by the adamant refusal of the French to side with their case. In 1953, as a group of Khmer in Cochinchina protested their conscription in the Vietnamese army, the Government of Cambodia encouraged them to nonetheless accept this duty imposed on them by Vietnam.¹⁵⁹

It was important to note that the Viet Minh-led DRV, too, considered the Khmer born in Cochinchina (or in any of the territory it proclaimed to rule over) to be Vietnamese nationals, as per the Decree no. 53, signed by Ho Chi Minh in October 1945: “Article three turned ‘ethnic minorities residing in the *pays* of the ‘Tho, Man, Muong, Nung, Kha, Lolo, etc’ and with ‘fixed residence in Vietnamese territory’ into ‘Vietnamese citizens’.”¹⁶⁰ The attitude of Viet Minh forces in different provinces of Cochinchina, however, did not appear to reflect any concern for upholding this decree, as they frequently fueled Khmer patriotism towards Cambodia in order to recruit the Khmer into revolutionary causes. Of course, it would hardly be the only instance where local Viet Minh forces in Cochinchina diverged from orders or decrees it received from Hanoi; conflicts between diplomacy-minded orders in the north and pragmatic warfare concerns in the south were frequent.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Letter from the Political Counselor to the French Superintendent in South-Vietnam, 5 October 1951, box 728, HCI, ANOM.

¹⁵⁹ “Note to the General, Commander-in-Chief, on the Khmer minority of South Vietnam,” 2 February 1954, box 10 H 282, Fonds d’Indochine, Service historique de la Défense.

¹⁶⁰ Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, 141.

¹⁶¹ Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army,” 340.

One may indeed surmise that the situation of the Viet Minh in Cochinchina did not permit the same luxuries as it did the French: While the French-backed government dominated over Cochinchina, the Viet Minh were fighting an uphill battle. In Cochinchina, for a good duration of the war, the Viet Minh sought to overthrow—not build—a state. The relationship built with the Khmer by Viet Minh cadres was perhaps utilitarian, meant to get the Viet Minh all the advantages and allies they could get in a difficult war, rather than remaining ideologically consistent. The model of citizenship that the State of Vietnam had left in its wake, one that appeared consistent with the nationality decree endorsed by the DRV, would shape the fate of the Khmer for years to come. Despite the model of a nation-state that Vietnam and Cambodia both appeared to aspire to, the Khmer in Cochinchina became more entrenched in their status as Vietnamese citizens. A citizenship that, oftentimes, did not confer the equality it promised.

Conclusion

The defeat of the French army at the battle of Dien Bien Phu against the Viet Minh marked the end of the First Indochina War. Shortly thereafter, the Geneva Accords were signed, dividing Vietnam into two: the north, above the 17th parallel, controlled by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; the south, below the 17th parallel, ruled by the State of Vietnam. There was little respite, however, for another war commenced between the two states, this time with the intervention of the United States.¹⁶²

The evolving status of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta over the two decades leading up to 1954 would shape the battleground for years to come. Over this period, relationships between Khmer and Vietnamese shifted toward more instrumental, opportunistic interactions, as factional skirmishes multiplied during the war. Local conditions dictated strategies: At times, Vietnamese and Khmer associated with one another; at others, confrontations predominated. Ideology mattered less than survival.

However, as diverse as these interactions were, actors in the Mekong Delta overall reinforced rigid differences between Khmer and Vietnamese from 1930 to 1954. Although Albert Sarraut's policy of Franco-Annamese collaboration during the colonial era was divisive, Khmer and Vietnamese nonetheless intermingled in Cochinchina in the 1930s, in locations that ranged from religious oratories to revolutionary meeting points. The Vichy era saw a radical reformulation of identities that essentialized and entrenched ethnic distinctions, problematizing the place of the Khmer within a majority-Vietnamese polity. The model of the ethnic nation-state guided national reconfigurations over the First Indochinese War. While utilitarian violence in the conflict prompted the Khmer to adopt varying strategies, the political chaos motivated the French

¹⁶² Brocheux, *Indochine, La Colonisation Ambiguë*, 362–63.

and the Viet Minh actors in the conflict to search for allegiances, such as by reaching out to the Khmer. These efforts to appeal to the Khmer adopted an increasingly “ethnonationalist” formulation of identities.¹⁶³

The end of the First Indochinese War offered no real resolution to the thorny situation of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. As the Second Indochinese War began, the United States, sought the help of the Khmer ethnic minority against the Viet Minh, a strategy not unlike that of the French.¹⁶⁴ In the 1970s Khmer Rouge attacks on the Vietnamese borders, motivated by a “desire to ‘take back’ the lower Mekong” inhabited by a Khmer population, would contribute to the Third Indochinese War.¹⁶⁵ The existence of the Khmer minority within the borders of a post-1945 Vietnamese state appeared an impossible incongruence: Either the state, or the Khmer must be unraveled. Though the Vietnamese government today claims to accommodate the Khmer in the Mekong Delta as Vietnamese citizens, just as the French authorities did in the 1940s, in reality, no one has found a way to truly integrate these inside-outsiders.

