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**‘DUST BENEATH THE MIST’: STATE AND  
FRONTIER FORMATION IN THE CENTRAL  
HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM, THE 1955-61  
PERIOD**

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**March 2006**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy of Political Science**

# STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY



I declare that this thesis is my own original work and all sources used have been duly acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stan B-H Tan", positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

Stan B-H Tan

# **WORD COUNT**

I declare that the main text of this thesis consists of 99,967 words.

Stan B-H Tan



## PREFACE

I began studying the Vietnamese language in 1995 while doing my undergraduate studies in the Southeast Asian Studies Program at the National University of Singapore. In 1997, I conducted my first fieldwork in Vietnam after completing an intensive Vietnamese language course in Ho Chi Minh City earlier that year. The fieldwork was carried out in Dong Thap province of the Mekong Delta region. While I was able to conduct the interviews in Vietnamese by myself, I still needed much help when I transcribed the recorded interviews. By the time I went up to the Central Highlands, specifically Dak Lak province, to conduct fieldwork for my master's thesis in late 1998, I was already quite adept at reading, speaking and writing in the Vietnamese language. In the highlands, however, I was confronted by other aspects of the language barrier. These were namely: the convergence of different regional accents of the language (generally categorized as north, south, and central) on the frontier; the 'variants' of the Vietnamese language spoken by some local highlanders; and the plethora of highlander languages. I soon got used to this rich variety of the Vietnamese language (but not so when it comes to highlander languages such as Ede or Jarai). At present, I have a tendency to speak in a mixed accent, which my Vietnamese friends termed '*giong thap cam*'. I was not alone when speaking in this accent. Many of the Vietnamese people who live in the highlands that I know actually have a similar accent. There is no mistaking the fact that the person speaks in a mainly northern, central, or southern accent, but it is also quite obvious that the accent is usually 'localized' in the context of the highlands frontier.

I still recall my initial thoughts when I first went to the Central Highlands to conduct fieldwork. Traveling along National Highway 14, which cuts across Binh Duong and Binh Phuoc provinces before entering Dak Lak, I was struck by the contrasting scenes going uphill. More significantly, at that point in time, I felt rather disturbed when I observed that the landscape on both sides of the road consisted of cleared lands, recently planted coffee or rubber trees, almost stereotypical clusters of frontier residences inhabited mainly by the Kinh people. The mesmerizing landscape of the forested hills and highlanders beautifully portrayed in the books written by ethnographers were gone. I identified this scene I saw as the retreat and subordination of the old inhabitants in the face of state formation on an expanding frontier.

I would soften my stance as I spent more time living and conducting research in the highlands. From the initial pulses of injustice I felt for the old inhabitants at the hands of the newcomers and the expanding state, I was soon confronted by the fact that many of these newcomers to the frontier were not out to 'dispossess' the highlanders. Many were there to realize their hopes of a better life; and many came to realize this objective via agriculture. The engraving on the tablet of a makeshift grave that I came upon (in 1999), which belonged to an ethnic Nung, is perhaps illustrative of this frontier dynamic.<sup>1</sup> Engraved in Han characters, it says

到此生黄金  
未得黄金  
却得土地葬身

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<sup>1</sup> Field notes, Dak Lak province, Vietnam, July 1999.

Translated to English, it simply means 'I came here to plant gold, yet to get rich but I at least found a piece of land to bury my body'. In the late 1990s, many farmers in the Central Highlands got rich by planting coffee, thanks to the booming international coffee market. As a result, many people from other parts of Vietnam began migrating to the Central Highlands, hoping to find a better life by planting coffee. Planting coffee, for many in the Central Highlands, was literally 'planting gold'. Planting coffee, or in fact any agricultural crop, is a long-term investment. Common sense tells us that agriculture expansion required a certain element of stability that cannot be sustained in an environment of perpetual conflict. And conflict was definitely not the sole characteristic defining the rise of an agrarian frontier.

I was also confronted by my observations of how officials went about their jobs. Many were more than willing to soil their feet, see to the fact that the job gets done, and attend to the concerns of the people within the jurisdiction of their job scopes. When I first presented my request in 1999 to study the knowledge and marketing networks of pioneer coffee farmers, district authorities immediately pointed me to the direction of an out-of-the-way settlement. What is so significant about this decision was that the field site they recommended was a free-migrant settlement. There were concerns about my safety and whatever rather insalubrious things I might find out concerning land disputes, ethnic conflicts or state-society disputes. But officials were more than willing to permit me to live in that village to conduct my study. They were also interested in understanding how they could help these people improve their lives.

There were reciprocal sentiments among the settlers, too. They were not just trying to escape the control of the state. One settler told me,

*...Life here, I can see that the state has put up some plans in the future for expansion in the cultivation of cash crops and coffee. The state is not going to forcefully chase us away; it will help us one way or another in our cultivation [my emphasis]. When an incident such as this happens (he was bitten by a snake a few weeks ago), it is really your fate or ill-fortune...Back then, I thought I had only a twenty percent chance of surviving the ordeal; the other eighty being that I am unable to bear with the pain. I was extremely sad. I have only a few siblings; my wife and my son, my wife...[inaudible mumbling] my son is still young. With just my wife working alone in the garden, when you actually calculate it is just ...[inaudible]. If I die, the future of my child will definitely be tougher.<sup>2</sup>*

This settler had just gone through the terrible experience of a poisonous snakebite that traditional herbal treatment by a local practitioner in the settlement failed to arrest. He finally had to rely on the goodwill of the local officials in the district center to help him get treatment at the district hospital.

I could not quite relate my encounters in the field with what I read in the existing scholarship about the Central Highlands of Vietnam. First, the convergence of Kinh people from different places of origins produced something quite different (for example, the way the Vietnamese language is spoken), to the extent that I would term it as hybrid. Can the meeting of Kinh and highlanders produce a similar effect? Can the meeting of state and society on the frontier produce a similar effect? Second, there is certainly more to the frontier story than conflict, conquest and a paradise lost. One simply cannot survive on agricultural means if one cannot be sure if the field will still

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<sup>2</sup> Field Interview, Dak Lak province, Vietnam, July 1999.

be there the next day or if one can actually reap the harvest. Third, some agents of the state are certainly capable of learning something about local practices on the frontier. Certainly enforcement is not the only mode of policy implementation. The state seeks the allegiance of the people. The people also seek from the state, guarantee or help for their livelihoods. There is a deal to be 'brokered' here.

I am mindful that existing studies about the Central Highlands are not wrong. These studies, however, could not explain my encounters in the field. I wanted to conduct a systematic study to determine if these were mere spurious encounters. If these were not, then there must exist a certain facet of the story of Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier that is not explained by existing literature. By the time I began my PhD project in 2002, this kind of fieldwork was no longer possible in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The protest-demonstrations of 2001 and subsequent occurrences of such political disturbances meant that I could not obtain the kind of official field research permit that I had in 1998 and 1999. I could, however, still visit my friends and stay in the districts, which I did regularly between 2000 and 2004. But without official sanctions, I chose not to probe for more information or conduct any field interview. I did not want to get any of my friends into trouble with the security department or to 'poison the well' for future researchers hoping to conduct fieldwork in the highlands with official permission. Instead, I went to National Archive Center No. 2 of Vietnam (*Trung Tam Luu Tru Quoc Gia So II*) to see if I can detect any similar occurrences even in the so-called 'darkest period' of Vietnamese state formation for the Central Highlanders under the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, also known as the First Republic. This thesis is the result of my own experience on the frontier and my reading of the archival materials from the First Republic.

# ABSTRACT

As an undergraduate student, I read about the distinctiveness of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and its inhabitants in comparison to the Kinh people, the dominant majority from the plains. I was often left with the feeling that these people and their cultures were teetering on the edge of endangerment with the arrival of Kinh settlers and the Vietnamese state. This is the typical storyline of state formation on the frontier, telling how a sophisticatedly organized and technologically powerful people arrived to reign over the margins (of its heartland domain) and the inhabitants there. The turbulence caused by this 'transformation of the margins' can still be observed and felt in the present day context of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Covered by the red dust spiraling from the rotary motion of vehicles traversing the road while traveling in the Central Highlands frontier, I cannot help but feel that when the dust settles, the people and landscape are subjected and covered by the manifestation of an exogenous vector of force, state formation. And this seems to be the main storyline exalted by the existing literature, too.

Another facet to this story of state formation on the frontier, however, is missing from the prevailing literature. I am talking about a facet of the story that paints a less bleak picture of life on the frontier. It tells of how actors on the frontier try to make everyday relations bearable and operational, born out of attempts to understanding one another, albeit sometimes involving misunderstandings. This facet tells of mutability in the state formation process. This thesis explores this facet of the story and uses more nuanced conceptualizations of state, frontier, power, government and social orderings. I call this approach a 'recombinant model' of state formation.

This thesis is about one particular period of Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier, 1955-61 under the government of the First Republic. I argue that the prevailing approach to understanding Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier conceptualizes the state as an *a priori* formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier. I call this the 'diffusion model' of state formation. Using recently available archival documents and the optic provided by the 'recombinant model', I argue that Vietnamese state formation between 1955 and 1961 on the Central Highlands frontier was a mutable process that produced a state form that was hybrid and recombinant in nature. I support this argument with a thick description of policy making and modification of policies by the government on four key issues: administrative standardization, frontier formation program of *Dinh Dien*, state formation via agrarian change and management of the land question. The story reconstructed through these archival documents does not fit nicely with the storyline advanced by the diffusion model. The recombinant model provides a better framework for understanding this story.

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# *'Bui Tham Suong; Dust Beneath The Mist'*

## INTRODUCTION

### CHAPTER 1

#### 'DUST BENEATH THE MIST'<sup>1</sup>

Two knocks on the wood. "Anh Hien, get ready for breakfast!" Binh's voice penetrated through the door. I slipped into my jeans under the cover of the thick blankets and wormed myself out of the mosquito net. The crisp cool air of the morning in the highlands was a sharp contrast with the morning mood of city life in Saigon. Binh was my friend from the district forestry enterprise. He was standing outside my room at the staff quarters of the forestry enterprise compound. I lit a '*ngua trang*', as I usually do in the morning, and handed one to him.<sup>2</sup> Eastwards beyond the far end of the ridgeline was my destination for this afternoon. The mist was hovering atop the hills in that direction. Or rather, it was as if that lone standing tree, the survivor of a once thick canopy, was supporting the intimidating body of mist. "It is not going to rain later, is it?" I asked. "It's the dry season, remember? Let's head out for *bun rieu*<sup>3</sup>, have a cup of Thien Ly coffee<sup>4</sup> and then make our way to Ea Tong. We will visit Thuong. You haven't met his wife, have you? Remember to bring your camera. There you can take some pictures of our coffee groves." Thuong was Binh's elder brother, who also worked at the forestry enterprise. With this, Binh went about to wash up, while I stood there panning the scenery.

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on excerpts from my field diary entry dated 14 February 2004. *Hien* is my Vietnamese name. All names of people and places are replaced with pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> *Ngua trang*, meaning 'white horse', is one of the more popular brand of cigarettes in this part of Dak Lak. It is unofficially considered as the local cadre's brand of cigarettes. In Buon Me Thuot city, senior cadres usually prefer the brand, '555'. In the communes, brands such as 'Jet' or 'Era' are more popular. Among the Kinh migrants from the north, water-pipe tobacco (*thuoc lao*) is more of the norm while among the local highlanders, most prefer to smoke rolled-up tobacco leaves that resemble cigars.

<sup>3</sup> *Bun rieu* is a crab meat rice-noodle soup originating from the central lowlands of Vietnam. The soup stock is made from the small, ricefield crabs, cooked with a variety of local spices and herbs, such as lemon grass and chillies.

<sup>4</sup> Cafe Thien Ly was perhaps one of the most popular cafe in the district center at the time of my visits.

Just below that solitary tree was the neat line of almost uniformly shaped top of rubber trees. Lowering my line of sight, the round shape groves of more intense green, the coffee trees, provided a sharper contrast with the white mist. Somehow, the mist atop this scene of green played a part in the composite picture that symbolized what I was trying to write about politics in the highlands, but I could not, at that moment, quite make sense of it, yet.

“So, I heard you are heading to Ea Tong this morning?” Trang, wife of another friend at the forestry enterprise, asked. “Enjoy the ‘dirt bath’ (*tam bui*) on your way in.” Trang remarked. Ea Tong is the commune center (*trung tam xa*) of the same name commune, located some 20 kilometers from the district center. It is also within the jurisdiction of the forestry enterprise. A number of the forestry cadres had moved out of the dormitory and settled in that commune. A few married the local Kinh girls, and others married longtime sweethearts from their home village in the Central Lowlands, who then joined them here. Thuong was one of the latter. A few of them had also secured land-use rights (*quyen su dung*) for plots of agricultural land in the commune, planting coffee. They spent the majority of their time in the commune, only coming into the district office for reports and meetings. As I recalled from my fieldwork in 1999, a hilly and undulating dirt road - sticky and slippery during the wet season - linked the district and the commune center. Traveling on the dirt roads in the highlands was a dusty affair, but I thought calling it a ‘dirt bath’ was a bit of an exaggeration. “Oh, isn’t this your first stay during the dry season?” Trang reminded me as I gave her a surprised look.

Binh and I set out late that morning, I pillion-ride on his borrowed ‘*xe wind*’.<sup>5</sup> We wore windbreakers, Binh added a forestry official’s cap and a pair of shades, while I put on a denim jungle hat. As we sped downhill, then up, we left behind a trail of red dust clouds upon hitting the dirt section of the road.

Back in 1999, there was only one road leading to Ea Tong from the district center. During the wet-season, our only concern then was not to skid

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<sup>5</sup> *Xe wind* is actually a motorbike model from the ‘wind’ series of the Honda automobile maker. In this part of Dak Lak, it is actually the preferred type, particularly among government officials and the more affluent, of motorbike for the rough terrain. A more economical and commonly utilized model will be the Russian ‘minsk’ all-terrain motorbikes.

and fall off the bike on the muddy dirt path. I had only suffered such an ordeal twice because my friends driving me in were probably two of the most skilful riders in the forestry enterprise. Mid-way through the journey, we would come across a Y-junction, the left route leading to Ea Xong and the right route taking us to Ea Tong. At the Y-junction was a small stall that sold meat (usually pork or beef) in the morning. This day, Binh turned left soon after we went up the first slope upon hitting the dirt road. "The old route is too dusty nowadays, what with all the tractors (*xe cang* or *xe cay*), motorbikes, trucks (*xe tai*) and buses (*xe buyt*)." Binh explained. "Even buses?" I was rather surprised. "Yes, Ea Tong has developed a lot since you last went."

Five minutes went by and I saw a wild boar groveling for food at the roadside ditch. A few small wooden houses on timber pilings lined the road. Similar houses stood beyond my immediate view. There were some wooden houses with walls flush to the ground. Some children were playing by the road, chasing one another if not the wild boars. Some of the kids were topless, others wearing their soiled school uniforms. A few women folk was raking at the mung beans, black beans or black pepper that they were drying on the flat ground beside the road, in order to dry the harvest evenly. Further down the road stood a concrete house on concrete pilings, with a sign on top that read '*Nha Van Hoa*' (Cultural House). A right turn and we began to leave the village scenery behind us, replaced by the neat corridors of rubber trees ahead; a rubber plantation owned by a state farm. We sped along this road before making a right turn again. "You still remember this junction, right?" Binh asked. We were at the Y-junction leading to Ea Xong and Ea Tong. "If we have time, we will ride into Ea Xong later this afternoon. But you won't see any coffee trees, it's all pepper trees (*toan la cay ho tieu khong*)!"

Binh was right. The old route to Ea Tong was indeed extremely dusty. Soon after we embarked on the route, Binh stopped the motorbike and waited by the side. The distant rotary sound of a sputtering diesel engine was soon upon us. It was a mini-bus carrying some passengers, and a motorbike and a few rattan baskets of goods on the roof. The black exhaust smoke was still bearable, but barely. The cloud of red dust that it kicked up was overwhelming.

Soon we were entering the outskirts of the commune center. The old shop house, run by a Jarai family, where I used to have a coffee or soft drink in the past, was still there. A woman carrying a baby, securely wrapped with a black woven cloth on her chest and a rattan basket filled with something on her back, and a few children trailing behind her, one of them guiding an oxen with a stick, walked in the opposite direction. People at the commune market were just packing up from the morning business. "This is where Huong teaches," Binh pointed towards the primary school. Soon, he pulled into the yard of a two-storey wooden cabin. Thuong's head popped up from under the open bonnet of a tractor, his face painted with grease while repairing the machine. "You finally came!" Thuong greeted me, "You must stay for lunch!"

Thuong's house bears a similar architectural style with many others that I have visited in the highlands. The ground floor was the living quarters and the flooring was but the flattened earth ground. A ladder usually brings one to the upper level. This second level is usually void of any furniture, being used mainly to store the coffee harvest and accommodate visiting relatives or seasonal labor. There is usually a well in the yard, which I was told in 1999, cost about a million dong to be dug.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, a few households would share a common well. Each house is usually well ventilated with windows fitted on all walls. The window is simply cut out from the wooden wall panel. There are of course other luxuriously built houses in the commune, often made of concrete, shiny tiled roofing, glass windows, ceramic flooring, and some were even fitted with heated showers and nice toilet bowls! Families living in all these houses are always sweeping the floors. It is not difficult to understand why - a few sweeps with the broom and a pool of red dust would have formed.

"The wind is strong today (*hom nay gio qua!*)" Thuong remarked, "We have to keep all the windows and doors closed! Go and visit our coffee groves, then tell us what you think! We are doing quite well nowadays!"

Thuong's coffee groves were lined with a thin layer of 'snow', or so it seemed. The coffee trees blossomed early. This was only their third proper

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<sup>6</sup> In February 2004, US\$1 was approximately worth about \$14,000 VN dong.

harvest, having planted the seedlings in late 1999. The white of the coffee flowers and green of the leaves were tainted by a faint layer of red particles, which was really the red dust that settled on it. When I brushed against the branches unknowingly, a cloud of dust momentarily enveloped the tree. I asked Binh, since he and his brothers could not attend to the coffee groves on a full-time basis, have they ever encountered any problem such as people stealing their harvests or destroying their trees (which I knew happened elsewhere). Binh answered, "Well, they know that we are government cadres, so they usually don't dare to do so. But we don't do anything to make people hate us (*khong lam viec gi ma cho nguoi ta ghet*). Besides, we help out one another (*giup do nhau*). For example, we have about twenty meters of rubber hose and a portable pump for irrigation. During the dry season, people will borrow from us to irrigate their coffee trees because they need additional length to reach their grove. We also borrow from them. Then, we also learn from them about how to take care of the trees and we help them in other ways."

Binh and Thuong's father traveled all the way here from Quang Nam every now and then to help out with the farm work. They also have a full-time farmhand, Bong, helping them. Bong is a Jarai, in his late twenties, who originated from Phu Bon in Gia Lai province. According to Binh, their father doted on Bong and treated him like one of his sons. Bong's family cultivated mainly rice and other food crops in their swidden plots. In his home village, Bong had been working as a farmhand for other people cultivating coffee. Apparently, his last employer (I am not sure if it was Kinh or other highlander people) was very slow in paying his salary. Binh and Thuong, being full time forestry officials and part-time coffee farmers, really needed a full-time farmhand to help them with the work. Thuong, having dealt with local Jarai for quite a few years, has very good relations with them. When he mentioned that he was looking for a farmhand, a friend recommended Bong. Thuong rode about 40 kilometers northeast from Ea Tong to recruit Bong. Fed up with his dodgy employer, Bong immediately left with Thuong, forfeiting his pay for the 30 bags of fertilizers that he just applied to the crops. Bong usually stayed with Thuong when he was working for him. He went home whenever the work was done or he was needed back home. It usually cost him about \$50,000 dong by *xe tho* (motorbike taxi) or \$15,000 dong by *xe cay* (tractor) to travel home, which was paid for by Thuong. But

Bong was often cheated of the fare or pick-pocketed along the way. After a few such incidents, Thuong decided to drive Bong on his motorbike every time he needed to go.

Bong was not very fluent in Vietnamese when I met him. Binh reminded me to speak slower when talking to Bong. Thuong, however, was quite fluent in colloquial Jarai and Bong acknowledged that Thuong knew a lot of Jarai words. According to Bong, Thuong stayed at his village quite a few times. Sometimes, it was to attend some festivals and other times, just simple social visits. Thuong had no problem communicating with Bong's family in Jarai and Thuong could hold his liquor. Still, Thuong got drunk several times because of the copious amount of *ruou can* (wine in a jar sipped with a straw) consumed during the visits. During lunch, Thuong taught me a few words of Jarai, such as 'nam pai' (drink up), 'ip hat' (smoke), 'im ea' (drink water), and 'wa soi' (eat rice).<sup>7</sup> Thuong also remarked that since 2001, all cadres serving in the highlands are now required to attend classes to learn one local highlander language. In their cases, they were to learn Jarai. He explained that although a number of them could speak Jarai colloquially, when it came to more serious matters such as explaining policies, they still had to rely on an interpreter. Thuong was supposed to begin attending these classes at the end of the month.

Huong, Thuong's wife, was trained as a primary school teacher in Quang Nam. She and Thuong got married about three years ago. Huong had also learnt quite a few Jarai words. I recalled that when it was time for lunch, she called out to Bong in Jarai to join us for the meal. Prior to this, she had never been to the highlands. When she first arrived, she felt miserable. Everything looked strange and she had very few friends. She told me that she cried quite a bit then and had wanted to go home very much. She was not the only who felt the despair of just arriving in the frontier.

I remember a particular Mrs. Hanh, who came with her husband as a 'free-migrant' (*di dan tu do*) to what has become Thon Chin of Ea Tong

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<sup>7</sup> Whatever Jarai words I recorded here are not based on the official Latinized Jarai script. The rendition here is simply based on the pronunciation I recalled of the words.

commune in 1994.<sup>8</sup> That feeling of leaving the familiarity of one's 'homeland' only to land into such different and sometimes difficult living conditions is perhaps a painful one. Mrs. Hanh told me then,

... I cried a lot! [Mrs. Hanh cried continuously for a few months back then, Mr. Ca, the village leader (*truong thon*), interrupted] When I first came here, I think it was not even half a year from that, I just did not want to stay on. Many times, I told my family I just want to give up and go home but the road out was too far, if it had been nearer I would have just gone home. Nobody really wants to plant his or her feet here, really! In the beginning, we lacked everything, food, drink, and daily necessities. The forest was dense and gloomy. I guess everyone here also suffers in such a manner, lacking daily needs, both material and economic...we did not have anything at all! Going to the market, you leave in the morning only to be able to return home in the evening; but there was really no money to go to the market in the first place! Oh, good heavens!<sup>9</sup>

Being a free-migrant, Mrs. Hanh's situation was of course, 'tougher' (*cuc hon*) than Huong's. Huong came to the highlands with proper documentation and her husband, Thuong, had already built the house when she arrived. Furthermore, they were located right in the commune center. When I made this visit, Huong was already quite accustomed to life here now, having found a job at the commune primary school. She was then pregnant with their first child. On this day, she prepared a simple meal of pork slices, vegetables and fish preserved paste (*mam ca*), to be eaten with rice paper and rice. She also brought out a plate of poached wild boar meat (*thit heo rung*) slices, brought from a nearby stall. Before eating, she made sure that all of us washed our hands and faces.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Free-migrants' are settlers who migrated outside government organized programs of migration. For further details about the free-migrants in Thon Chin, consult Stan B-H Tan, 'Coffee Frontiers In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam: Networks Of Connectivity Between New Productive Spaces And Global Markets, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41 (1), pp 51-67, 2000; Stan B-H Tan, 'Coffee Production And Market Networks On The Pioneer Frontier Of The Central Highlands, Vietnam', M.A. Thesis, Southeast Asian Studies Program, National University Of Singapore, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Field Interview, Dak Lak province, Vietnam, July 1999.

We went to the back of the house to find that Huong had already prepared a basin of water. As I poured water on my face, I realized the water that rolled down was muddy red. We were covered in red dust after half a day out on the road. Traveling on the roads here was, as Trang described earlier, a 'dirt bath'. The afternoon sun was blazing down, but somehow I knew the mist would be back the next morning, and the red dust still in the wind.

...

The Central Highlands of Vietnam is located on the southern part of the Annam Cordillera. The region is officially known as Tay Nguyen (Western Plateau) today. The name Tay Nguyen was purportedly first used in 1946.<sup>10</sup> The region mainly lies within the administrative territory of the present day provinces of Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Lam Dong, Gia Lai and Kontum (Map 1.1). It also stretches into the neighboring lowlands provinces such as Phu Yen, Binh Dinh, Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, Quang Nam and Quang Ngai. The region has a contrastingly distinct landscape from the lowlands, the abode of the Kinh people, who are the ethnic majority in Vietnam. I discuss more of this in Chapter Two. The region today is quite famous for its coffee. Vietnam is in fact the second largest exporter of robusta coffee in the world. When talking about traveling in the southern part of Vietnam, people often recommend visiting Dalat city, a former French hill station, to enjoy the cool climate and see the beautiful mountainous landscape.

Beneath the morning mountain mist were once upon a time, mainly the highlanders, whom I call the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands. Among the old inhabitants were the rich and diverse languages, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Long houses, communal houses, buffalo sacrifices, swiddens and oral verses set them apart from the neighboring lowlanders. Changes to the living and physical landscapes are the stuff of the intertwined processes of state formation and frontier formation. Roads are established to connect settlements. Newcomers arrived and settled on the lands. The forests are cleared, replaced by 'permanent' agricultural landscapes. Villages, old and new, are remodeled, sometimes entirely, other times partially.

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<sup>10</sup> Chu Thai Son, 'Mot so van de van hoa-xa hoi' [A Few Social-Cultural Problems] in *Tay Nguyen tren duong phat trien* [The Western Plateau On The Road Of Development] edited by Dang Nghiem Van (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1989), p 377.



Schools, markets and administrative buildings are established to create administrative centers. Rules are created on how to use the lands, how long one can use it and where one can use it. Regulations are created to determine where one can be and should be. Since the end of French colonialism in Vietnam, the intertwined processes of state formation and frontier formation were put in motion under various regimes in South Vietnam and the socialist regime after 1975.

'Dust beneath the mist' – the title of this thesis – symbolizes the process of state formation on the highlands frontier. The morning mist reminds one about being in the highlands frontier. The dust in the wind represents the on-going process of state formation. The transforming landscape effectively exposed the red earth to the elements. During the dry season, the wind that blows across the highlands carries the dust into the air. The rotary motion of the spinning wheels of motorbikes, tractors, trucks and buses, immediately creates thick, momentary clouds of red dust on the dirt roads, too. When the dust settles, the landscape is changed and the old inhabitants are subjected to the conditioning of exogenous force of state formation. This is the familiar storyline of state formation on the highlands frontier. But it is only half the story.

Old inhabitants and newcomers, all of them travel on the roads established to link settlements. Creating dust clouds on the dirt roads are not the prerogative of the newcomers or the state per se. Schools are not attended by just newcomers. The Vietnamese state having its origins from the Kinh-dominated lowlands does not necessarily mean that everything on the highlands must be Vietnamized. Living in the highlands, there is bound to be some interpenetration of culture. Even in the Kinh-dominated commune center, it did not take long for Huong to pick up Jarai because she encounters one on a regular basis. Government officials willfully do as they please at their own risk. Losing a few coffee trees or some coffee cherries is a small matter. In comparison, when people rebel, the cost is much greater; but that does not mean such things do not happen. Governing the conduct of people is not always about imposition or enforcement of rules and regulations. When the dust settles beneath the mist, it does not select the people it settles on. It lands on everyone on the frontier, everyone is affected and everything is changed; and of course, the process affects everyone differently. State formation on the highlands frontier, as much as it transforms the frontier, could also be about the re-conditioning of the state form.

Map 1.1 The Main Provinces Of The Central Highlands Region At Present



Source: Terry A. Rambo, et al (eds.), *The Challenges of Highland Development in Vietnam*, Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Center Program on Environment, 1995, back cover.

## TELLING STORIES OF STATE FORMATION ON THE FRONTIER

My general argument in this thesis is that there is a facet to the story of state formation on the frontier which tells of mutability in the process and reproducing a state form that is hybrid and recombinant in nature. This is to say that the state form is just as likely subjected to changes. These changes may involve intermixing state prescribed practices with local ways of doing things, thus making it hybrid. Changes may also involve the breaking up and redefinition of particular state prescribed practices only to recombine with particular local ways doing things, producing a form of recombinant hedging. This does not suggest that state formation and frontier formation are void of tensions and conflicts. Tellers of stories about conflicts and tensions during the process of state formation on the frontier are not wrong. But these are not the only things found in the stories. There are also attempts at modifying the state form on the frontier, sometimes at the initiative of the government. These attempts, however, do not necessarily achieve the results desired by the government or meet the expectations of the critics (of the process of state formation) who would then be less critical of the process. As a result of such attempts at ameliorating the tensions and conflicts, the state form is not reproduced as initially envisioned.

My specific concern is with the process of Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands frontier during the period between 1955 and 1961, under the South Vietnam government, which is also known as the First Republic (*De Nhat Cong Hoa*). The opening vignette of this thesis bears some reverberations among newcomers to the highlands during this period of Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands. One respondent in his mid-fifties now, still remembers the scene when his family migrated to Pleiku in the late 1950s because the father, an official with the government, was posted there. He recalls,

[w]e traveled there in a convoy of buses and army trucks with other migrants. There was no air-conditioner in the bus, so the windows were opened. But after a while, we had to close all the windows because the red dust caused by the movement of the vehicles was just too much! We had to close the windows and it was quite stuffy. It was best to be in the first few vehicles of the convoy, that way you suffered less dust. Those at the back really suffered!

We were lucky because my father was a senior official so we get to be in front.<sup>11</sup>

My analysis begins with 1955 because it was in that year that the government of South Vietnam actually began taking over the administration of the Central Highlands. I do not examine developments after 1961 because I regard this period, with the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet program, as one determined more by considerations of the war against the communist insurgency than anything else. Most outside observers and scholars consider the time under the First Republic as the ‘darkest period’ in the lives of the Central Highlanders. The First Republic, as the existing literature suggests, adopted policies to culturally and politically assimilate the highlanders, which effectively meant undermining their cultural integrity and dispossessing them of their political rights. I group these criticisms as the ‘Vietnamization paradigm’.

Evidence from recently available archival materials suggests that we might only have been aware of half the story. I argue that for all the seemingly assimilationist tendencies that could be identified in the policies of the First Republic between 1955 and 1961, the state form that was continually being reproduced was much more hybrid and recombinant in nature. The story reconstructed from the archival materials does not conform to the storyline of assimilation or ‘Vietnamization’ of the Central Highlands. Even if skeptics must insist that ‘assimilation’ was the Republic’s policy direction, then it certainly did not go far. Finally, I suggest that the theoretical model I adopted to uncover this facet of state formation on the frontier could also possibly help to tell us something different about the story of the Central Highlands after 1975.

I argue that the Vietnamese government (under the various regimes) envisioned state formation in the Central Highlands, and critics of the state analyzed and critiqued these visions and policies implemented to realize the visions, by using a common conceptual framework. Both adopted a conceptual understanding of the state as an *a priori* formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier. The government and critics have different approaches but share three conceptual underpinnings, namely the state as an *a priori* formed entity, the state as a self-

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<sup>11</sup> Interview, Canberra, Australia, September 2004.

contained bounded entity, and state formation as a diffusion process. Both discourses respectively identify things that are gained and lost in the process of state formation on the frontier. The perceptions produced by both discourses are not wrong. These conceptual underpinnings, however, might have led both discourses to miss another important facet of the process of state formation on the frontier that tells of mutability, hybridization or even recombination of the state form. I discuss this in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Three, I propose an alternative model that speaks of how state formation programs are modified, compromised, hybridized or even recombined with local practices. I critically examine the significance of why we call a particular space a 'frontier' and what does the process of frontier formation entails. I also attempt to reconceptualize our understanding of the 'state' and its formation process without falling back on the conceptual underpinnings of the diffusion model. I further suggest that the diffusion model is predicated upon an understanding of power that can be held and applied to effect changes in accordance with the will of the 'ruler', i.e., the state. In this thesis, I employ a different understanding of power in the background of my analysis. I propose that state formation is not driven simply by the objective of political control alone. State formation is about government, which I understand as the shaping of behavior, both ruler and ruled; and it is also driven by motivations of maintaining or improving the well being of the population in general. (The latter motivations, I must clarify, is not applicable to all governments. In extreme cases, such as Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge government, I am not sure if this was of any concern at all to the regime.) When underpinned by such motivations, the government may find it necessary to compromise, improvise and reshape its vision. In the process, the state form undergoes reshaping as well.

I identify four policy areas that were considered in the existing literature as an assault on the cultural and political integrity of the Central Highlanders in the process of state formation under the First Republic. These were administrative standardization, frontier formation through resettlement of Kinh people, state formation through agrarian change among the highlanders, and imposition of the government defined land regime in the highlands. Critics argue that state formation under the First Republic approximated an attempt at 'Vietnamization' of the Central Highlands. I do not go as far as to suggest that there were no attempts at 'Vietnamization'. I do argue, however,

that any supposed attempts at 'Vietnamization' were in fact punctuated by compromises after careful deliberations and consideration of local responses.

I show in Chapter Four how the government of the First Republic attempted to establish a comprehensive administrative structure in the Central Highlands that was standardized with the rest of the country. Archival documents, however, show that the government was well aware of the challenges to this endeavor and took steps to remedy them. The actual results of these attempts are hard to gauge. Yet, we must recognize that there were institutionalized attempts at improving the situation. Thus, we find that administrative standardization was paralleled by attempts to take into account the particularisms of the highlands frontier.

In Chapter Five, I show that *Dinh Dien* was effectively a frontier formation program driven by motivation of state formation. I argue that a primary concern of the government was to ensure that newcomers (settlers) were able to survive, sink their roots in the new land, and stay. To be able to stay, newcomers transformed the frontier environment. At the same time, they also adapted their agricultural practices to suit the frontier environment. Archival documents reveal that the settlers did just that. More significant for my argument was that the government decided to alter the initial strategy to stabilize the process of settlement because of early responses by highlanders with regards to the policy and the environmental limitations of the highlands on the *Dinh Dien* program.

Third, I discuss in Chapter Six that the government of the First Republic envisioned a process of modernization for the highlanders. This ideal vision entails a neat transition from the primitive to the modern and the old to the new, which was to be realized primarily through agrarian change among the highlanders. Agrarian change for the highlanders, as correctly identified by critics, basically meant sedentarization of swidden agriculture. Archival documents reveal that from a simple sedentarization formula, it finally came to be composed of resettlement, sedentarization, rotationally farmed swidden fields, regulated swidden plots and model villages of several varieties.

Fourth, I discuss in Chapter Seven how the government of the First Republic managed the land question during the processes of state formation and frontier

formation. There was no unequivocal *de jure* recognition of the highlanders' claims to land rights according to their traditional land regime. Archival documents reveal, however, that there seems to be *de facto* recognition by the government of highlanders' rightful claims to land besides plots under active cultivation (swidden). During the process of frontier formation, the government actually took into account land use practices of the highlanders and tried to prevent further loss of land by the highlanders due to land grabbing. I suggest in this chapter that contention between the two forms of land regime, one defined by the government and the other by highlander communities, was less conflictual than previously believed.

### A NOTE ON RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature of the data I used for this thesis, the result is essentially a thick description of policy making and modifications to the policies by the government. When talking about state formation on the frontier, we are essentially telling the story of interactions between the newcomers – which includes state agencies and settlers – and the old inhabitants. We hear and read less about the settlers and old inhabitants in this particular story I am telling but this does mean that they are absent. Stories that focus on them will have to be told by someone else with full access to fieldwork in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Since the protest demonstrations of 2001, this has not been possible for foreign researchers. However, in the story I can tell, we will come across instances of how settlers and highlanders were responding to the policies through government reports. Archival documents reveal that the government did not simply ignore the responses of these actors during the process of state formation.

The bulk of the empirical data for this thesis is based on documents read at the National Archive Center No. 2 of Vietnam (*Trung Tam Luu Tru Quoc Gia So II*) in Ho Chi Minh City from June 2003 till Feb 2004. The documents are from the *Phu Tong Thong De Nhat Viet Nam Cong Hoa* (The Presidential Office of the First Republic of Vietnam, henceforth, PTTDeNhat) collection. This is a huge depository of documents submitted to the Saigon government between 1954 and 1963. It has a ten-volume catalogue and is organized by topics or types of documents that are filed in the collection. Each dossier contains documents relating to a certain issue or event, and

sometimes the dates for these documents stretch for a few years, depending on the time period spent deliberating and acting on the issue. Most of the documents are typed or hand-written in Latinized Vietnamese (*quoc ngu*). There is, however, slight variation in the vocabulary and sentence structure between the Vietnamese used then and what is used currently. Even the spellings for some of the words are different. For example, ‘government’ is sometimes spelled as ‘*chinh phu*’ or ‘*chanh phu*’. The historian will be disappointed to find out that I only recorded the dossier numbers and not the exact title of each document that I read. These numbers are footnoted as ‘PTTDeNhat, File no.’. In some cases, when the archive center approved my requests to make photocopy of some documents, the dossier number was lost when I made backup photocopies of these documents. Whenever possible, I included the date and author of the document in the main text of the thesis. It should be noted that the titles for individual documents are often different from the general title of the main dossier.

The PTTDeNhat collection contains valuable government reports and investigations on specific topics such as land use, *Dinh Dien* (often translated as Land Development Program), *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* (Fixed Plough and Fixed Residence program), etc. I will like to highlight two particularly valuable threads of data that can be found in the PTTDeNhat collection. First, I found it extremely useful to read through the provincial monthly reports (*bao cao hang thang cac Tinh*). These reports contain the required update on the state of administration work conducted in the province. But these reports also reflect the problems encountered and recommendations made by these officials on how to resolve those problems. A number of policies that were made later could be traced to how these were initially raised and discussed in these reports. Second, I found it useful to read the marginalia that was hand-written by Ngo Dinh Diem, whom I believe read through most of these reports. The marginalia was officially termed ‘*but phe*’ (penciled remarks). Appendix A provides an example of Diem’s ‘*but phe*’. The ‘*but phe*’ often reflects Diem’s inner thoughts and opinions on the issues being reported. Quite often, the ‘*but phe*’ was treated as a directive from the president and quickly acted upon by officials. It is interesting to note that these ‘*but phe*’ were almost always written in vermillion colored pencils. It bears certain similarity to the ‘*chau ban*’ (vermillion records) of the kings in pre-colonial Vietnam.



Prior to my research in the archives, I had already conducted research work in the Central Highlands of Vietnam for the purpose of my M.A. thesis. Between December 1998 and September 1999, I stayed in Dak Lak province for six months. During this period of fieldwork, I had permission to stay in a free-migrant settlement for close to two months and conducted frequent field trips to other parts of the province. Afterwards, I made frequent visits to Dak Lak province on my own. While conducting archival research in Ho Chi Minh City, I also made regular trips to Dak Lak to visit friends. Sometimes, I was able to discuss the things I read in the archive with them. I gained valuable feedback in the process. Towards the end of my fieldwork in Vietnam, I made a short trip to Kontum province. I was able to visit some of the settlements that were formed during the First Republic but I did not conduct any formal interviews because I did not have the proper research permit to do research in Kontum then. Additional secondary materials written in Vietnamese were collected at the Library of the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities in the South (*Thu Vien Vien Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi va Nhan Van Nam Bo*), Vietnam National Library in Hanoi (*Thu Vien Quoc Gia Viet Nam tai Ha Noi*), the library of the Institute of Ethnology (*Thu Vien Vien Dan Toc Hoc*) and the library of the Ecole Francaise D'Extreme Orient in Hanoi. I also had the fortune of interviewing an overseas Vietnamese living in Canberra, Australia, who was born and grew up in the Central Highlands of Vietnam during the early years of the First Republic.

Thus, this thesis focuses on the period between 1955 and 1961. I do mention events that happened before and after the period in order to illustrate certain points that I try to make along the way. This thesis is therefore *not* about the Central Highlands under the rule of the socialist regime after 1975. It is in no way an attempt to understand the protest demonstrations of 2001. I do, however, hope that the theoretical model I adopt may in the future, when field research conditions permit, help uncover things that elude us so far concerning Vietnamese state formation after 1975. This thesis is *not* about Ngo Dinh Diem, president of the First Republic although there is a fair amount of discussion about the initiatives that came directly from Diem. What I say in this thesis, however, may contribute to how we rethink Diem's political intentions for the Central Highlands and also how the First Republic's government functioned. Finally, I wish to remind the reader that this thesis is *not* an attempt to discredit existing arguments about

Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands. It is an attempt to uncover a missing facet to the story told so far.

# *'Dust Storms'*

## WHEN THE DUST SETTLES

### CHAPTER 2

#### DUST-STORMS

2001

If the rooster's crow is the harbinger of daylight, then the gradual thickening street sounds tells of the beginning of another day in Buon Me Thuot city. The 'beeps' from the horns of motorbikes (*xe may*), 'screechings' from the starts, halts and re-starts of buses (*xe buyt* or *xe do*), 'clanking' of the rotary engines of tractors (*xe cay*), and the occasional sputtering engine of an old 'Lada' automobile amidst the increasing number of cars and four-wheel drives, approximately make up the hustle and bustle of the quickly urbanizing provincial capital that usually accompanies day-break.<sup>1</sup> The gradual trickling in of people that finally congregated into the massive protest-demonstration, which rocked Buon Me Thuot on 3 February 2001, only became noticeable when instead of the usual comings and goings that mark the busiest intersection 'circle' (*nga sau*)<sup>2</sup> of the city, more and more highlanders stood and squatted, while tractors and motor bicycles clustered. This gathering of the crowd soon escalated into a gradual synchronizing chorus of slogans about 'ancestral lands, religious freedom, and political autonomy'. These people then began marching towards the office of the Provincial People's Committee (*Uy Ban Nhan Dan Tinh*).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Lada' is one particular brand of automobiles imported from Russia during the Cold War period. It used to be much coveted but is now more of a cheap source of automobiles, as the well to do and powerful very much prefer Japanese or European cars. Lada plying the street now are quite notorious for the tendency to break down suddenly due to shortage of spare parts or know-how to maintain the vehicle.

<sup>2</sup> '*nga sau*' refers to a six-way intersection. In Buon Me Thuot, this six-way intersection is constructed in the shape of a circle.

<sup>3</sup> This section is based on recollections by locals that were later related to me. I only returned to the Central Highlands for a short, social visit in late February 2001. I could only make a 'short, social visit' because prior to that the roads to the highlands were blocked by the security forces. I was in Hanoi before the visit to Buon Me Thuot. Everyone I met in Hanoi told me to give up the idea of visiting friends in the highlands because of the security situation. When I called my friends there, I was told that things had reverted back to normal and I could visit them.

Beginning in late January 2001 and continuing to early February 2001, a series of largely peaceful and well-coordinated protest-demonstrations took place in several localities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The Human Rights Watch reports that in Gia Lai province, the demonstrations began as early as 31 Jan 2001 in the district center of Cu Prong when approximately five hundred Jarai villagers staged a protest to demand the release of two Jarai men arrested over religious subversion charges.<sup>4</sup> Two days later, on 2 February 2001, some three to four thousand Jarai people were reported to have marched to Pleiku, provincial capital of Gia Lai, where they staged a protest-demonstration at the provincial headquarters of the Vietnam Communist Party and the People's Committee. Authorities in Buon Me Thuot city of Dak Lak province were probably aware of the possibility of similar disturbances. The gathering crowd under the guise of usual morning activities, however, probably caught them unaware. Smaller scale protests also took place in other outlying districts of the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai and Kon Tum.<sup>5</sup> Arrests were quickly made with on-site protest leaders first to be put into police cars. Even construction trucks were used to transport the many other arrested person to police stations. Snapshots of participants in the demonstration were taken for later arrests. Most were released later. A small number was later charged in courts for subversive activities and sentenced to jail. Other participants were 'reprimanded' by village elders and lightly punished according to 'local customs' for disturbing social orderliness.<sup>6</sup>

### 1958

There was a time when simple footsteps of people walking to the lone town market or *enroute* to the morning chores of farm work, and the occasional passing of a few motor vehicles, indicated the beginning of another day in Buon Me Thuot. In the late 1950s, Buon Me Thuot, or rather Ban Me Thuot, as it was

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<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Repression Of Montagnards: Conflicts Over Land And Religion In Vietnam's Central Highlands*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002, p 87. See also, Nguyen Nhu Phuong, 'Su that ve cuoc gay roi mang mau sac chinh tri o Tay Nguyen thang 2-2001 (I)' [The Truth About The Cause Of Political Disturbance In The Western Plateau 2-2001], *An Ninh The Gioi* (218), pp 1-3, 7/3/2001; Nguyen Nhu Phuong, 'Su that ve cuoc gay roi mang mau sac chinh tri o Tay Nguyen Thang 2-2001 (II)' [The Truth About The Cause Of Political Disturbance In The Western Plateau 2-2001], *An Ninh The Gioi* (219), pp 1-3, 14/3/2001.

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed reports on the events of 2001, see *Repression of Montagnards*; Writenet, *Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups In The Central Highlands*, UNHCR Center For Documentation And Research, Writenet Paper No. 05/2001, 2001

<sup>6</sup> This account is based on recollections by informants related to me in mid February 2001 and late 2003 during my visits to the highlands.

usually referred to then, was a less populated and much quieter place; it was then very much a 'frontier' town. Even so, the Central Highlands was experiencing significant demographic, social and political changes. The period between 1955-63 is now known as the First Republic (*De Nhat Cong Hoa*) period. Previously known as *Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois* under French colonial rule, and *Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne* during Bao Dai's short-lived Crown Domain administration, the Central Highlands region was in 1955, for the first time, integrated into Vietnamese official territorial defines.<sup>7</sup> There was undeniably, a certain romanticism and simplicity about Ban Me Thuot during the more stable period between the end of the First Indochina War and the outbreak of the second.<sup>8</sup> For the English reader, this is perhaps best captured by Gerald Hickey's detailed description of his travels along Route 14 to Ban Me Thuot in 1957.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Hickey was no mere teary-eyed romantic observer. He also recorded the emerging tensions of the transforming frontier as a result of intense state formation under the First Republic, in particular, disaffections among the highlanders concerning the resettlement of Kinh people in the highlands.<sup>10</sup>

Archival documents report that things came to a head on 21 September 1958. The time was approximately 7 a.m.

'Release our representatives!' 'Kinh people should not appropriate the land of the highlanders!' 'Kinh people should not exploit our forest resources!' 'Defeat Ho Chi Minh!' 'Defeat the communist Viet Minh!' 'Defeat Vietnamese colonialism in disguise!'<sup>11</sup>

Slogans shouted in a mixture of French and Vietnamese echoed through the streets of morning Ban Me Thuot. It is rather obvious from the slogans that organizers of the protest wanted to tell listeners that they did not support the

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of administrative shuffling of the Central Highlands during the French colonial period, see Gerald Hickey, *Sons Of The Mountains: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands To 1954*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, chapters 8-11.

<sup>8</sup> For a concise history of the Second Indochina War, consult William Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political And Military History, 1954-75*, Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Free In The Forest: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982; Gerald Hickey, *Window On A War: An Anthropologist In The Vietnam Conflict*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Preliminary Research Report On The High Plateau (PMS)*, Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1957.

<sup>11</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

communists and Viet Minh adherents. At the same time, it is also obvious that the protesters opposed the appropriation of land by Kinh people. A crowd of highlanders numbering around 2,000 people from the villages in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot had gathered to demand the release of several highlanders arrested the week before, on 15 September 1958. The arrested were representatives of an underground movement, which the government called, 'Highlander Autonomy Movement' (*Phong Trao Dong Bao Thuong Doi Tu Tri*).<sup>12</sup> Shouting the slogans as they marched towards the Provincial Administrative Bureau (*Toa Hanh Chanh Tinh*), the protest-demonstrators were finally stopped by police at Buon Ale and dispersed.<sup>13</sup> Y Phim, a member of the movement's chapter in Kontum province was told to organize similar protest-demonstration in a letter dated 23 September, sent by the Ban Me Thuot chapter. Y Phim, however, reported the matter to the provincial authorities. The intended demonstration in Kontum therefore did not take place. On 24 September, another demonstration numbering about 3,000 highlanders was staged in Lac Thien district of Darlac province. Back in Ban Me Thuot, another demonstration by highlanders was staged in Buon Ale on 16 October. The protest-demonstration on 16 October was dispersed by police who fired tear-gas grenades into the crowd. Both demonstrations centered on a similar agenda as the one on 21 September 1958 in Ban Me Thuot.<sup>14</sup>

### *Two Events, One Process*

Foreign observers have explained the events of February 2001 by emphasizing three grievances among the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. One is their loss of ancestral lands to government agencies, agricultural sedentarization policies, and influx of settlers from other parts of the country. Second is their lack of religious freedom, especially in a situation where a significant portion of the ethnic minority population has converted to evangelical Christianity (*Tin Lanh*), certain groups of which the government regards as subversive.<sup>15</sup> Third, some highlanders also sought political

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<sup>12</sup> The arrested were leaders of the movement. They included, Y Bham Enuol, Y Dzu, Siu Sup, K'the, Ksor Jan, Paul Nur, Parih, Xiu Phung, Y Ju, Ya Ba, Ito Luong, Touneh Phan M'lon Seo, and Rahlan Beo. PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>13</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>14</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>15</sup> For more details concerning highlanders' conversion to Protestantism in recent years, readers may consult, Oscar Saleminck, 'Development Cooperation As Quasi-Religious Conversion' in *The Development Of Religion/The Religion Of Development* edited by Oscar Saleminck, Anton Van Harskamp & Ananta Kumar Giri (Eburon Delft, 2004); Do Quang Hung, 'Kito Giao truoc buon lang' [Christianity Before Villages] in *Mot so van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi buon lang cac dan toc Tay Nguyen* [A Few

autonomy or even independence of a highlander Dega-state.<sup>16</sup> Vietnamese authorities, in contrast, explained the events as a conspiracy by the subversive Dega-elements, supported by foreign forces, particularly Kok Ksor's Montagnard Foundation in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the Vietnamese government also admitted shortcomings when implementing ethnic policies (*chinh sach dan toc*) in the Central Highlands. Almost immediately after, the government announced a series of policies to address the grievances of the highlanders over land rights and cultural preservation, and worked on developing the capabilities of cadres and officials stationed in the highlands.<sup>18</sup> I was also told that all people, Vietnamese and highlanders, who bought or sold land in the vicinity of the urban centers and highlander villages were subjected to verifications by the authorities to see if they had broken any government regulations.<sup>19</sup>

Vietnamese authorities' reaction had been swift when the incidents occurred. No foreigners were allowed into the highlands region during that period. As for foreigners already staying in the highlands (for example, technical aid workers, business people and a few researchers), the security agencies kept an extra keen eye on their activities or advised them to temporarily leave the region. Extra police and military forces from outside the Central Highlands region were immediately mobilized and sent to the

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Problems About Socio-Economic Development Of Villages Of Ethnic Groups In The Western Plateau] edited by Ngo Duc Thinh & Vo Quang Trong (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2002); Ban Ton Giao Tinh Gia Lai, 'Van de ton giao va thuc hien chinh sach ton giao trong vung dong bao dan toc thieu so tinh Gia Lai' [The Problem Of Religion And Implementing Religion Policies In Ethnic Minority Regions In Gia Lai Province] in *Mot so van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi buon lang cac dan toc Tay Nguyen*; Nguyen Xuan Nghia, 'Thien Chua Giao va Dao Tin Lanh o vung cac dan toc thieu so Tay Nguyen' [Catholicism And Protestantism In Ethnic Minority Regions In The Western Plateau], *Tap Chi Dan Toc Hoc* 4, pp 59-68 & 73, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> This is the name coined by both Vietnamese authorities and Kok Ksor of Montagnard Foundation in the U.S. for the independent political unit in the Central Highlands that 'separatist groups' such as that led by Kok Ksor aspire to establish. See *Repression Of Montagnards; Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups In The Central Highlands*.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Su that ve cuoc gay roi mang mau sac chinh tri o Tay Nguyen thang 2-2001 (I)'; 'Su that ve cuoc gay roi mang mau sac chinh tri o Tay Nguyen thang 2-2001 (II)'.

<sup>18</sup> For a report on the current state of cadres from the ethnic minority groups serving in the Central Highlands, consult Le Huu Nghia, *Mot so van de ve xay dung doi ngu can bo lanh dao chu chot cap huyen nguoi cac dan toc o Tay Nguyen* [A Few Problems About Building The Most Important Leadership Rank Cadres At The District Level Among Ethnic People In The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> For details on this, consult Matthieu Guerin, Andrew Hardy, Nguyen Van Chinh & Stan B-H Tan, *Des montagnards aux minorites ethniques: Quelle integration nationale pour les habitants des hautes terres du Viet Nam et du Cambodge?*, Paris, Bangkok: L'Harmattan, IRASEC, 2003. As one of my Vietnamese friends commented, it is quite typical of the government (the usual term that is used nowadays is '*nha nuoc*', which also means 'state') to react after 'the horse has bolted'. The exact words he used were, '*nha nuoc chung toi luon luon nhu vay, tro viec da xay ra roi moi co phan ung*' (our state is always like that, reacting only after the problem occurred). As we will see later in the thesis, the government did respond even prior to the 'occurrence of problems'.

various ‘hotspots’ (*diem nong*), sites where locals were known to have actively participated in the protests.<sup>20</sup> Major highways linking the highlands region with other parts of the country, namely National Highway (*quoc lo*) No. 14 and 28, were blocked. The army was sent in from the north into the various communes to ensure that people went about their everyday business and did not participate in further protest gatherings. As one informant, in his early thirties, who had been in the highlands since the early 1990s later recounted to me, he had never seen that many helicopters dropping off troops in the highlands. I was told that the troops only camped outside villages that had participated in the protest-demonstrations, a counter-insurgency tactic successfully used against FULRO<sup>21</sup> after re-unification.<sup>22</sup>

The Dega-affair (*vu Dega*), as local Vietnamese officials term it, bears much similarity to what happened in late 1958 in terms of how the protest-demonstrations played out, the underlying causes, interpretation of the event by foreign observers, and even reactions on the part of the state. Gerald Hickey informs us that the ‘Highlander Autonomy Movement’ in fact adopted the name ‘BAJARAKA’ during a clandestine meeting on 1 May 1958.<sup>23</sup> The name was actually an acronym representing four major ethnic groups of the Central Highlands, namely Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade and Kaho (Coho). Publications after the fact usually refer to this movement as Bajaraka.<sup>24</sup> According to Hickey and government reports, the main objective of this movement was to work

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<sup>20</sup> My Vietnamese friend in Sai Gon (written as two separate words after 1975, whereas before 1975, it was generally written as ‘Saigon’) noted that most of the senior officers known to visit the various ‘*bia om*’ outlets and late night food outlets, otherwise known in Vietnamese as ‘*com ma*’, were suddenly detailed away in early February.

<sup>21</sup> FULRO is the acronym for *Front Unifie pour la Liberation des Races Opprimees*, an insurgent group that was formed by factions within the Bajaraka movement. See *Free In The Forest*, pp 132-167.

<sup>22</sup> For descriptions concerning how the Vietnamese government countered the FULRO insurgency after re-unification, consult Ngon Vinh, *FULRO?*, Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Cong An Nhan Dan, 1982; Thanh Tin, *Dap nat cong cu hau chien CIA: FULRO* [Crushing The Post-War Instrument Of CIA: FULRO], Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1983; Nguyen Chu Hoang, *Nhung con loc Cao Nguyen* [Whirlwinds In The High Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Cong An Nhan Dan, 1985.

<sup>23</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 54.

<sup>24</sup> Nguyen Trac Di, *Tim hieu phong trao tranh dau FULRO (1958-69)* [Understanding The Political Struggle Movement of FULRO (1958-69)], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1969; Norman Charles Labrie, ‘Fulro: The History Of Political Tension In The South Vietnamese Highlands’, Master Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1971; Mai Thi Duong Chi & Vo Quang Son, ‘Chinh sach doi voi nguoi Thuong cua Viet Nam’ [Policies Towards Highlanders In Viet Nam], Khao Luan Tot Nghiep, Ban Su Dia, Vien Dai Hoc Hue, 1974; Hoang Van Loc, ‘Tim hieu nhung dau tranh tri cua dong bao Thuong mien nam Viet Nam’ [Understanding The Political Struggles of Highlander Compatriots In Southern Viet Nam], Khao Luan Ca Nhan, Truong Chanh Tri Kinh Doanh, Vien Dai Hoc Dalat, 1968; Le Dinh Chi, ‘Van de dong bao son cuoc tai Viet Nam Cong Hoa’ [The Problem of Mountainous Region Compatriots In The Republic Of Viet Nam], Luan An Tien Si Luat Khoa, Cao Hoc Luat Cong Phap, 1969; Paul Nur, *Ve chinh sach Thuong Vu trong lich su Viet Nam* [On Highland Policies In The History Of Viet Nam], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1966.



towards independence or autonomy for the Central Highlands region.<sup>25</sup> This was clearly symbolized in the movement's flag. It had a background of green to represent the forested highlands, four white stars to represent the four main highland provinces of Darlac, Pleiku, Djiring<sup>26</sup> and Kontum, and a red circle in the middle to symbolize the red soil – '*terre rouge*' – of the highlands.<sup>27</sup> Between April and August of 1958, the advocates of this movement had formed a Central Committee and chapters in the each of the four provinces. The Central Committee comprised of a chairman in Y Bham Enuol, a deputy, and secretaries for foreign affairs, defense and civil affairs.<sup>28</sup> By July 1958, the movement had also accumulated \$18,580 piasters<sup>29</sup> to finance its activities.<sup>30</sup> When two members of the movement were arrested for suspicion of participation in subversive activities against the government, the Bajaraka leaders decided to take action.<sup>31</sup> Finally, on 8 September 1958, Y Bham sent a letter, which was signed off as 'the Committee of Liberation', to Ngo Dinh Diem to demand autonomy and the release of the arrested men.<sup>32</sup> By 15 September 1958, security forces had arrested nine leaders of the movement, including Y Bham Enuol.

The Bajaraka movement was also an organized response by the highlander elites against Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands. These grievances were duly recorded in a propaganda material entitled, 'Hra Potan'. It was written in Rhade, and probably circulated among the literate highlanders so that they could help spread the word and recruit followers for the movement. Literate Rhade at

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<sup>25</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731. See also, *Free In The Forest*, p 52-54.

<sup>26</sup> Names of provinces in the Central Highlands were sometimes referred to by using simply the name of the provincial capital or a major administrative center during the French colonial period and even the Republic years. For example, Djiring was the administrative center of Haut Donnai, otherwise known as Dong Nai Thuong. Darlac province was often referred to by the name of Banmethuot (rather than Ban Me Thuot), which was the provincial capital.

<sup>27</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731. See also, *Free In The Forest*, p 52-54. The movement had its beginnings in early 1957, when highlander students such as Nay Luett and Tounch Han Tho studying at the Lycee Yersin in Dalat decided to form an organization aimed at advocating autonomy for the highlanders.

<sup>28</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731. See also, *Free In The Forest*, p 53, where Hickey provides further details on the responsibilities assumed by the various highlander leaders in the movement.

<sup>29</sup> According to Louis Wiesner's account, US\$1 was worth about \$35.5 piasters in 1955. Louis Wiesner, *Victims And Survivors: Displaced Persons And Other War Victims In Viet-Nam, 1954-75*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1988, p 7.

<sup>30</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>31</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 57.

<sup>32</sup> 'Fulro: The History Of Political Tension In The South Vietnamese Highlands', p 68. According to archival documents, in September 1957, Y Bham met up with Y Ju, Siu Sip, Si Gel and Y Blap to discuss and compose a document seeking autonomy for the highlanders. In early 1958, the Bajaraka leaders also sought the advice of Father Roger Bianchetti of the Kontum Mission after the first draft of the letter was composed. PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731. According Hickey, Bianchetti advised against the demand for autonomy and the letter was not sent out until later. *Free In The Forest*, p 56.

that time most likely knew both French and Latinized Rhade since these were the languages taught in schools established earlier by the French colonial government and French missionaries.<sup>33</sup> According to the summary filed in the archived police reports, this document urged the reader to spread the news to other highlanders that they had started a movement for the independence of the highlands, comprising the four provinces. The document also claimed that the movement had the support of the Americans. It went on to proclaim that highlanders did not need Kinh people to govern them nor did highlanders want to hand over their land to the Kinh people. Highlanders, having fought wars on behalf of the French against the Japanese and Viet Cong<sup>34</sup>, had no wish to be involved in any more war. It ended by referring to the right of any country to seek self-determination for independence. Hra Potan is possibly the same document that later surfaced in French, authored by Y Bham Enuol, entitled, *Extraits de l'histoire des hauts-plateau du centre Viet-Nam*, which is reported in Hickey's *Free In The Forest*.<sup>35</sup>

There was certainly much apprehension on the part of the highlanders over Vietnamese state formation projects, in particular the *Dinh Dien* program, which resettled thousands of lowlanders in the highlands. According to the confession statement by a particular Mr. On, Paul Nur – one of the leaders of Bajaraka – gave him money to travel to Konhring to observe Kinh migrants clearing land claimed by local

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<sup>33</sup> The French schools in Darlac included French and Rhade languages as part of the curriculum, which originated from Leopold Sabatier's administration in the 1920s. For a detailed account of Sabatier's administration, consult Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp 73-99.

<sup>34</sup> Archival documents from the First Republic termed all Vietnamese adherents of the communists, such as party member, supporter or even the Viet Minh, as 'Viet Cong'. Highlander adherents of the communists are referred to as 'Thuong Cong'. The author of this archival document also used the term 'Viet Cong'.

<sup>35</sup> Y Bham Enuol, *Extraits de l'histoire des hauts-plateau du centre Viet-Nam*, Phnom Penh: mimeographed, 1965. Details of this document are cited in *Free In The Forest*, pp 54-5. See also *Ve chinh sach Thuong vu trong lich su Viet Nam*, pp 104-110. Y Bham Enuol's 'Extraits de l'histoire' and Paul Nur's account in *Ve chinh sach Thuong vu trong lich su Viet Nam* list the grievances suffered by the highlanders under the first three years of rule by the government of the First Republic, which led to the emergence of Bajaraka. Grievances suffered included, loss of autonomy; loss of the '*statut particulier*' granted by the French during the Crown Domain years; loss of land to Vietnamese settlers; exploitation by Vietnamese traders; Vietnamese, instead of highlanders, were appointed to superior positions in the administration; arrogant attitudes of Vietnamese administrators; administrative discrimination because highlanders received lower pay and status in comparison to Kinh; highlander military officers were not respected by Kinh enlistees and faced no prospects for promotion; harassment by the republic's army; the highlander customary law courts (*toa an phong tuc*) were abolished by Diem's government; and cultural discrimination by the government because training in highlander languages and schools for highlander children were ignored.

highlanders. Mr. On reported that Paul told him highlanders did not want Kinh migrants cutting down their forests and resettling in the highlands. According to the confession statement of a Mr. Pih, in one of the meetings, the leaders (their identities could not be verified) spent most of the time 'digging up all the bad things about Kinh people' (*vach su xau cua nguoi Kinh*).<sup>36</sup> The tensions of Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the highlands had created fertile ground for the mobilization of highlanders into the Bajaraka movement. Norman Labrie reports that by late 1958, Bajaraka had claimed some 200,000 followers.<sup>37</sup> This means that one-third of the estimated 600,000-highlander population supported the Bajaraka movement, which was rather unlikely given its limited organization network.

According to Gerald Hickey, Ngo Dinh Diem's nation building was founded upon strategies of assimilation and there was 'never the slightest suspicion that they [the policies] might trigger dissidence among the highlanders'.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Norman Labrie states that Vietnamese officials 'could not comprehend the reasons for the dissent' and blamed communists as the principal agitators.<sup>39</sup> Ngo Dinh Diem then responded to the Bajaraka affair with the arrests of its leaders, and re-deployment of highlander civil servants and soldiers to the lowlands. Hickey further argues that one significant outcome was the official denial of highlanders' rights of landownership according to their traditional practices and beliefs when Ngo Dinh Diem's government issued the three 'decrees', namely Official Letter (*Cong Van*) 3169-BDT/VP, Decree (*Du*) 513-a/DT/CCDD and Circular (*Thong Tu*) 981-BT/DC.<sup>40</sup> The first two 'decrees' supposedly prohibited highlanders from selling their land, while the third 'decree' was actually an official circular that stated highlanders only possessed user rights to the land but not ownership rights. For Hickey, these were sufficient evidence that Diem's government had went as far as to use legislative means to deny the highlanders' traditional claims of ownership of the land. I suggest, on the basis of recently available archival documents, that Hickey and others might have misinterpreted this matter. I discuss this in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

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<sup>36</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731. The interrogations were conducted in Vietnamese and translated into the respective highlander languages by a junior highlander official, but I noted in the dossier that several interrogations were recorded as translated by one of the suspected participants of the Bajaraka movement!

<sup>37</sup> 'Fulro: The History Of Political Tension In The South Vietnamese Highlands', p 64.

<sup>38</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 48.

<sup>39</sup> 'Fulro: The History Of Political Tension In The South Vietnamese Highlands', p 69.

<sup>40</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 59.

Based on my reading of the critiques by many foreign scholars and observers (which I group as ‘critics’ of Vietnamese state formations in this thesis), I often picture Vietnamese state formation on the frontier as akin to an exogenously projected vector of force that struck into the forested highlands, drastically transforming the landscape and leaving behind in the paths of ‘destruction’, clouds of dust beneath the mountain mist. When the wind blows or motor vehicles run along the dirt paths, clouds of red dust whirls into the air. When the dust settles, the highlands frontier is covered by a Vietnamese state form, dominated by Vietnamese people and Vietnamese culture. I term this approach the ‘Vietnamization paradigm’, which I will explain later. Social and political tensions arising from this state formation process led to public outcry against government policies such as through the Dega-affair and the Bajaraka movement. When such a disjuncture is manifested, it is like a dust storm brewing amidst the mountain mist.

## INTRODUCTION

I argue in this chapter that *Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands has been envisioned by the government (under the various regimes) and analyzed by the critics from a conceptual understanding of the state as an a priori formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier*. Each adopts a different approach but in fact both fall back on similar conceptual underpinnings. This thesis examines the period of state formation in the Central Highlands between 1955-61 under the First Republic. This chapter, however, broadly examines the way we have so far read the process of Vietnamese state formation under the various regimes in order to tease out the general analytical framework adopted.

This chapter also examines the conceptual underpinnings adopted in the discourses of state formation by the Vietnamese government (under the various regimes) and the critics (of the various regimes). My own encounters in the field and my reading of government sponsored reports on the problems of state formation in the highlands suggest that there is another facet not revealed or explored by either discourses. I begin with a brief exploration of the distinction between hills and plains. I suggest that state formation on the highlands frontier is underlined by the meeting of

two agricultural systems, namely swidden and wet-rice. I then outline how the Vietnamese governments envision state formation on the highlands frontier and how this is criticized by the critics. I identify three conceptual threads, namely the state as an *a priori* formed entity, as a self-contained bounded entity and state formation as a diffusion process, common to both discourses. Both discourses respectively identify things that are gained and lost in the process of state formation on the frontier. The perceptions produced by both discourses are not wrong. These conceptual underpinnings, however, might have led both discourses to miss another important facet of the process of state formation on the frontier that tells of mutability, hybridization or even recombination of the state form.

The Central Highlands and its inhabitants were traditionally located outside the *proper* political and cultural domains of the pre-colonial Vietnamese states. In stating this, I am not ignoring the strong linkages between the uplands and the lowlands through trade, tributary relations or even seepages of cultural exchanges.<sup>41</sup> Colonialism initiated a process of enjoining the hills and the plains into a common political entity. Decolonization redrew the territorial boundaries that brought hills and plains into a single political entity now known as Vietnam. Traditional highland societies were organized quite differently from lowland Kinh society. Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands is generally mediated by agrarian programs. I identify three main policy instruments. One such instrument is agricultural expansion via population redistribution to the highlands. In other words, I am talking about frontier formation (see Chapter Five). A second policy instrument is agricultural intensification and here I am talking specifically about transformation of agricultural practices among the old inhabitants through sedentarization (Chapter Six). Finally, I will discuss the introduction of legally defined land regime by the central government to manage land use (Chapter Seven). Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands, when it failed to take into account local nuances, gave rise to conflicts and even rebellions. Did the Vietnamese government simply press on and disregard such differences? In the first place, were conflicts the only pre-dominant characteristics of this process of frontier formation on the frontier? Are we then assuming that the government did not concern

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<sup>41</sup> Edmund Leach makes this important point about the symbiotic relationship between hill and valley people in Burma. See, Edmund Leach, 'The Frontiers Of Burma' in *The Essential Edmund Leach, Volume 1: Anthropology And Society* edited by Stephen Hugh-Jones & James Laidlaw (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000) pp 234-5.

itself with the well-being of the people it lays claims to? If the Vietnamese government did accommodate such differences, then what was the outcome? Was it simply the triumphant victory of one set particularism over another, or was something hybrid created?

From the Vietnamese government's point of view, state formation is envisioned as an endeavor to achieve what is perceived as the ideal living conditions for the highlanders that constitute being a part of the post-colonial state. For the critics, this period is essentially a 'turbulent time' for the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands, when their cultural integrity is intensely tested and threatened by 'civilizing projects' of the post-colonial state. I borrow the term 'turbulent time' from a recent edited volume entitled, *Turbulent Times And Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities In The Southeast Asian Massif*. It examines the fate of inhabitants in the uplands along the Southeast Asian Massif in the face of intense state formation and globalization processes.<sup>42</sup> This volume includes an article by Oscar Salemink that examines the assault on Central Highlanders' cultural identity by the Vietnamese state's policies of sedentarization and selective cultural preservation.<sup>43</sup> I borrow the term 'civilizing projects' from *Civilizing The Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies For The Development Of Minorities*. This volume examines how the states in Southeast Asia attempt to 'civilize' these upland peoples, rendering them marginalized and dispossessed.<sup>44</sup> Both volumes seek to bring to light the precarious situation of the highlanders in the context of intense state formation that seemingly threatens the cultural integrity and political rights of these people in the margins. Critics of the Vietnamese government's vision of state formation argue that state formation amounts to attempts at 'simplification', 'disciplining' and insidious assimilation of the old inhabitants in the Central Highlands in order to facilitate state control. For critics of this persuasion, it is as if the 'turbulence' created by state formation sends clouds of dust rising into the air. When the dust settles, the 'sons of the mountains' who once roamed 'free in the forest' were in

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Michaud (ed.), *Turbulent Times And Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities In The Southeast Asian Massif*, Curzon: Curzon Press, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Oscar Salemink, 'Sedentarization and Selective Preservation Among The Montagnards In The Vietnamese Central Highlands' in *Turbulent Times And Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities In The Southeast Asian Massif* edited by Jean Michaud (Curzon: Curzon Press, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Duncan (ed.), *Civilizing The Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies For The Development Of Minorities*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2004.

danger of, if not already had their 'world shattered' and lost their freedom, land and identity.<sup>45</sup>

I neither doubt the fact that tensions of state formation on the frontier are at play nor do I wish to argue at this point that highlanders' lives are much better improved as a result of state formation projects, but I do ask whether if the situation in the Central Highlands is so bleak as portrayed. My own encounters in the field seem to suggest a different dynamic at work in the midst of these larger tensions, leading me to ask if state formation is simply a conflictual process? There could exist other facets such as concern for the well-being of the inhabitants (old and new) on the frontier, competition for allegiance of the inhabitants between the government and communist insurgents and physical ecological limitations on the frontier. These factors could possibly lead to compromises and reshaping of government programs, finally producing a rather hybrid state form in contrast to the initial vision of state formation by the government or the picture painted by the critics. The dust that settles also lands on the newcomers, settlers and state alike. While reshaping the frontier, the process of state formation could possibly also reshape the state form itself.

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I recall incidents related to me, in the course of my fieldwork between 1998 and 1999, and also from subsequent travels until December 2004, about frequent but smaller scale protests by highlanders in the 1990s over land disputes with agencies such as state agricultural enterprises (*nong truong quoc doanh*) and forestry enterprises (*lam truong quoc doanh*). Land dispute is one of the most conspicuous manifestations of the tensions caused by the process of state formation on the Central Highlands frontier. Highlanders would gather everyone in the villages, including the limping old and the carried young, and march to the local government offices to seek explanations and redress their grievances. Bui Minh Dao et al report that between 1990 and 1998, some 2,500 cases of land disputes in the four major provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, Kontum and Lam Dong, were referred to higher authorities for resolution. They admitted that

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<sup>45</sup> This is perhaps the message that Gerald Hickey tries to convey to the reader through the titles of his three-volume work on the Central Highlands. See, *Sons Of The Mountains*; *Free In The Forest*; and *Shattered World: Adaptation And Survival Among Vietnam's Highland Peoples*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

many of these disputes were not yet resolved at the time the report was written. We can infer that there were many more cases of land disputes that were either of a smaller scale or went unreported. According to Bui Minh Dao et al, land disputes in the Central Highlands occurred in various formulations, between individuals and individuals, groups and groups, state and other state agencies, individuals and groups, individual and states agencies, groups and state agencies. However, according to their sample study of 60 'hot' cases in three highlands provinces, 45 cases involved disputes between state agencies (mainly state farms) and the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands.<sup>46</sup> In recent publications, Dang Nghiem Van has criticized the government for failing to satisfactorily address the problem of land use in the Central Highlands, which was first identified in the second government-sponsored research program about the region, namely *Chuong Trinh Tay Nguyen II* (Tay Nguyen Program II) that began in 1984.<sup>47</sup>

In the 1950s, there were also other protest-demonstrations not connected to the Bajaraka movement. For example, Hiar, the highlander delegate to the Republic's national assembly, chaired a meeting on 4 September 1958 to explain the government's highland policies for villagers from Konroban and Konhering. The villagers, however, used the occasion to air their grievances, which soon escalated into a protest-demonstration. Archival documents mention about violent clashes between police and people (it is unclear if only highlanders were involved) at Plei Mouville because of abuse of authority by local officials.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, there were numerous other smaller scale protest-demonstrations by highlander villagers affected by government development projects, such as the refugee resettlement projects between 1955-57, the

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<sup>46</sup> Bui Minh Dao, Vu Dinh Loi & Vu Thi Hong, *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen* [Ownership And Utilization Of Land In The Provinces Of The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000, pp 155-160. For further details of land conflicts in the Central Highlands, see also, Bui Minh Dao, Vu Dinh Loi & Vu Thi Hong, 'Thuc trang su dung dat o mot so tinh Tay Nguyen hien nay' [Situation Of Land Use In A Few Provinces Of The Western Plateau At Present], Bao Cao Tong Hop De Tai, Vien Dan Toc Hoc, Trung Tam Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Va Nhan Van Quoc Gia, 1999; Dang Nghiem Van, 'So huu dat dai o Tay Nguyen' [Land Ownership In The Western Plateau], *Tap Chi Dan Toc Hoc* 1+2, pp 75-82, 1988; Vu Dinh Loi, 'Su dung dat dai va nhung giai phap phat trien Tay Nguyen hien nay' [Land Use And Various Measures To Develop The Western Plateau At Present], *Tap Chi Dan Toc Hoc* 3, pp 10-22, 1999.

<sup>47</sup> See for example, Dang Nghiem Van, 'Van de dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen' [The Problem Of Land In The Provinces Of The Western Plateau] in *Mot so van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi buon lang cac dan toc Tay Nguyen*. Results of the *Chuong Trinh Tay Nguyen II* are found in the following two volumes: Dang Nghiem Van (ed.), *Mot so van de kinh te xa hoi Tay Nguyen* [A Few Socio-Economic Problems In The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1986; Dang Nghiem Van (ed.), *Tay Nguyen tren duong phat trien* [Western Plateau On The Road Of Development], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1989.

<sup>48</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.



*Dinh Dien* program that resettled migrants from the lowlands, and expansion of cash crop plantations owned by the state.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Frederic Wickert and Gerald Hickey report bitter complaints by the highlanders over loss of ancestral lands to Kinh migrants, discrimination by Kinh officials, and loss of their cultural autonomy due to resettlement projects and being forced to learn and use the Vietnamese language.<sup>50</sup> The underlying causes that helped to bring the highlanders into the protest-demonstrations organized by Bajaraka were real and persistent.

There is also a different dynamic at work that tells of attempts by agents of the state to take into account local responses regarding government policies or even be more accommodating to local practices. I recall repeated reminders by local officials, when I was conducting fieldwork in the past, telling me that the highlanders have different customs in comparison to the Kinh and giving me pointers on how to behave if and when I encounter highlander respondents in order to not to antagonize them and to gain their trust. So, I was told to try to learn at least a few words of highlander languages (for example, Jarai), never refuse a drink with them, show them due respect, never wander about their villages without permission, and remember that each ethnic group and even individual villages have different customs. To this end, I learnt how to say 'smoke', 'fire', 'eat' and 'drink' in Jarai, from my Kinh friends, who had only been in the highlands since the mid-1990s. In fact, I learnt that these Kinh people, who were cadres and had to deal with highlanders on a daily basis, could communicate colloquially in at least one or two highlander languages. They admit that they still required the help of highlander interpreters when explaining policy measures. After 2001, however, I learnt that all cadres are now required to attend classes to attain at least a measure of proficiency in local highlander languages.

I also recall situations when officials I know had to excuse themselves from a session of '*nhau*' (leisure eating and drinking) simply because there was a prior appointment with a highlander villager. As I observed later in one case, the official even made an extra effort to be more patient when listening to his visitor's problems and offered his advice generously. The next day, he promptly went about to resolve the

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<sup>49</sup> I cover some of such public outburst of grievances in later chapters.

<sup>50</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Preliminary Research Report On The High Plateau (PMS)*, Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1957; Frederic Wickert, 'The Tribesmen' in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years* edited by Richard Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959).

visitor's problems. He told me, once you gave your word to a highlander you must quickly act to fulfill it or they would lose trust in you. The same principle possibly holds true for any official when dealing with Kinh people but it is apparently pertinent when dealing with highlanders. I have heard more than once from local officials, casually related to me while traveling into the inner communes or during conversation over meals and drinks, the operational imperative that 'we work with the people' (*chung toi lam viec voi dan*), so being cadres, they must fulfill their duties to both people and state, yet 'must have good relations with the people' (*phai co quan he tot voi nguoi dan*). It is, after all, not uncommon for officials to have their own coffee or pepper gardens in the outlying communes. All officials themselves are residents within the district. They also have a stake in the highlands that cannot be secured by fear or brute force.<sup>51</sup>

When I first traveled to the Central Highlands, as a tourist in 1997, and to conduct fieldwork in 1998, I saw the coffee and tea farms along side the main roads, the Kinh settlements, and complex network of intra-provincial roads, as signs of encroachment by the state and settlers. This perception would have been accentuated by the events of 2001. After all, highlanders have been subjected to the domination of the state and the encroachment of settlers. Highlanders could only resist by retreating further into the forests or subordinate (read 'assimilate') to these forces of domination, as I was informed by the literature about the Central Highlands. Then again, the same transformation that I took as emblems of this encroachment, also brought in the comforts of modern technology and accompanying benefits of an improved material life. Even in the protest-demonstrations, highlanders came in their tractors, motor bicycles and even used the same roads that the government built to 'penetrate' and expand its reach. The 'invaders' may have benefited relatively more than the highlanders, but the highlanders were not denied such improvements altogether. I also started thinking about the operational imperative related to me by local officials whom I met, that they are responsible to both state and people. Surely there must be another

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<sup>51</sup> This of course leads to the question of whether the central government is then caught in the dilemma of making officials settle on the frontier in order to gain an in depth understanding of local people to create better government-civilian relations, which might lead to growth of local 'bosses', or should the central government periodically redeploy these officials to prevent 'localization of power'? The answer is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

facet about the process of Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands that is not explored in the literature.

## HILLS AND PLAINS

To the uninitiated, it is quite possible to imagine Vietnam's landscape as predominated by vast expanse of wet-rice fields (*dong ruong* or *dien dia*) and punctuated by urbanized towns or large cities (such as Ho Chi Minh city, Danang and Ha Noi). Well, that is not entirely wrong. For a long time in Vietnam's history, Vietnamese civilization seldom ventured into the hills.<sup>52</sup> From the cradle of the Kinh civilization in the Red River Delta, Vietnamese have gradually expanded southwards, but mainly along the lowlands, in what Vietnamese historians have identified as the 'southern advance' (*nam tien*).<sup>53</sup> I do not treat this as an 'inexorable march' of the Vietnamese population southwards. In fact, recent scholarship suggests that this expansion southwards was mediated by the interplay of a series of regional conflicts and spontaneous migration practices of the Viet (or Kinh) people.<sup>54</sup> This preference for the lowlands, in particular along the riverines and delta regions, has much to do with the Kinh's predilection for wet-rice cultivation.<sup>55</sup>

Clifford Geertz characterizes wet-rice agricultural system as an artificial, continual-cultivation, durable, elastic, highly specialized (in terms of crop type), and permanent open-field system.<sup>56</sup> The system requires a high level of technology know-

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<sup>52</sup> See Georges Condominas, 'Aspects Of A Minority Problem In Indochina', *Pacific Affairs* 24 (1), pp 77-82, 1951; Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants And The State In The Highlands Of Vietnam*, Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 2003, pp 3-11; Paul Mus, *Sociologie d'une guerre*, Paris: Seuil, 1952, cited from *Red Hills*, p 4.

<sup>53</sup> See Michael Cotter, 'Towards A Social History Of The Vietnamese Southward Movement', *Journal Of Asian History* 9 (1), pp 12-24, 1968.