¹⁶³ McHale, “Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations,” 384–85.

¹⁶⁴ Thomas L. Ahern, “CIDG and the Cambodian Minority,” in *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001), 104–9.

¹⁶⁵ McHale, “Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations,” 386.

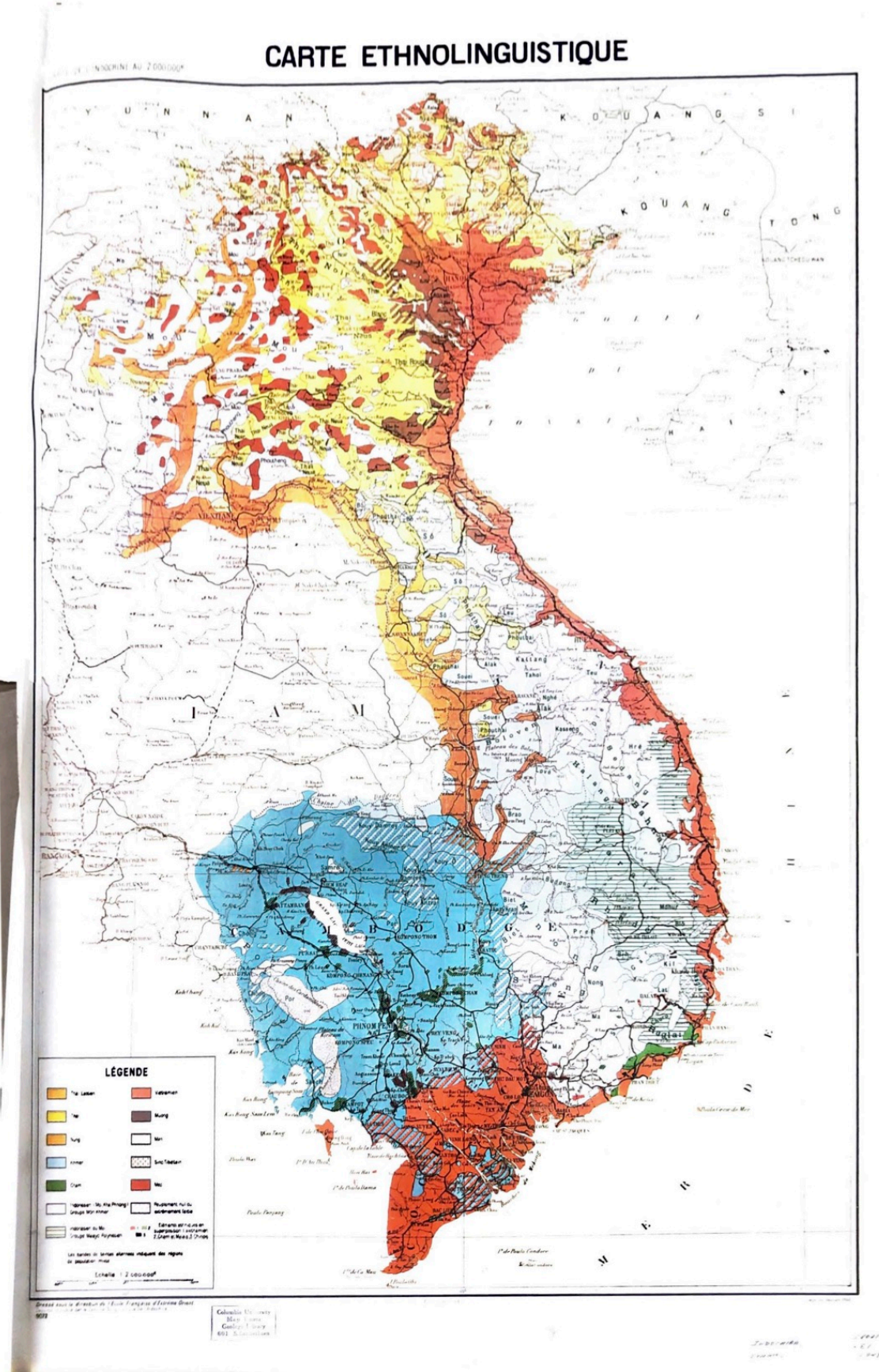
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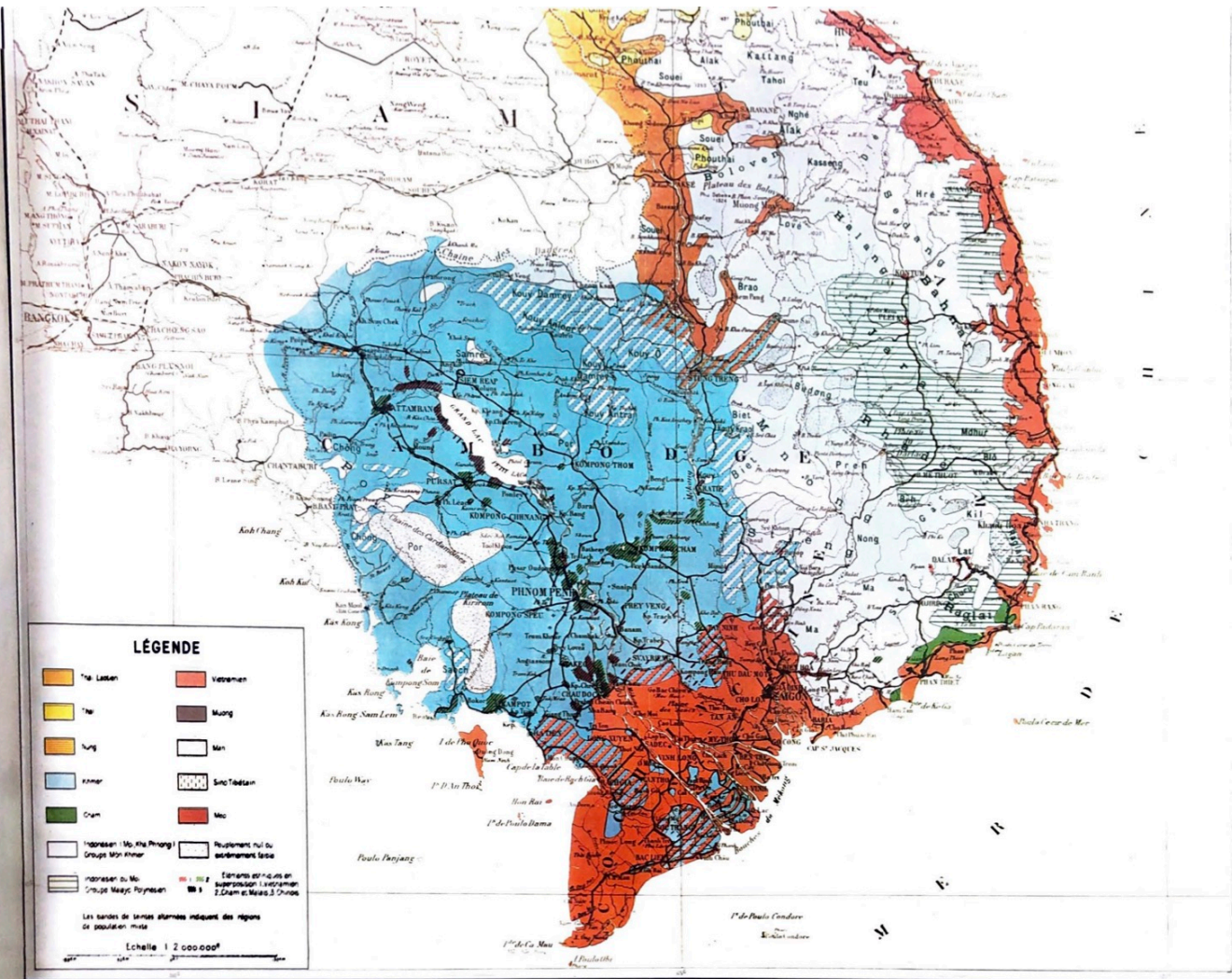
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Appendix 1: Map of Cochinchina's roads, 1926. (Carte routière de la Cochinchine dressée par le Service des Travaux publics, 1926).

Appendix 2.a.: Ethnolinguistic map of Indochina, 1949. (Service géologique de l'Indochine,



Carte Ethnolinguistique de l'Indochine, 1:2000000.) Light blue and orange indicate respectively the Khmer and the Vietnamese as ethnolinguistic groups.



Appendix 2.b.: A closer look at the lower portion of the Ethnolinguistic map.

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