<sup>54</sup> See *Red Hills*, pp 286-288; Keith Taylor, 'Nguyen Hoang And The Beginnings Of Vietnam's Southward Movement' in *Southeast Asia In The Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, Belief* edited by Anthony Reid (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>55</sup> *Red Hills*, p 7. For an indepth discussion of the relationship between Viet villages and the wet-rice agriculture system, consult Diep Dinh Hoa (ed.), *Lang Nguyen: Tim Hieu Lang Viet (II)* [The Nguyen Village: Understanding The Viet Village (II)], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1994. For general distinction between hills and plains in mainland Southeast Asia, consult Robbins Burling, *Hill Farms And Padi Fields: Life In Mainland Southeast Asia*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965; Charles Keyes, *The Golden Peninsular: Culture And Adaptation In Mainland Southeast Asia*, New York: Macmillian, 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process Of Ecological Change In Indonesia*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University Of California Press, 1963, p 28.

how, sophisticated tools (the plow, sickle, spades, flat-blade hoe, etc) and inputs (such as manure for fertilizers), and skilled labor to completely rework the natural environment in order to create the durable rectangular rice-fields, sophisticated irrigation system, and sustenance of the productive system day in and out.<sup>57</sup> The system is elastic because it is able to support rising population numbers by simply working the land harder and intensifying production, *a la* Chayanov's concept of the peasantry's 'self-exploitation'.<sup>58</sup> Thus, wet-rice agricultural systems are known to sustain higher population densities, as we can easily observe in the lowlands of Southeast Asia (and also Southeast China). Wet-rice cultivation is therefore a complete overhaul of the natural environment. Hill country, which seldom possesses the natural conditions for wet-rice agriculture, was no lush land for the Kinh people. That was prior to the arrival of modern agricultural technological breakthroughs and rise of global agro-commodity economy.<sup>59</sup> The foothills marked the border zone of traditional Vietnamese cultural domain.

The Central Highlands region is the traditional abode of a diversity of ethnic groups such as the Rhade (Ede), Jarai, Bahnar, Coho, and others that belong either to the Mon Khmer or Austronesian linguistic groups.<sup>60</sup> The inhabitants were often called 'moi' in the past. The term 'moi' is conventionally understood as meaning 'savage', which is perceived as a derogatory term to call the old inhabitants of the highlands.<sup>61</sup> The origin of this word is, however, seldom discussed in the literature. The word 'moi' is not a generic Vietnamese or Han-Vietnamese term. According to Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, this is how the word 'moi' came to be used. The Bahnar people

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<sup>57</sup> See detailed discussion of wet-rice agriculture in Southeast Asia, consult also, Lucien Hanks, *Rice And Man: Agricultural Ecology In Southeast Asia*, Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972; Francesca Bray, *The Rice Economies: Technology And Development In Asian Societies*, New York: Blackwell, 1986.

<sup>58</sup> For Chayanov's theory of self-exploitation, see Aleksander V. Chayanov, *The Theory Of Peasant Economy*, American Economic Association: R.D. Irwin, 1966 (Edited by Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay and R.E.F. Smith).

<sup>59</sup> *Hill Farms And Paddy Fields*, p 6.

<sup>60</sup> For detailed listing of the various highlander ethnic groups, see Peter Kunstadter, 'Vietnam: Introduction' in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities And Nations* edited by Peter Kunstadter (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967) pp 693-702; Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son & Luu Hung, *Ethnic Minorities In Vietnam*, Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 1993; Vien Dan Toc Hoc, *Cac dan toc it nguoi o Viet Nam: Cac tinh phia nam* [Ethnic Minorities In Vietnam: The Southern Provinces], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1984.

<sup>61</sup> 'Aspects Of A Minority Problem In Indochina', p 77. Several early French texts about the Central Highlanders either used *Moi* or *Savages* in the title. For example, P. Abbe Dourisboure, *Les Sauvages Bahmars (Cochinchine Orientale): Souvenirs d'un missionnaire*, Paris: Tequi/Les Missions Etrangiers, 1873; Henri Maitre, *Les Jungles Moi: Mission Henri Maitre (1909-1911), Indochine Sud-Centrale*, Paris: Larose, 1912.

use the word 'to'moi' to refer to visitors (*khach*), so they would refer to visitors as 'to'moi Djarai, to'moi Xo'dang', etc. Thus, when Kinh people first interacted with the Bahnar, they would constantly hear the words 'to'moi' and would use the same word to refer to the highlanders. Because Vietnamese language is monosyllabic, the 'to' was slowly removed, becoming just 'moi'. The term 'moi' slowly evolved into the common term of reference used by the Kinh for the people staying in the forested highlands.<sup>62</sup> Before reading the book *Moi Kontum* by Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, one might think the title is referring to 'The Savages of Kontum'. The book, however, does not in anyway portrays the Bahnar as 'savages'. Instead, it explains why the Bahnar has certain cultural practices and whenever, possible, illustrate the similarities in practices and beliefs between the Kinh and the Bahnar. The authors probably wanted us to understand the title as 'The Peoples of Kontum'. Unfortunately, the pejorative understanding of the term 'moi' continued to remain common.

If the picture of the plains reveals a highly populated and neatly ordered, grid-like expanse of fixed wet-rice fields and towns, a 'legible' human engineered landscape, to borrow the words of James Scott, then the hills paint a contrastingly different story.<sup>63</sup> The view towards the far end of the horizon on the 'grid-like' plains is often interrupted by the jutting up of the hills. Intimidating from the plains, since the illegibility of the thick forest cover easily lends credence to wild imaginations of what resides up there, it is little wonder why the lowlander Kinh often perceived hill country as a foreboding place, where the 'forest is haunted and the water is poisonous' (*rung thieng nuoc doc*) and resided by wild animals, and savages. The view is slightly more reassuring to the privileged observers flying in an aircraft, who view it downwards from the skies. These chunks sticking out of the plains bear certain resemblance to a 'Gruyere' cheese sitting on a Belgian waffle (perhaps a rather unpalatable combination for some!). Here, I am borrowing the analogy put forth by William Clarence-Smith and Francois Ruf when describing the process of frontier pioneering. They suggest that frontier pioneering is often mediated by the emergence of frontier settlements when small groups of pioneers clear small patches of the land that leaves the vegetated landscape looking like a

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<sup>62</sup> Nguyen Kinh Chi & Nguyen Dong Chi, *Moi Kontum*, Hue, 1937, p 5.

<sup>63</sup> James Scott, 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia...Or Why The State Is The Enemy Of People Who Move Around...Or...Why Civilizations Can't Climb Hills', paper delivered at the Development and the Nation-State Conference, Washington University, 2000; James Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes To Improve The Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, p 186.

'Gruyere' cheese.<sup>64</sup> The hills, from this top-down view, are often punctuated by irregular patches of clearings or patches of uneven canopy as if the natural cover was replaced by recently regenerated growth, much like the air pockets that formed in the Gruyere cheese. Not all highlanders practice swidden or shifting cultivation, since we do see elaborately terraced paddy fields in some parts of the highlands. For example, John McKinnon and Jean Michaud mention that terraced paddy landscape in the mountainous Hani region at the headwaters of the Red River easily 'dwarf the pyramids of Egypt'.<sup>65</sup> At relatively more modest scale, some Chru and Coho people of the Central Highlands are known to practice wet-rice cultivation in the valleys and carved out modest terraced rice-fields by the slopes. Nonetheless, swidden is the pervasive agricultural system practiced in the hills.<sup>66</sup>

According to Harold Conklin, the term 'swidden' originates from old English dialect referring to a burned clearing.<sup>67</sup> The usual Vietnamese terms in use to describe a swidden are 'nuong', 'ray' or 'nuong ray'. 'Nuong' is commonly used in the north, while 'ray' is the more common term in the Central and South.<sup>68</sup> 'Nuong Ray' is a compound word to refer to swidden in general. 'Nuong' or 'ray' is often used in conjunction with other words to describe a specific type of swidden, for example 'ray lua' refers to a 'rice swidden', etc. For the highlanders, swidden is known as 'mir' among the Ma, Mnung, Coho and Bahnar (who also calls it 'chec'); 'hma' between the Ede and Jarai; 'diec' among the Sedang; and 'apoh' among the Raglai.<sup>69</sup> Following Conklin, swidden agriculture, or shifting cultivation, refers to a particular system of agriculture in which 'fields are cleared by firing and are cropped discontinuously' and

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<sup>64</sup> William G. Clarence-Smith & Francois Ruf, 'Cocoa Pioneer Fronts: The Historical Determinants' in *Cocoa Pioneer Fronts Since 1800* edited by William G. Clarence-Smith (Great Britain and USA: MacMillan Press and St. Martin's Press, 1996) p 2.

<sup>65</sup> John McKinnon & Jean Michaud, 'Montagnard Domain In The Southeast Asian Massif' in *Turbulent Times And Enduring Peoples*, p 7.

<sup>66</sup> For a brief description of wet-rice cultivation among the Central Highlanders, Chru in particular, consult Gerald Hickey, *The Highland People Of South Vietnam: Social And Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967, pp 156-8. For details about wet-rice cultivation among the Coho people, consult Bui Minh Dao & Vu Thi Hong, *Dan toc Co Ho o Viet Nam* [Ethnic Co Ho In Viet Nam], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2003, pp 71-75.

<sup>67</sup> Harold Conklin, *Hanunbo Agriculture: A Report On An Integral System Of Shifting Agriculture In The Philippines*, Rome: FAO, 1957, pp 1-2.

<sup>68</sup> Bui Minh Dao, *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen* [Traditional Cultivation Of Autochthonous Ethnic Groups In The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000, p 42. Incidentally, the Thai similarly refers to swidden as 'rai', see Andrew Walker, 'The Karen Consensus, Ethnic Politics And Resource-Use Legitimacy In Northern Thailand', *Asian Ethnicity* 2 (2), pp 145-62, 2001.

<sup>69</sup> *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen*, pp 42-5.

marked by periods of fallowing.<sup>70</sup> In Vietnamese, swidden agriculture is commonly described as ‘*dot rung lam ray*’ (burn the forest to make swidden) or ‘*dao canh hoa chung*’ (plough by blade, plant by fire).<sup>71</sup>

Warren Dean notes that swidden, in spite of its simplicity in terms of tools used, in fact requires the acquirement of skillful and clever methods such as the felling of trees in the required direction, prediction of the right time of the season to conduct the felling and burning, the burning of the felled trees is by itself a sophisticated art, and finally even the planting of the crops requires a certain ‘finesse’ that is well ritualized. Thus, Dean, when describing past swidden practices among the indigenous Indians in Minas Gerais of Brazil, states that ‘swidden was very economical of labor, but it was not artless’.<sup>72</sup> Swidden agriculture practiced by most Central Highlanders falls into the category of what Harold Conklin defines as ‘integral swidden systems’.<sup>73</sup> In ‘integral swidden systems’, swidden farmers reside in a long-settled area and rotate their fields within a particular territory. Each plot goes through the process of ‘firing-cultivating-fallowing’ where by, upon reaching the third stage, the swidden agriculturalist re-starts the process in an alternate plot. Cultivation in a particular swidden spans between one and three years (in some regions swiddens are cultivated for slightly longer period of up to five years) and left to fallow for a longer period of time. A complete swidden cycle – that is when one swidden plot has been cultivated, left to fallow and finally return to – may take up to ten or fifteen years although others may take up to twenty-five.<sup>74</sup> The swidden cycle is also how the Mnong Gar, also known as the ‘*Phii Bree*’ (men of the

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<sup>70</sup> *Hanunbo Agriculture: A Report On An Integral System Of Shifting Agriculture In The Philippines*, pp 1-5; Jonathan Spencer, *Shifting Cultivation In Southeastern Asia*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University Of California Press, 1966, pp 6-10.

<sup>71</sup> *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen*, p 42.

<sup>72</sup> Warren Dean, *With Broadax And Firebrand: The Destruction Of The Brazilian Atlantic Forest*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995, pp 26-28.

<sup>73</sup> On classification of the type of shifting cultivation in Vietnam, see Do Dinh Sam, *Shifting Cultivation In Vietnam: Its Social, Economic And Environmental Values To Alternative Land Use*, London: International Institute For Environment And Development, 1994, pp 7-15. *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen* provides the most detailed comparative study on swidden agriculture practiced by the Central Highlanders.

<sup>74</sup> *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen*, p 55; Harold Conklin provides an exemplary examination of a full swidden cycle in *Hanunbo Agriculture: A Report On An Integral System Of Shifting Agriculture In The Philippines*, pp 139-147.

forest) kept time; in terms of how many times they have 'eaten' a particular tract of the forest.<sup>75</sup>

Among the swidden agriculturalists in Southeast Asia, rice is the main food crop cultivated but practitioners are known to plant a great variety of cultivars to supplement their dietary and ritual needs, too.<sup>76</sup> Further food supplement is gathered from the standing forest, often perceived as sacred and thus not used for swiddening, and from hunting. In contrast to wet-rice agriculture, where crops are usually planted in an orderly fashion of neatly delineated inundated fields (and often also in rows within the fields), swidden agriculture to the uninitiated seems rather haphazard and disorderly. Clifford Geertz notes that swidden is akin to a mimicry, or 'fabrication' of nature, where 'a natural forest is transformed into a harvestable forest'.<sup>77</sup> Swidden nonetheless is a man-made landscape.

Most scholars concur that the Central Highlanders effectively lived in stateless societies during the pre-colonial period.<sup>78</sup> Swidden societies seldom give rise to elaborate political formations. The village (*plei, buon, ban, kon*) often represented the highest level of 'political' organization.<sup>79</sup> There also existed, however, some form of loose inter-village alliances based on extended family or clan relations. The village was, and even now still is, often led by a group of elders or 'men of prowess', who are perceived to be spiritually potent or imbued with rich knowledge of the living and spiritual worlds. Sometimes, one or more such 'men of prowess' may gain sufficient reputation and have strong influence across the villages of a particular region.<sup>80</sup> There

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<sup>75</sup> Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten The Forest: The Story Of A Montagnard Village In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Translated by Adrian Foulke. Original publication 1957, p xvii.

<sup>76</sup> *Agriculture Involvement*, pp 24-25; *Shifting Cultivation In Southeastern Asia*, pp 110-125; *Hanunbo Agriculture: A Report On An Integral System Of Shifting Agriculture In The Philippines*, pp 72-88.

<sup>77</sup> *Agriculture Involvement*, pp 25.

<sup>78</sup> 'Aspects Of A Minority Problem In Indochina', p 77; Grant Evans, 'Internal Colonialism In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam', *Sojourn* 7 (2), pp 274-304, 1992, p 274.

<sup>79</sup> Dang Nghiem Van, 'So huu dat dai o Tay Nguyen' [Land Ownership In The Western Plateau] in *Dan toc, Van hoa, Ton giao* [Ethnicity, Culture, Religion] edited by Dang Nghiem Van (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2001, p 614.

<sup>80</sup> For an insightful discussion of the concept of 'men of prowess', see Oliver W. Wolters, *History, Region And Culture In Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982, pp 6-9. For an extended portrayal of a typical man of prowess, follow the character of Baap Can in *We Have Eaten The Forest*. According to Bui Dinh, such men of prowess are known as 'Ca Ra' among the Hre in Ba To. One such character, a Mr. Dinh Mach, was appointed as representative of the Ba Xuy commune in Ba To district during the early years of The First Republic. Bui Dinh, *Duong Len Xu Thuong* [Road To The Highland Region], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Bo Cong Dan Vu, 1963, pp 11-15 & 18-21.



was, however, no centralized and overarching form of political organization that could lay sovereign claims over the highlanders. According to the Nguyen dynastic records, the reputable Master of Fire (*p'tau pui*) and Master of Water (*p'tau ea*) among the Jarai people paid tribute to the Nguyen king, Minh Mang, and were recognized as mandarins of second degree in return. The *p'tau pui* and *p'tau ea* were respectively termed 'hoa xa' (king of fire) and 'thuy xa' (king of water), being perceived as rulers of their own realms in the highlands.<sup>81</sup> These masters, together with the lesser-known Master of Wind (*p'tau angin*), were effectively only exceptional religious spiritual leaders rather than political chiefs among the Jarai people.<sup>82</sup>

The village elders or spiritual leaders were also guardians of the oral customary laws that regulated behavior of the highlanders within the village. With the blessings of the spirits, specific elders within the village, for example the *tom bri* among the Mnong Gar (otherwise known as forest guardian) or the *polan* among the Ede (otherwise known as earth guardian), selected a particular tract of forest for swidden within the village's territory, performed the necessary rituals and ensured conformity to the customs in order to maintain harmonious relation with the spiritual world so that the crops would grow and harvests would be good.<sup>83</sup> Diep Dinh Hoa observes that the role

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<sup>81</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam And The Chinese Model: A Comparative Study Of Vietnamese And Chinese Government In The First Half Of The Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971 (1988 edition) pp 237-8; Nghiem Tham, 'Tim hieu dong bao Thuong: Hai phien vuong cua trieu dinh Viet Nam hoi truoc, Thuy Xa va Hoa Xa (I)' [Understanding The Highlander Compatriots: Two Kings Of The Vietnamese Court In The Past, King Of Water And King Of Fire], *Que Huong* 28, pp 129-41, 1961; Nghiem Tham, 'Tim hieu dong bao Thuong: Hai phien vuong cua trieu dinh Viet Nam hoi truoc, Thuy Xa Va Hoa Xa (II)' [Understanding The Highlander Compatriots: Two Kings Of The Vietnamese Court In The Past, King Of Water And King Of Fire], *Que Huong* 29, pp 140-72, 1961; Nghiem Tham, 'Tim hieu dong bao Thuong: Hai phien vuong cua trieu dinh Viet Nam hoi truoc, Thuy Xa va Hoa Xa (III)' [Understanding The Highlander Compatriots: Two Kings Of The Vietnamese Court In The Past, King Of Water And King Of Fire], *Que Huong* 31, pp 130-49, 1962; Hoai Dung, 'Lich su ky su: Viec thau phuc nuoc Thuy Xa va Hoa Xa (I)' [Historical Essay: Subjection Of The Countries Of King Of Water And King Of Fire], *Tri Tan* (98), pp 454-455, 1943; Hoai Dung, 'Lich su ky su: Viec thau phuc nuoc Thuy Xa va Hoa Xa (II)' [Historical Essay: Subjection Of The Countries Of King Of Water And King Of Fire], *Tri Tan* (99), pp 478-485 & 495, 1943.

<sup>82</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 259-60. Accordingly, Jacques Dournes' work on the Potao is the most detailed about these powerful figures of Jarai society. Unfortunately, this has not been translated into Vietnamese or English. Jacques Dournes, *Potao: Une theorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois Jorai*, Paris: Flammarion, 1977. For more details, about the *P'tau Ea*, readers may consult, To Dong Hai, *Nghi le va am nhạc trong nghi le của người Jarai* [Rituals And Music In Jarai Ceremonies], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2002, Chapter 2.

<sup>83</sup> *Trong trot truyện thông của các dân tộc tại cho Tây Nguyên*, pp 105-107; *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen*, pp 47-53; Be Viet Dang, Chu Thai Son, Vu Thi Hong & Vu Dinh Loi, *Dai cuong ve cac dan toc Ede, Mnong o Dak Lak* [General Outline Of Ede And Mnong Ethnic Groups In Dak Lak], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1982, pp 73. For detailed description of the *polan*, see Anne De Hauteclouque-Howe, *Nguoi Ede: Mot xa hoi mau he* [Ede People: A Matrilineal Society], Ha Noi: Nha

of these forest or earth guardians is similar to that of the ‘earth deity’ (*tho cong*) in Vietnamese beliefs. The significant difference is that these guardians are humans of ‘flesh, blood and bones’, while the *tho cong* remains a spiritual character.<sup>84</sup> Each household was assigned specific plots within the selected swidden area. This plot of land within the swidden area was passed down from generation to generation; it could be transferred among villagers but not to outsiders. Transfer of land use rights among villagers was in turn governed by village customs. Often, it also involved a ritual process of witness by other villagers from across different generations, the young, adults and the elders. Land was not considered as private property because it was only meant for the use of swiddening and only so with the blessings of the spirits (of the soil, the rice, ancestors, etc.). Dang Nghiem Van attempts to explain this through modern political economy and terms this as a form of ‘incomplete ownership rights’ (*quyen so huu khong tron ven*).<sup>85</sup> This conceptualization is rather unsuitable for understanding the nature of land use among the highlanders. This is because traditional land use was closely bound to the highlanders’ systems of cosmological beliefs, where tributary exchanges and rituals were enacted to maintain the cosmological equilibrium between the spiritual and the living worlds. It does not encompass any modern political economy conceptions of ownership or private property rights. Instead, it is perhaps more useful to see ‘land rights’ in traditional swidden societies as some sort of ‘custodial responsibilities’.

Land use was practiced within the territorial confines of the village. Village territory among most highlander communities in the Central Highlands was not restricted simply to the residential village and the cultivated fields. Neither is it delineated by definite boundaries formed by the cultivated fields as in wet-rice agriculture and recorded in village cadastral registries (*dia ba*) as often observed in

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Xuat Ban Van Hoa Dan Toc, 2004. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc & Phung Ngoc Cuu. Original publication, 1985. pp 80 – 94. For detailed description of the *tom bri*, see *We Have Eaten The Forest*.

<sup>84</sup> Diep Dinh Hoa, ‘Dat dai va huyet thong: Vai nhan xet ve quyen so huu dat rung qua chuyen Ho Phoc (Yao Pul Phok) cua nguoi Mnong Gar – Tinh Dac Lac’ [Land And Lineage: Some Observations On Forested Land Ownership Through The Tale Of Phok Family Of The Mnong Gar People In Dac Lac], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su 2*, pp 31-48, 1993, p 38. This inter-mixing of spiritual, nature and human world can also be found in Kinh culture but it is much reduced in intensity in modern times. I thank Professor David Marr for pointing this out to me. For further details on this, consult *Window On A War*; Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1993; Ngo Duc Thinh (ed.), *Tin nguong va van hoa tin nguong o Viet Nam* (Beliefs And Cultural Beliefs In Vietnam] Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Hoc, 2001.

<sup>85</sup> ‘So huu dat dai o Tay Nguyen’, p 616.

Vietnamese villages. Village territory included cultivated land, forests deemed as swidden grounds, forests perceived as sacred and therefore never cleared, fallow fields and burials grounds. This suggests that swidden in general required a large expanse of land and was often vulnerable to encroachment by neighboring swiddeners or other newcomers.<sup>86</sup> Records of the highlander village territories were preserved in oral verses known to the village elders. Diep Dinh Hoa records one such oral verse of the Mnong Gar of Sarluk,

**(In Mnong Gar)**

*Nhar Bri Sarluk*

*Dih hui Dak Mei troih dak Dam Blong*

*Boto hut tun Yok bloh troih pot Car Her*

*Tu but Ro 'Bak troih lieng bong hrong Pan Tlang*

*Boso Krong Pan Tlang troih dak Roebeh alok da Krong*

**(In Vietnamese, Hoa's translation)**

*Ranh gioi rung Sarluk*

*Phia nam tu Song Mei den song Dam Blong*

*Dong tu cai goi yen ngua doi Blach den ranh Car Her*

*Bac rung Ro 'Bak den Lieng Bong va rung gia Pan Tlang*

*Tay rung gia Pan Tlang den song Ro 'beh ben canh song Krong<sup>87</sup>*

**(In English, my translation from Vietnamese)**

Demarcation of Sarluk forest

South from Mei river to Dam Blong river

East from the saddle called Blach to Car Her brook

North of Ro 'Bak forest to Lieng Bong and old forest Pan Tlang

West of old forest Pan Tlang to river Ro 'beh next to river Krong<sup>88</sup>

Such oral customs are comparably similar to the 'unwritten customs' (*luat tục bat thanh van*) found in Vietnamese villages.<sup>89</sup> Even to this day, it is generally only known within

<sup>86</sup> I thank Andrew Walker in the Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, ANU, for bringing up this point to me.

<sup>87</sup> 'Dat dai va huyet thong', p 37. See also, *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen*, pp 44-56.

<sup>88</sup> I found it interesting that Professor Hoa's informant makes reference to the poles to indicate direction. I asked an ethnic Ede anthropologist about this. She was not sure how the poles came about, but suggested that the positions of the Sun and Moon were probably important indicators, which later helped the locals to recognize the poles. I thank Professor David Marr for reminding me about this point.

the village. In cases of inter-village disputes, representatives would recite such verses and identify territorial markers such as particular trees, stones, hills and streams to verify their claims to the territory.<sup>90</sup> Unresolved disputes often led to inter-village warfare, which was quite common in the past. Nancy Volk reveals how such methods continued to serve the highlanders from different communities even in the Resettlement Center of Da Ton of Lam Dong province in the early 1970s.<sup>91</sup> Hence, Gerald Hickey notes that

Tua, a native of Dak Tea Pen, pointed out that when one spoke of ‘Dak To’ or ‘Kon Horing’, it was not a reference the village itself but rather to its territory.<sup>92</sup>

Within the confines of this territory, the swidden practitioners rotated their fields as described earlier. Within this defined territory, the village, usually stay put. The villagers might move the entire village due to high incidences of death, outbreak of epidemic or encountered ill omens.<sup>93</sup> At times, the villagers would temporarily relocate and set up makeshift huts closer to fields located far away from the existing build-up village, only to return when these fields were left to fallow while cultivating swiddens closer to village. In this sense, the highlanders were technically not nomadic in the true sense of the term.

To say that highlanders lived in ‘state-less’ societies we are also inferring that the reach of pre-colonial Vietnamese states ‘petered out’ in the hills, although trade continued to traverse between hills and plains, and tributary relations between some influential highland leaders and the court continued to symbolize a rudimentary form of political connection. In fact, there were even legal restrictions, in the lowland polities,

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<sup>89</sup> For details on ‘*huong uoc*’ and ‘*luat tục bat thanh van*’, consult, Diep Dinh Hoa, *Nguoi Viet o dong bang Bac Bo* [Viet People In The Northern Delta], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000; Ngo Duc Thinh, *Tim hieu luat tục cac toc nguoi o Viet Nam* [Understanding Customary Laws Of Ethnic Groups In Vietnam], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2003, pp 251-296; Bui Xuan Dinh, *Huong Uoc va Quan Ly Lang Xa* [Village Customs And Village Administration], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1998, pp 19-23.

<sup>90</sup> *Trong trot truyện thông của các dân tộc tại cho Tây Nguyên*, p 105.

<sup>91</sup> Nancy Dorcas Volk, ‘A Temporary Community In A Temporary World: A Montagnard Resettlement Area In Southern Vietnam’, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Washington, Washington, 1979, pp 134-9.

<sup>92</sup> *Shattered World*, p 180.

<sup>93</sup> Gerald Hickey, *The Highland People Of South Vietnam: Social And Economic Development*, Santa Monica, 1967, pp 75; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 268-9; Nguyen Trac Di, *Dong bao cac sac toc thieu so Viet Nam (Nguon Goc va Phong Tục)* [Vietnamese Ethnic Minority Compatriots (Origins And Customs)], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1972, pp 128-9; *We Have Eaten The Forest*, pp 6-7.

to limit contact between the lowland Kinh and the highlanders, such as during the Le and Nguyen dynasties.<sup>94</sup> Under the Nguyen dynasty, security measures were taken to separate the highland region from Kinh domains. For example, the *Tran Man* (Barbarian Town) was demarcated as the extreme border district of the Nguyen kingdom and the *Truong Luy* (long fence), also known as *Luy Son Phong*, which according to Bui Dinh was a stretch of defense wall about 90 kilometers along the frontier found in present day Quang Ngai province, was constructed under Gia Long's reign.<sup>95</sup> I suspect that the Truong Luy was simply a series of strategic outposts of which along certain parts a wall of some kind was constructed.<sup>96</sup> Nonetheless, during periods of successful state expansion by the pre-colonial Vietnamese kingdoms, the state was able to project its influence and exacted a certain amount of claims among the highlander villages in the midlands. This is probably best illustrated by the establishment of the *cac-lai* system during the Nguyen dynasty, when frontier traders were appointed as responsible for collecting tributes on behalf of the court.<sup>97</sup> Under Minh Mang, the frontier region under the influence of the Masters of Fire and Water (*P'tau Pui* and *P'tau Ea*), were treated as vassals of the Nguyen kingdom but were mainly left alone, being treated as tributary domains under the charge of the two *P'tau*.<sup>98</sup>

In the lowlands, the massive transformation of the natural landscape into the grids of wet-rice fields was often founded upon a systematic organization of labor, creation and regulation of irrigation works, and a legible land regime that was clearly framed in cadastral registers recorded by the village councils. Traditional Vietnamese villages also had their own village customs (*huong uoc*), which were duly documented; and there were also unwritten customs (*luat tuc bat thanh van*). In this sense, similar to the highlander village, the lowland village very much ran its own affairs but subjected

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<sup>94</sup> For further details, consult Pham Huu Dat & Lam Ba Nam, *Chinh sach dan toc cua cac chinh quyen nha nuoc phong kien Viet Nam (X-XIX)* [Ethnic Policies Of The Feudal State Regimes In Vietnam (10<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001; Ta Van Tai, 'Ethnic Minorities And The Law In Traditional Vietnam', *Vietnam Forum* (5), pp 22-36, 1985.

<sup>95</sup> *Duong Len Xu Thuong*, pp 86-93.

<sup>96</sup> After some discussion with David Marr of Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, ANU, I believe this was more likely than an actual 90 kilometers stretch of solid defense wall.

<sup>97</sup> Georges Condominas, 'Aspects Of A Minority Problem In Indochina', *Pacific Affairs* 24 (1), pp 77-82, 1951, p 79.

<sup>98</sup> *Vietnam And The Chinese Model*, pp 237-8.

to interventions from the higher echelons of the political center.<sup>99</sup> The major difference was that Vietnamese village was also subjected to the overarching claims (taxes, corvee, conscripts, clothing, use of language, etc.) of the central state, in the pre-colonial days being the court and the figure of the king. Hence, villages were often administratively organized into communes, which were then subjected to the political authority of the canton (*tong*). Within the village, villagers must abide by the local code of conduct first and foremost, hence the proverbial saying, '*phép vua thua lệ làng*' (the king's edict gives way to the village customs). The cadastral registry (*dia ba*) was submitted to the canton authorities as a record of land claims. With the cadastral register, the village council thus managed access and ownership of land within the territorial confines of the village. The cadastral register, however, was also symbolic of the wider political relationship between the village and the state.<sup>100</sup> David Marr, however, notes that individual villages within the commune often kept their own registers that might not conform to the commune records.<sup>101</sup> In contrast to the land use practices among the highlanders, land ownership rights in wet-rice societies were clearly defined and documented, with clearly delineated boundaries. The cadastral register kept records of lands that were privately owned (*tu dien*) and communal lands under the management of the village or commune councils (*cong dien*). Nonetheless, this did not preclude ambiguities in customs that often led to bitter disputes between villages over land claims. Vietnamese traditional agricultural system was therefore characterized by a sophisticated body of social co-ordination that was in turn paralleled by a centralizing political system.

The lowland Vietnamese kingdoms, which were strongly subjected to Sinitic political influence, were organized in a very centralized fashion.<sup>102</sup> Although village customs (written and unwritten) governed the conduct of individual villagers, but

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<sup>99</sup> David Marr, 'A Brief History Of Local Government In Vietnam' in *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government In Vietnam* edited by Benedict J. Triandafyllidis & David Marr (Singapore: Institute Of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004) pp 31-35. For further discussion on the autonomy of Vietnamese villages, consult, Bui Xuan Dinh, *Le Lang Phép Nuoc* [Village Customs, State Laws], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Phap Ly, 1985; Martin Grossheim, 'Village Government In Pre-colonial And Colonial Vietnam' in *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government In Vietnam*.

<sup>100</sup> Phan Huy Le, 'Dia ba o Viet Nam' [Cadastral Register In Vietnam], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* 3, pp 19-25, 1995.

<sup>101</sup> 'A Brief History Of Local Government In Vietnam', p 33.

<sup>102</sup> For analyses of Sino influences on the evolution of the Vietnamese pre-colonial political system, consult *Vietnam And The Chinese Model* and Keith Taylor, *The Birth Of Viet Nam*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1983.

beyond issues of local conduct, allegiance was to the king. By means of the circulation of symbols of allegiance, such as language, tattoos, legal code, tax registers, cadastral registers, and agricultural practice, etc., the state thus claimed control of the population.<sup>103</sup> Wet-rice agricultural system essentially fixed people to the land, but some still departed for the frontier in search of better prospects or to seek less political control on their lives. The ability to control the population was therefore translated into claims over territory. It is therefore of little surprise that agricultural expansion often served as the main tool of state territorial consolidation and expansion.<sup>104</sup> Territorial expansion among the pre-colonial lowland states, however, never climbed uphill.<sup>105</sup> Although the lowland political center was quite often able to project its influence in the hills, 'radiate' its influence, as Andrew Walker puts it critically, was about all it could do.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the Central Highlands remained very much outside the proper political domain of the pre-colonial Vietnamese states.

This ambiguous relationship between the pre-colonial Vietnamese lowland states and the hills took a significant turn with the arrival of colonialism. In the face of French imperialism, Vietnamese loyalists took to the hills and started the *Can Vuong* (Support the King) Movement.<sup>107</sup> The frontier would have provided the required base to counter the French had pre-existing relations between the Vietnamese political center and the hills been any better. That was, however, not the case. In fact, the hills had always provided a refuge for people seeking escape from the Vietnamese court. For example, in the Central Highlands, French Catholic missionaries and their followers found a safe haven among the 'savages' in Kontum when persecuted by the Vietnamese court.<sup>108</sup> Each time the Vietnamese retreated to the hills, it was clear that there was a need to remake the relationship between the hill-dwellers and plains inhabitants. Thus, David Marr notes that the retreats to the hills, in Thanh Nghe Tinh between 1885 and

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<sup>103</sup> See "Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia"; *Seeing Like A State*, pp 185-7.

<sup>104</sup> See Rodolphe De Koninck, 'The Peasantry As The Territorial Spearhead Of The State In Southeast Asia: The Case Of Vietnam', *Sojourn* 11, pp 231-58, 1996; Rodolphe De Koninck & Steve Dery, 'Agricultural Expansion As A Tool Of Population Redistribution In Southeast Asia', *Journal Of Southeast Asian Studies* 28, pp 1-26, 1997.

<sup>105</sup> 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia'; *History, Region And Culture In Southeast Asian Perspectives*, p 32.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Walker, *The Legend Of The Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade And Traders In The Borderlands Of Laos, Thailand, China And Burma*, Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 1999, p 7.

<sup>107</sup> For details of the *Can Vuong* Movement, consult, David Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-colonialism, 1885-1925*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1971.

<sup>108</sup> *Moi Kontum*, pp 9-12; Do Nang Van, 'Nguoi Kinh dau tien len Kontum' [The First Kinh People In Kontum], *Van Hoa Nguyet San* (20), pp 305-9, 1957.

1895, and in Viet Bac until 1910, had different outcomes.<sup>109</sup> It was clear that the anti-colonial quest could not succeed without winning over the highlands and its inhabitants. Tran Tu Binh recalls in his memoir, winning over the highlanders, who had initially aided the French to ensure maintenance of a servile labor population in the rubber plantations of the 'red earth', was crucial in helping them to turn the tide against the repressive plantation regime.<sup>110</sup> David Marr notes,

[p]robably the most sensitive contradiction that ICP (Indochinese Communist Party) members had to deal with until early 1945 was that between ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) and the highlands minority peoples (Thuong) living in the provinces between the Chinese frontier and the Red River delta...without the active involvement of some of them, his [Ho Chi Minh] plan to create and defend one or more liberated zones in the mountains was doomed to failure.<sup>111</sup>

It was quite clear that the pre-existing relationship between hills and plains must be revised in the struggle for independence, and if the hills and plains were to be enjoined as one single post-colonial political unit.

## TWO VIEWS OF STATE FORMATION ON THE FRONTIER IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

### The Vietnamese Government's Vision of State Formation

The Vietnamese government's vision of state formation in the highlands is marked by an endeavor to overcome the binaries of civilization-wild, swidden (often interpreted as primitive by plains people)-paddy (perceived as more advanced by plains people), and poverty-prosperity. If once upon a time the *truong luy* (see earlier section) symbolized the separation of the savages and the civilized, discourses of state formation during the quest for anti-colonialism and post-colonial state formation seek to replace

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<sup>109</sup> *Vietnamese Anti-colonialism*, p 44-76; Mark Mcleod, 'Indigenous Peoples And The Vietnamese Revolution, 1930-75', *Journal Of World History* 10 (2), pp 353-89, 1999, pp 360-1.

<sup>110</sup> Tran Tu Binh, *Phu Rieng, The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir Of Life On A Colonial Rubber Plantation*, Athens: Ohio University, Center For International Studies/Southeast Asian Studies, 1985.

<sup>111</sup> David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition On Trial, 1920-45*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1981, pp 403-4.



this division by a consanguineal kinship. The arrival of the Kinh people and the Vietnamese state is justified by a fraternal obligation of guiding the younger brother, i.e., the highlanders, towards a more prosperous life. This entails the adoption of an advanced form of agricultural system for which policies of agricultural expansion and intensification are seen as key solutions. Within the broad framework of the post-colonial Vietnamese state, both Kinh and highlanders are to be equal members of this modern political unit.

When writing *Moi Kontum*, a 'guidebook' sponsored under the auspices of the French colonial government, for Kinh people heading to the Central Highlands frontier in the 1930s, Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi saw the need to revise the relationship between hills and plains.<sup>112</sup> As French colonial government extended and expanded its reach in the highlands, and the region was opened up to the rapidly expanding plantation economy, the authors also recognize that the fates of the hills and plains were now tightly joined together. The authors implicitly acknowledge the rather troubled relationship between highlanders and lowlanders when they ask their Bahnar informant about whether highlanders like lowlanders and the French settling and ruling over the hills. Their concern then, is what the Kinh people must do to justify their arrival in the highlands. They suggest that the Kinh people, being exposed to the ways of the wider world and becoming more technologically advanced, and hence 'civilized', are morally responsible for helping the highlanders to achieve progress, rather than use this advantage for their own gains. The Kinh, however, must see themselves as 'elder brothers' (*nguai anh*), which was more humble than to see themselves as 'teacher' (*thay*), to the highlanders when helping them to understand and adopt the ways of the wider world.<sup>113</sup> In order to effectively perform this responsibility, however, the Kinh must sincerely try to understand the cultures of the highlanders without attempting to judge or discriminate them. In other words, if Kinh people were to stay in the highlands, then the highlanders could no longer be perceived as 'savages'. Instead, Kinh and highlanders must be perceived as elder and younger 'siblings', respectively.

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<sup>112</sup> *Moi Kontum*. For details about French commercial agriculture expansion in the Central Highlands, consult chapter five of Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development Of French Indochina*, London: Oxford University Press, 1944. Translated by I.A. Ward. Original publication 1939. For a comprehensive study of development of capitalism in Vietnam through the agriculture sector during French colonial period, consult Murray Martin, *The Development Of Capitalism In Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1980.

<sup>113</sup> *Moi Kontum*, p ix.

Ho Chi Minh similarly articulated the relationship between the Kinh and the highlander compatriots as ‘siblings’ bound to the same homeland and emphasized the need for solidarity in the fight for freedom and independence. In a letter to the Conference of Ethnic Minorities in the South held at Pleiku in April 1946, Ho wrote,

...Kinh or Tho, Muong or Man, Gia Rai or Ede, Xe Dang or Ba Na and all other ethnic minorities (*dan toc thieu so*) are equally children of Vietnam, are all consanguineal siblings (*anh em ruot thit*). We live and die with one another; undergo sufferings and happiness together; in hunger and plenty help out one another... We must love one another, respect one another, help out one another in order to work towards the common happiness for ourselves and our children... Rivers could be dried, mountains could be eroded, but our solidarity will never be reduced. We are determined to contribute all our forces to hold on to our freedom and independence.<sup>114</sup>

The Viet Minh were able to gain considerable support in the northern highlands early in their quest for anti-colonialism.<sup>115</sup> Support among the Central Highlanders, however, remained weak during the early stages of the First Indochina War. Communist cadres operating in the Central Highlands learnt much about the challenges of establishing a foothold in the uplands frontier after initial setbacks in the early to mid-1940s.<sup>116</sup> By late 1940s, the communist had begun to win over a significant number of the population (in the Central Highlands). In the spring of 1954, they were even able to destroy the elite corps of *Groupe Mobile 100* on Route 19 near An Khe in the Central Highlands.<sup>117</sup> The communists’ success in the Central Highlands continued well into the Second Indochina War, or at least until the massive, voluntary relocation of the highlanders away from communist held areas into the Republican areas, beginning in 1961.<sup>118</sup> This

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<sup>114</sup> Ho Chi Minh, ‘Thu gui Dai Hoi Cac Dan Toc Thieu So mien nam tai Play Cu’ [Letter To Conference Of Ethnic Minorities In The South At Play Ku] in *Chinh Sach va Phap Luat cua Dang, Nha Nuoc ve Dan Toc* [Policies And Legal Laws Of The Party, State On Ethnic Groups] by Hoi Dong Dan Toc Cua Quoc Hoi Khoa X (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa Dan Toc, 2000), p 821.

<sup>115</sup> See Larry Jackson, ‘The Vietnamese Revolution And The Montagnards’, *Asian Survey* 9 (3), pp 313-330, 1969.

<sup>116</sup> See Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political And Military Analysis*, New York: Praeger, 1963, p 195-6.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> The experiences of many of these cadres are recollected in another book, Nguyen Xuan et al (ed.) *Am vang Tay Nguyen* [Echoes of Tay Nguyen], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa Dan Toc, 2001 and local party histories (*lich su dang bo*) of the Central Highlands. We even catch snapshots of the communist’s success through people working on the opposite side of the war, such as Hickey’s own recollection in the Central Highlands during the war period. See *Window On A War*.

success is further attested in the adoption of Ho Chi Minh's surname among several highlander groups. For example, the entire Bru-Van Kieu population located along one stretch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, adopted Ho as their surname. Similarly, the Co people in Tra My also adopted Uncle Ho's surname. Among the Hre in the Ba To area, many adopted the surname Pham, after Pham Van Dong (who was from Nghia Binh).<sup>119</sup>

All we know till now is that the key to this success was adoption of the formula of 'three together' (*ba cung*), which involved 'eating, sleeping and working together with the highlanders'. There were thus, communist cadres who dressed and lived like them, filed their teeth and even married the locals, and finally won over their trust in the process.<sup>120</sup> Bui San and Nguyen Huu Thau's operative guide for the Central Highlands, '*Kinh Nghiem Cong Tac Thuong Du Tay Nguyen*', published in 1948, tells us more about the recipe behind this successful mobilization.<sup>121</sup> Bui San and Nguyen Huu Thau prescribed that to reform the agricultural practices and 'mobilize a new life' among the highlanders is the key to successful revolutionary mobilization. This, however, could only be achieved with in depth understanding of the highlander compatriots' cultures and customary practices.

Bui San and Nguyen Huu Thau premise that highland compatriots look to the Kinh as the elder brother (*nguai anh*).<sup>122</sup> They use the proverb, '*doi ret lam than*' (suffering miserably in cold and hunger), to describe the past and present (in the 1940s) living conditions of the highlanders. This is because highlanders suffer from the prevalence of three types of 'diseases' of the highlands. The first type of 'diseases' refers to malaria, small pox and alcohol indulgence. The second type refers to the perpetual shortage of salt in their diet. The third type refers to the chronic shortage of food in most areas where the highlanders practice '*du canh du cu*' (traveling plough traveling residence), i.e., swidden, with the exception of Kontum where the locals have

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<sup>119</sup> Dang Nghiem Van & Luu Hung, *Nhung dieu can biet khi len Truong Son Tay Nguyen* [Things To Know When Going Up To The Long Mountains Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1988, pp 37-39. There were of course highlanders who identified, through the close wartime experiences, with the American Special Forces. For details on this, consult *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 179-210.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Hardy & Nguyen Van Chinh, 'Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres: un exercice d'equilibriste' in *Viet Nam Contemporain* edited by Stephane Dovert & Benoit de Treglode (Paris, Bangkok: L'Harmattan, Irasec, 2004), pp 417-8.

<sup>121</sup> Bui San & Nguyen Huu Thau, *Kinh nghiem cong tac Thuong Du Tay Nguyen* [Working Experience In The Western Plateau Highland Region], Ha Noi: Phai Doan Van Hoa Khang Chien Tay Nguyen, 1948.

<sup>122</sup> *Kinh nghiem cong tac Thuong Du Tay Nguyen*, p 6.

learnt how to produce double cropping in their wet-rice fields.<sup>123</sup> The key to successful mobilization of the Central Highlanders to join the resistance war revolves around two fundamental principles. First, cadres must have the appropriate attitudes and behavior when operating in the highlands. The elder brother must treat the younger brother right, to be tolerant and appreciative of the younger ethnic brother's culture and customs. They urge the cadre to possess 'a soul of the highlands' (*tam hon thuong du*), that is to achieve the state of understanding and appreciating the cultures in the highlands. Second, the highland compatriots must have three 'enoughs', namely 'food' (*an no*), 'clothes' (*mac am*) and 'schooling' (*duoc hoc*).<sup>124</sup> Basically, the cadres must gradually help the highlanders to develop a more advanced form of agricultural production, bring about the use of modern amenities in everyday life (such as clothes), develop education among the highlanders and gradually do away with extremities or excesses in their cultural beliefs and customary practices.<sup>125</sup> In other words, they must actualize the 'brotherly' relationship (*tin huy nh de*) between Kinh and Thuong. Curing the highlanders of the 'three diseases' therefore means 'mobilizing a new life' (*van dong doi song moi*) among the highlanders; and this in turns means bringing the highlanders into the revolutionary cause.

We find similar policy motivations under the government of the First Republic. Ngo Dinh Diem, President of the First Republic, also saw the Central Highlands as an integral part of Vietnam and the inhabitants, the highlander compatriots (*dong bao thuong*), as essentially 'younger brothers' of the Kinh. Similar to the communist regime, Diem's government often said the Kinh and the Thuong were siblings separated by the 'divide and rule' (*chia de tri*) policies of the colonialist. In the public manifesto of the First Republic's 'Highland Policies' (*Chinh Sach Thuong*), the document read,

living together in the cherished Viet land of ours, besides the compatriots who live in the plains whom we usually call the Kinh compatriots, there are also people who live in the forested mountains whom we usually call the highlander compatriots. These compatriots, because they seldom interact with the outside world, their levels of civilization are therefore still low. But regardless of Kinh or highlanders, regardless of being more civilized or less, we are all families

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p 7.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p 44.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p 10.

from the same descent who have struggled and contributed to create the Vietnam nation; who have lived together in the same land for thousand of years, and together went through days of hardship, as well as benefited from glorious and peaceful days of our motherland. As such, Kinh or highlanders are compatriots of the same bloodline, we are all Viet compatriots.<sup>126</sup>

For Diem, the key to realizing the ‘fraternal relationship’ (*tin huy nh de*) between Kinh and Thuong was to bring about socio-economic development among the highlanders in order to ‘even out the Kinh and the Thuong’ (*dong hoa kinh thuong*). The term ‘*dong hoa*’, used within this context does not necessarily connote the meaning of ‘assimilation’ as in ‘*dong hoa chung toc*’ (ethnic assimilation). Only by bringing ‘real’ development among the highlanders then could Free Vietnam defeat the subversive communist elements operating in the highlands. Preceding communist strategy of state formation in the highlands, Diem advocated large-scale frontier formation by bringing Kinh settlers to the highlands. This would not only help relieve population pressure in the crowded Central Lowlands province and created by the influx of refugees from the north, but also help combat communist insurgents in the highlands. More importantly, frontier formation could help bring about both economic development in the highlands region and influences from the advanced civilization of the Kinh to the Thuong. I will discuss this issue of frontier formation in detail in Chapter Five of this thesis. As early as 1958, Diem’s government introduced a comprehensive package of programs to bring about agrarian change among the highlanders through sedentarization, agriculture extension and even resettlement. These programs, designed specifically for the highlanders, were supposed to help realize the government’s vision of integrating the Central Highlanders into the Vietnamese state by significantly ‘improving the livelihoods of the highlander compatriots’ (*cai tien dan sinh dong bao Thuong*). Further details of this body of policy measures are discussed in Chapter Six. Improving the livelihoods of the highlander compatriots also meant reconfiguring traditional land use practices, which would be put to rational development by government policies and arrival of Kinh settlers, who would together with the highlanders, ‘shake up the economy of the highlands’ (*chan hung kinh te cao nguyen*). The management of the land question in the process of state formation on the frontier is discussed in Chapter Seven.

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<sup>126</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728.

Similar policy pursuits can be found under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after reunification. ‘Mobilization to a new life’ for the Central Highlanders was concretely outlined into policies after reunification, although for the northern highlanders, it began as early as 1960.<sup>127</sup> The communist party under the leadership of Le Duan wanted to quickly advance the Central Highlands, in tandem with the lowlands, to socialism. If the Central Highlands was primarily perceived as the strategic region to win the Second Indochina War, then in the post-war years, the region’s great potential in terms of land and natural resources was perceived as pertinent in helping the country to advance towards socialism. Le Duan reason that because the highlanders had contributed so much to help reunify the country, the government and people are morally obligated to do something in return for the Central Highlands (*ca nuoc vi Tay Nguyen*). They must now help to build up (*xay dung*) and develop the Central Highlands, to bring its level of development on par with the lowlands. This entails bringing in thousands of cadres and settlers to the Central Highlands to help realize the resource potential of the region and help raise the level of development (*trinh do phat trien*) of the highlanders.<sup>128</sup>

The road map towards the ‘new life’ (*doi song moi*) under socialism for the highlanders involved ‘three revolutions’ (*ba cuoc cach mang*) in the areas of technology and science (*khoa hoc ky thuat*), production relations (*quan he san xuat*), and culture and ideology (*van hoa va tu tuong*). Revolution in the area of technology and science essentially referred to an overhaul of the agrarian systems among the highlanders, transforming agrarian practices from shifting or rotational agriculture focusing on subsistence production to a more sophisticated, sedentarized and intensive agrarian system that was interconnected with the wider economy. On production relations, there was a need to further develop the rural household as the basic production unit and bring these individual production units into the cooperatives or state farms. Finally, to reorganize the cultural relations among the highlanders, it was also necessary to ‘revolutionize’ the cultures and customs by abolishing superstitious practices but at the same time must take care to preserve the essence of individual cultures. This involved

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<sup>127</sup> The Democratic Republic of Vietnam implemented the comprehensive program to develop the northern highlands through the Plan For The Economic And Cultural Development Of The Highlands in 1960. Patricia Pelley, ‘Barbarians And Younger Brothers: The Remaking Of Race In Postcolonial Vietnam’, *Journal Of Southeast Asian Studies* 29 (2), pp 374-391, 1998, p 386.

<sup>128</sup> Le Duan, *Tay Nguyen doan ket tien len*, Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1978. See also, *Nhung dieu can biet khi len Truong Son Tay Nguyen*, pp 7-8.

paying attention to development of education among the highlanders and the training of highlander cadres.<sup>129</sup>

Three policy instruments were introduced to advance the Central Highlands into socialism.<sup>130</sup> Through *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* (Fixed Plough, Fixed Residence), the old inhabitants were expected to progress towards a modern, intensive and fixed-field form of agricultural system to suit the transforming frontier.<sup>131</sup> *Vung Kinh Te Moi* (New Economic Zone) and *Nong Lam Truong Quoc Doan* (Agriculture and Forestry State Enterprises) would help to better exploit the resource potentials of the highlands and revolutionize production relations.<sup>132</sup> To effectively realize these two policies, thousands of settlers from the technologically advanced lowlands would be re-deployed (*phan bo lai*) to the highlands. These settlers could perform the dual roles of providing the needed labor to develop the resource potential of the highlands and to diffuse influences from a technologically advanced civilization to help transform the highlanders.<sup>133</sup> Together, these three policy instruments could contribute to 'revolutionizing' the material cultures of the highlanders.

Implicitly then, land, the ultimate abundant resource in the Central Highlands, will be rationally utilized, managed by a socialist-defined land regime guided by the Party-State in place of the traditional village customs. Introduction of the Doi Moi reforms significantly adjusted the socialist vision of state formation. The policy instruments of *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*, *Vung Kinh Te Moi* and *Nong Lam Truong Quoc Doan* were adjusted to meet more market-oriented objectives. Land use rights were 'returned' to the farming households but it was clear that the legally defined land

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<sup>129</sup> *Nhung dieu can biet khi len Truong Son Tay Nguyen*, pp 79-85.

<sup>130</sup> *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen*, pp 73-84. See also, 'Su dung dat dai va nhung giai phap phat trien Tay Nguyen hien nay'.

<sup>131</sup> For details on the *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* program by the DRV and SRV, consult, Nguyen Huu Tien, Duong Ngoc Thi, Ngo Van Hai & Trinh Khac Tham, *Mot so van de ve Dinh Canh Dinh Cu va Phat Trien Nong Thon Ben Vung* [A Few Problems About Fixed Plough And Fixed Residence And Rural Sustainable Development], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Nong Nghiep, 1997; Ban Dinh Canh Dinh Cu Bo Lam Nghiep, *Hoi Thao Khoa Hoc ve cong tac Dinh Canh Dinh Cu I* [Scientific Conference About Fixed Plough And Fixed Residence I], Ha Noi: Bo Lam Nghiep, 1984.

<sup>132</sup> For details on *Vung Kinh Te Moi* program and state agricultural and forestry enterprises, consult Bo Nong Nghiep, *Chinh sach khuyen khich khai hoang, xay dung cac Vung Kinh Te Moi* [Policies Encouraging Pioneering, Building New Economic Zones], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Nong Nghiep, 1981; Cuc Dinh Canh Dinh Cu va Vung Kinh Te Moi, *Di Dan, Kinh Te Moi, Dinh Canh Dinh Cu: Lich Su va Truyen Thong* [Migrants, New Economy, Fixed Plough And Fixed Residence: History And Tradition], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Nong Nghiep, 2000.

<sup>133</sup> *Nhung dieu can biet khi len Truong Son Tay Nguyen*, p 78.

regime would still remain the chief arbiter of land rights rather than the traditional communal land regimes.

Dang Nghiem Van succinctly sums up the communist vision of state formation in the Central Highlands as the transition from the old to the new. Under the Vietnamese socialist regime, the highlanders are expected to evolve from the Traditional Man (*con nguoi co truyen*) directly to a new Socialist Man (*con nguoi chu nghia xa hoi*), skipping the feudal and capitalist stages of development altogether, by participating in the collectivization reforms under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. If the Traditional Man's priorities lay with family, clan or ethnic group, then the new Socialist Man is supposed to place loyalties to the larger collective of class and country.<sup>134</sup> When the Doi Moi reforms were implemented in the late 1980s, this transition from the Traditional Man to the Socialist Man was similarly adjusted. The new Socialist Man would now actively participate in the market economy through the basic economic production unit of the nuclear family and will effectively break free of the shackles of the traditional customary practices of swidden societies.<sup>135</sup>

Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands meant that highlanders are viewed as equal citizens within the political framework of the post-colonial state. According to Ngo Dinh Diem's declaration of the ideal equality for all citizens of the Republic,

As citizens of the Republic of Vietnam, Kinh and highlander are equals in terms of rights and responsibilities. Everywhere in the territory of Vietnam, highlander compatriots as well as Kinh compatriots have the same right to live and make a living like each other. Any work or duty that Kinh are able to do, highlanders with abilities also have the right to do so. With similar capabilities, Kinh or highlanders receive the same salary. Kinh or highlander compatriots must fulfill their civil responsibilities. Only by fulfilling their civil

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<sup>134</sup> Dang Nghiem Van, 'Mot so van de co ban va cap bach ve kinh te xa hoi Tay Nguyen tren chang duong dau tien cua thoi ky qua do tien len Chu Nghia Xa Hoi' [A Few Basic And Urgent Problems About The Socio-Economy Of The Western Plateau At The Beginning Of The Road In The Transition Period Of The Advance To Socialism] in *Mot so van de kinh te xa hoi Tay Nguyen*, pp 56-9.

<sup>135</sup> Chau Khac Chuong, Ngo Duc Thinh & Nguyen Huu Tri (eds.), *Van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi cac dan toc thieu so o Dac Lac* [The Problems Of Socio-Economic Development Of The Ethnic Minorities In Dac Lac], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1990, pp 150-152.



responsibilities, then could Kinh and highlanders be deemed as worthy of being citizens of the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>136</sup>

Under the socialist regime, both in the pre-unification and post-reunification periods, the highlanders were ethnic minority members within the larger family of the multi-ethnic Vietnamese nation-state. The communists promised some form of autonomy by creating autonomous zones for minorities populated regions according to the prescriptions of Stalinist-Leninist ideology. These zones were created in the northern highlands in the 1950s but ultimately abandoned by the early 1980s. In the Central Highlands, the communist started the Tay Nguyen Autonomy Movement (*Phong Trao Tay Nguyen Tu Tri*) to attract the support of the highlanders, which was never materialized when the country was reunified.<sup>137</sup> The reunified Vietnamese state nonetheless projected the image of a multi-ethnic state, where highlanders – the ‘younger brothers’ – being citizens of Vietnam have the same rights as the Kinh.

This remaking of the cultural relationship between inhabitants of hills and plains helps to join the two topographical regions as a common political entity. It also comes with strings attached. It follows that the elder brothers are responsible for the cultural advancement of the younger brothers. This entails the arrival of Kinh people in the highlands to spread the influences of an advanced civilization and to realize the economic potential of the highlands for the betterment of the entire nation-state. It also entails the reconfiguration of the practice of everyday life by the highlanders through policies of sedentarization and cultural development implemented by the government. Hence, the Vietnamese state extended to the Central Highlands the orderliness of central administration. With this administrative centralization comes the imposition of a legally defined land regime in place of customary land regimes. In the process, wet-rice farming or other more modern techniques of agriculture would replace swidden. *State formation on the frontier, according to the vision of the Vietnamese government (in its various versions), is predicated upon an evolutionary binary from the old to the new,*

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<sup>136</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong* [The Task of Improving People’s Livelihood for the Highlander Compatriots: After 5 Years of Assuming Government By President Ngo], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959, p 13.

<sup>137</sup> Vien Dan Toc Hoc, *Nhung van kien cua Dai Hoi Phong Trao Dan Toc Tu Tri Tay Nguyen* (Lan Thu Hai 1966) [Documents Of The Conference On Western Plateau Ethnic Autonomy Movement (Second Conference, 1966)], Tai Lieu Roneo, 2003.

*primitive to modern or primitive to socialism.* Protest-demonstrations in the forms of the Dega-affair and the Bajaraka movement, were therefore perceived by the Vietnamese governments as instigated by subversive elements since these projects were implemented to improve the well being of the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands.

### **Critiques On Vietnamese State Formation In The Central Highlands**

Critiques of Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands are similarly framed on the binary. *This binary, however, speaks in terms of majority versus minorities, domination over subordination, and domination versus resistance.* I identify three recurring motifs in the critics' arguments, which lead to a shared understanding among them concerning the outcome of Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands. (Here, I am only looking at studies that attempt a broad sweep analysis of the Vietnamese state's policies in the highlands. For a detailed analysis of ethnographies about the Central Highlands, I refer the reader to Oscar Salemink's compendious *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders of Vietnam.*)

First, according to Patricia Pelley, redacting of the relationship between compatriots from hills and plains is seen as an erasure of historical processes and imposition of an unequal relationship of fraternity. This unequal relationship analogously meant that the 'younger brother' is subjected to the tutelage of the 'elder brother', who will 'civilize' the previously perceived 'savages'.<sup>138</sup> Second, policies for actualizing this fraternal relationship are in turn founded upon erroneous assumptions of the agricultural systems of the Central Highlanders.<sup>139</sup> Third, frontier formation, referring to both arrival of the lowlanders and the more efficient extraction (often also meaning more destructive) of resource potential in the hills, essentially marginalizes the highlanders more than benefits them.<sup>140</sup> The outcome of this story, as told by the critics, is a familiar one that resonates in studies about relations between state and margins or hills and plains in Southeast Asia such as the volumes edited by Christopher Duncan

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<sup>138</sup> See, 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers'.

<sup>139</sup> Jacques Dournes, *Minorities of Central Vietnam: Autochthonous Indochinese Peoples*, London: Minority Rights Group, 1980, pp 12-16; Gerald Hickey, *The Highland People Of South Vietnam: Social And Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967, p 75; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 243, 267-8; Anonymous, *The Montagnards Of South Vietnam*, London: Minority Rights Group, 1974, pp 7-8.

<sup>140</sup> Grant Evans, "Internal Colonialism In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam", *Sojourn* 7 (2), pp 274-304, 1992.

and Jean Michaud.<sup>141</sup> The conclusion is that state formation on the frontier ultimately serves to expand and deepen the hold of the post-colonial state on the frontier, rather than achieve the normative vision of the state. The highlanders continued to be entrapped within the web of domination by outsiders even with the end of Western colonialism.

Patricia Pelly argues that the unity of hills and plains portrayed in post-colonial socialist historiography is often portrayed through the motif of resistance against foreign aggression. Hence, in state-sanctioned historiography, we read about the important role played by highlanders in maintaining the Sino-Vietnamese border zones to the north, or the role that Central Highlanders played in helping the Tay Son brothers in reunifying the country and repelling Ming China's invasion.<sup>142</sup> More significant, perhaps, is the recurrent theme of anti-colonialism among the highlanders. Hence, N'Trang Long's violent entanglement with the French is interpreted as highlander anti-colonialism.<sup>143</sup> The Python Rebellion, which according to Oscar Salemink is essentially an indigenous form of millenarian movement, is interpreted as another significant act of anti-colonialism.<sup>144</sup> The historical volatility of the frontier between the hills and plains, characterized by slave raids, blood raids, tribal-settler skirmishes, is submerged to elucidate the unity of the hills and plains.<sup>145</sup> According to Pelley, the uplands, as reflected in To Huu's poem, *Viet Bac*, no longer bears any sign of 'insalubrity nor, for that matter, any trace of the violence that engulfed it'.<sup>146</sup> Andrew Hardy and Nguyen Van Chinh therefore note that 'minority policy served the interests of national independence, with ethnic solidarity becoming from the outset the strategy of the Vietnamese revolution'.<sup>147</sup> Pelley observes that if colonial historiography paints the

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<sup>141</sup> See *Civilizing The Margins and Turbulent Times And Enduring Peoples*.

<sup>142</sup> 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers', p 376; La Van Lo, *Buoc dau tim hieu cac dan toc thieu so o Viet Nam trong su nghiep dung nuoc va giu nuoc* [Initial Understanding Of Ethnic Minorities In Vietnam In The Work Of Building The Country And Defending The Country], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1973; Vu Dinh Loi, *Ve nguon goc lich su, truyen thong chong ngoai xam va ban sac van hoa cac dan toc ban dia Tay Nguyen* [Concerning The Origins, History and Tradition of Resisting Foreign Aggression And Cultural Roots Of Autochthonous Ethnic Groups In The Western Plateau], Bao Cao Dien Da, Vien Dan Toc Hoc, 1998.

<sup>143</sup> Nguyen Huu Thau, 'Phong trao N'Trang Lung (1912-1935)' [The N'Trang Lung Movement (1912-1935)], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* 69, pp 55-62, 1964.

<sup>144</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 100-128; Oscar Salemink, 'The Return Of The Python God: Multiple Interpretations Of A Millenarian Movement In Colonial Vietnam', *History And Anthropology* 8 (1-4), pp 129-64, 1994.

<sup>145</sup> 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers', p 377.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, p 377-8.

<sup>147</sup> 'Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres', p 394.

picture of Vietnam as an ethnically fragmented society then post-colonial socialist historiography essentially paints over these cracks from an inclusive, multi-ethnic perspective with the cohesive ingredient of 'resistance to foreign aggression'.<sup>148</sup> The perspective of the hills as borders of Vietnamese cultural and political domains, and highlanders as barbarians or savages, was 'erased' from the very historical processes that gave shape to Vietnamese culture and politics, and once upon a time defined highlanders' cultural identities.

Pelley argues that the state's redacting of the relationship between highlanders and lowlanders from 'savages/barbarians' to siblings, which essentially 'casts ethnic relations in kinship terms', produced a rather organic undercurrent of unequal status amidst the projection of multiculturalism in the post-colonial socialist state. This in turn placed the Vietnamese (the elder brother) on the normative position, who in Pelley's words became the 'acting subject rather than the colonial object', obliged to 'civilize the unenlightened ethnic groups'.<sup>149</sup> Hardy and Chinh argue that within the multi-ethnic nation, the Vietnamese socialist state recognized that ethnic groups, especially the highlanders, suffer from gaping socio-economic disparities; a recognition in which the 'yardsticks used for measurement were the Viet ethnic group and the lowland regions'.<sup>150</sup> Thus, policies of sedentarization and cultural selective preservation were adopted to mobilize the highlanders to a new life to catch up with the plains. Patricia Pelley and Pamela McElwee respectively note that the destination of this new identity is replete with 'elements of the material life of the lowlanders' and that 'becoming socialist' therefore looks a lot like 'becoming Kinh'.<sup>151</sup> These statements, however, seem to imply that there are certain immutable characteristics which define what it means to be a 'highlander' or a 'Kinh'.

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<sup>148</sup> 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers', p 376; see also, Patricia Pelley, 'The History Of Resistance And The Resistance To History In Postcolonial Constructions Of The Past' in *Essays Into Vietnamese Pasts* edited by Keith Taylor & John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1995).

<sup>149</sup> 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers', p 382.

<sup>150</sup> 'Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres', p 395.

<sup>151</sup> 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers', pp 386-89; Pamela McElwee, 'Becoming Socialist Or Becoming Kinh? Government Policies For Ethnic Minorities In The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam' in *Civilizing The Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies For The Development Of Minorities*, p 195-6. One may similarly pose the question that by adopting habits of life and usage of a particular language, for example, a Singaporean Chinese like myself, writing, speaking (with a 'Singaporean' accent) and reading in English, eating 'Western cuisine' and wearing Western style clothing, I become a non-Chinese and therefore 'English'?

Oscar Salemink argues that Vietnamese state policies under the communist regime towards the Central Highlanders are reflective of the oscillation between 'evolutionistic' and 'relativistic' ethnographic discourses.<sup>152</sup> This is perhaps best reflected in the socialist regime's policy of selective preservation. Although the ethnic minorities must develop towards the next stage of evolution from 'primitive' to the recently re-defined 'new socialist man', certain cultural practices of the ethnic minorities are deemed valuable, and must be preserved.<sup>153</sup> For example, Article 5 of the Constitution grants the rights of ethnic minorities to preserve 'fine' aspects of their culture. Yet, agency is appropriated by the government as Article 30 goes on to state explicitly that 'superstitions and harmful customs are to be eliminated'.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, Hardy and Chinh note that 'at no point was a right of consultation, about good customs or right behavior, extended to the minorities'.<sup>155</sup> At the end of the day, it is the state that determines what aspects of culture are to be preserved, often in a decontextualized fashion; resulting in what Salemink terms the 'folklorization' of culture.<sup>156</sup> Thus, highlanders have lost the agency to determine their cultural identities in the post-colonial context.

One consensus among the critics is that the Vietnamese government's discourse – during both socialist and republic regimes – on sedentarization rests upon erroneous assumptions about swidden practices among the Central Highlanders.<sup>157</sup> In contrast to the predominant agricultural systems of the lowlanders, the swidden system is seemingly chaotic, backward, aimless, destructive and nomadic. Hence, the practice is often perceived as responsible for destroying the forest and its practitioners as 'nomads'. It is quite common to read documents, or hear people, in Vietnam referring to the system as '*pha rung lam ray*' (destroy the forest to make swidden) or '*du canh du cu*' (traveling plough and traveling residence). Oscar Salemink, as with Nguyen Van Chinh et al, suggest that the sedentarization program, called '*Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*',

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<sup>152</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*.

<sup>153</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 276-9.

<sup>154</sup> Neil Jamieson, *Rethinking Approaches To Ethnic Minority Development: The Case Of Vietnam*, Ha Noi: Winrock International, 1996, pp 26-7.

<sup>155</sup> 'Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres', p 396.

<sup>156</sup> Oscar Salemink, 'Who Decides Who Preserves What? Cultural Preservation And Cultural Representation' in *Vietnam's Cultural Diversity: Approaches To Preservation* edited by Oscar Salemink (Paris: UNESCO, 2001) pp 208-210.

<sup>157</sup> This is similar to what Andrew Walker identifies as the 'Karen Consensus' concerning the misperception towards swidden agriculture among the Karen in northern Thailand, see 'The Karen Consensus, Ethnic Politics And Resource-Use Legitimacy In Northern Thailand'.

implies that the highlanders' residential practice is 'nomadic' (*du cu*) and cultivated fields 'not fixed' (*du canh*).<sup>158</sup> As swidden agriculture is perceived as primitive, Ron Hill notes that sedentarization of the highlanders is justified by the government as an 'altruistic measure of social progress'.<sup>159</sup> According to James Scott, however, simply because the swidden system had no provision for fixed field cultivation and therefore involves the periodic shifting of people, though not necessarily of villages, it is a form of illegibility that runs counter to the precepts of political control.<sup>160</sup>

Critics of Vietnamese state formation never fail to remind us the fallacy of the sedentarization policy. Certainly 'myths' pertaining to the destructive and nomadic nature of swidden agriculture have been persuasively busted by Michael Dove and more recently, Lori Ann Thrubb et al.<sup>161</sup> Swidden agriculture is in fact a sustainable form of agriculture, but only under certain optimal conditions, in particular the condition of low population density, in the forested uplands. Using fire to clear the forest actually released the nutrients, stored in the thick vegetation, into the highly fertile ashes for cropping purposes. The maintenance of large tree stumps and the use basic agricultural tools, such as the dibble stick, helped reduce soil erosion. Yet, when optimal conditions are violated, such as increase in population density, 'accidents' because of drought or fires that went out of control, and expansion into unsuitable forest types that may not possess sufficient regeneration conditions, the self-equilibrium built into the system breaks down.<sup>162</sup> Thus, critics note even Vietnamese scholars admit that much of the ecological destruction in the Central Highlands was caused by wanton exploitation of natural resources by state agencies and permanent field-type agricultural expansion by settlers.<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, arrival of settlers and appropriation of land by state agencies reduced access to swidden land by the highlanders, causing the practitioners to shorten

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<sup>158</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 266-76; Nguyen Van Chinh, Nguyen Thi Lan Huong, Pham Quang Hoa & Michael T. Marx, *Rural Poverty Reduction: Lessons Learnt From Credit, Forestry And Sedentarization Policies And Programs In Vietnam*, Asian Development Bank Report: TA 3464-VIE, 2001, pp 76-95.

<sup>159</sup> Ron Hill, 'Primitives To Peasants: The Sedentarization Of The Nomads In Vietnam', *Pacific Viewpoint* 26 (2), pp 448-59, 1985.

<sup>160</sup> 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia'; *Seeing Like A State*, p 186.

<sup>161</sup> Michael Dove, 'Theories Of Swidden Agriculture And The Political Economy Of Ignorance', *Agroforestry Systems* 1, pp 85-99, 1983; Lori Ann Thrubb, Susanna B. Hecht, John O. Browder & et al, *The Diversity And Dynamics Of Shifting Cultivation: Myths, Realities, And Policy Implications*, World Resources Institute, 1997.

<sup>162</sup> *Agricultural Involvement*, pp 26-8.

<sup>163</sup> Dang Nghiem Van, 'Nhưng van de xa hoi hien nay o Tay Nguyen' [Various Social Problems At Present In The Western Plateau] in *Tay Nguyen tren duong phat trien*.

the fallow period or extend the cultivation period.<sup>164</sup> This in turn destabilizes the self-equilibrium of the swidden system leading to degeneration of the ecological environment. The point made by the critics on this is a simple one, ecological destruction on the frontier is caused more by the 'state's' policies of agricultural expansion and intensification than by swidden because these policies severely disrupted the optimal conditions.

Where the sedentarization projects worked according to plan, scholars note the adoption of Vietnamese style of consumption, such as building 'Vietnamese' style houses, modern furniture, buying electrical appliances and the ubiquitous motorcycles (or simply *xe Honda*, although the brand name may not be Honda).<sup>165</sup> In other words, sedentarization, like the selective cultural policy in place to advance towards modernity or socialism, was simply an attempt to replace the varied economic and social practices with a state conceived socio-economic destination. As Hardy and Chinh note, there was no specific economic regime for the hills, and as a result, 'highlanders ...were expected to adapt to methods of production similar to those practiced in the plains.'<sup>166</sup>

Perhaps no other processes transformed the Central Highlands as drastically as the process of frontier formation. Migration of lowlanders significantly altered the demographic and agrarian landscapes, and helped to relieve population pressure in the lowlands (Central Lowlands under the First Republic and the Red River delta provinces under the Socialist government). This redistribution of population to the highlands frontier, some argue, also helped to secure the peripheral territory.<sup>167</sup> After reunification, the socialist regime organized wave after wave of migration from the crowded Red River delta provinces to the uplands.<sup>168</sup> Andrew Hardy argues that this process of migration, although organized by the state, was often altered and manipulated in practice by the migrants. After Doi Moi, the loosening of political control effectively led to a situation where the migration process went out of the control of the state but was determined by individual life-decisions and facilitated by networks

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<sup>164</sup> *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen*, pp 173-199.

<sup>165</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 271-2; 'Barbarians And Younger Brothers', p 387-8.

<sup>166</sup> 'Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres', p 400.

<sup>167</sup> 'The Peasantry As The Territorial Spearhead Of The State In Southeast Asia'.

<sup>168</sup> Jacqueline Desbarats, 'Population Redistribution In The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam', *Population And Development Review* 13 (1), pp 43-76, 1987. For a more detailed and critical study, consult *Red Hills*.

that were often, rather ironically, formed by earlier state-organized frontier formation. With the drastic change in demography, so came the expansion of state institutions as these frontier settlements were quickly integrated within the administrative hierarchy.<sup>169</sup> Thus, Hardy notes that the Vietnamese state,

by the end of the twentieth century, its flag in every town, its settlers in every village, the communist government in Hanoi succeeded, with certain limits, in bringing the highlands under its control.<sup>170</sup>

In other words, frontier formation was but a brief prelude to state formation.

With this expansion of the reach of the state, so came increase in number of Viet cadres in the highlands. Hardy and Chinh note that minority officials were not always deemed able to carry out government policies effectively and Viet cadres became a necessity. They argue that transformation of the highlands frontier led to a reversal of wartime conditions. Wartime mobilization of Central Highlanders created the imperative of maintaining a balance between the ‘revolutionary cause and ethnic self-determination’ and thus Viet cadres came to live, eat and work together (the three together, or *ba chung*) with the highlanders. After the war, Hardy and Chinh note, the highlanders found themselves overwhelmed by the Viet, and now have to practice the ‘three together’ alongside the Viet.<sup>171</sup> In his own study of Vietnamese migration to the highlands, Andrew Hardy concludes that when the newcomers (both state and settlers) came in force, there was little need, apart from acclimatizing to the living conditions in the highlands, to adapt to the ways of the highlands.<sup>172</sup> If I follow the logic of this argument correctly, Hardy is suggesting that agricultural adaptation (to the demands of the physical environment in the highlands) did not lead to any cultural dilution of the Kinh identity. The highlands was thus effectively ‘lowlandized’. Yet, the same logic is not applied to the highlanders when criticisms are targeted at the Vietnamese state’s sedentarization policy. For most critics, the state’s agricultural sedentarization policy is equivalent to an attempt to ‘Vietnamize’ the highlanders. When highlanders have to adapt their agricultural practices, their cultural identities are considered as in a state of

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<sup>169</sup> *Red Hills*.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, p 2.

<sup>171</sup> ‘Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres’, p 418.

<sup>172</sup> *Red Hills*, pp 223-30.



crisis. I do not doubt that these Kinh settlers in the highlands remain Kinh despite adaptation to the highlands environment. But I am quite sure that their cultural practices carry certain nuances from that in the plains. Agricultural adaptation, I reckon, is a very demanding exercise. Perhaps Hardy may have understated the demands of agriculturally adapting to the frontier environment for the newcomers, both state and settlers. I develop this point in Chapter Five.

Some critics tell us that frontier formation is essentially a form of colonialism. The highlands frontier possessed vast resources such as such as the timber, mineral and agricultural land. Sedentarization would lead to a more rational and effective usage of these resources, rather than subject to the destructive, wasteful practices of swidden. Large-scale state enterprises would harness these resources for the nation in general and the highlands in particular. This *mise en valeur* was variously carried out by policy measures such as ‘*dinh dien*’ (under the First Republic), *Chinh Sach Khai Hoang* (Clear The Wild Policy), etc. (DRV), and finally collectivization under the management of state-enterprises under the SRV. For Patricia Pelley, this marks ‘a certain continuity of exploitation under the colonial yoke’.<sup>173</sup> Grant Evans simply terms this complexity of frontier formation process as ‘internal colonialism’.<sup>174</sup> In other words, land rights are now defined by a national land regime where unoccupied and uncultivated land are deemed as public land to be managed by the state, which would put these resources to more effective and rational use. Traditional land use systems practiced by the highlanders were simply negated by this high-modernist scheme of development. Yet another aspect of highlander cultural integrity is therefore subjected to the assault of state formation on the frontier.

At this point, I want to outline Gerald Hickey’s position concerning Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands. Hickey’s works remain the most extensive documentation about the Central Highlands and its inhabitants prior to reunification written in the English language. Hickey uses the term ‘highlanders’ to describe the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands, which is based on his position that these communities in the mountains share certain commonalities in ways of life and values that distinguish them from the lowlanders, particularly the ethnic Kinh in the

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<sup>173</sup> ‘Barbarians And Younger Brothers’, p 386.

<sup>174</sup> ‘Internal Colonialism In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam’.

lowlands; a position that is shared by other studies of highland-lowland relations in Southeast Asia in general. This is perhaps epitomized by the title of the first volume, *Sons of the Mountains*, translated from an ethnic Ede term, 'Ana Chu'. He argues that as the inhabitants of the Central Highlands were brought into the fold of French colonialism and later incorporated as part of the Vietnamese states (initially the Republic of Vietnam and later under the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam), and as a result of the policies of the ruling authorities and the exigencies of the Indochina Wars, a sense of common identity soon emerged among the elites of the various highland communities and spread to different quarters of the highlander population. Hickey's documentation of the First Republic minority policies suggests that Ngo Dinh Diem adopted an assimilationist approach to make Vietnamese citizens out of the highlanders, effectively threatening their cultural existence. Similar policy measures discussed above were adopted in almost extremist fashion under the First Republic. The development of pan-highlander ethno-nationalism intensified as a result of this experience that ultimately led to the formation of Bajaraka, and finally the armed separatist movement of FULRO.<sup>175</sup>

Critics of Vietnamese state formation, if I may at the risk of a reductionist reading, see these policies as mere instruments of a 'lowland state-making project in the highlands' (to borrow a phrase from James Scott).<sup>176</sup> This state-making project, critics say, is based on either an expedient misreading or an ethnocentrically informed understanding of the highlanders' agricultural system and social. The highlands and its inhabitants can only be civilized and developed through a state-designed project. For Saleminck, evolutionist or cultural relativist theoretical precepts may inform ethnic policy but its ultimate aim is to governmentalize the highlanders. He writes,

[a] state which, because of its history of foreign intervention, is so preoccupied by questions of sovereignty, security and territorial integrity as Vietnam is, cannot but conceive of its subjects through the prism of governmentality, simultaneously aiming at the well-being and the 'improvement' of its

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<sup>175</sup> This line of argument is pursued by Hickey through the compendious two-volume ethnohistory of the Central Highlanders, *Sons Of The Mountains and Free In The Forest*.

<sup>176</sup> 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia'.

population by making its subjects into proper citizens of the state through disciplining tactics.<sup>177</sup>

Salemink, however, is skeptical about the state's intention of 'improving' the well being of the highlanders. My reading is that he sees all these highlander policies more as attempts to establish a grid of control over the highlanders. This is similar to Scott's thesis that often the state's grand scheme of 'improving' the human condition is more concerned with spreading her grid of control over society.<sup>178</sup> Critics of Vietnamese state formation question the ability, if not sincerity, of the state to improve the condition of people's life. For the critics, politics is a power play of domination and subordination between a single center and a broadly defined society. There is no mutability in the interplay of state-society relations. Unless the people's rights are enshrined and acted upon in proper institutions, represented by the people themselves, the state will abuse its power.

I group this body of critiques of Vietnamese state formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands, rather provocatively, as the 'Vietnamization paradigm'. This is because most of the critiques either manifestly argue or insinuate that Vietnamese state formation is akin to a process of 'Vietnamizing' the highlands and its inhabitants. This paradigm highlights the tensions of this process. It raises the critical question of identity in the context of an overwhelming majority dominating the minority highlanders of the post-colonial state. The balance between promoting the principles of multi-ethnicism yet at the same time maintaining national solidarity is often lost. The vision of state formation on the frontier bears more familiarity among the settlers than the highlanders, and as a result, which Georges Condominas observed more than fifty years ago, the Vietnamese 'bested' the Central Highlanders in all dealings in the frantic frontier condition.<sup>179</sup> Yet, limits of government capability meant that national administration often failed to replace pre-existing structures. Local social structures, such as the hierarchy of village elders or influential spiritual leaders and body of oral customary laws, often persist and compete against the government imposed authority hierarchy

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<sup>177</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 270.

<sup>178</sup> *Seeing Like A State*.

<sup>179</sup> 'Aspects Of A Minority Problem In Indochina'.

such that even officials had to make reference to them.<sup>180</sup> Highlanders are also no supine mass; they frequently voice their grievances in collective protests when their lands are appropriated for resettlement of migrants, or for commercial purposes. Sometimes, they even resort to destroying crops planted by government agencies that apparently appropriated their land.<sup>181</sup> Highlanders also vote with their feet, as many did, by moving deeper into the forest and sometimes across the border into Cambodia or Laos.<sup>182</sup> Some joined the furtive FULRO insurgency, which dogged the Central Highlands for more than a decade. When the frontier was subjected to the allure of the 'coffee fever' in the 1990s, things spun out of control. The protest-demonstrations in 2001, it seems, had been slowly bubbling underneath all the while.

### Discussion

Despite the seemingly duo-monologue of both discourses speaking past each other, both government and the critics produced an absolute binary framework of primitive-modern, primitive-socialist, majority-minority and domination-subordination (or resistance) to understand the situation of the highlands. This binary is in turn underlined by three conceptual threads common to both discourses.

First, both treat the state as an *a priori* formed entity. In the above discussion, I presented an understanding of Vietnamese government's vision of state formation in the Central Highlands as an attempt to achieve the ideal conception of the new post-colonial state amongst the hills inhabitants. This ideal conception revolves around the four main issues of cultural identity, frontier formation by outsiders (mainly the Kinh lowlanders), reconfigurations of everyday life of the highlanders, and land rights. For the Vietnamese government, this conception is predicated on a perceived normative responsibility towards the people it claims to govern. Critics of Vietnamese state formation on the highlands frontier, however, see this ideal conception as founded upon precepts of the lowland majority culture. There is no questioning of whether the state undergoes any form of transformation in the course of implementing this vision. The state and its vision are already formed, the only thing we need to examine, it seems, is

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<sup>180</sup> 'Gerer la question ethnique sur les hautes terres', pp 424-5; 'Internal Colonialism In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam', pp 300-1.

<sup>181</sup> *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen*, pp 157-9.

<sup>182</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 279-281.

the implementation process (and for the critics, how the highlanders resist its implementation).

Second, both perceive the state as a self-contained bounded entity. The interface of engagement with other social forces is seen as one bouncing off against the other, which either results in one replacing the other or an eternal struggle between 'state' and 'society'. Thus, when local structures or institutions persist in the face of a state imposed administrative hierarchy, it is interpreted as resistance against domination. When state policies reconfigure how festivals could be celebrated, it is about the replacement of one mode of social ordering by another, *a la* folklorization. Then, when villages retreat further into the forest when sedentarization failed, it is about 'escape', one entity bouncing off another.

Third, the discourses see state formation on the frontier as analogous to a *diffusion effect* (for example, turning the hills 'red') that emanates from an exogenously located political center. This process of state formation is akin to a scenario of a more powerful force (the state), 'powering' its way over a weaker force (highlanders). In the process of expansion into the frontier, the entity of the state is not subjected to any form of adulteration. It may encounter obstacles of resistance, or it may encounter further retreat of the recalcitrant. Diffusion, as understood in physics, is the physical process of spreading something into otherwise unoccupied space rather than a chemical process of something being created by two or more elements. Hence, state formation is simply the expansion of state power to realign the highlands frontier according to the image of the source.

State formation on the frontier, according to my interpretation of both discourses, falls within the broad framework of traditional frontier theory, where the space beyond the proper domain succumbs to the 'bulldozer effect' of expansion by the intruders.<sup>183</sup> Most scholars probably do not perceive penetration of the frontier as mediated by an advancing 'Turnerian' red line of civilization but see it as mediated by multiple sites of penetration. The frontier, however, is nonetheless subjected to the diffusion effect of an external ordering (of the state and settlers) through the many

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<sup>183</sup> Rodolphe De Koninck, 'The Theory And Practice Of Frontier Development: Vietnam's Contribution', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41 (1), pp 7-21, 2000, p 8.

conduits of penetration. It seems then we had merely replaced the imagery but the effect remains the same.

I suggest that the vision of Vietnamese state formation on the frontier and the critics' counter-discourse each parallel one half of the answer given to Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi when they asked a Bahnar informant, 'do the Bahnar people like the French and Vietnamese settling down in Kontum, and would the Bahnar be happier if the French and Vietnamese leave?' The informant replied,

Before the Pha-lang<sup>184</sup> people and the Yoan<sup>185</sup> people came to stay in Kontum, the Moi were miserable (*cuc*) but extremely happy (*cuc suong*); from the day they came up here, the Moi are happy (*suong*) but happily miserable (*suong cuc*). You probably do not understand what I mean by this; let me explain. In the past although the Moi lived alone, there were often robberies and looting, hostilities and warfare, seasonal hunger and thirst. But there was also total freedom; there was no need to do corvee and pay one's taxes. That is what I mean by miserable but extremely happy. Now, thanks to the Pha-lang and Yoan people, the Moi are safe and secure, and sufficiently fed. But they have to build roads and pay taxes; totally losing their freedom. That is what I mean by happy but happily miserable. In comparison, there are happiness and misery on both ends. But alas, you sirs are here to stay, the Pha-lang people to maintain the order on our behalf and the Yoan people to trade to us rice and fermented preserves (*mam*) to eat.<sup>186</sup>

The first half of the answer – that before the arrival of the French colonial state, the Vietnamese and French settlers, the Bahnar were 'miserable but miserably happy' – is quite self-explanatory. They were basically free from the domination of an overarching State but subjected to the inherent disorders of the state of 'statelessness'. The Bahnar could effectively be free in the forests, and lead a life that functions according to the age-old customs. But the Bahnar people were also miserable in that

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<sup>184</sup> *Pha-lang* refers to the French.

<sup>185</sup> The authors suggest an explanation offered by one of their informants on why the highlanders call the *Kinh* people, 'Yoan'. 'Yoan' originates from a Djarai term 'Doan' meaning hat. The Djarai people observed that *Kinh* people often wear a hat wherever they go, and referred to them as 'Doan', the people who wear hats. Slowly, this term became 'Yoan' in everyday conversation, and the highlanders began calling the *Kinh* people, 'Yoan'. *Moi Kontum*, p 9.

<sup>186</sup> *Moi Kontum*, p ix.

they suffer from shortage of rice between harvests (*giap hat*), there is a perennial shortage of salt, and there were frequent conflicts with neighboring villages, clans or tribes.<sup>187</sup>

The second half of the answer, ‘happy but happily miserable’, tells of lost freedoms when the highlanders were subjected to an overarching political order and the gains achieved in other aspects of life. The imposition of the colonial political order no doubt significantly compromised the traditional social orders of highland societies. French pacification campaigns were often a naked and brutal show of force to expand the domain of colonial rule.<sup>188</sup> Yet, the French colonial state also provisioned for a stable social order in the highlands frontier. Outsiders, namely the Kinh traders, had traditionally engaged in exchange or trade with the highlanders for centuries. The opening of the frontier intensified this mode of interaction but also injected a new dimension with increased settlement by outsiders. The newcomers brought along material complementarities, such as producing surplus rice and bringing up salt and salted products (all kinds of fermented preserves, or *mam*) to trade, which supplemented deficiencies inherent in the traditional agrarian systems of the highlanders. On a prolonged basis, the technologically more advanced newcomers could also bring along influences that improve the living condition of the old inhabitants.<sup>189</sup>

The critiques offered so far in the Vietnamization paradigm resonate with the first half of the answer offered by the Bahnar interlocutor, while the government’s vision is aimed at achieving the latter half. The Bahnar interlocutor’s answer, however, should be seen as a whole. He (I assume it is a aged male) was not merely emphasizing what was lost, but also speaking of what was gained. Neither was he specifically lamenting about having to adopt something that was purely ‘Kinh’.

My earlier discussion about both discourses suggests a rather ‘destructive’ or ‘conflictual’ process of state formation on the frontier at work. Both discourses emphasized the transformation of the frontier by the newcomers. These binary

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<sup>187</sup> For a description of the dietary and consumption practices of the Bahnar, see *Moi Kontum*, pp 76-81.

<sup>188</sup> The authors recall that just a few years earlier in March 1929, the French even resorted to using airplanes to bomb the village of Kon-barr to force their submission, *Moi Kontum*, pp 8-9.

<sup>189</sup> The highlanders in the vicinity of Kontum city are possibly among the earliest in the inner highland regions to develop wet-rice cultivation. *Moi Kontum*, pp 14-15.

perspectives tend to ignore the possibility of mutability in state formation. If decolonization is taken as the watershed that saw the birth of the new post-colonial Vietnamese state, how can we simply assume that the shape and content of this political entity is already formed and therefore unsusceptible to possible reformulation on the ground? Recalling my own encounters in the field, I thought rather naively to myself, if officials see it as their duty to ‘fulfill duties to both state and people’ and it is imperative to ‘maintain good relations with the people’, then would not this lead to more varied manifestation of state policies on the ground? For all the superficiality of these anecdotal encounters, but in the absence of unhindered fieldwork among the highlanders in the present context it is not unreasonable to ask, could there be room for a more tangential direction of state formation?

### THINGS LEFT UNSAID

Although critics rightly point out the tensions of state formation on the frontier at work, some questions remain unaddressed. The diffusion effect often encounters ‘obstacles’. Certainly the government is aware of the problems that arise when implementing policies. If the government is duty-bound to the people as articulated in the discourse of state formation and from the anecdotal incidents I pointed out earlier, then certainly attempts are made to understand the problems and to resolve them rather than simple enforcement or repression.

Under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), two state-level research programs about the Central Highlands were implemented. *Chuong Trinh Tay Nguyen I* was started in 1979 to conduct studies about the peoples and physical environment of the region. Results of the research program were published as several monographs about the various ethnic groups in the highlands provinces.<sup>190</sup> *Chuong Trinh Tay Nguyen II* was started in the early 1980s to study the problems that emerged from policies implemented to develop the highlands. The results of the latter program were

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<sup>190</sup> Dang Nghiem Van (ed.), *Cac dan toc tinh Gia Lai - Cong Tum* (Ethnic Groups Of Gia Lai – Cong Tum Province), Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1981; Mac Duong (ed.), *Van de dan toc tinh Lam Dong* [Ethnic Problems In Lam Dong Province], Lam Dong: So Van Hoa Tinh Lam Dong, 1983; Vien Dan Toc Hoc, *So tay ve cac dan toc o Viet Nam* [Handbook On Ethnic Groups In Vietnam], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1983; *Dai cuong ve cac dan toc Ede, Mnong o Dak Lak; Cac dan toc it nguoi o Viet Nam* (Cac Tinh Phia Nam).



discussed in several major conferences involving researchers, party and government officials in the highlands. Two major volumes, *Mot So Van De Kinh Te Xa Hoi Tay Nguyen* (A Few Socio-Economic Problems In The Western Plateau) and *Tay Nguyen Tren Duong Phat Trien*, (Western Plateau On The Road Of Development) were published respectively in 1985 and 1989.<sup>191</sup> These volumes identify the strengths and weaknesses of every department in the policies already implemented in the Central Highlands. When results were published, anyone who had read the findings would have been well informed about the problems of projects such as *Vung Kinh Te Moi*, *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*, and other policy measures on issues such as culture, land distribution and administration in the Central Highlands. Prior to the Dega-affair in 2001, a government sanctioned research project on the land use situation and related problems was conducted by several senior researchers in the late 1990s.<sup>192</sup> The report was published in 2000, entitled *So Huu va Su Dung Dat Dai o Cac Tinh Tay Nguyen* (Land Ownership And Land Use In The Provinces Of The Western Plateau). This is perhaps the most candid report about government policies and problems on the land issue to be published to date. The report makes obvious that the government was already well informed about the problems related to its policies in the Central Highlands.

The question then is what did the 'state' do with this improved knowledge about policies and problems in the Central Highlands? This is a question that has not been considered in depth by recent studies about the Central Highlands. If we grant the state the benefit of doubt that apart from seeking allegiance of the people it lays claims on, it also accepts certain responsibility for the general well-being of the people – meaning if they have sufficient to eat, clothes to wear, land and resources for agriculture production, schools to study, access to medical resources, etc. – then there must be some reshaping of the vision of state formation.

The prescriptions from another 'highlands handbook' gave me some hope that something was being done and certain middle ground practices were already adopted when implementing policies in the highlands. *Nhung Dieu Can Biet Khi Len Truong*

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<sup>191</sup> *Van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi cac dan toc thieu so o Dac Lac* is also one of the volumes originating from this second research program.

<sup>192</sup> Initial findings were filed at the Vien Dan Toc Hoc. These included, Vu Thi Hong, *Thuc trang su dung dat dai o mot so tinh Tay Nguyen hien nay* [Situation Of Land Use In A Few Provinces Of The Western Plateau At Present], Bao Cao Dien Da, 1996; Vu Dinh Loi, *Mot so van de kinh te xa hoi o Tay Nguyen hien nay* [A Few Socio-Economic Problems In The Western Plateau At Present], Bao Cao Dien Da, 1993.

*Son Tay Nguyen* (Things To Know When Going Up To The Long Mountains Western Plateau) was published in 1988.<sup>193</sup> It was written by Dang Nghiem Van and Luu Hung, both being experienced anthropologists deeply involved in research about the Central Highlands after re-unification in 1975. This book was meant to help prepare the many cadres and settlers moving to the highlands as part of the government's grand scheme to advance the region towards socialism. Most probably only a small number of cadres had a copy of this handbook, but it is not far-fetch to assume that the contents reflect the general directives (both official and verbal) from the central authorities. The authors recognize that there have been policy and implementation short-comings in the highlands region due to lack of understanding of cultures and customs of the highlanders and failure to follow the three main guiding principles for operating in ethnic minority regions, namely 'patience, caution and certainty' (*kien nhan, than trong va chac chan*).<sup>194</sup>

Similar to *Moi Kontum* and *Kinh Nghiem Cong Tac Thuong Du*, this handbook informs the reader about the role and responsibility of cadre and settler sent to the highlands, both to the nation and the highlanders; and the what-not and how-to when in the highlands. The authors hope the handbook user will have a more sensitized understanding of highlanders' cultures. They succinctly explain the differences in cultures and customs between highlanders and Kinh. For example, they explain that the forest is not 'no man's land' as perceived in the lowlands. Certain parts of the forest are actually 'planted' by the locals to supplement their food source; and a great many are rehabilitating fallow grounds reserved for future use. Despite the introduction of the *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* policy, it is of great importance to always set aside forestland for swiddens, which still provide a source of subsistence safety net for the highlanders.<sup>195</sup> Like *Kinh Nghiem Cong Tac Thuong Du*, the authors of this handbook also remind the reader to pay attention to local social orderings. In the context of the reunified country, although the state's laws serve as the common legal framework, local customary practices must still be respected. For example, although state administrative units and party cells are established in every village, it is still pertinent that visitors (cadres or

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<sup>193</sup> *Nhung dieu can biet khi len Truong Son Tay Nguyen*.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, p 66.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, pp 95-96.

settlers) first pay a visit to the village elders upon entering the villages.<sup>196</sup> At the village level, even though the government has established a *Ban Hoa Giai* (Resolution Committee) to look into local conflicts, the committee usually includes the village elders.<sup>197</sup>

To the authors, the perseverance of local forms of social ordering is not a form of resistance against the state's grid of control nor is the state weak and unable to stamp-down its authority. Instead, they see these as the multiple relations arising out of the process of state formation on the frontier. The message in the book is quite clear: failure to take into account the differences in cultures and customs of the highlander population in the government's policy designs and policy implementation on the ground have resulted in problems between the old inhabitants and the newcomers, both state and settlers. I mentioned in the introduction that Dang Nghiem Van has recently criticized the government for not doing more to resolve the land problem in the Central Highlands. His criticisms, however, were made in the recognition that the government had already begun paying more attention to the land situation among the highlanders. This is in contrast to the policies between 1975 and 1990, which were more focused on developing the capacities of the state enterprises and newcomers in the *Vung Kinh Te Moi* program in the Central Highlands. Although after 1990, the government reorganized the system of state farms and rehabilitated the farming household as the basic economic production unit, Dang Nghiem Van felt that more could be done to compensate for the disparity between the old inhabitants and the newcomers.<sup>198</sup> The direction of changes over the last few years have been to look into how local forms of ordering, such as how customary laws (*luat tục pháp*) can be incorporated into policies rather than simply using such knowledge as a means to mobilize the highlanders.<sup>199</sup> This is, however, not a question about the triumph of 'societal' forces over the state, but

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, p 95.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, pp 95-96.

<sup>198</sup> *Van de dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen*, pp 328-334.

<sup>199</sup> See for example the discussions of how local customary laws can contribute to rural development in *Mot so van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi buon lang cac dan toc Tay Nguyen*; Ngo Duc Thinh & Phan Dang Nhat (eds.), *Luat Tuc va Phat Trien Nong Thon hien nay o Viet Nam* [Customary Law And Rural Development In Present Day Viet Nam], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2000. Another volume examines how customary resource management practices can contribute to rural development and environmental sustainability, Hoang Xuan Ty & Le Trong Cuc (eds.), *Kien thuc ban dia cua dong bao vung cao trong Nong Nghiep va quan ly tai nguyen thien nien* [Indigenous Knowledge Of Highland Compatriots In Agriculture And Natural Resource Management], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Nong Nghiep, 1998.

rather about hybridization of the state form in order to operate on the frontier. To be able to reveal this dimension of state formation, it is obvious that we need to begin by adopting a different understanding of the concept of the state; one that is not treated as an *a priori* formed entity.

## CONCLUSION

I accept that state formation on the frontier involves considerable friction and often produces conflicts between newcomers and old inhabitants. This helped to produce the public outburst of grievances in the Bajaraka and Dega affairs. My brief survey of the distinction between hills and plains revealed the issues at stake during the process of Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands. State formation in the Central Highlands, as envisioned by the various Vietnamese regimes, is predicated on a normative ideal of what constitutes being a part of the post-colonial Vietnamese state for the region and its original inhabitants. The Vietnamization paradigm suggests a certain perpetuation of the subjection of the highlanders by an exogenous political center that is disguised in an altruistic normative. I argue both discourses – the state’s and the critics’ - despite their differing conclusions about outcome, produce a binary framework that only addresses one facet of the process of state formation on the frontier. That is, both are about how the frontier and its inhabitants are lost to the process of state formation.

Anecdotal incidents I encounter in the field and government reports that review policy measures adopted in the Central Highlands suggest that there is more to the rather coarse and frictional process outlined by critics and by the ‘state’. Could there be another dimension of state formation on the frontier not addressed by either discourse? Or to put it more specifically, were there attempts to reshape the vision of state formation as a result of local conditions, practices and responses, since we are aware of the larger tensions at play in the process? This is the question behind my study. To begin an answer requires moving beyond the ‘diffusion’ paradigm of political expansion. We need to seriously consider the concepts of frontier, state and the respective formation processes. We also need to critically examine the concept of power in order to move beyond an understanding of power relations as a two-dimensional

struggle between the stronger and the weaker of one pushing off (or even destroying) the other to gain dominance. Only then, perhaps can we explore overlooked dimensions of state formation on the frontier.

## *'Tam Bui; Dirt Bath'*

# THEORIZING STATE FORMATION ON THE FRONTIER

## CHAPTER 3

### TRAILS FROM THE FIRST REPUBLIC

There is no critical inquiry in the existing literature about highland policies under the First Republic. We are informed, mainly through Gerald Hickey's works and snippets of information from others, that this was the period of high Kinh ethnocentrism. It was the modern 'dark age' for the Central Highlanders, as Ngo Dinh Diem's government embarked on the road of culturally assimilating the highlanders. Hickey tells us that Diem's highland policies led to the rise of pan-highlander ethno-nationalist Bajaraka movement. Rather than adjust its policies to counter possible support for the movement, the government responded with repression and punitive measures against the highlanders.<sup>1</sup> It seems then that state formation projects under the First Republic were immutable and driven by ethnocentric impulses of an *a priori* ethnocentric state. A closer look at the Bajaraka movement through archived documents indicates otherwise. Below is a summary of two reports I read from the archive.

A report, dated 1 September 1958, authored by a committee investigating how rising discontent among highlanders led to the emergence of the Bajaraka movement, gave the following explanation. It admitted that highlanders in Ninh Thuan province had clashed, using bows and arrows, with the Civil Guards because of forced relocation. These highlanders from Ninh Thuan were resettled in Ba Rau, but some deserted the settlement and escaped to the hills. In other words, there was much discontent among the highlanders over such resettlement orders. The authors suggested that Viet Cong propaganda must be at work to incite the highlanders into action. The report

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Free In The Forest: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp 58-60.

further suggested that the policy introduced in early 1958 to restrict forest burning in order to regulate swidden agriculture was poorly carried out, such that highlanders treated it as a general ban on swidden practices.<sup>2</sup>

The report suggested several solutions to counter the rising discontent. First, it recommended that the government must specially train cadres stationed in the highlands in order to avoid further misunderstanding occurring between Kinh and highlanders because of cultural differences. Second, the government must make further effort to prevent exploitation of the highlanders, especially by Kinh traders (*lai thuong*). Third, the government must re-examine the policies to improve the living conditions of the highlanders. The government should bring development to the highlanders rather than forcibly resettle them in selected centers. Fourth, there was an urgent need to better explain the government's policy on swidden agriculture, and more importantly, to simplify the procedure for applying permits to clear land for swidden. The existing application procedure was too complicated for most highlanders. Fifth, there was a need for improving the working relations between Kinh and highlander cadres and the report emphasized that Kinh cadres must treat highlander cadres with more respect.<sup>3</sup>

Another report prepared by the Ministry of Defense (*Bo Quoc Phong*) listed four reasons behind the rise of the Bajaraka movement among the highlanders. First, it admitted there were high incidences of exploitation of highlanders by Kinh people, especially the Kinh traders. It did not, however, explain whether exploitation included appropriation of land by the Kinh. Second, it also admitted that in practice, there was disparity in the payroll between Kinh and highlander civil servants. Though Kinh and highlander officials received the same pay, Kinh officials sent to the highlands were given housing provision and extra bonuses for being stationed in the frontier; highlander officials received no such 'hardship' perks.

Third, there were certain 'unexpected' consequences from the government's highlander programs aimed at improving the living conditions of the highlanders, such as resettlement, sedentarization and introduction of new cultivation methods similar to the Kinh way. The arrival of more Kinh people,

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<sup>2</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>3</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

settlers and officials, contributed to increased dissatisfaction over material expectations among the highlanders. For example, Kinh settlements such as *Dinh Dien* were conspicuously better off than the nearby highlander villages. Then, there were also highlander intellectuals whose leadership ambitions were hindered by the arrival of senior Kinh officials, who were appointed to important posts within the provincial governments. Kinh officials, on the other hand, were often culturally insensitive to the needs of the highlanders, and failed to apply tact and flexibility in the application of bureaucratic rules and regulation when dealing with the highlanders. Finally, the report suggested that the above reasons combined to generate misunderstanding among highlanders that the government was bent on 'culturally assimilating' (*dong hoa*) them. These reasons provided fertile ground for communist propaganda to sway the highlanders against the government.<sup>4</sup>

These reports reveal interesting points about the First Republic's highland policies not raised in Gerald Hickey's works.<sup>5</sup> First, Hickey tells us that the government then, as part of its assimilation strategy, was bent on eliminating swidden agriculture. Yet, the reports reveal that swidden was in fact not banned but only subjected to government regulation. The reports even recommended that the government simplify the regulatory procedures for swidden farming and other administrative paper work because highlanders found such bureaucratic workings complicated. One question I investigate, therefore, is why were highlanders allowed to continue practicing swidden? How did the government manage this whole issue relating to swidden regulation? Second, the government was very much aware that highlanders were exploited by Kinh people in one way or another, such as during trading and possibly with regards to land sales. My question then, did the government try to resolve the situation? Third, the reports point out that highlanders, with additional agitation by communist agents, were worried about being culturally assimilated by the Kinh. Since this was raised as a possible grievance among the highlanders, did the government take measures to address this problem? Fourth, the reports also cited the design and implementation of the

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<sup>4</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Gerald Hickey, *Preliminary Research Report On The High Plateau (PMS)*, Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1957; *Free In The Forest: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982; *The Highland People Of South Vietnam: Social And Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967; *Shattered World: Adaptation And Survival Among Vietnam's Highland Peoples*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.



sedentarization program as one of the causes for highlanders' disgruntlement. Since the government knew this was a problem, what steps did it take to ameliorate the situation? Fifth, since there were so much issues at stake with regard to the state formation programs, were there any attempt to modify the most controversial one, namely *Dinh Dien*, which brought tens of thousands lowlanders to the highlands? Gerald Hickey and other scholars who examined the First Republic's policies in the highlands do not raise these questions. I address these specific questions in Chapter Four through to Chapter Seven of this thesis. In order to even begin to ask these questions, however, there is a need, as suggested in Chapter Two, to revise our more general theoretical conceptualizations of frontier, state, power and the processes of state formation and frontier formation.

## INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter of this thesis, I described how state formation on the frontier is so clearly manifested by the drastically transformed landscape. The impact of outside forces on highlander societies and the highlands landscape is quite often lamented by people with strong feelings for the old inhabitants of the region. Georges Condominas, noticing the use of outside artifacts in a ritual ceremony among the Mnong Gar people, remarks,

[w]hat the marchers are wearing is a bizarre and very colorful mixture of Mnong and imported European and Vietnamese garments; not one person is wearing a costume all of one style. There is even one umbrella, belonging to Mang-Master-of-the-Ivory, whose getup is among the uglier. Like all the Cil Bboon Jaa, he wears only imported Western clothing; today *cai quan* (Vietnamese trousers), a European-style shirt and vest, a Basque beret, the leather headband of which he has turned inside out, and a towel which he has draped around his shoulders like a kind of neck-piece. Each item is indescribably filthy, which serves to accentuate the look of ethnic debasement one notices in the Cil Bboon Jaa, whereas the Gar have none of it even when they do deck themselves out in mixed clothes. *It is interesting to try to imagine what a procession such as ours would have looked like thirty or even twenty*

*years ago, when imported goods had not yet penetrated these regions to any great extent [my emphasis].<sup>6</sup>*

We could similarly imagine that before the arrival of outsiders (such as the French colonial government and French planters; the Vietnamese governments and Vietnamese settlers) the fresh mountain air was unadulterated beneath the morning mist. But at the present, as we recall from Chapter One, traveling along the dirt paths is described as ‘*tam bui*’ or taking a ‘dirt bath’. In the midst of such massive transformation, certainly when the dust settles, the landscape is totally changed and life either turns for the better or worse. Yet, the dust also settles on anyone traversing the frontier and the many physical manifestations of state formation. This is not a scene from the aftermath of a paradise lost. Rather it tells of how old inhabitants and newcomers are both affected, perhaps not equally, by state formation on the frontier.

This chapter is an attempt to construct an alternative theoretical model of state formation on the frontier. In Chapter Two, I argued that existing understandings of state formation in the Central Highlands frontier are framed by a diffusion model, in which the state is conceptualized as an *a priori* formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier. The diffusion model successfully brings out the tensions inherent of state formation but leaves out other aspects of the process that are quite possibly at work. The alternative model that I propose is one that speaks of how state formation programs are modified, compromised, hybridized or even recombined with local practices. State formation is not driven simply by the objective of political control alone. Rather, state formation is about government, which I understand as the shaping of behavior, both ruler and ruled. Government is also driven by motivations of maintaining or improving the well-being of the population in general. Underpinned by such motivations, the government may find it necessary to compromise, improvise and reshape its vision. In the process, the state form undergoes reshaping as well.

In order to explain this alternative model, we need to seriously take into account the significance of why we call a particular space a ‘frontier’ and what does the process

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<sup>6</sup> Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten The Forest: The Story Of A Montagnard Village In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Translated by Adrian Foulke. Original publication 1957, p 50.

of frontier formation entail. We also need to reconceptualize our understanding of the 'state' and its formation process without falling back on the conceptual underpinnings of the diffusion model. I suggest that the diffusion model is predicated upon an understanding of power that can be held and applied to effect changes in accordance with the will of the 'ruler', i.e., the state. There are, however, different understandings of power that may be employed. Power relations should not be perceived as a two-dimensional struggle between the stronger and the weaker of one pushing off the other to gain dominance. Instead, there are multiple modes of ordering at work at any singular conjuncture. Even in the most seemingly spectacular asymmetrical power relationship, a basic expectation of the fulfillment of moral obligation exist or what Barrington Moore identifies as the social bases of obedience. Anything less and the configuration of power relations falls apart and even the most timid will cry moral outrage, fight back or desert.<sup>7</sup> Certainly state formation on the frontier is about the attempt of one political center trying to establish overarching claims over the population, but it does not mean that the process simply negates existing social orderings. The product that is being continually shaped and reshaped is never purely black or white. Rather it is often grey.

## FRONTIERS AND FRONTIER FORMATION

There are three ways to explain why a frontier is formed, namely the push and pull factors, and finally the strategic factor. Population pressure, political disturbances and social discrimination helped to *push* people towards the edge of the populated heartlands. The frontier provides a safety valve to help reduce demographic pressure in the heartlands from which the settlers originate. Settlers may arrive as a result of state initiatives. In the case of Southeast Asia, the most prominent cases can be found in Indonesia and Vietnam. The Indonesian transmigration program saw the government investing heavily to redeploy population from Java to the outer islands.<sup>8</sup> In Vietnam, Andrew Hardy's study of migration reveals how the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

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<sup>7</sup> Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases Of Obedience And Revolt*, White Plains, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Hardjono, 'The Indonesian Transmigration Programme In Historical Perspective', *International Migration* 26 (4), pp 427-438, 1988; *Transmigration In Indonesia*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977.

and later, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, relocated millions of lowlanders to the hill regions in the northern highlands and later to the Central Highlands.<sup>9</sup>

Newcomers on the frontier are often *pulled* by the attraction of availability of resources and opportunities to find an improved material life in the promised land. To the advancing group, state and individuals, the frontier often carries one common attraction, 'a high potential for exploitation'.<sup>10</sup> The grasslands of the Great Plains in America<sup>11</sup>, the highlands of Central Mesa in Costa Rica<sup>12</sup>, or even the forests of Mina Gerais in Brazil<sup>13</sup>, were frontiers expanded upon because these lands presented an array of resources that the incoming group could convert into abundant consumption, or what Walter Prescott Webb conceptualizes as the 'frontier windfall'.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Vietnam, the Quang Nam region during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, because of the flourishing international sea trade, became something of a Vietnamese El Dorado, attracting traders and settlers alike.<sup>15</sup> Andrew Hardy shows us how 'free migration' to the Central Highlands of Vietnam became the main dynamic of population redistribution after the Doi Moi reforms removed the restrictive conditions of population movements.<sup>16</sup> My own earlier work makes the point that many of these settlers, pulled by the attraction of reaping the benefits of coffee planting, are there to 'build a new homeland' (*xay dung que huong moi*); they are there to stay, with or without the state.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the phrase '*dat lanh chim dau*' (birds alight on lush land) is

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants And The State In The Highlands Of Vietnam*, Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 2003. For a succinct account of agricultural expansion by the Thai in the vicinity of the Bangkok area and later in the hill regions, consult Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History Of Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp 81-89, 155-50.

<sup>10</sup> Warren Dean, *With Broadax And Firebrand: The Destruction Of The Brazilian Atlantic Forest*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995, p 40.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, New York: Ginn & Company, 1931 (Reprint 1959).

<sup>12</sup> Lowell Gudmundson, *Costa Rica Before Coffee: Society And Economy On The Eve Of The Export Boom*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> *With Broadax And Firebrand*.

<sup>14</sup> *With Broadax And Firebrand*, p 40. For Walter Prescott Webb's conceptualization of 'frontier windfall', see Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Woodside, 'Central Vietnam's Trading World In The Eighteenth Century As Seen In Le Quy Don's Frontier Chronicles' in *Essays Into Vietnamese Pasts* edited by Keith Taylor & John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995) p 165; see also Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam In The Seventeenth And Eighteenth Centuries*, New York, Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hardy, 'Strategies Of Migration To Upland Areas In Contemporary Vietnam', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41 (1), pp 23-34, 2000; 'State Visions, Migrant Decisions: Population Movements Since The End Of The Vietnam War' in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics Of A Transforming Society* edited by Hy Van Luong (Singapore: Institute Of Southeast Asian Studies; Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> William Roseberry uses the term 'precipitate peasants' to describe this kind of frontier peasants.

Precipitate peasants refer to the category of peasants who respond to the call of 'capitalism' and colonize

commonly used to describe the phenomenon of free migration in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, for example, in Thailand, spontaneous migration has been the main driving force in frontier expansion. Similar to Vietnam, in the case of Thailand, communication infrastructure established by the government and the penetration of commercial networks, helped to crystallize the expansion of the frontier.<sup>19</sup>

Third, the frontier is often formed because of strategic motivations. Frontier formation plays an important role in terms of territorial consolidation.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, soldiers often also performed the dual role of settling and defending the frontier regions. This has been a consistent motif in the expansion of Chinese kingdoms. Military agricultural colonies were common features in Chinese frontier history, found in Si Chuan, Yun Nan, Gui Zhou and Guang Xi during what Harold Wiens describes as the 'march to the south'.<sup>21</sup> We find similar deliberations in the frontier history of Latin America. Charles Alistair Hennessy describes how colonization schemes often coincided with concerns to securing the political frontiers.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Vietnam, the *don dien*, or 'agriculture military-outposts', has throughout the history of Viet kingdoms been a crucial policy to secure the frontier regions.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, we are actually

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frontiers of previously 'vacant' land to specifically produce commercial crops for the export market. This originates from William Roseberry, *Coffee And Capitalism In The Venezuelan Andes*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983, pp 206-208; see also, Douglas Yarrington, *A Coffee Frontier: Land, Society And Politics In Duaca, Venezuela*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997, pp 2-3. This conceptual categorization of the migrants is significant for two reasons. First, it outlines the single-minded objective of the migrants aimed at getting a share of the 'spoils' Second, conceptualizing the migrants as 'precipitate peasants' implies that, originating from different parts of the country, they do not share a common set of identity nor enjoy the stability provided by a set of village social norms and communal institutions that could be traced back into their social history. Indeed, life in the Vietnamese village in northern Vietnam is often subjected to a set of unwritten regulations (*huong uoc bat thanh van*) or a set of unwritten practices (*tuc le bat thanh van*) that guides the everyday relations amongst the villagers as well in their agricultural production practices (see my discussion on this in Chapter Two). More significantly, it is a well-known fact that different villages have different sets of norms and therefore what is acceptable behavior or practice in one village may not be so in another. In the context of the pioneer front, where neither communal institutions nor unwritten social norms are well established with the benefit of a rooted history, one is perhaps legitimate to ask how everyday life on the pioneer front is socially ordered amongst the 'precipitate peasants'.

<sup>18</sup> Stan B-H Tan, 'Coffee Frontiers In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam: Networks Of Connectivity Between New Productive Spaces And Global Markets, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41 (1), pp 51-67, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Rodolphe De Koninck, 'The Theory And Practice Of Frontier Development: Vietnam's Contribution', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41 (1), pp 7-21, 2000, p 9; see also Harald Uhlig (ed.), *Spontaneous And Planned Settlements In Southeast Asia: Forest Clearing And Recent Pioneer Colonization In The ASEAN Countries And Two Case-studies On Thailand*, Hamburg: Institute Of Asian Affairs, 1984.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Theory And Practice Of Frontier Development', p 10.

<sup>21</sup> Harold Wiens, *China's March Towards The Tropics*, Hamden, Connecticut: Shoe String Press, 1954.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier In Latin American History*, London: Edward Arnold, 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Vu Huy Phuc, 'Don Dien – Mot loai hinh to chuc san xuất nông nghiệp quan trọng nua dau The Ky XIX' [Agricultural Military-Outposts – An Important Type Of Agricultural Production Unit In The First Half Of The Nineteenth Century], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* [Historical Research] (274), pp 20-25, 1994;

talking about state formation on the frontier, which is quite different from the process of frontier formation itself. I discuss the nuances between these two distinct yet intertwined processes later when I provide my definitions of the respective processes.

### Two Approaches To Frontier Formation

Rodolphe De Koninck, in his succinct paper about theories of frontier development, tells us that stories about the frontier have typically been about how 'a technological powerful people have been able to effect a transformation of both nature and less evolved populations in areas peripheral to their 'cultural core'.<sup>24</sup> Owen Lattimore generally sees the frontier as a zone of dynamic interpenetration of cultures.<sup>25</sup> However, he sees the process of frontier formation as basically about how the peripheral zone is transformed by the invaders. In the case of the northern frontier of 'Chinese' civilization, the 'Chinese' drove back the 'barbarians' but did not venture beyond where irrigated farming must be abandoned. But in the south, 'Chinese' agrarian civilization could expand. Low altitude inhabitants were gathered into the 'Chinese' amalgam and hill dwellers were subdued or had to retreat.<sup>26</sup> In the case of America, he points out that British settlers, when they left Europe, had already jettisoned much of their cultural baggage upon arriving in the New World.<sup>27</sup> Lattimore's argument emphasizes how newcomers transform the frontier rather than how the frontier transforms the newcomers, both state and settlers.

Richard White succinctly sums up how scholars have been telling stories about the frontier in America when he writes,

[t]he history of Indian-white relations has not usually produced complex stories. Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm. There have been but two outcomes: The sea wears down and dissolves the rock; or the sea erodes the rock but cannot finally absorb its battered

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Nguyen Bao Tri & Nguyen Tan Hien, 'Chinh sach nong binh trong lich su Viet Nam' [The Policy Of Peasant-Soldier In The History Of Vietnam], *Tap San Quoc Phong* [Journal Of National Defense] (74), pp 3-24, 1974.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Theory And Practice Of Frontier Development: Vietnam's Contribution', p 7.

<sup>25</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers Of China*, New York: American Geographical Society, 1940.

<sup>26</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Studies In Frontier History: Collected Papers 1928-58*, Paris: Mouton & Co., 1962, pp 475-77.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p 490.

remnant, which endures. The first outcome produces stories of conquest and assimilation; the second produces stories of cultural persistence.<sup>28</sup>

I suggest that this analogy can similarly be applied to frontier studies around the world. In Chapter Two, I argued that this has been the dominant story line in studies about relations between highlands and lowlands, and center and periphery in Southeast Asia. We can identify two main effects of frontier formation from this dominant story line of frontier studies, or what I would term the mainstream frontier literature. First, old inhabitants of the frontier either had to retreat from or become subordinate to the technologically advanced incoming dominant group. Second, the frontier environment is 'tamed', which often led to environmental degradation. For example, the forest is often perceived as 'forbidden realms' and agricultural expansion is akin to a process of 'civilizing' the wild.<sup>29</sup>

There is another facet about frontier formation, which talks about the effect of the frontier itself on actors and institutions. Frederick Jackson Turner argues that frontier formation could drastically remold the newcomer to the frontier. He writes,

the wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. Before long he gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion...He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe...here is a new product that is American.<sup>30</sup>

Turner proposes that the American frontier experience was partly responsible for the nature of democracy that developed in America.<sup>31</sup> This is, of course not a position that Lattimore could agree with and he criticizes Turner, saying that when 'he (Turner) saw

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<sup>28</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires And Republics In The Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p ix.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Theory And Practice Of Frontier Development', pp 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Turner, *The Frontier In American History*, New York: Dover, 1920. Reprint edition 1996.

<sup>31</sup> *The Frontier In American History*, p 4.

what the frontier did to society, he was really seeing what society did to the frontier'.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, De Koninck notes that 'good grounds may be found' for Turner's thesis, 'at least over the issue of liberty'.<sup>33</sup> De Koninck suggests that frontier can influence a polity's 'center of gravity'. Resource availability, geographical proximity to the new nexus of the economy and shifting of population distribution patterns, can combine to shift the center of gravity of a polity. Vietnam's history offers a good example in that it shifted from the northern to the central region as the Kinh population gradually spread southwards. The emergence of capitalism beginning in earnest in the south permanently shifted the economic center of Vietnam to the south, particularly present day Ho Chi Minh City.

There is nothing wrong with analyses provided by the mainstream frontier theories, such as Lattimore's. Tensions do break into serious public outburst of conflicts. In the case of Vietnam, policies of Vietnamization of Southern Vietnam under Minh Mang's rule in the nineteenth century led to ethnic segregation and intense clashes.<sup>34</sup> But there is nothing ridiculous about the thesis that something new or even hybrid could arise from the process of frontier formation. Commenting on the historiography of Indian-white relations in America, Richard White continues,

tellers of such stories do not lie. Some Indian groups did disappear; others did persist. But tellers of such stories miss a larger process and a larger truth. The meeting of sea and continent, like the meeting of whites and Indians, creates as well as destroys. Contact was not a battle of primal forces in which only one could survive. Something new could appear.<sup>35</sup>

In his study on the Indians and the European colonialists encounters in the Great Lakes region between the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, White describes not stories of conquest and assimilation or cultural persistence that have predominated stories of Indian-White relations. Instead, he recounts stories about search for mutual

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<sup>32</sup> *Studies In Frontier History*, p 490.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Theory And Practice Of Frontier Development', pp 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> Choi Byung Wook, 'Vietnamization Of Southern Vietnam During The First Half Of The Nineteenth Century', *Asian Ethnicity* 4 (1), pp 47-65, 2003. For a more detailed account of Minh Mang's policy on the political frontier in the south, consult Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam Under The Reign Of Minh Mang (1820-41)*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> *The Middle Ground*, p ix



understandings, accommodations and sometimes, common meanings. He recounts practices of social norms that were established among the various frontier actors, Indians and Whites, in the frontier region of the Great Lakes. These practices took place in the 'middle ground'. As Calloway succinctly defines it,

[t]he middle ground, which White describes, was not just a place; it was a network of fluid relationships, held together by its own language, rituals, and patterns of behavior. The peripheries of empires met here the nonstate world of Indian villages, and European imperialists had to adjust to the local and kinship politics of native society. People tried to persuade others by appealing to what they perceived as the others' cultural values, and they achieved accommodation and shared meaning through 'a process of creative, and often expedient misunderstandings'.<sup>36</sup>

White is proposing that stories of cultural contact and change need not necessarily be spoken in terms of assimilation or persistence. Similarly, in her ethnography about the 'Meratus' (highlanders) of South Kalimantan, Anna Tsing portrays the Meratus not so much as 'marginalized' people in the periphery of the Indonesia political circle, but rather as people who engage this supposed 'marginality' and use it to develop their social standings within their community, to gain political advancement in the local administration hierarchy, to extend their linkage with the spiritual world and even to break through local gender conventions. The margins, Tsing argues, can be zones of creativity and empowerment.<sup>37</sup> And in *Europe And The People Without History*, Eric Wolf meticulously presents his relational approach to studying cultures and societies.<sup>38</sup> He argues that social and cultural identities have throughout history, morphed and developed in the course of incorporation into larger systems. Social and cultural identities were far from self-evident and distinct.<sup>39</sup> He shows how ethnically defined groups were formed under conditions of relative autonomy, unhampered by the political projects of colonialism, along the frontiers of European expansion in the Americas and Africa. For example, he shows how the expansion of the

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<sup>36</sup> Colin G. Calloway, 'Native American History And The Search For Common Ground', *Reviews In American History* 20 (4), pp 447-452, 1992, p 448.

<sup>37</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In The Realm Of The Diamond Queen*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>38</sup> Eric Wolf, *Europe And The People Without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Wolf, *Pathways Of Power: Building An Anthropology Of The Modern World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp 187-188 & 353-369.

fur trade in North America intensified competition among local native groups, leading to dislocation of some and enhancement of others. New alliances were made, often under new names and ethnic identities. A prime example was the Iroquois, which expanded at the expense of others, subsuming other members of the original 'confederation' of groups located at the upper drainage area of the Hudson River.<sup>40</sup>

White's account of the middle ground in this particular period of American frontier history tells us that as much as frontier formation is about how the frontier was transformed, it is also about how the process itself reshapes the participants and the socio-political forms being produced. He differs from mainstream frontier theorists by giving due attention to the specificity of the demands of frontier social and natural environment. That is, newcomers must adapt and old inhabitants must borrow. For White, however, the middle ground could only be sustained when no one single side could claim superiority of force over another. When one side is able to apply coercive force to overwhelm the other, at considerable cost of course, the middle ground breaks down. White relates the breakdown of the middle ground to American's effort at territorial consolidation through coercion.<sup>41</sup> This is of course White's version of the story of Indian-white relations in the American frontier. This, however, also suggests that in explaining the breakdown of the middle ground, White may have replaced the process of frontier formation with that of state formation. State formation is often intertwined with the process of frontier formation. The story of state formation, however, is not necessarily simply about how the sea batters the rock. I will come back to this in the next section on state and state formation. White's middle ground concept provides us with sufficient ground to better appreciate what it means when we call a place a frontier.

### **Defining Frontier And Frontier Formation**

There are two ways to define a frontier. First, frontier is commonly referred to as the zone that marks the fringe of a political center (or the buffer zone between two political center without clear-cut political boundaries such as found in pre-colonial

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<sup>40</sup> *Europe And The People Without History*, pp 165-70.

<sup>41</sup> *The Middle Ground*.

Southeast Asia).<sup>42</sup> James Scott argues that hill-lands, wastelands and forests represent domains outside the control of the dominant lowland Southeast Asian states. Scott suggests that such 'out-of-the-way' places, as Anna Tsing terms them,<sup>43</sup> are essentially 'non-state' spaces.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, these out-of-the-way places have throughout the history of Southeast Asia been the destination of the peasantry's flight from political and economic oppression, typically when the polity, such as the kingdom, collapses. Flight, or voting with one's feet, is the ultimate weapon of the weak; and these out-of-way places have always been the preferred destination of flight.<sup>45</sup> If we look at the *dramatis persona* found running to these spaces through history, Scott tells us, we find bandits, petty traders, 'rebels', social outcasts, adventurers, poor peasants, and royal pretenders, essentially the 'stock cast of characters on any frontier'.<sup>46</sup> Scott's conceptualization of the frontier as 'non-state' space parallels what John Prescott defines as a primary settlement frontier, a zone that marks the *de facto* zonal limit of the state.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of the Central Highlands of present day Vietnam, pre-colonial maps did not delineate a western boundary on the Central Coast of Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> During the colonial period, administrative boundary of the Central Highlands was often redrawn but within the larger confines of French Indochina (encompassing present day Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). The creation of the map-based boundaries of the post-colonial Vietnamese state absorbed this former primary settlement frontier within the territorial confines of the lowland based political center. The border zone is now replaced with a strict boundary but this legal incorporation does not, however, mark an instantaneous transformation of the relationship between the hills and the plains. According to

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<sup>42</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History Of The Geo-body Of A Nation*, Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 1994, pp 62-80.

<sup>43</sup> *In The Realm Of The Diamond Queen*.

<sup>44</sup> James Scott, 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia...Or Why The State Is The Enemy Of People Who Move Around...Or...Why Civilizations Can't Climb Hills', paper delivered at the Development and the Nation-State Conference, Washington University, 2000; *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes To Improve The Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, pp 186-91.

<sup>45</sup> See James Scott, *Weapons Of The Weak: Everyday Forms Of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985; Michael Adas, 'From Avoidance To Confrontation: Peasant Protests In Pre-Colonial And Colonial Southeast Asia', *Comparative Studies In Society And History* 23, pp 217-47, 1981; Michael Adas, *Prophets Of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements Against The European Colonial Order*, Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1979.

<sup>46</sup> 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia'.

<sup>47</sup> John R.V. Prescott, *The Geography Of Frontiers And Boundaries*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1965, p 35.

<sup>48</sup> See the volume by Li Tana & Anthony Reid (eds.), *Southern Vietnam Under The Nguyen: Documents On The Economic History Of Cochinchina (Dang Trong), 1602-1777*, Singapore: Institute Of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

Prescott, this frontier now represents that peripheral, spatial zone, which he calls a 'secondary settlement frontier' that marks the limit to which the state is able to *effectively* extend its authority in its legally defined territory.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the political definition of frontier often gives it some kind of neat delimitation about the reach of a particular political center.

Second, we can also follow Edmund Leach's definition of frontier as *a zone where peoples and cultures, converge and 'interpenetrate in a dynamic manner'*.<sup>50</sup> This frontier does not correspond neatly with the political boundaries drawn to separate the jurisdiction domains between countries. This cultural definition of frontier emphasizes ambiguity amidst the cultural dynamism found on the frontier. Discussing such interactions on the zone bordering the highlands and the lowlands in the region of the Central Highlands of Vietnam, Li Tana argues that in the historical Kinh settlements and trading posts on the fringe of the uplands, 'just as the Vietnamese borrowed aspects of economic life from uplanders, they equally absorbed or adapted some of the latter's religious beliefs'.<sup>51</sup> She further argues that one of the most prolific revolts in the history of Vietnam, the Tay Son movement, was in fact a direct product of Vietnamese expansion into frontier territories and the resulting process of 'localization' – absorption and adaptation of cultures – on the frontier.<sup>52</sup>

I will also add to Leach's definition that the frontier is also the zone where economic interests converge and interpenetrate. For the Vietnamese, the Central Highlands has historically presented a wide array of resources in terms of minerals, forest resources, particularly timber, and agricultural land. Li notes a Vietnamese folk song from Quy Nhon, which probably reflects the traditional interaction between the uplands and lowlands in this area,

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<sup>49</sup> *The Geography Of Frontiers And Boundaries*, p 34.

<sup>50</sup> Edmund Leach, 'The Frontiers Of Burma', *Comparative Studies In Society And History* 1 (1), pp 49-68, 1960, p 50; see also Ainslie Embree, *Imagining India: Essays On Indian History*, Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p 68 cited from Stanley Tambiah, *Edmund Leach: An Anthropological Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp 138-9.

<sup>51</sup> *Nguyen Cochinchina*, p 125.

<sup>52</sup> *Nguyen Cochinchina*, pp 141-8; see also Vu Minh Giang, 'Tay Son thuong dao, can cu dau tien cua cuoc khoi nghia' [The Upper Trail Of Tay Son, Initial Bases Of The Uprising] in *Tay Son Nguyen Hue* [Nguyen Hue Of Tay Son] (Nghia Binh: Ty Van Hoa Va Thong Tin, 1978) pp 141-54. The concept of 'localization' is advanced by Oliver Wolters to explain how Southeast Asian civilizations borrowed foreign cultural and political practices but drained them of the original contents, which were then replaced with local ideas. See Oliver Wolters, *History, Region And Culture In Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982.

*Ai ve nhan voi dau nguon,  
Mang le gui xuong, ca chuan gui len*

whoever goes to see the uplanders please remind them,  
[if] forest products are brought down, sea products are carried up

(Translated by Li Tana)<sup>53</sup>

Long-standing fear of the highlands and deep forests, especially with regard to the deadly fevers, poisoned waters and much-feared ‘savages’, has traditionally acted as an obstacle, deterring the Vietnamese from settling in great numbers on the upland frontier.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, small groups of Kinh people, mainly traders, political refugees or social outcasts, settled in or traversed the frontier. In the process some inter-married with locals and picked up local languages and cultures.<sup>55</sup> As noted earlier, frontiers throughout history were often formed because of perceived resource abundance by the incoming parties.

Leach’s definition tells us that ambiguity is the key element that characterizes the nature of cultural interaction on the frontier. There is no reason to suggest that we can draw any neat delimitation about politics on the frontier. Conceptualizing the frontier or border zone as a ‘non-state’ space or the zonal limit of political authority lends imagination to a strict boundary where in fact it is ambiguity that characterizes the zone.<sup>56</sup> I suggest we understand frontier as a ‘thin state space’ and the political heartland as ‘thick state space’. The latter has less ambiguity in terms of according to whose rules the inhabitants need to live by. This understanding is predicated on an alternative understanding of the concept of the state, which I discuss later in this chapter. *In this thesis, I define the frontier as an ambiguous zone of political rendering, where peoples, cultures and economic interests converge and interpenetrate.*

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<sup>53</sup> *Nguyen Cochinchina*, p 123; see also Phan Dai Doan, ‘Ap Tay Son Nhi’ [Hamlet Tay Son II] in *Tren Dat Nghia Binh* [On The Land Of Nghia Binh] edited by Phan Huy Le et al (Qui Nhon: So Van Hoa va Thong Tin Nghia Binh, 1988), p 27; Dang Nghiem Van & Luu Hung, *Nhung dieu can biet khi len Truong Son Tay Nguyen* [Things To Know When Going To Western Plateau-Long Mountains], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1988, p 15.

<sup>54</sup> *Shattered World*, p xiv.

<sup>55</sup> See for example the discussion in Nguyen Kinh Chi & Nguyen Dong Chi, *Moi Kontum*, Hue, 1937, pp 5-20.

<sup>56</sup> See for example, Li Tania Murray’s argument for a more relational approach to understand the constantly shifting relations between lowland states and highland societies in Indonesia. Li Tania Murray, ‘Relational Histories And The Production Of Difference On Sulawesi’s Upland Frontier’, *Journal Of Asian Studies* 60 (1), pp 41-66, 2001.

Based on my definition of frontier, *I propose understanding frontier formation as the process when newcomers begin settling in this zone of ambiguity located outside their traditional heartland, creating a zone of intensified convergence and interpenetration of peoples (newcomers and old inhabitants), cultures and economic interests.* On one hand, because this is a zone where cultures and interests interpenetrate, we could expect to encounter adaptations by the newcomers, *comprising both 'state' and settlers,* to the frontier environment. On the other hand, we will also find that the frontier environment is drastically transformed by the newcomers when bringing in aspects of life they are previously familiar with. For the old inhabitants, they will encounter competition, in terms of resource use, with the newcomers. At the same time, some of them may also benefit from the new technologies and other resources that are traditionally in shortage on the frontier (such as salt for the Central Highlanders of Vietnam) brought along by the newcomers. This definition does not in anyway suggests that the frontier is a conflict-free zone. It is at once destructive and creative, violent and accommodating. Attempts to intensify political control on the frontier are better understood as state formation on the frontier. I discuss this below.

## STATE AND STATE FORMATION

### Problematizing The 'State'

#### *State*

James Scott argues that certain schemes of the state aimed at 'improving' the human condition is more concerned with spreading a grid of control over the population. In order to achieve this grid of control, the state attempts to simplify the messy local ways of doing things, which he calls the '*metis*', into a standardized and legible format that is conducive to state control.<sup>57</sup> In her perceptive and critical review of James Scott's *Seeing Like A State*, Li Tania Murray argues that Scott's account,

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<sup>57</sup> *Seeing Like A State.*

posits an 'up there' all-seeing state operating as a preformed repository of power spreading progressively and unproblematically across national terrain, colonizing nonstate spaces and their unruly inhabitants.<sup>58</sup>

This perception of the state as a 'finished entity' has conventional and popular currency in the political science literature, found in the statist approach<sup>59</sup> or state-society relations approach.<sup>60</sup> In the case of Vietnam, Benedict Kerkvliet outlines two common approaches, namely the 'dominant state' and 'mobilizational corporatism' that have been used to analyze Vietnamese state-society relations.<sup>61</sup> He suggests that both approaches fail to sufficiently take into account what peasants did outside official channels of politics, in other words, the power of everyday politics, that could substantially engaged the state to modify its policies.<sup>62</sup> Kerkvliet and others advocate a dialogical analytic of state-society relations where

social forces and groups beyond the state can contribute to shifts in policies...[and] authorities can adjust and change policies in the face of realities beyond their control.<sup>63</sup>

However, all three approaches share a similarity with Scott in almost presuming the state as a finished entity and creating the binary of state-society oppositions engaged in

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<sup>58</sup> Li Tania Murray, 'Beyond The State And Failed Schemes', *American Anthropologist* 107 (3), pp 383-94, 2005, p 384.

<sup>59</sup> See for example, Alfred Stepan, *The State And Society: Peru In Comparative Perspective*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978; Theda Skocpol, 'Bringing The State Back In' in *Bringing The State Back In* edited by Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Reuschmeyer & Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>60</sup> See for example, Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli & Vivienne Shue (eds.), *State Power And Social Forces: Domination And Transformation In The Third World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>61</sup> For the 'dominant state' approach, consult Brantly Womack, 'Reform In Vietnam: Backwards Towards The Future', *Government And Opposition* 27, pp 177-89, 1992; Carlyle Thayer, 'Political Reform In Vietnam: Doi Moi And The Emergence Of Civil Society' in *The Development Of Civil Society In Communist Systems* edited by Robert F. Miller (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics Of Bureaucratic Socialism*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993. For the 'mobilizational corporatism' approach, consult William Turley, 'Party, State And People: Political Structure And Economic Prospects' in *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism* edited by William Turley & Mark Selden (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1993); William Turley, 'Political Renovation In Vietnam: Renewal And Adaptation' in *The Challenge Of Reform In Indochina* edited by Borje Ljunggren (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Institute For International Development, 1993); Yeonsik Jeong, 'The Rise Of State Corporatism In Vietnam', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 19, pp 152-71, 1997; Jonathan Stromseth, 'Reform And Response In Vietnam: State-society Relations And The Changing Political Economy', Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1998.

<sup>62</sup> Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power Of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2005, pp 33-36.

<sup>63</sup> *The Power Of Everyday Politics*, p 36; see also the volume edited by Hy Van Luong, *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics Of A Transforming Society*.

an eternal struggle, or as they prefer, a dialogical relation.<sup>64</sup> My only concern is that 'dialogue' creates a binary of two sides, for example state and society. There are exchanges of ideas, attempts to understand each other, agreements and disagreements, and acceptance and rejection of alternatives. There is, however, a tendency to think of the outcome as a result of one side being the more persuasive or more 'powerful' party. Thus, the division of binary is perpetuated and we begin looking for 'winners' and 'losers' in the story. The broader outcome, however, can be more hybrid or recombinant than suggested by the binary formula.

### *Government*

The conventional conception of the state, as outlined above, is connected to the notion of 'government' that speaks of how this sovereign body (the state) with a claim to monopoly of territorial rule and use of force carry out acts of rule and administration through the formalized institutions of the bureaucracy.<sup>65</sup> Dean Mitchell and Barry Hindess point out an earlier notion of government in fact covers a broader ground, which 'invokes an understanding of government as a pervasive, complex and heterogeneous enterprise' that 'intrudes all aspects of life' and does not necessarily emanate from a 'single controlling center' such as the state.<sup>66</sup> The tension between the two notions of 'government' is such that the specific notion is concerned with acts of domination over the population it claims to rule, while the broader notion examines the multiplicity of relations at play in shaping the conduct of people, both 'rulers and ruled'.<sup>67</sup> The conventional conception of the state creates a bounded, self-contained entity that is somehow already fully formed and it draws lines of absolutism, as to where the state domination ends and societal autonomy begins. It cannot account for the element of ambiguity highlighted on the frontier. The lines drawn by this understanding effectively create the analytical binaries of state versus society, domination and subordination, and domination versus resistance.

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<sup>64</sup> *The Power Of Everyday Politics*; see also, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Everyday Politics In The Philippines: Class And Status Relations In A Central Luzon Village*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power And Rule In Modern Society*, London: Sage, 1999, pp 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> Mitchell Dean & Barry Hindess, 'Introduction: Government, Liberalism And Society' in *Governing Australia: Studies In Contemporary Rationalities Of Government* edited by Mitchell Dean & Barry Hindess (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp 1-3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



## *Power*

The conventional perception of the state, I suggest, is sustained by a discourse of power as a quantitative capacity, which is seen as undesirable and should be replaced by a normative practice of power as legitimate right. Li Tania Murray suggests that Scott's perception of the state, and I would include scholars in the 'statist' and 'state-society' schools as well, is 'associated with an image of power as thing'.<sup>68</sup> In other words, power is perceived as a quantitative capacity, *a la* Hobbes, being

a remarkably heterogeneous set of attributes which appear to have in common the fact that they may be useful to their possessor in pursuit of at least some of his or her purposes.<sup>69</sup>

Let me begin this discussion by giving an example. Scott argues that certain grand schemes of the state (he does not refer to all projects of the state) to improve the human condition (which he really means to control the population) failed because these schemes ignored the *metis* (local knowledge and ways of doing things) and sought to replace the *metis* with a high modernist grid of control characterized by elements of simplification for the purpose of legibility. Scott suggests that swidden agriculture system is illegible to attempts of state control because swiddens are cultivated on a temporary basis and are scattered across the forested landscape, and the system is organized through an exclusive social organizational form described in Chapter Two. Simplifying the system into sedentarized, grid-like, standardized forms of wet-rice or plantation systems are therefore more legible to state control.<sup>70</sup>

This despotic use of power by the modern state essentially reflects a perception of power as quantitative capacity. Scott tells us that usage of this kind of power to enhance state control often fails for two reasons. One, state power can effect changes but inability to take into account the *metis*, which had developed after long periods of trials and errors, could not immediately overcome natural obstacles such as posed by the ecology and therefore the grand scheme could not be effectively sustained. Instead of improvement to life, the well-being of the population actually deteriorates but political

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<sup>68</sup> 'Beyond The State And Failed Schemes', p 385.

<sup>69</sup> Barry Hindess, *Discourses Of Power: From Hobbes To Foucault*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Seeing Like A State*, pp 186-91; see also 'Hill And Valley In Southeast Asia'.

control by the state is greatly enhanced. Two, state power often encounters resistance in various forms from the ground, which sabotaged the grand scheme sufficiently to make it ineffective, thus both sides, state and society suffer damages because of such willful use of power by one side.<sup>71</sup> Scott's thesis suggests that state formation should take into account the local way of doing things rather than rely on a 'high modernist' scheme of political control. *Metises* should be retained and no overriding power should be imposed on the people without their consent. What he is normatively promoting here is similar to the classical argument for the need to replace this use of power as quantitative capacity with a conception of power as legitimate right, that is the free will consent of those being governed.

The perception of power as a quantitative capacity is problematic for several reasons. First, it suggests that power travels across space unadulterated. Attempts to effect changes only fail because of resistance or obstacles. The form and content of the envisioned transformation are immutable. We only need to explain what are these obstacles and modes of resistance. The analysis ultimately results in the winner-loser formula. Second, this perception places political relations within the context of the narrow understanding of government, as a perpetual struggle between one and the other, good and evil, and assumes that the problem will only be solved when this form of power relations is replaced by another form, power as legitimate right.

The discourse of power as legitimate right seemingly provides the solution for a more accountable relationship between the political center and society in general, without seeking recourse to the broader definition of government identified above. As such, Scott's normative position is to be applauded, but this alternate discourse of power is problematic as well. Barry Hindess notes that it assumes the achievement of an ideal social order that is based on the free will consent of autonomous subjects. He argues that even the classical proponent of this discourse, John Locke, who cogently argued for this notion of political power through his *Two Treatise Of Government*, problematized this discourse in his other work, *An Essay Concerning Human*

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<sup>71</sup> *Seeing Like A State*, pp 186-91.

*Understanding*.<sup>72</sup> According to Hindess, Locke acknowledged that not all individuals are imbued with the rational use of reason. Human subjects are more ‘creatures of their habits rather than of an essential human nature’ of which the latter infers the use of rational reason is a given.<sup>73</sup> This suggests that all humans may not possess the rational attributes for the construction of a political compact to seek the greater good. Thus, individuals should be subjected to a paternal form of guidance, for the short term, to help develop the appropriate use of reason. In other words, their conduct and conception of conduct could be modified.

Hindess neatly sums up the fundamental problem of the discourse of power as legitimate right identified by Locke himself,

[w]hat Locke presents in the *Essay* then is a model of the human individual as governed by habits of thoughts and behavior. He provides a straightforward account of the causes of those habits of thought and behavior which might be regarded as undesirable: namely, that they are the result of poor education or bad company. The model also suggests a range of mechanisms that might be employed both in the regulation of behavior and in the formation of individuals whose habits are such that they can normally be relied upon to regulate themselves. In other writings, Locke developed proposals for education and training, and for programs aimed at developing mental habits appropriate to the proper conduct of the understanding.<sup>74</sup>

In other words, even the discourse of power as legitimate right cannot ignore the broader notion of government that is concerned with the general conduct of people, both rulers and ruled. Power as legitimate right also similarly falls into the same problem of power as a capacity when it assumes that power when enacted, through the consent of free will people, can travel unadulterated.

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<sup>72</sup> See the following, John Locke, *Two Treatises Of Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 (Original publication 1689) and John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957 (Original publication 1689).

<sup>73</sup> *Discourses Of Power*, p 77.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p 79.

In contrast, Foucault suggests that power can be found everywhere and is available to everyone. Hindess rephrases Foucault's understanding of power in more accessible prose as such,

[p]ower, as Foucault presents it, is the total structure of actions bearing on the actions of individuals who are free; that is whose own behavior is not wholly determined by physical constraints. Power is exercised over those who are in a position to choose, and it aims to influence what their choices will be.<sup>75</sup>

In other words, power relationships are always unstable, often subjected to manipulation, resistance, or even evasion of the subjects. Such acts then reverberate in modification or reshaping of the way power is being exercised. Thus, things are never totally one-sided even in the most asymmetrical of power relationship. The victim of this uneven relationship, according to Foucault, can still exercise power by 'committing suicide'.<sup>76</sup>

### *Multiple Modes Of Ordering*

There is some similarity between this notion of power relations and Barrington Moore's study about the social bases of obedience and revolt.<sup>77</sup> Moore alerts us that relations of domination and subordination consist of more than the capacity of one group (the 'dominant group') to make another group (the subordinate group) submit to their demands. According to Moore, such relations are very much maintained by a set of moral obligations to guide the behavior and decision calculus of either group. In other words, in between the acts of domination and acts of subordination, there exists at least a plane of interaction where both sides assess the performance of each other. James Scott further problematizes the relation of domination and subordination by convincingly relating to us stories of everyday resistances through weapons of the weak and illustrating to us that beneath the layer of subordination, there are hidden transcripts

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp 99-100; see also Michel Foucault, 'The Subject And Power' in *Power: Essential Works Of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3* (London, Penguin Books, 1994. Edited by James D. Faubion).

<sup>76</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic Of Care For The Self As A Practice Of Freedom' in *The Final Foucault* edited by J. Bernauer & D. Rasmussen (Boston, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p 12 cited from *Discourses Of Power*, p 103.

<sup>77</sup> *Injustice: The Social Bases Of Obedience And Revolt*.

of dissatisfaction with the status quo of relations and notions of justice and injustice.<sup>78</sup> William Roseberry proposes that hegemony 'should not be seen as a finished and monolithic ideological formation but as a problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle'.<sup>79</sup> In similar but different ways, Scott and Moore tell us that domination must be negotiated and maintained by adhering to acts of moral obligation.

Relations of domination and subordination are essentially processes of ordering. I understand 'ordering' as the way in which things are being done and behavior being conducted. If we map out the dynamics of the relations of domination and subordination as illuminated by Scott and Moore, we see at least three different layers of ordering happening at the same time. On one layer, we see a 'pure' layer of domination and subordination. On another layer, we see recurring acts of resistance and vice versa, recurring acts of restraint. On yet another layer, we see notions of mutual moral obligations at play, as 'dominator' and 'subordinate' alike are equally entitled to evaluate the performance of either party. Although Moore and Scott may not have meant to perceive things as such, relations of domination and resistance are essentially a composite of multiple layers of social orderings.

Picking up from where Moore and Scott leave off, I would like to take a risk to venture a bit further and propose that we live in a world of multiple social orderings. I propose that beyond orderings of domination and subordination, there are other orderings such as adaptation to ecological environment, strategies of subsistence, cosmological beliefs and other social customary practices at play in guiding decisions and behavior in our everyday life. Even Moore submits that when we talk about authority, there are multiple modes of authorities such as found in family relations and employer-employee relations that are at play in our everyday life, apart from political relations of the ruler and ruled, and the dominant and subordinate classes.<sup>80</sup> In a rather different way, Foucault perceives these different 'authority relations', whether they are found in the political sphere of state regulation or in the social spheres of non-state

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<sup>78</sup> See James Scott's *Weapons Of The Weak* and James Scott, *Domination And The Arts Of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

<sup>79</sup> See William Roseberry, 'Hegemony and the Language of Contention' in *Everyday Forms Of State Formation: Revolution And The Negotiation Of Rule In Modern Mexico* edited by Gilbert M. Joseph & Daniel Nugent (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994); Jay O'Brien & William Roseberry, 'Introduction' in *Golden Ages, Dark Ages: Imagining The Past In Anthropology And History* edited by Jay O'Brien & William Roseberry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> *Injustice: The Social Bases Of Obedience And Revolt*, pp 23-24.

agencies and social institutions, as essentially the points of references in conducting our 'conduct'. This conduct of 'conduct', or governmentality, as Foucault terms it, shapes the behavior and decision-making calculus of everyone, both those in positions of rule and those not.<sup>81</sup> In other words, government, in the Foucauldian sense is not an 'obsession' with mere relations of domination and subordination. And government of behavior is performed by both 'state' and 'non-state' agencies. Thus, Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller suggest that there is 'political power beyond the state'.<sup>82</sup>

At this point I find it useful to make a quick reference to John Law's notion of 'multiple modes of ordering' in order to illustrate the many points of references that shape our conduct.<sup>83</sup> Law argues that our world is underlay by processes of orderings rather than a ready-made order. There are in fact, multiple *modes of ordering* at play at the same time. He argues that *modes of ordering* are, on the one hand narrative 'ways of telling about the world... They tell of what used to be, or what ought to happen'; and on the other hand, materially 'performed or embodied in a concrete, non-verbal manner in a network'.<sup>84</sup> Law further argues that actors are often involved in multiple networks at one single time, and have different 'identities' or roles arising from the different overlapping sets of orderings in which they are involved. In his ethnography of the Daresbury Laboratory, Law shows how multiple modes of ordering are at play at the same time. He identifies a mode of ordering of 'enterprise' as the most significant mode of ordering at play alongside three other modes of ordering of 'vocation', 'administration' and 'vision', which shape the organization and practice of laboratory science. To further illustrate this notion of multiple modes of ordering, we may briefly examine the interplay among law, customs and practice. The law, such as devised by the state, as most would agree, stands as the most 'prominent' legal mechanism regulating our behavior; yet most would also agree that the law does not necessarily

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<sup>81</sup> Colin Gordon, 'Government Rationality: An Introduction' in *The Foucault Effect: Studies In Governmentality* edited by Graham Burcell, Peter Miller & Colin Gordon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality' in *The Foucault Effect*.

<sup>82</sup> Nikolas Rose & Peter Miller, 'Political Power Beyond The State: Problematics Of Government', *The British Journal Of Sociology* 43 (2), pp 173-205, 1992; Nikolas Rose & Peter Miller, 'Political Thought And The Limits Of Orthodoxy: A Response To Curtis', *The British Journal Of Sociology* 46 (3), pp 590-7, 1995.

<sup>83</sup> John Law, *Organizing Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

<sup>84</sup> *Organizing Modernity*, p 20 cited from Sarah Whatmore & Lorraine Thorne, 'Nourishing Networks: Alternative Geographies Of Food' in *Globalising Food: Agrarian Questions And Global Restructuring* edited by Michael J. Watts & David Goodman (London: Routledge, 1997), p 294.

govern every single aspect of our behavior nor do we adhere to every aspect that is govern by the law. In his study of traditional England, Edward P. Thompson states,

the Law may punctuate the limits tolerated by the rulers; it does not, in eighteenth century England, enter into cottages, find mention in the widow's prayers, decorate the wall with icons, or inform a view of life.<sup>85</sup>

People's behavior or practices, especially in rural societies, are often governed by vague and highly contested notions of customs. Again, referring to Thompson, custom is essentially the interface between law and practice.<sup>86</sup> To be sure, neither do people practice their everyday life according to customs of their locality per se.

### *Government...Reprise*

The alternate understanding of power proposed by Foucault and the broader definition of government discussed earlier suggest that rulers (for example, the state) are not simply concerned with attempts to dominate. Nikolas Rose rephrases Foucault's understanding and suggests that domination as a particular modality of power is 'to ignore or to attempt to crush the capacity for action of the dominated'. Rather, rulers are often concerned with attempts to 'govern'. In accordance to the broader notion of government outlined earlier, to govern is to essentially 'recognize that capacity for action and to adjust oneself to it'.<sup>87</sup> Foucault's own work also suggests that to secure the well-being, in terms of health, wealth and happiness, of the population through detailed regulation of their behavior is essentially the tasks of the rulers.<sup>88</sup> He calls this intimate involvement to govern the behavior of the population rather than simply maintaining subservience to a 'prince', the 'governmentalization' of the state.<sup>89</sup> The imperative for maintaining the well-being of the ruled is in fact a primary responsibility expected of traditional Vietnamese kings, and perhaps political leadership in Southeast Asia in general. Alexander Woodside lists three distinct qualities of kingship in pre-colonial Vietnam. The Vietnamese king is expected to 'resist political domination of the

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<sup>85</sup> Edward P. Thompson, *Customs In Common*, New York: The New Press, 1993, p 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p 97.

<sup>87</sup> Nikolas Rose, *Powers Of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p 4.

<sup>88</sup> *Discourses Of Power*, p 118.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, pp 108-9.

Chinese' to the north; 'preserve the people's livelihood and well-being; and 'introduce and domesticate Chinese culture'.<sup>90</sup> To secure the well-being of the ruled is often the basic dominator of what it means to fulfill the 'moral bases of obedience'. As much as the conduct of the ruled is being conducted by the rulers, the rulers' conduct is in turn reshaped by this attempt to conduct their conduct.

### *Power Reprise...Translation*

The exercise of power does not entail a faithful reproduction of the intended effect as found in the earlier conceptions of power as capacity and right. Bruno Latour's notion of a *diffusion* model of power, which he criticizes, illustrates the way power is exercised in these earlier conceptions. In this model, a particular ordering is endowed with an inner force similar to that of inertia in physics. Following the inertia principle, when a certain force is applied, this order will move and do so in the same direction as long as the momentum is not interrupted. In this model, explanation is only required to explain two things: the initial force that triggers the movement, and the resistance against that force.<sup>91</sup> Yet, as John Allen reminds us, such a conception of power does not adequately explain that spatial void of what happens in between at the center of power and the targeted locality, how that power is spread across time and space.<sup>92</sup>

Latour offers an alternative model that approximates how Foucault's conception of power and the broader notion of government may be played out. Latour shows how in the *translation* model, the spread in time and space of a certain objective is in the hands of different actors, each of who plays a different role to make it move. Displacement is not caused by the initial force alone; each actor has to contribute a certain force or energy to keep it going. Each actor must be persuaded that it is worth his/her while to perform the act, either by fear or by consent, to keep the momentum of that objective going.<sup>93</sup> Barry Hindess similarly suggests that in political theory, interests

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<sup>90</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam And The Chinese Model: A Comparative Study Of Vietnamese And Chinese Government In The First Half Of The Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971 (1988 edition), p 12.

<sup>91</sup> Bruno Latour, 'The Powers of Association' in *Power, Action And Belief: A New Sociology Of Knowledge?* edited by John Law (London, Boston & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

<sup>92</sup> John Allen, 'Spatial Assemblages Of Power' in *Human Geography Today* edited by Doreen Massey, John Allen & P. Sarre (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p 198. This spatial problematic of power is further elaborated in John Allen, *Lost Geographies Of Power*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

<sup>93</sup> 'The Powers Of Association'.



only have ‘consequences’ when ‘they provide actors with reasons for action’.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, as noted earlier, each actor’s conduct is shaped by multiple modes of ordering. Thus, each actor along the way may sabotage, enhance or modify the way the objective is being performed. Each actor shapes the outcome in a different way and thus, the order transforms as it moves along the network of space and time. Indeed, it is a rarity for the faithful transmission of an objective from start to end.<sup>95</sup>

In their critique of James Scott’s *Seeing Like A State*, Li Tania Murray and Michael Herzfeld identify how agents of the state on the ground actually adapt to local conditions rather than faithfully reproduce the high modernist state schemes.<sup>96</sup> Li shows how instead of singular attempts to replace local ways of doing things, there are conjunctures when local knowledge and practices are sustained and embraced by both planners and field officials. She identifies four such conjunctures. First, she notes that sometimes systematic data, or the ingredients of grand projects of state control, may be jettisoned in favor of local knowledge when extending the central administrative networks. Second, the purpose of state intervention sometimes could simply just aim at modifying local practices, to achieve a confluence between local and central modes of governing conduct. Others have identified this particular practice as certain ‘invention of tradition’.<sup>97</sup> Third, tacit sanction of local knowledge by officials sometimes serves to sustain the state scheme. In other words, beneath the façade of effective operation of the state scheme we may find that it is actually the continual operation of local *metis* which makes things work. Finally, there are times when officials recognize that local ways of doing things are in fact more efficient than state designs.<sup>98</sup> Herzfeld argues that ‘the state cannot function, even on its own terms, in the absence of the socially embedded practical knowledge that the high-modernist project so disparages’.<sup>99</sup> He suggests that government officials have their own *metis*. Some officials, in order to successfully implement the policies from higher echelons, modified it to make it work; and others

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<sup>94</sup> Barry Hindess, ‘Interests In Political Analysis’ in *Power, Action And Belief*, p 112.

<sup>95</sup> Latour’s concept of translation and related ideas are discussed and illustrated in Bruno Latour, *Science In Action: How To Follow Scientists And Engineers Through Society*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987; *Aramis Or The Love Of Technology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. Translated by Catherine Porter.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Beyond The State And Failed Schemes’; Michael Herzfeld, ‘Political Optics And The Occlusion Of Intimate Knowledge’, *American Anthropologist* 107 (3), pp 369-76, 2005.

<sup>97</sup> See the volume Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention Of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Beyond The State And Failed Schemes’, pp 388-90.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Political Optics And The Occlusion Of Intimate Knowledge’, p 372.

manipulate it for selfish ends.<sup>100</sup> I suggest that these adaptations by local agents of the state actually approximate what can be seen as moments of translation identified in Latour's alternative model of exercise of power. Nikolas Rose, applying the concept of translation from Latour, suggests that

in the dynamics of translation, alignments are forged between the objectives of authorities wishing to govern and the personal projects of those organizations, groups and individuals who are the subjects of government.<sup>101</sup>

The exercise of power very seldom reproduces the form of conduct envisioned by the 'ruler' (state).

...

I have proposed in this section a broader conception of government that underlies my understanding of the 'state; an alternative understanding of power; and the multiplicity of social relations at play that govern our conduct. These alternative understandings suggest that we may perhaps proceed to develop a different conceptualization of the state and state formation.

### **Defining State And State Formation**

My extended discussion above suggests that when talking about the state, we are referring to that assemblage of institutions we call 'government', judiciary and military. This assemblage of institutions, which I call a political center, also has a broad structural existence of agencies across the territory and manifested by means of how we live, talk, eat and walk. Timothy Mitchell proposes that we treat the state not as an actual structure, 'but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist', and thus, 'the nation state is arguably the paramount structural effect of the modern social world'.<sup>102</sup> This 'structural effect' as Mitchell

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> *Powers Of Freedom*, p 48.

<sup>102</sup> Timothy Mitchell, 'The Limits Of The State: Beyond Statist Approaches And Their Critics', *American Political Science Review* 85 (1), pp 77-96, 1991, p 194; see also, Timothy Mitchell, 'Society, Economy And The State Effect' in *State/Culture: State Formation After The Cultural Turn* edited by George Steinmetz (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

proposes, or ‘image’ of the state as Joel Migdal puts it,<sup>103</sup> is operated by the assemblage of institutions; and sustained by putting into circulation certain rules and practices of conduct among the population. Thus, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer note,

[s]tates state the arcane rituals of a court of law, the formulae of royal assent to an Act of Parliament, visits of school inspectors, are all statements. They define, in great detail, acceptable forms and images of social life. In this sense ‘the State’ never stops talking...Out of the vast range of human social capacities – possible ways in which social life could be lived – state activities more or less forcibly ‘encourage’ some whilst suppressing, marginalizing, eroding, undermining others...Certain forms of activity are given the official seal of approval, others are situated beyond the pale. This has cumulative, and enormous, cultural consequences; consequences for how people identify...themselves and their ‘place’ in the world.<sup>104</sup>

Although the physical presence of the governing institutions, such as military units, administrative units and even schools tells of the existence of the state, it is only manifestly sustained when people talk, abide and live it out. The state, according to Derek Sayer, ‘lives in and through its subjects...’.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps the same thing could be said of virtually every institution or even religion in the world. In this sense, the state is not something special. But it is something that affects everyone living within the sovereign territory claimed by the state.

I broadly agree with this understanding of the state such as proposed by Timothy Mitchell, Joel Migdal, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer. I do have one reservation in that if the state is to live through the people whom it lays claims to, then it is rather unthinkable that it can produce the singular effect of the state that they infer to. Instead, each individual or group of people probably has a different image, or experience a different ‘structural effect’, of the state. My earlier discussion of the translation model of power suggests that the political center envisions a certain effect, but the effect that is

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<sup>103</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *State In Society: Studying How States And Societies Transform And Constitute One Another*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp 15-7.

<sup>104</sup> Philip Corrigan & Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation As Cultural Revolution*, Oxford, U.K. & New York, U.S.: Blackwell, 1985, pp 3-4.

<sup>105</sup> Derek Sayer, ‘Everyday Forms Of State Formation: Some Dissident Remarks On “Hegemony”’ in *Everyday Forms Of State Formation*, p 377.

continually being reproduced is often adulterated, transformed, and reshaped at different nodes. This is because people's behavior is governed by multiple modes of ordering. The resultant state that is actually lived out by people is more like a piece of hedge work, or at best a recombinant effect, which has a fuzzy image but a clear overarching presence. Thus, when I talk about the effect of the state, I do not infer to any sort of singular effect, as much as the political center would like to produce, that is being lived out by the people. Apart from this one reservation, I agree with the conceptualization discussed by the authors above and as such, I propose understanding *the state as an abstract overarching political entity that claims control of conduct of the population within its sphere of influence.*

The discussions on border zones and political frontier, both in Chapter Two and this chapter, suggest that on the margins of the state, one need not necessarily adhere, on the everyday basis, to the rules, identification and customary practices within the political heartland where one comes from. Here, the state effect is thin because people do not necessarily live it out as prescribed. Yet, we can equally suggest, as Philip Taylor does, the margins of the state could also be easily found right in localities of the political center such as in the religious realm, where people's beliefs and religious practices effectively function according to a different mode of ordering than that determined by the state, in spite of the state's overarching claims.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, mafia, secret societies, business corporations or even the family clan in the urban centers effectively parallel the ordering that sustains the effect of the state. The main difference, I suggest, is that within the heartland spaces alternate modes of social orderings form shadow effects to the state. On the highlands frontier, the state could only at best 'radiate its influence' during the pre-colonial era.<sup>107</sup> Instead of the shadow effect we find in the political heartland, we find multiple modes of political and social orderings loosely at play. As boundaries are arbitrarily drawn with the creation of the post-colonial state, frontiers are located within its territorial boundaries. Following Andrew Walker, I prefer to see post-colonial attempts of political integration as intensified efforts to broaden already existing linkages between the frontier and the heartland rather

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<sup>106</sup> Philip Taylor, *Goddess On The Rise: Pilgrimage And Popular Religion In Vietnam*, Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2004, pp 23-56. On similarly nuanced conception of the margins of the state, see the collection of papers in Veena Das & Deborah Poole (eds.), *Anthropology In The Margins Of The State*, Santa Fe: School Of American Research Press, 2004.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Walker, *The Legend Of The Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade And Traders In The Borderlands Of Laos, Thailand, China And Burma*, Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 1999, pp 6-7.

than as some form of penetration in order to effectively prop-up the effect of the state.<sup>108</sup>

The above-proposed conception of the state suggests that it is not an already established phenomenon or an *a priori* finished entity. The state is always in the making. Thus said, we need to examine *the process in which the effect of the state is created and sustained, both in the abstract and empirical sense, through its various agencies and by constructing a particular mode of social ordering among the population it lays claim on; or in short, the process of state formation.* Referring to Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer's influential study on the formation of the English state,<sup>109</sup> Joseph and Nugent remind us of this important process,

[r]ather than dwell on the traditional preoccupations of some social scientists, such as 'nation building' (the project of certain modernizing elites) or the origins of some apparatus of power routinely called 'the state' ...Corrigan and Sayer reconstruct for England a centuries-long cultural process, which was embodied in the forms, routines, rituals, and discourses of rule.<sup>110</sup>

By not privileging the state as an already established phenomenon, we need to begin to ask 'not who rules but how is rule accomplished' in the first place.<sup>111</sup> Corrigan and Sayer critically examine how state formation should be seen as a process rather than treat the 'state' as an *a priori* formed entity. However, they fail to take into account that the 'state' is also bound by the moral imperative found in power relations between the ruler and the ruled that I discussed earlier. Rulers are often obligated to see to the general well-being of the ruled, but not all rulers place that as a priority. In the process, the state form could be reshaped.

Following George Steinmetz et al<sup>112</sup> and Tony Day<sup>113</sup>, I suggest that *the state itself is also an object of transformation. I see state formation as a dynamic process of*

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, pp 6-7.

<sup>109</sup> *The Great Arch*.

<sup>110</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph & Daniel Nugent, 'Popular Culture And State Formation In Revolutionary Mexico' in *Everyday Forms Of State Formation*, p 20.

<sup>111</sup> Philip Corrigan, 'State Formation' in *Everyday Forms Of State Formation*, p xvii.

<sup>112</sup> George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State Formation After The Cultural Turn*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

*recombination with different layers and groups of society, or extra-society influences.* I use the term recombination as referring to a form hedging when diverse ideas or practices are redefined and recombined to produce a hybrid or even something possibly new.<sup>114</sup> Through theories of Indianization and localization in the cultural and political spheres of Southeast Asia, we learnt that early Southeast Asian states were known to be susceptible to the recombination of foreign ideas (from Indian subcontinent and China) and local beliefs.<sup>115</sup> The 'state' is also susceptible to transformation in form and content. There is no reason to think that this element of metamorphosis found in the states of the pre-colonial period is lost with the coming of colonialism and the process of decolonization. Creation of strict cartographic boundaries effectively compartmentalized geographic territory into individual nation-states. The colonial state introduced new instruments of government and disciplines, from identification documents, telecommunication networks, police, prisons, commodity monopolies, etc to produce the structural effect of the post-colonial state. Decolonization in no way translates into an instantaneous existence and complete formation of the post-colonial 'state'. The state effect, that is of the post-colonial state, still need to be established and continuously maintained. One important caveat, therefore, is that if the state is to 'live' through the very people it lays claims to, then it is also possible that the state is subjected to malleability in form and content while attempting to maintain its overall effect.

## CONCLUSION: STATE FORMATION ON THE FRONTIER

The post-colonial Vietnamese state in Southeast Asia almost immediately has to grapple with the question of state formation in the hills upon decolonization. Integrating this frontier essentially requires a remaking of the relationship between the hills and plains. The hills can no longer be perceived or treated as a cultural or political border zone. State formation on the frontier in the Central Highlands entails reconfiguring the

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<sup>113</sup> Tony Day, *Fluid Iron: State Formation In Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.

<sup>114</sup> For a particular take on the idea of recombination, see David Stark, 'Recombinant Property In East European Capitalism', *The American Journal Of Sociology* 101 (4), pp 993-1027, 1996.

<sup>115</sup> See for example the classic texts on early Southeast Asia, George Coedes, *The Indianized States Of Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: East West Center, 1968. Edited by W.F. Vella. Translated by S.B.Cowing; and Oliver Wolter's *History, Region And Culture In Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Coedes's theory of Indianization is now much rejected by most scholars in favor of Wolter's localization theory.

practices of everyday life among the highlanders, from what were previously centered on the village or the clan to one that makes references to the overarching claims of the state. Thus, swidden agriculture could no longer be simply based on the cosmological harmony between the worlds of the spirits and the villagers, but must instead take into account the state as an institutional patron. Alternatively, swidden could be replaced by a relatively more technological advanced and socially more sophisticated agricultural system. Analogously, a complex political structure, such as found in the lowlands, begins to take shape. Breaking through the barrier of the hills as border zone also requires implanting the process of frontier formation. Frontier peasants, after all, often serve as the 'territorial spearheads' of the state. By putting effort into making the land productive, peasants lay territorial claims on the land. They eventually enter into a pact with the state, where they submit to the state's political claims in return for its provision of security and regulation. Rodolphe De Koninck conceptualizes this relation between frontier peasants and state as a 'territorial compromise'.<sup>116</sup> The arrival of settlers and policies targeted at transforming the highlanders into citizens meant the extension of a central administrative structure on the frontier. Hence, land could no longer be dictated by communal based land regimes. Instead, a national land regime defined by a legal framework, comes into play.

What I am describing above is essentially an intertwined process of state formation and frontier formation, which I have been referring to earlier as state formation on the frontier. Theoretically speaking then, state formation on the frontier is a dynamic process. My proposed conceptualization of frontier formation suggests that although the newcomers greatly transformed the frontier, it probably does not necessarily lead to a faithful replication of the heartland domain. Being in the frontier demands a certain element of adaptation and creativity because here cultures, peoples and interests interpenetrate. If state formation is, theoretically speaking, also a mutable process, then state formation on the frontier cannot simply be perceived as an immutable diffusion effect. When De Koninck theorizes that relations between frontier peasants and state involve a certain exchange of obligations, which he terms a territorial compromise, he does not exclude a possible similar exchange between the old inhabitants and the state. The point to bring home here is that he recognizes that state

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<sup>116</sup> Rodolphe De Koninck, 'The Peasantry As The Territorial Spearhead Of The State In Southeast Asia: The Case Of Vietnam', *Sojourn* 11, pp 231-58, 1996.

formation on the frontier need not imply a spread, *a la* diffusion, of a preconceived state form. Rather, there could be what White conceptualizes as *practices on the middle ground* or Latour sees as *moments of translation* that render the state form quite different from what was envisioned. Beyond the readily noticeable transformations that resembled replications, a different dynamic could be hidden from view. For want of a better name, I call this a *recombinant model* of state formation on the frontier.

The introduction of this chapter suggested that the First Republic responded to the Bajaraka affair with more than mere punitive actions. Indeed, if the government was aware of the challenges to state formation on the Central Highlands frontier as suggested by snippets from the archival documents, it would have to be a rather stubborn and unwise government not to have taken any measure at all to alter the policies. They also point towards a more thoughtful approach by the government on policy deliberations than so far sustained by the Vietnamization paradigm (see Chapter Two). In later chapters, I will examine in detail, how the government actually formulated, implemented and revised the policies, even before the emergence of the Bajaraka affair and also after, to incorporate local responses and practices when implementing state formation projects in the highlands. The image of the First Republic's highland policies as determined by only intransigent ethnocentric impulses advanced in existing studies could be rather inaccurate. Even if whatever responses made by the government were simply meant to enhance control of the highlands and its inhabitants, it is quite clear that the diffusion model discussed in Chapter Two could not quite explain how this was played out. Or, perhaps we could ask if such attempts at re-modifying the programs be driven by other motivations as well, for example, as genuine attempts to improve the well-being of the people that the 'state' lays claims to? Such attempts at modifying the programs may fail to achieve the desired results as intended by the government. But the point is to recognize that the government tried to make the changes, and in the process, the state form that is being produced is fundamentally reshaped, giving it a hybrid or recombined form.



# *‘Old Inhabitants, Cadres, Traders And Refugees’*

## GOVERNING THE FRONTIER

### CHAPTER 4

#### BAN ME THUOT ECONOMIC FAIR

Nguyen Huu Ha and Nguyen Van Tien had lady luck on their side. Ha had won the first prize and Tien, the second prize, in a special lottery organized at the Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair (*Hoi Cho Kinh Te Ban Me Thuot*) that began on 22 Feb 1957 in Darlac province. Winners of the top three prizes each received a five-hectare piece of land located in Cu Ebu Mathuot commune (*xa*) of Ban Me Thuot district (*quan*). On 6 February 1957, Decree 53/BNV/HC was passed, which approved the use of three lots of public land as the top prizes in the special lottery at the fair. The rationale given for such an unusual utilization of public land was that it could bring forth ‘possible benefits’ that might contribute to the development of the highlands region.<sup>1</sup> ‘Possible benefits’ meant attracting potential settlers and investors to visit the fair and come to the highlands. It is, however, not known if the three lots of land were bought from local old inhabitants (highlanders) or were simply previously forested land claimed by the government as ‘public land’. The first prize included a fully furnished bungalow with a planted orchard and animal pens with animals provided. All three lots of land were already cleared and ready for immediate cultivation of crops. Other prizes were not too bad either. These attractive prizes ranged from tractors and irrigation pumps to a round trip air-ticket between Saigon and Ban Me Thuot (Figure 4.1).<sup>2</sup>

The Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair was organized by Brigadier-General (*Thieu Tuong*) Le Van Kim, who in early 1957 was the *Quan Doc Cong Truong* (Director Of Public Works) of Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku, before he was appointed as the *Quan Doc Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen Trung Phan* (Director of *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands). At this time, Kim was also in charge of

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<sup>1</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14153.

<sup>2</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14153.

Figure 4.1 Results Of Special Lottery At The Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair

**KẾT-QUA CUỘC XÚ-SÚ**

**HỘI CHỢ KINH TẾ BANMETHUOT**

Mở tại tòa Đô-Chính Saigon ngày 15-7-1957, hồi 15 giờ

**Vê số 34.663 trúng lô Độc-Đặc :**

5 màu dặt bên bờ suối cách tỉnh lỵ Banmethuot 5 cây số trên đó có sản :  
 Một biệt thự lầu bằng gỗ đủ tiện nghi (bàn ghế tủ giường, máy điện máy nước v. v.)  
 Có nhà cho gia-nhân và nhà xe — Một vườn rau — Một mẫu đất trồng cam quýt  
 Một chuồng bò có sản hai con bò — Một chuồng heo có sản bốn con heo  
 Một chuồng gà có sản 10 con gà giống — Một chuồng thỏ có sản 4 con thỏ  
 Một chuồng chim bồ câu có sản chim.

**Vê số 09.222 trúng lô thứ nhì :**

5 màu dặt đã khai phá bên cạnh bờ suối cách tỉnh-lỵ Banmethuot 5 cây số :  
 Trên đó có một biệt thự bằng gỗ.

**Vê số 53.849 trúng lô thứ ba :**

5 màu dặt gần Banmethuot đã khai phá có thể trồng lúa ngay.

<b>Vê số</b>	<b>18.623</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ tư</i>	Máy bơm nước bằng điện của hãng <b>DENS FRÈRES</b> tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>06.901</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ năm</i>	Máy đánh chữ hiệu Johnson 3 mã-lực của hãng <b>DESCOUES CASAUD</b> tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>44.502</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ sáu</i>	Máy đánh chữ hiệu Alpha của hãng <b>ALPHA</b> , đường Tự-Do, Saigon tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>36.822</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ bảy</i>	Máy đánh chữ hiệu Alpha của hãng <b>ALPHA</b> , đường Tự-Do, Saigon tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>32.434</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ tám</i>	Máy đánh chữ hiệu Remington của hãng <b>DENS FRÈRES</b> tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>22.404</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ chín</i>	Máy đánh chữ hiệu Adler Privat của hãng <b>SMAL</b> , đường Tự-Do, Saigon tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>34.620</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ 10</i>	Máy đánh chữ hiệu Adler Privat của hãng <b>SMAL</b> , đường Tự-Do, Saigon tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>56.827</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ 11</i>	Một thùng rượu Dubonnet của hãng <b>OPTON</b> Saigon tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>44.865</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ 12</i>	Một hộp 20 máy cưa tay của hãng <b>KELLER</b> tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>16.734</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ 13</i>	Một lọ bằng đồng của ông <b>NGUYỄN-NGOC-DÂN</b> tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>35.611</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ 14</i>	Hai vé máy bay Saigon-Banmethuot và trở về của hãng <b>Hàng-Không-Viet-Nam</b> tăng.
<b>Vê số</b>	<b>00.838</b>	<i>trúng lô thứ 15</i>	Một thùng Savon Việt-Nam của hãng <b>TRƯƠNG-VĂN-BẾN</b> tăng.

Các vé số : 35.277 43.523 23.573 21.904 04.394 15.969 11.961 51.677 15.742 13.609 32.544 23.384  
 Trúng mỗi vé một đồng hồ đeo tay do hãng đồng hồ **VINA** tăng.

Vé số 31.641 trúng một bản igiton của hãng **BROWNELL LANE** tăng.

**THẺ-THỨC LÃNH CÁC LÔ TRÚNG**

1° — Tại **SAIGON, CHỢ LỚN, GIA-ĐÌNH** : Đơn vé số trúng lệ Phòng Thương-Trục Ban Tổ-Chức Hội-Chợ Kinh-Tế Banmethuot tại Gò-Đài, 15 30 đường Nguyễn-Tùng-Châu để nhận các lô trúng.

2° — Ở **CÁC TỈNH** : Các thẻ đơn vé trúng lệ các ông Quận-trưởng hay Thị-trưởng để nhờ chuyển giao về Ban Tổ-Chức Hội-Chợ hay gửi về trung tâm (thờ báo-đơn về) Phòng Thương-Trục Ban Tổ-Chức Hội-Chợ Kinh-Tế Banmethuot, Hộp thư : Saigon 61.

Nhất là vì đơn-chỉ ở Ban Tổ-Chức gửi các lô trúng cần kê biên-mẫu và công-nhận đồng ý ở trung tâm, Rising 1 là đơn trúng bằng **lưu-định-sơn**, Ban Tổ-Chức sẽ báo ngay một các vé trúng số đến họ nhận.

Thời hạn lãnh các lô trúng : Trong vòng sáu tháng, kể từ ngày về số. Quá thời hạn này, những lô trúng không có người đến nhận sẽ được chuyển về ngân khố của Chính-Phủ.

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 14153

coordinating resettlement of the 1954 northern refugees (who are nowadays referred to as *di dan Bac '54*) in the highlands.<sup>3</sup> Planning for the fair officially began on 31 December 1956, when the government formed an organizing committee for the Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair.<sup>4</sup> Kim was appointed to head the committee. The main purpose for organizing the fair was to showcase the economic potential of the Central Highlands (otherwise known as Cao Nguyen Trung Phan during the First Republic). The organizers wanted to inform people about three types of economic opportunities available in the Central Highlands.

First, there was an abundance of land for development of cash crop plantations, animal ranching and agricultural settlements. Second, the Central Highlands possessed a wealth of natural resources such as timber, minerals and wild life for hunting. Third, the exotic mountainous landscape had great potential for tourism development.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the organizers put up displays about the types of cash crops that had been produced in the highlands since the French colonial period and possible benefits that could be reaped from these kinds of investments. For the potential settlers, there was an abundance of land available for them to set up a new home. Rather than emphasizing the precariousness of the highlands, often perceived as a place where the 'forest is haunted and water is poisonous' (*rung thieng nuoc doc*), the fair described the region in positive tones. The highlands, as one journalist put it in his poem dedicated to the fair, was 'a region full of promises' (*mot vung day hua hen*).<sup>6</sup>

The fair was also organized to bring to the attention of potential settlers and investors that the Central Highlands was an integral part of the Republic. As Ngo Dinh Diem noted in his opening ceremony speech,

the fair is not only an opportunity for compatriots in the whole country to see clearly the resource potentials of the highlands, but also an occasion to uphold the contribution of our highlander compatriots (*dong bao Thuong*) in building the country...As such, the government of the Republic has already made plans to

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<sup>3</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10853.

<sup>4</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14153.

<sup>5</sup> n.a., 'Ly do to chuc Hoi Cho Kinh Te Ban Me Thuot' [Reasons For Organizing the Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (2), p 4, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Lam Son, 'Banmethuot', *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (2), p 15, 1957.

mobilize all ability to exploit all those resources to bring benefits to highlander and Kinh compatriots in general.<sup>7</sup>

Diem and the fair's organizers were well aware that the Central Highlands and its inhabitants were indeed an oddity to most Vietnamese. The highlands region being a part of the Republic was a recent administrative *de jure* occurrence. The Vietnamese state was still trying in early 1957 to establish its presence there. To the average Vietnamese, perhaps with the exception of those living in the foothills, the region was not part of their traditional social space.

The Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair featured displays introducing the various sub-regions in the highlands, such as Pleiku, Kontum, Dalat and Ban Me Thuot.<sup>8</sup> In order to highlight the distinctiveness of the highlands and its old inhabitants, Le Van Kim even spent \$300,000 piasters to build two traditional Rhade long houses (which was simply referred to as *nha Thuong*, or 'highlander house' in the archival documents).<sup>9</sup> There were also exhibitions about traditional life-styles among the highlanders, together with cultural performances of folk songs and dances, and even elephant racing, to introduce the cultures of highlanders to the visitors.<sup>10</sup> There was no doubt, however, that the main emphasis of the fair was to attract settlers and investors to the Central Highlands as part of the Republic's government objective of developing the region in order to integrate it into the national political framework.

When I read that the government gave land as prizes for the fair's special lottery, I felt the accusation made by critics that the First Republic did not respect the land claims of the highlanders is rather justified. The archival documents, however, reveal that that Nguyen Huu Ha and Nguyen Van Tien could not immediately claim their prizes because Ngo Dinh Diem wanted the land reduced in size. Le Van Kim was adamant that there should be no changes because conditions and prizes were clearly stated on the lottery ticket and the government should not go back on its word. The issue dragged on for close to

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<sup>7</sup> Ngo Dinh Diem, 'Dien van cua Tong Thong Cong Hoa Viet Nam doc trong buoi le khai mac Hoi Cho Kinh Te Ban Me Thuot ngay 22/2/1957' [Speech By The President Of The Republic Of Vietnam Read During The Opening Ceremony Of The Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair, 22/2/1957], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (2), p 2 & 6, 1957.

<sup>8</sup> Le Tan Loi, 'Hoi Cho Kinh Te Ban Me Thuot' [Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (2), pp 3-4 & 13, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11715.

<sup>10</sup> 'Hoi Cho Kinh Te Ban Me Thuot'.

three years. Finally, in 1960, Ha and Tien 'received' their prizes with official recognition from the provincial cadastral office. The second prize, which was not claimed by anyone, was auctioned off.<sup>11</sup> There are perhaps more to find out about how the First Republic managed the land question than what we know so far. I examine this issue in Chapter Seven.

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There are four significant aspects to the Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair. First, it reflected a certain sense of unfamiliarity about the Central Highlands among the average Vietnamese, and even government officials. It was not deemed as the ideal destination for settlement, economic investments, and as we will see, administrative posting. Thus, the fair was meant to better inform visitors about the highlands. Second, the government recognized that without active encouragement and incentives, such as access to land, people generally did not want to go the highlands. This probably explained the rationale behind the use of land as prizes for the special lottery. Third, Diem's hesitance over the size area of the lands given out as prizes, possibly reflected that as much as he saw there was a vast availability of land in the highlands, he was not about to frivolously grant them to any Vietnamese without further consideration. Fourth, Gerald Hickey reports that there was a failed assassination attempt on Diem during the fair, which ended up seriously wounding the minister for agriculture. The assailant was described as a 'communist agent bent on killing Diem'.<sup>12</sup> There was no doubt that attempts at Vietnamese state formation by the First Republic on the highlands frontier had to take into account competition with the communists who had already established a strong foothold in the region. Hunting down the communists was one objective but as will be seen in later chapters, winning over the population remained the main objective.

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<sup>11</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14153.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Free In The Forest: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, p 20.

## INTRODUCTION

The Central Highlands in the mid-1950s was a frontier to both the Vietnamese state and Kinh people. Except for a small number of Kinh already settled in the highlands and in adjacent foothills, most people were unfamiliar with the highlands and its inhabitants. For the old inhabitants of the highlands, Vietnamese administration was something of a 'novelty'. Although the territory was placed within the sovereign boundary of South Vietnam, actual administration of the region and governing of people's everyday life by the South Vietnamese government was at best a veneer. I suggest in this chapter that the First Republic, upon reclaiming the Central Highlands as part of its territory, effectively inherited a frontier in the true sense of the term. I show how the government of the First Republic attempted to establish a comprehensive administrative structure that was standardized with the rest of the country, in the Central Highlands. I describe the challenges encountered in this endeavor and the responses by the government. In the final section, I discuss briefly how the government attempted to expedite the process of state formation by resettling, in the highlands, refugees from the northern exodus after the Geneva Agreements of 1954. Comprised of old inhabitants, unwilling officials, traders and refugees (and communist insurgents as well), the Central Highlands in the mid-1950s had the stock cast of a frontier.

Most critics of the First Republic argue that attempts at state formation in the highlands frontier looked a lot like 'Vietnamization' of the region and its inhabitants. I group all such criticisms as belonging to the 'Vietnamization paradigm'. Gerald Hickey tells us that the government of the First Republic was bent on replacing all local (highlander) social institutions with Vietnamese national institutions. A Vietnamese administrative structure was imposed with no regard for local customs. Vietnamese education was imposed on the highlanders and training in local languages was replaced by the Vietnamese language. Kinh officials were often described as ethnocentric and had no regard for local culture and customs. Highlander officials were discriminated against and Kinh officials were given more favorable treatment by the government.<sup>13</sup> Bernard Fall describes the settlement of Kinh refugees in the highlands as an attempt to

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<sup>13</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 5-12 & 59.

'Vietnamize' the region.<sup>14</sup> In fact, highlander leaders later pointed out that the discriminatory policies under the First Republic had helped to nurture the rise of the Bajaraka movement (see Chapter Two of this thesis). Y Bham Enuol's *Extraits de l'histoire* and Paul Nur's account in *Chinh Sach Thuong Vu Trong Lich Su Viet Nam* list the grievances suffered by the highlanders under the First Republic. Grievances suffered included: lost of autonomy; loss of the '*statut particulier*' granted by the French during the Crown Domain years; loss of land to Vietnamese settlers; exploitation by Vietnamese traders; Vietnamese, instead of highlanders, were appointed to superior positions in the administration; arrogant attitudes of Vietnamese administrators; administrative discrimination because highlanders received lower pay and status in comparison to Kinh; highlander military officers were not respected by Kinh enlistees and faced no prospects for promotion; harassment by the Republic's army; the highlander customary law courts (*toa an phong tục*) were abolished by Diem's government; and cultural discrimination by the government because training in highlander languages and schools for highlander children were ignored.<sup>15</sup>

Criticized by foreign observers and condemned by the highlanders, the First Republic's highlands policies seemed to have nothing much positive. Archival documents, however, show that the government was well aware of these problems and took steps to remedy them. The actual results of these attempts are hard to gauge. Yet, we must recognize that there were institutionalized attempts at improving the situation. Archival evidence suggests that the situation was not as bleak as the standing verdict suggests. On refugee resettlement, the pressing issue was to resolve the problem of the long-term livelihoods for the many refugees without land or job congregating at the camps. The Central Highlands provided an important source of safety valve for this sudden population pressure caused by the exodus from the north. The primary concern when resettling these refugees in the highlands was to ensure that they were able to subsist in a stable agricultural environment rather than to place them in strategic locations that might not be conducive to set up a new home. While settling on the frontier, as much as these settlers transformed the new environment, they also had to

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Fall, 'Commentary On Father Harnett' in *Vietnam: The First Five Years* edited by Richard Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959), p 94.

<sup>15</sup> Y Bham Enuol, *Extraits de l'histoire des hauts-plateau du centre Viet-Nam*, Phnom Penh: mimeographed, 1965; Paul Nur, *Ve chinh sach Thuong Vu trong lich su Viet Nam* [On Highland Policies In The History Of Viet Nam], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1966, pp 104-110.

adapt to the new conditions of living. Resettling Kinh refugees in the highlands provided the government with a means to quickly establish a government presence in a frontier environment that would otherwise have taken a longer time to do so. Right from the beginning, the government had already recognized that it would take an extended period to reform the living conditions of the highlanders, or in other words, a sense of government in their everyday life. I do not go as far as to suggest that there were no attempts at 'Vietnamization'. *I do argue, however, that any supposed attempts at 'Vietnamization' were in fact punctuated by compromises after careful deliberations and consideration of local responses. This seems to suggest that the state form that was continually being reproduced on the frontier looked a lot more hybrid than suggested by the 'Vietnamization' paradigm.*

## ADMINISTRATION IN THE CAO NGUYEN TRUNG PHAN

### Administrative Standardization

Between 1950 and 1955, the Central Highlands was known as the *Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*, or the 'Southern Mountaineer Country of the Crown Domain'. Prior to that, it was known simply as *Pays Moi* (Savage Country) or *Haut Plateaux*. During the Second World War, the French labelled the region as *Pays Montagnards du Sud Indochinois* (PMSI). According to Oscar Salemink, this was meant to delineate the region as separate from the territorial realms claimed by Vietnamese nationalists.<sup>16</sup> Among the Vietnamese, it was known as *Vung Thuong Du Mien Trung* (Central Highland Region) or *Cao Nguyen Mien Nam* (Southern High Plateau); and by its administrative name, *Hoang Trieu Cuong Tho Cao Nguyen Mien Nam* (Southern High Plateau of The Crown Domain). According to the population census conducted by the French colonial government in 1943, the Central Highlands was predominantly composed of highlanders. There were supposedly about 77,000 in Darlac, 150,000 in Kontum, 130,000 in Pleiku and 27,000 in Haut Donnai. In comparison, there were only 4,000 Kinh in Darlac, 10,000 in Haut Donnai, 7,000 in

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<sup>16</sup> Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p 28.



Kontum, 21,000 in Pleiku and 267 in Dalat.<sup>17</sup> In 1953, according to the '*Plan d'action social pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*', a conceptual plan for social development of the highlanders authored by Nguyen De (Bao Dai's *Chef de Cabinet*), there was an estimated 500,000 highlanders and 30,000 Kinh living in the Crown Domain.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to the First Republic years, Vietnamese people in general referred to the old inhabitants of this highland region as '*moi*', popularly interpreted as meaning 'savage'. Not every usage of this name inevitably carried the derogatory connotation (see my discussion in Chapter Two). One respondent, who was born in 1950 in Blao (present day Bao Loc), recalls how he went to school as a child in the mid-1950s, together with some children of the old inhabitants, and had to refer to them as '*moi*' because there was no 'official term' or other common ethnic labels for them in everyday usage. He also recalls how he himself looked like a '*moi*' because as a child, he was out in the sun everyday playing with other children, Kinh and '*moi*', therefore acquiring a dark tan similar to the locals.<sup>19</sup> Politically or ethnographically constructed terms, such as Pemsien (which was used by Jacques Dournes) and Proto-Indochinois (which was used by Georges Condominas), never caught on. The term Montagnard, being 'mountaineer' in French, became popular in colonial official usage in the 1940s.<sup>20</sup> *Dong Bao Thuong*, or highlander compatriots, was the official and common term of reference for the old inhabitants of the highlands with the coming of the First Republic.

The *Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne* consisted of the provinces of Darlac (provincial capital being Ban Me Thuot), Pleiku (provincial capital being Pleiku), Kontum (provincial capital being Djiring), Haut Donnai (provincial capital being Djiring) and Dalat municipality. In 1954, when Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel after the Geneva Agreements, the Crown Domain remained outside the jurisdiction of South Vietnam's government. It was only on 11 March 1955 that the Crown Domain was abolished. On 23 October 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem won the public

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Sons Of The Mountains: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands To 1954*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, p 370.

<sup>18</sup> Nguyen De, *Plan d'action social pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*, Saigon: Editions de la Delegation Imperiale du Domaine de la Couronne, 1952; see also Nguyen De, *Plan de developpement economique pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*, Saigon: Editions de la Delegation Imperiale du Domaine de la Couronne, 1952.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Canberra, Australia, September 2005.

<sup>20</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 28-9 & 155.

referendum on whether the country should remain a monarchy or become a republic. On 26 October 1955, the Republic Of Vietnam was formed.<sup>21</sup> Finally, on 24 October 1956, the Crown Domain became officially known as Cao Nguyen Trung Phan (which should rightfully be translated as the Central High Plateau, but for this thesis I simply refer to it as the Central Highlands).<sup>22</sup> The original provincial names remained, but Haut Donnai was from then onwards referred to by its Vietnamese name, Dong Nai Thuong. The four main provinces of Cao Nguyen Trung Phan were by the end of the First Republic reorganized into seven provinces. On 19 May 1958, Dong Nai Thuong was renamed Lam Dong. Tuyen Duc province was created on the same day, incorporating the district of Dran and the area under the administration of Da Lat municipality.<sup>23</sup> On 23 January 1959, Quang Duc province was formed, incorporating the southern part of Darlac province with parts of the neighbouring provinces of Phuoc Long and Lam Dong.<sup>24</sup> Finally, on 1 September 1962, Phu Bon province was created from the north-eastern portion of Darlac and south-eastern part of Pleiku.<sup>25</sup> Map 4.1 shows the location of the highlands provinces as of 1959.

At this point, I should remind the reader that these administrative boundaries do not coincide with the natural geographic locations of the hill-dwellers. The government of the First Republic recognized this and when referring to the highland region (*mien thuong*), the government was referring to not just the Cao Nguyen Trung Phan, but also the highland parts of provinces in Trung Nguyen Trung Phan or Central Lowlands (for example Phu Yen, Binh Tuy, Binh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai) and Nam Phan (such as Phuoc Long, Binh Duong). For example, the mandate of the *Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong* (Directorate for Social Work In The Highlands Region, or NCTXHMT) covered all highland areas inhabited by highlanders (*dong bao Thuong*) who possessed distinctive cultural and linguistic features different from the Kinh.

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, Volume II: Vietnam At War*, New York, Washington & London: Praeger, 1967, pp 890-2.

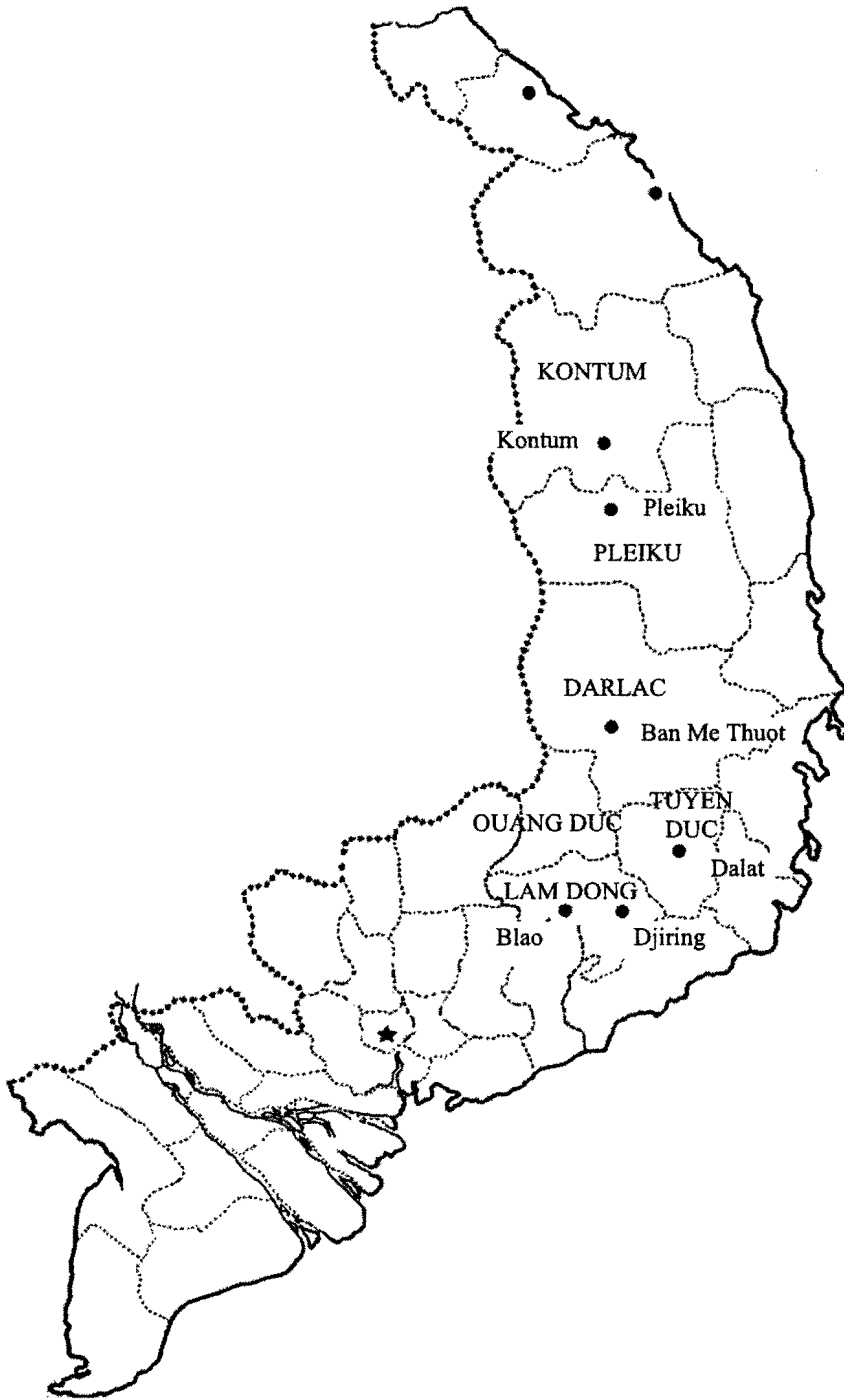
<sup>22</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no.10130; Nguyen Quang An, *Viet Nam: Nhung thay doi dia danh va dia gioi hanh chinh: 1945-2002* [Vietnam: Changes in Place Names and Administrative Boundaries: 1945-2002], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Thong Tan, 2003, p 260.

<sup>23</sup> *Viet Nam: Nhung thay doi dia danh va dia gioi hanh chinh*, p 298.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p 314.

<sup>25</sup> Nghiem Dang, *Vietnam: Politics And Public Administration*, Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966, p 121.

**Map 4.1 Provinces Of Central Highlands In 1959**



Source: William Henderson, 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages: The Republic Of Vietnam's Land Development Program' in *Problems Of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* edited by Wesley Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p 131.

Under the French, the highlands provinces were each governed by a French Resident. A Vietnamese mandarin, the *Quan Dao* (equivalent of Chief of Province), was appointed in Kontum in 1928 to represent the Annam court and to oversee matters related to Kinh people who have settled in the highlands.<sup>26</sup> In Darlac, a *Quan Dao* was also appointed due to the influx of Kinh laborers for the French plantations and the establishment of a political prison after the Yen Bay revolt.<sup>27</sup> In 1940, Ton That Hoi was appointed as *Quan Dao* in Darlac.<sup>28</sup> Ton That Hoi would later be reappointed as the first Government Delegate (*Dai Bieu Chanh Phu*) for the Central Highlands under the First Republic. During the Crown Domain period, the region was only nominally under the rule of Bao Dai. French administrators remained as the main decision-makers with regard to policy matters. At the same time, however, more Vietnamese administrators were also appointed to serve in the provincial governments.<sup>29</sup> On 3 March 1955, a Government Delegate (*Dai Bieu Chanh Phu*) representing the Republic's government was appointed to the *Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*.<sup>30</sup> Finally, on 11 March 1955, administration of the Central Highlands was handed over to the Republic's government.<sup>31</sup>

For the highlander villages (*buon, plei, kon*), the French merely appointed a village head whose responsibilities were mainly to collect taxes and organize corvee labour for the colonial government. The village chief did not receive any official salary but was exempted from head tax (*mien suu*). Village chiefs from a group of villages in the same area reported to a highlander canton chief (*tong truong*), who received \$7-8 piasters a month from the colonial government in the mid-1930s. The canton chiefs were also exempted from tax.<sup>32</sup> The canton, however, reported to a highlander *chef de secteur* (*Truong Khu*), who headed the intermediary administrative unit of the sector between the subsidiary group of cantons and the higher administrative unit of the district in the

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<sup>26</sup> Nguyen Kinh Chi & Nguyen Dong Chi, *Moi Kontum*, Hue, 1937, p 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Sons Of The Mountains*, p 335.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p 363.

<sup>29</sup> The father of one of my respondents was a Vietnamese official who served in Blao (present day Bao Loc) during the Crown Domain years.

<sup>30</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10130. Archival documents simply refer to this appointment as *Dai Bieu Chanh Phu* although at that time, South Vietnam was still governed by the Regional Governor system. The system of Regional Governors was finally replaced by a more supervisory system of regional Government Delegates on 24 December 1955. According to Nghiem Dang, this was part of Ngo Dinh Diem's attempt at centralization of the national government system. *Vietnam: Politics And Public Administration*, p 130.

<sup>31</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Moi Kontum*, p 23.

highlands. Both sector and district chiefs were appointed from among the highlanders in areas predominated by highlander population. In areas settled by the Kinh people, the court in Annam appointed Kinh officials variously at the rank of *Tri Phu* (prefect), *Tri Huyen* (district magistrate), or *Bang Ta* (assistant district chief), who were answerable to the *Quan Dao*.<sup>33</sup> French colonial administrative hierarchy persisted until the First Republic absorbed the Crown Domain as part of its national territory.

After the Crown Domain was abolished, the Vietnamese government began to develop for the highlands a similar administrative hierarchy as the rest of the republic. The regional Government Delegate supervised the general administration of the provinces under his portfolio. The Chief of Province (*Tinh Truong*) was appointed by the president. Alongside the Chief of Province in the highlands was appointed a *Pho Tinh Truong Thuong* ('highlander deputy chief of province' but often referred to in the short form as just *Tinh Truong Thuong*) and a *Pho Tinh Truong* who was a Kinh. Under the province chief was the Chief of District (*Quan Truong*) and down the hierarchy was the Chief of Canton (*Tong Truong*) and Chief of Commune (*Xa Truong*). On 12 March 1958, the intermediary administrative unit of the sector chief (*Khu Truong*) was abolished.<sup>34</sup> The Chief of Province under the First Republic was invariably a Kinh and often also a military man of the rank lieutenant-colonel (*Trung Ta*) and above.<sup>35</sup> The Chief of District was also directly appointed by the central government and usually a highlander. Some districts were headed by Kinh district chiefs. In these districts, if the population included a significant number of highlanders, a highlander deputy (*Quan Truong Thuong*, or officially known as *Pho Quan Truong*) was appointed to manage affairs related to the highlanders.<sup>36</sup>

When the position of the sector chief was abolished, the government was concerned that this could lead to disaffections among highlander leaders originally holding this position. Several solutions were proposed. One was to let the situation slowly unravel because some of the sector chiefs were already quite advanced in age.

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<sup>33</sup> For a succinct yet informative discussion of the history of local government in Vietnam, consult David Marr, 'A Brief History Of Local Government In Vietnam' in *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government In Vietnam* edited by Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet & David Marr (Singapore: Institute Of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 1504.

<sup>35</sup> *Vietnam: Politics And Public Administration*, pp 127-31.

<sup>36</sup> This is based on my reading of the archival files in the PTTDeNhat collection.

Once they had to retire from the appointment because of age, it was proposed that the government should not appoint anyone else to replace the person. Another was to re-deploy the office holder at the canton level, either as canton chief or deputy.<sup>37</sup> From the canton level downwards, the administrative hierarchy formed by the French was retained. The First Republic continued the practice of appointing a representative (*dai dien*) from among the highlander village, who was usually perceived as the village chief, or simply called a '*ly truong*', similar to the Vietnamese village. Similar to the French period, this representative, or village chief, was usually appointed from among the village elders or influential 'men of prowess' within the community.<sup>38</sup> For example, in his account of a visit to Ba To, Bui Dinh mentioned his meeting with a Mr. Dinh Mach, an influential village elder, or a *Ca Ra*, among the Hre, who served as the highlander representative for the area.<sup>39</sup>

During the French colonial period, highlanders were governed according to their local customary laws such as codified by the French administrators. Leopold Sabatier was the first of such administrators who went about codifying the customary laws (*luat tục phap*) of the Rhade in order to better govern the highlanders.<sup>40</sup> The practice was continued by Paul Guilleminet in Kontum, who codified the customary laws among the Bahnar, Sedang and Jarai.<sup>41</sup> Oscar Salemink points out that this was effectively an instance of administrative 'tribalization' of the diverse highlander groups. Although Bahnar and Sedang are patrilineal, and the Jarai matrilineal, and each group had different practices in general, they were 'tribalized' as one general grouping simply because they were under the same administrative unit delineated by the French colonial government.<sup>42</sup> Besides, even at the village level, customary practices vary from village to village even if they belong to the same ethnic grouping. Salemink further argues that

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<sup>37</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 1504.

<sup>38</sup> On the concept of 'men of prowess' among the highlanders, see Chapter Two.

<sup>39</sup> Bui Dinh, *Duong Len Xu Thuong* [Road To The Highland Region], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Bo Cong Dan Vu, 1963, pp 11-12 & 18-21.

<sup>40</sup> This is later published as Leopold Sabatier & Antomarchi Dominique, *Recueil des coutumes Rhades du Darlac*, Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extreme-Orient, 1930.

<sup>41</sup> This is later published as Paul Guilleminet, *Coutumier de la Tribu Bahnar, des Sedang et des Jarai de la Province de Kontum*, Hanoi: Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient, 1952. Theophile Gerber compiled the customary laws of the Stieng, which was published as Theophile Gerber, 'Coutumier stieng', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient* XLV/1, pp 227-71, 1951. The French anthropologist Pierre Lafont compiled the customary laws of the Jarai, which was published as Pierre Bernard Lafont, *Toloi Djuat: Coutumier de la tribu Jarai*, Paris: Publications de l'EFEO, 1963. The missionary-turned-anthropologist, Jacques Dourmes, performed a similar feat by compiling the customary laws of the Sre, which was published as Jacques Dourmes, 'Nri (Coutumier Sre: extraits)', *France-Asie* 60, pp 1232-41, 1951.

<sup>42</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 135 & 140.

these efforts at codifying the customary laws of the highlanders were aimed at disciplining the highlanders according to the objective of better controlling the population. The compilers included certain provisions that were clearly aimed at subjecting the highlanders to the authority and economic objectives of the French colonial government.<sup>43</sup> For example, Guilleminet recorded how the Bahnar organized land use according to the traditional institution of the land guardian in the form of the 'to'ring' but still proclaimed the French colonial government as the 'outstanding proprietor' of all the territories in his codification of the customary laws for the Bahnar.<sup>44</sup> This, Saleminck argues, allowed the French colonial government to legally appropriate lands, in accordance with the codified (or invented) customary laws, in order to facilitate the development of French colonial plantations.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Saleminck concludes that,

the French claimed that Montagnard culture was valuable in itself, and had no need for assimilation to Vietnamese culture. However, it was the French who defined what constituted Montagnard culture, which aspects of it were to be preserved, and which aspects to be changed. Cultural expressions which did not suit the colonial administration were not recognized as valuable or even authentic.<sup>46</sup>

According to Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, Kontum in the 1930s had essentially three legal systems, one each for the French, the Kinh and the highlanders. In the event a dispute included people from more than one group, judges from both groups were evaluated the case, under the supervision of the French resident.<sup>47</sup> During the Crown Domain period, Bao Dai signed a decree on 21 May 1951, which provisioned for a *statut particulier* among the highlanders. Article 3 of the *statut particulier* called for increased participation of highlanders in the government of the Crown Domain. This regulation also provided for continuing the practice of the French colonial government where highlanders were basically ruled under their 'own customs' and 'institutions' such as set by the French. According to Gerald Hickey, Article 7 of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p 158.

<sup>44</sup> *Coutumier de la Tribu Bahnar, des Sedang at des Jarai de la Province de Kontum*, p 463 cited from *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 158.

<sup>45</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 158-9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p 141.

<sup>47</sup> *Moi Kontum*, p 25.

the decree guaranteed the rights of the highlanders to own, purchase, rent or lease lands but subjected to the review of administrative authorities and local highlander leaders, and 'conducted in accordance with pertinent traditions'.<sup>48</sup> The customary law court, which was set up by the French, was extended down the hierarchy and established at the district and commune levels when previously it was only available at the provincial level.<sup>49</sup> In 1958, the administrative hierarchy of a typical province in the Central Highlands resembled something as shown in Figure 4.2. Critics point out that Ngo Dinh Diem's government abolished the highlander customary law courts and replaced them with a unitary Vietnamese national legal regulation.<sup>50</sup> Archival documents suggest that this statement oversimplified the issue. I discuss this later.

### *'Mise En Valeur' And 'Mission Civilisatrice'*

The government of the First Republic saw socio-economic development as the key to integrating the Central Highlands and its inhabitants into the national political framework. Ngo Dinh Diem made no pretense of his twin objectives to improve the living conditions of the highlanders and secure the Central Highlands from communist insurgents,

I came to visit our compatriots and at the same time study on-site measures to raise the standard of living and provide security for our compatriots.<sup>51</sup>

Old inhabitants of the Central Highlands were still mainly engaged in their traditional methods of subsistence agriculture practices, i.e., swidden. Through the eyes of the officials, the rudimentary agricultural methods of the highlanders often left them short

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<sup>48</sup> *Sons Of The Mountains*, pp 410-1.

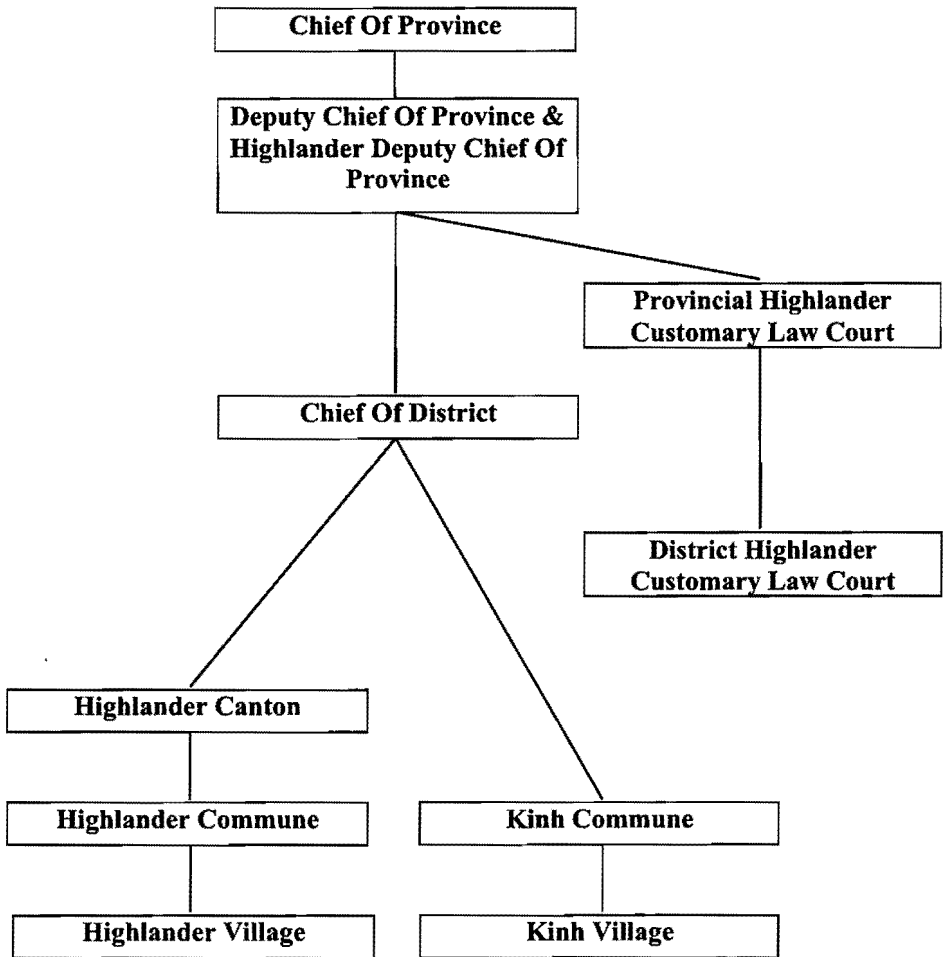
<sup>49</sup> Nguyen Trac Di, 'Viec bai bo Toa An Phong Tuc Thuong duoi thoi chinh phu Ngo Dinh Diem' [The Issue Of Abolishment Of The Highlander Customary Law Court During The Ngo Dinh Diem Government], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* [Highland Affairs Monthly Periodical] (15), pp 4-7, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 45-6; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 187; Bernard Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness: 1953-66*, New York: Praeger, 1966, pp 190-6; Cuu Long Giang & Toan Anh, *Cao Nguyen Mien Thuong* (High Plateau of The Highland Region), Saigon: Viet Nam Chi Luoc, 1974, p143; Nguyen Van Can, 'Van de kien dien dat dai canh tac cho dong bao Thuong' [The Issue Of Establishing Cultivation Land For Highlander Compatriots], *Tap San Thuong Vu* [Highland Affairs Periodical] (1), p 40, 1966.

<sup>51</sup> Viet Hung, 'Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh vung Cao Nguyen Trung Phan (I)' [The Task of Improving People's Livelihood in the Region of the Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (34), pp 16-7, 1957.



**Figure 4.2 Basic Provincial Administrative Structure In The Highlands Under The First Republic**



Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 16434.

of rice and at the mercy of nature. At the same time, traditional agricultural practices effectively spread out the highlanders across the vast forested landscape, rendering them susceptible to communist infiltration and out of reach of the embryonic administration. Socio-economic development in the Central Highlands could reform the traditional agricultural systems among the highlanders, materialize the resource potential of the region, and improve the living conditions of the inhabitants (old and new). This strategy could, in theory, help to counter the communist insurgents hiding among the highlanders and at the same time win over the hearts and minds of the people by giving them a better material life.

In June 1956, a committee tasked to study the most effective strategy for realizing socio-economic development in the highlands submitted its recommendations. The report suggested that the government should expand cash crop production in the Central Highlands. The region possessed both land and natural conditions for many lucrative cash crops, which had attracted many French planters to the highlands. The report, however, suggested that large-scale plantation was not an effective strategy. Instead, the government should expand cash crop agriculture through smallholders, each cultivating an area of about 1.5 hectares. It recommended the government should avoid expanding into areas currently claimed by the highlanders, who were mainly practicing swidden agriculture. The report recognized that swidden cultivation among the highlanders had laid claims to a large proportion of the cultivable lands. To overcome this, it recommended that the government regulate swidden in a systematic fashion and introduce improved methods of agriculture, which could effectively reduce the areas claimed by the highlanders and finally sedentarized the highlanders. Agricultural expansion, however, would require the government to bring in more human resources to work the land. Highlanders, primarily still engaged in swidden, would not be able to meet the demand. The report recommended the government look to refugees who were being resettled in the highlands, and possible migrants from the crowded central lowlands.<sup>52</sup>

Between 1955 and 1957, the government resettled a number of refugees in the Central Highlands (see below). By mid-1957, a comprehensive program to bring in

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<sup>52</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10037.

settlers from the lowlands to the Central Highlands was developed in the form of the *Dinh Dien* program. The focus on cash crop cultivation, however, was not the initial strategy to stabilize resettlement in the highlands. I discuss this in Chapter Five. Meanwhile, the government began to look into possible measures to socio-economically develop the highlanders to realize its national integration objective. This was carried out under the slogan of 'Improving Highlander Compatriots' Livelihood' (*Cai Tien Dan Sinh Dong Bao Thuong*), which by late 1957 developed into a broad program encompassing most aspects of highlanders' everyday life. As part of Diem's rather subtle but clumsily articulated 'Personalist' revolution, *Cai Tien Dan Sinh* was an integral part of his social reform program targeted at the rural areas (I elaborate on this in Chapter Five). The aim was to develop the material well-being of the people by establishing a range of public amenities, education and 'propertization' (giving each citizen a piece of property in the republic), which would then contribute to fulfilling the spiritual well-being of the individuals.<sup>53</sup> This improvement of material and spiritual well-being, however, was to be developed by harnessing resources available within the local communities and with support from the government.<sup>54</sup> For the highlanders, this social agenda was adapted to gradually improve their living conditions (*nang do muc song*) in order to catch up with the Kinh, so that highlanders could participate as equal citizens of the new nation.<sup>55</sup> It was also clear, by mid-1957, that a specialized agency was required to help realize this objective.

To bring about socio-economic development, the government began by multiplying the administrative services in the highlands. Agricultural, educational, and many other services were established or expanded from previously embryonic ones. Figure 4.3 illustrates the many administrative services in operation within a province under the First Republic. On 3 July 1957, Decree 302/NV was passed to establish the Directorate for Social Work in the Highland Regions (*Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien*

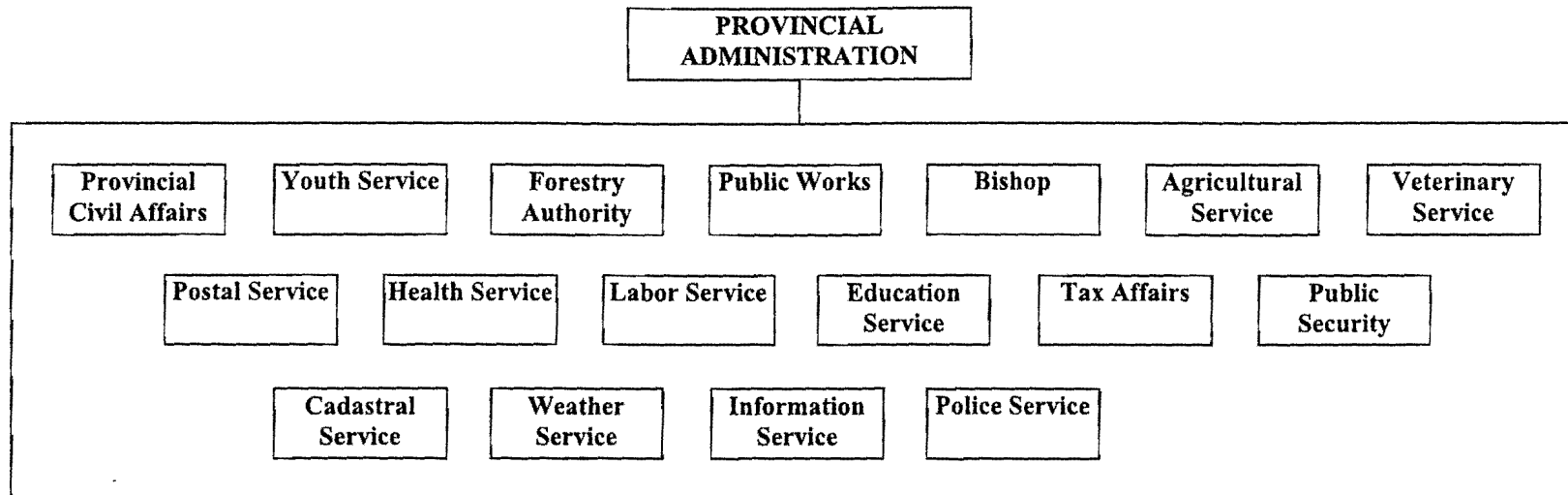
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<sup>53</sup> For details on Ngo Dinh Diem's Personalist ideology, consult John C. Donnell, 'Politics In South Vietnam: Doctrines Of Authority In Conflict', Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1964.

<sup>54</sup> n.a., 'Y nghĩa và mục đích của công cuộc cải tiến dân sinh (I)' [The Meaning And Purpose Of The Task Of Improving Livelihood Of The People], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (41), pp 9 & 16, 1957; n.a., 'Y nghĩa và mục đích của công cuộc cải tiến dân sinh (II)' [The Meaning And Purpose Of The Task Of Improving Livelihood Of The People], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (42), pp 9 & 15, 1957; see also, Chapter Five of this thesis.

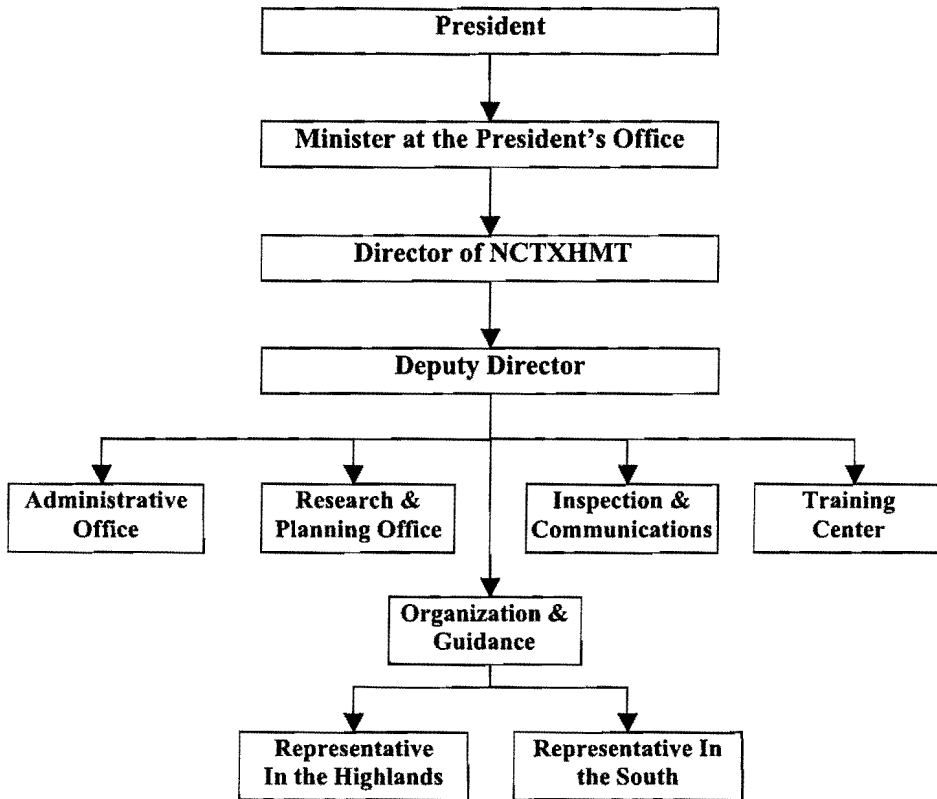
<sup>55</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728; *Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong* [The Work Of Improving Highlanders' Livelihoods: Five Years After The Administration Of President Ngo], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959, pp 13-14.

**Figure 4.3 Administrative Services In Operation Within A Province**



Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 16434

**Figure 4.4 Organization Hierarchy Of The *Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong***



Source: *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 135.

*Thuong*, henceforth NCTXHMT), with Huynh Cong Tinh as the first director.<sup>56</sup> The directorate was placed directly under the President’s Office because Ngo Dinh Diem himself was especially concerned about the issue of socio-economic development among the highlanders. All highland regions in the country were included within the mandate of the directorate. Figure 4.4 illustrates the organizational structure of the directorate. Its main responsibility was to design specific programs to improve the living conditions of the highlanders. These programs were to be carried out by individual provinces with the directorate providing technical and advisory assistance. The directorate, however, operated its own training programs for highlanders, initially located in Dalat but later expanded into a boarding school unit in Hue. It was not

<sup>56</sup> Nguyen Trac Di, ‘Nhưng ngày đang ghi nhớ của ngành Thương Vụ’ [Memorable Days In The Field Of Highland Affairs], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (5), pp 37-39, 1967, p 37.

established as a ministry promoting ethnic minority rights, such as *Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc* (Ministry For Ethnic Development) under the Second Republic. Under the direct supervision of Ngo Dinh Diem, who took upon himself a very active role in the direction of the programs, this mere directorate drew up scheme after scheme to improve the living conditions of the highlanders and to win over the allegiance of the highlanders.<sup>57</sup> By the end of August 1957, the directorate had outlined two major sets of programs to 'improve highlanders' livelihoods in all aspects' (*cai tien dan sinh dong bao thuong ve moi mat*). The first set of programs focused on reforming the agricultural practices of the highlanders, which I will examine in detail in Chapter Six. The second set of programs focused on improving the social conditions of highlanders through training of highlander cadres, development of education, cultural reforms, economic integration of highlanders and development of social services, which I will refer to below.

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Transition from French to Vietnamese administration in the Central Highlands was not a smooth process. First, the French merely set up a very basic administrative machinery in the highlands. Although there were attempts to multiply administrative services in the highlands under the French, there were no deep social impacts at the time of the handover. Second, there were very few administrators conversant in Vietnamese except for the few ethnic Kinh administrators who served under French colonial government or Bao Dai's government. Most highlander appointees were conversant in local languages and French, and very seldom in Vietnamese. In fact, the main administrative language was French at the time the Crown Domain was abolished. Third, because of the nature of indirect rule by the French, local institutions and those refashioned by the French as 'local', such as the customary law courts, remained the main instruments of government among the highlanders. Apart from taxes and corvee, most highlanders, with the exception of those living near to the administrative centers, plantations and roads could very much carry on with life according to their traditional practices. The fact that Georges Condominas could write an ethnography about the

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<sup>57</sup> On Diem's very active involvement in the work of the directorate and the highlands, see Joseph Buttinger, 'Ethnic Minorities In The Republic Of Vietnam' in *Problems Of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* edited by Wesley Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

Mnong Gar based on field work in the late 1940s that make minimal reference to the French colonial government is perhaps significant as to what extent colonial state formation had impacted on the highlanders outside the main centers of state penetration.<sup>58</sup>

## FOUR CHALLENGES

Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands essentially meant standardizing the practice of bureaucratic administration. Thus, Vietnamese language was to replace French as the main official language in the administration. It also meant that the Republic's legislation was to replace the prior practice of separate legislations for the different groups of inhabitants. Socio-economic development of the highlands and its inhabitants essentially meant multiplication of the administrative services provided by the government in the highlands. It did not take long for the government to realize the challenges to achieving these objectives. All provincial governments under the First Republic were required to submit monthly reports (*bao cao hang thang*) to the central government. These reports reveal some of the problems encountered by the administration and also the measures proposed to resolve the problems. I identify four fundamental challenges, namely language barrier, cultural barrier, lack of suitable cadres, and reliance on 'middle men' administrators in the form of the mobile traders (*lai thuong* or *lai buon*).

### Language

In the monthly report filed from Darlac province for the month of August 1956, the province chief reported that two thirds of the staff comprised of highlanders and most of them did not understand Vietnamese (the report used the term '*tieng Kinh*'). He requested the central government to post more Kinh officials to the province.<sup>59</sup> In November of the same year, he reiterated this problem,

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<sup>58</sup> Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten The Forest: The Story Of A Montagnard Village In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Translated by Adrian Foulke. Original publication 1957.

<sup>59</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 27.

all activities had met with much obstacles because of language difference (*ngon ngu bat dong*) [between Kinh and Thuong] and lack of resources and personnel; highlander staff make up the majority among the civil servants but they are not as capable as Kinh civil servants.<sup>60</sup>

Bureaucratic paperwork under the republic's administration was notoriously overwhelming. Inability to work in the Vietnamese language had rendered the provincial administration unable to meet the demands of bureaucratic paperwork. In March 1958, the province chief illustrated the problem when he wrote,

during training (*buoi hoc tap*) and meeting (*hoi nghi*) sessions, [we] have to translate into French so that they [highlander civil servants] could understand better. All the more reason that when it comes to the issue of official documents, it was difficult for them to understand these documents on their own.<sup>61</sup>

At the district level, the problem became all the more serious. Darlac province reported in December 1957,

as for personnel at the districts, each district only has one district chief and one secretary. Except for the Chief of District of Lak, who is a Kinh, all other district chiefs and personnel are highlander civil servants. [They are] unfamiliar with the Vietnamese language, yet all official documents and directives from the central government and the province are in Vietnamese. Under fortunate circumstances, if there are a few cadres in the district but under other services, such as civil affairs or public security who know Vietnamese, then they are able to translate for the district chief. But under unfortunate circumstances, when there are no cadres who know Vietnamese, they will have to 'put aside and wait' (*xep lai cho doi*), even though it is an urgent issue.<sup>62</sup>

The issue of highlander officials not understanding Vietnamese was only one half of the problem. Just as serious was the fact that most Kinh officials did not understand highlander languages (generally referred to as *tieng Thuong*). If there were

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<sup>60</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 27.

<sup>61</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 182.

<sup>62</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 115



not many highlander officials who understood Vietnamese, the situation was direr among the general highlander population. Even for Ban Me Thuot district of Darlac province, which was where Ban Me Thuot, the capital of the highlands region was located, 99% of the highlander population was reported as not familiar with the Vietnamese language.<sup>63</sup> Pham Nhu Phien, who was the Government Delegate for the Central Highlands from 1957 onwards, recommended that

all government programs must be specially implemented for the highlands region because in this forested mountainous region, there are so many different tribes speaking so many different languages.<sup>64</sup>

Many administrative services, when staffed by Kinh personnel, were unable to properly carry out its duties. For example, Phien reported in November 1957 that Kinh cadres in the provincial Civil Affairs service (*Cong Dan Vu*)

working in highlander villages, where the majority of the population does not understand Vietnamese language, could not achieve any desirable results if they do not know the local languages.<sup>65</sup>

In May 1957, the province chief for Kontum reported that one of the major challenges encountered when attempting to reform agricultural practice among the highlanders was in fact the lack of manuals written in *tieng Thuong* (highlander languages) to help guide the highlanders.<sup>66</sup> The problem of Kinh people not understanding *tieng Thuong* was also responsible for disputes between the settlers and the locals. In June 1958, the province chief for Pleiku admitted in his report that the language barrier was indeed responsible for some of such disputes.<sup>67</sup> The fundamental problem created by the language barrier is perhaps best summed up by Pham Nhu Phien, who reported about the problem encountered when implementing the 'Popular Education' (*binh dan giao duc*) program among the population,

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<sup>63</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 182.

<sup>64</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 114.

<sup>65</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 114.

<sup>66</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 117.

<sup>67</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 185.

in Darlac, only a few 'Popular Education' classes for the highlanders could be organized because of shortage of highlander teachers fluent in Kinh language and lack of Kinh teachers fluent in *Thuong* languages.<sup>68</sup>

## Culture

A second challenge to government in the Central Highlands was cultural diversity, meaning that among the many groups of highlanders, and between the highlanders and Kinh, they have different cultural beliefs and practices. The province chief for Pleiku reported in May 1956,

differences between the Kinh and *Thuong* population are quite distinct. Implementation of social reforms among the Kinh are going well but met with much obstacles among the *Thuong* because of [different] beliefs, customs, reluctance to change, lack of concern for the future...etc.<sup>69</sup>

Different cultural practices meant that the government could not apply to the highlanders the same method of policy implementation used for the Kinh. The province chief of Darlac pointed out later in November 1956 that the highlanders were culturally,

honest [and] simple-mannered but easily swayed by people close to them. They always believe in their leaders and absolutely loyal to their village leaders, and would only listen to them. Winning over the villager leaders, we could believe that 9 out of 10 highlanders in that village are on our side.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, things perceived to be positive among the Kinh might not be seen as such by the highlanders. On the issue of schooling among the highlanders, Hoang Van Ngoc, province chief of Pleiku reported in April 1956 that the government must make more effort to provision for the highlander boarding schools because

for the highlanders, letting their children to go to school is considered as a sacrifice on the part of the parents. If [the government] could not provision

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<sup>68</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 290.

<sup>69</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 25.

<sup>70</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 27.

adequately for the highlander schools, then [the schools] will gradually face dissolution (*tan vo*). My administration wishes to bring to the attention of the higher authorities that this situation can be quite tricky. Parents of some students (in the Bahnar area) possessed the perception that schools are places that lead their children astray. In addition, penalties practiced in the past when parents refused to send their children to schools, such as fines in terms of a pig or money, corvee or even temporary incarceration, etc. - things which have already been abolished - have made the situation worse. As such, provisioning for the students in these schools is of utmost importance.<sup>71</sup>

Some readers may feel that Hoang Van Ngoc was simply looking at the highlanders from his ethnocentric or even racist point of view. Yet, we cannot deny that he noted a certain different cultural perception among the highlanders, which he felt the government should take into account when implementing policies. Thus, parents should not be punished when they did not send children to school. The government should provision for the school children to convince parents that their children were well looked after.

Cultural difference also made simple matters of compiling data about the highlander population a challenge. For example, Pham Nhu Phien reported that it was difficult to compile identification records (*ho tich*) of the highlanders because most of them did not know their age, being not accustomed to counting of years.<sup>72</sup> Nguyen Duy Nghe, province chief of Kontum in 1959, wrote that agricultural programs such as resettlement or introduction of new agricultural methods,

should not be done hastily but must respect the complex of customary taboos of the highlanders.<sup>73</sup>

This seems to hint that some Vietnamese government officials were perhaps willing to meet local practices halfway.

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<sup>71</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 29.

<sup>72</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 114. Compiling identification records was also a common problem among the Kinh population during the 1950s.

<sup>73</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 292.

## Unwilling And Incapable Cadres

Standardization of the administrative system and multiplication of administrative service in the highlands meant that there was a sudden demand for more officials who possessed the ability to perform the duties required of the bureaucracy as well as conversant in Vietnamese. Sending Vietnamese civil servants to the highlands was one option, but it came with its own set of problems. A report filed in September 1956 by the Government Delegate in the Central Highlands explained that not many Kinh cadres were willing to be posted to the highlands because the pay was not high and the working environment was simply 'not attractive' (*khong hap dan*).<sup>74</sup> Later, in December 1956, Pham Nhu Phien, when reviewing the medical services in the highlands, went straight to the heart of the matter,

the problem of medical service in the highlands region is naturally one very important matter. My administration seriously thinks that the Ministry of Health should send a delegation to the highlands to conduct field research for an extended period of time in order to draw out a detailed and long-term plan. As for the issue of personnel, my administration seriously thinks that doctors, who are supposed to possess the innate goodwill expected of the profession, should not have any reason to hesitate when posted to a province in the highlands region. Requisition of a few doctors to serve in the highlands for a short period of between six months to a year is only a temporary measure. I already have had the opportunity to meet and talk to a number of doctors posted to the highlands. *I observed that these doctors really look forward to the final day of their contract so that they could return to Saigon. Such a situation must be stopped [my emphasis].*<sup>75</sup>

In short, most Vietnamese officials were unwilling to be posted to the Central Highlands. Yet, serving in the highlands was one accelerated means to be promoted up the administrative echelon because of the small number willing to be posted to the region. After promotion, however, most officials preferred to be posted back to their home provinces in the lowlands.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 25.

<sup>75</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 25.

<sup>76</sup> Interview, Canberra, Australia, September 2005.

Unwilling officials was only one half of the problem relating to the issue of suitable Kinh cadres. The other half of the problem was the tendency for posting poor quality officials to the highlands. In November 1957, the province chief of Darlac pleaded with the central government to send better officials to the province,

it is regrettable that from the day we took over the administration of Darlac province, we have observed that whenever there was any exercise to expand the service and receive new personnel, it was essentially an 'opportunity' to receive trainees or personnel from other areas re-posted here because of disciplinary problems. We sincerely hope that the higher authorities will look into this matter and stop such a practice.<sup>77</sup>

If this situation did improve for the case of Darlac, the problem was not exactly nipped at the bud but was merely transferred to other new provinces that were just created. Quang Duc province, created in 1959, suffered just such a fate. The provincial capital of Quang Duc was created out of one of the first *Dinh Dien* established in 1957, namely Dak Nong, which was then renamed Gia Nghia. When I first visited Gia Nghia in 1999, it was still a rather sleepy town in comparison to other district centers in what was then known as Dak Lak province.<sup>78</sup> In 1959, one could imagine that the so-called provincial center was still surrounded by recently cleared tracts of land, newly established settlements and wild forests. Any attempt to develop an effective administration system was probably hampered by the practice of sending incapable personnel to the new province. Le Tan Thiet, province chief for Quang Duc, pleaded for better staff when he wrote,

we request the higher authorities and other ministries to please not transfer anymore personnel who are punished for disciplinary problems or short in capability and good will (*thien chi*). Instead, please appoint to the province outstanding cadres, especially those with a firm spirit (*tinh than vung chac*). Only then can we quickly develop Quang Duc province.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 115.

<sup>78</sup> Between 1975 and 2004, Dak Lak province was composed of what was under the First Republic, Darlac and Quang Duc. After 2004, Dak Lak was re-divided into Dak Lak and Dak Nong. The current Dak Lak province approximates what was previously Quang Duc under the First Republic. The division of Dak Lak province was first mooted in 1999. Field Interview, Dak Lak province, Vietnam, July 1999.

<sup>79</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 290.

The situation, however, was not totally bleak. There were Kinh officials who had settled well in the highlands and were genuinely putting effort in their administrative duties. Province chief of Darlac reported in September 1957 that among

Kinh civil servants, there are some who, having already been here for some time and had settled down with their family, were working positively. But for the majority, in terms of qualifications and experience, they are inferior when compared with the civil servants in the central lowlands, but having served the administration with good will and whole-heartedness, their service to the administration deserves praise.<sup>80</sup>

On the highlander officials, the same province chief reported,

many highlander civil servants serving in the administration are very positive but not much has changed in their way of doing things. In addition, language differences and limited understanding of the Vietnamese language have hindered the efficiency of their work.<sup>81</sup>

I am not sure what the province chief when he wrote 'there was not much change' in the highlander officials' way of doing things. He could mean that they were still following procedures under the French or that they were just simply incompetent. But he recognized that they were very positive in their attitude towards work and that highlander officials were not by nature less capable than Kinh officials. Language and training were the main factors affecting their ability to serve the administration.

### **Traders: Proxy Administrators**

The shortage of Kinh officials able to manage highlander affairs meant a reliance on existing 'middle men' to shoulder the work of government. Highlander officials were usually the ones dealing with things relating to the highlander population. But such officials were not always available and often the language barrier proved just as problematic. Quite often, at the lower echelons of the administrative hierarchy, this meant using the *lai buon* who were already familiar with the highlanders, as

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<sup>80</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 115.

<sup>81</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 115.

administrative 'middle men'. During the Nguyen Dynasty, frontier traders performed a similar role in the *cac-lai* system, where they were responsible for collecting tributes on behalf of the court.<sup>82</sup> In contrast to officials newly posted to the highlands, many of these traders were familiar with the people and geography of the area where they traded. In many ways, they were better equipped to convey the wishes of the authorities to the locals and vice-versa.

Bui Dinh describes one such *lai thuong* (or *lai buon*) in Ba To, who served as guide during his visit. Mr. Huan had already lived in Ba To for more than twenty years when Bui Dinh encountered him in the late 1950s. Huan was very fluent in the language of the local inhabitants, being mainly the Hre. While plying his trade, he had visited many Hre villages, made friends with many Hre, especially the *Ca Ra* (men of prowess), and learnt much about their culture and customs. Huan was appointed as an administration delegate (*phai vien hanh chanh*) by the district administration because he was deemed as someone who knew the area well and had good relations with the locals. He was essentially the 'bridge' (*nhip cau*) between the district and the highlander communes (*xa Thuong*).<sup>83</sup> Huan explained to Bui Dinh, how some of the traders like him managed to establish good relations with the locals. First, they managed to establish good friendship with the local *Ca Ra*, so that the people would also place trust in them. Second, once they established trading relations with the locals, they were often more than willing to provide credit to them. For example, during the months of *giap hat* (period between planting and harvest when food supply is low) when the highlanders were short in rice, they would 'loan' rice to the locals without charging them any interest. Normally, if a Hre borrow two *ang*<sup>84</sup> of rice from a *Ca Ra*, they were expected to repay three *ang* of rice. When these highlanders have goods to sell, which they could fetch a higher price if they sell to other traders, they would rather sell back to that particular trader who had loan them credit or rice, and at an even lower price! This way, a certain 'social alliance' was established between a trader and select groups of highlanders.<sup>85</sup> The traders naturally benefited a lot more than the highlanders from this supposed 'social alliance'. True enough, this kind of relationship between traders and

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<sup>82</sup> Georges Condominas, 'Aspects Of A Minority Problem In Indochina', *Pacific Affairs* 24 (1), pp 77-82, 1951, p 79.

<sup>83</sup> *Duong Len Xu Thuong*, pp 11-2.

<sup>84</sup> *ang* means a rough estimate of a certain quantity, for example a can of rice.

<sup>85</sup> *Duong Len Xu Thuong*, pp 13-4.

highlander villagers was often subjected to exploitation by the traders and was one of the administrative problems that the First Republic government tried to resolve.

The government of the First Republic recognized the utility of the traders in helping to extend the reach of the administration. The government also recognized that traders performed the important function of providing credit and essential goods such as salt to the highlanders. However, highlanders were often subjected to the mercy of the traders as well, having to purchase goods at exorbitant prices in comparison to the more urbanized town centers and could only sell their own goods to the traders at low prices. The province chief for Phu Yen reported the situation, in a document dated 1 August 1958,

exploiting the simple-mannered nature and traditional practice of trading only at home rather than going to market, common among the highlander compatriots, many of these traders purposely 'buy cheap and sell dear' (*mua re ban dat*) to the extent of 'squeezing' (*bop chet*) in order to compensate for the long-term (*lau dai*) credit often extended to the highlanders, and the labor (of the traders) for bringing the goods from midlands to the highlander villages.<sup>86</sup>

When the highlanders could not pay off whatever debt they owed the traders, the debt was extended. In other words, highlanders were often caught within the vicious cycle of debt and repayment in their relations with the traders. Traders as administrative proxy could at best be only a temporary measure for the local government because their means of living was basically trade. Furthermore, complaints of exploitation (*boc lot*) by traders had become common enough by the late 1950s that the government had to seek ways to resolve the situation.

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<sup>86</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16774.



## OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES: RESHAPING THE GOVERNMENT

### Language & Education

Critics of Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands under the First Republic often point out that highlanders were forced to give up learning in their mother tongues and had to learn Kinh language instead. As I recounted above, the language barrier was indeed a major challenge to state formation under the First Republic. One major aspect of the problem was that highlander officials and civilians did not understand the Kinh language. Teaching Vietnamese to the highlanders was seen as a major solution to the problem. Yet, the complementary half of the solution was in fact to teach highlander languages to Vietnamese officials serving in the highlands. Pham Nhu Phien recommended in December 1956,

on the issue of appointment of teachers, my administration recommends implementing a regulation that makes it compulsory that Kinh teachers must learn highlander languages, as well as highlander teachers must learn Kinh language. We should set in place a special salary allowance as incentive on this matter. Popularizing the national language in the highlander schools is an important issue. With respect to politics, it is natural that the education cadres serving in the highlands should be fluent in Kinh and highlander languages.<sup>87</sup>

Phien's recommendation was reiterated in a special reported dated 6 November 1958. He wrote,

in order for Kinh personnel in all administrative, military and specialized services in the Central Highlands to better understand the highlander compatriots, their aspirations, and keep up with the changes in their thinking, teaching highlander languages to Kinh cadres is just as necessary as teaching Kinh language to highlander compatriots, especially highlander cadres.<sup>88</sup>

Teaching Vietnamese to the highlanders did not necessarily mean that highlander students were denied opportunities to learn their mother tongues. In early

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<sup>87</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 25.

<sup>88</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 181.

1957, there was active discussion in the Ministry of Education on the methods for teaching Vietnamese to highlander students. A highlander delegate to the National Assembly, Ropa Hiar, together with some officials, suggested that the most efficient method was to teach the students directly in Vietnamese. Ropa Hiar himself was very fluent in Vietnamese and that was how he learnt the language. But the committee felt that Hiar's case was special because he started learning at a very young age from a Kinh teacher. The committee felt that because most teachers and pupils were highlanders who were not very fluent in Vietnamese language, it was best to start by learning to read and write in highlander languages, but also to start learning basic Vietnamese as well. After that, they could begin to learn basic grammar in Vietnamese and in the third stage, learn to read and write in Vietnamese.<sup>89</sup> In August 1957, when Huynh Cong Tinh, the inaugural director of NCTXHMT, presented his social program to help 'improve the highlanders' livelihood' (*cai tien dan sinh dong bao Thuong*), he proposed that the government should increase the number of schools in the rural areas where the curriculum was taught in Latinized local languages. He recommended it was absolutely unviable to teach Vietnamese immediately to the students. At the same time, the government should also attempt to expand the program to 'popularize education' among the adults so that they could learn some basic Vietnamese.<sup>90</sup>

Installing a new education system among the highlanders proved to be a major challenge on its own. Some officials, such as Hoang Van Ngoc, province chief for Pleiku in 1956, believed that highlanders and Kinh should not be segregated into schools for Kinh and Thuong respectively. Rather, all students should follow the national curriculum set by the ministry for education.<sup>91</sup> When the First Republic took over the education service from the French colonial administration (under the Crown Domain) in August 1955, the school curriculum was set according to the French, taught in French and by mainly French teachers. There were some highlander teachers, and some schools were teaching in Latinized highlander languages, but these were done from French to highlander languages.<sup>92</sup> Missionaries stationed in the highlanders had volunteered to help the government to develop education among the highlanders. But most of these missionaries were still using local language textbooks printed in dual

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<sup>89</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16645.

<sup>90</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16435.

<sup>91</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 29.

<sup>92</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 25.

French and Latinized highlander languages in the curriculum. In addition, these books were printed in France and were not designed according to any curriculum set by the Vietnamese government. Huynh Cong Tinh reported that this had led to serious disagreement between the provincial authorities in Kontum and the foreign missionaries stationed there.<sup>93</sup>

An additional problem when developing the national education system in the highlands was the issue of provisioning for the highlander schools. Province chief for Pleiku reported in April 1956,

apart from the village schools where the highlander compatriots themselves are responsible for living conditions of the students, there is only one primary school in Pleiku that has a dormitory but in a negligent (*cau tha*) state. The problem of everyday livelihood of the highlander students has not yet been resolved since the local budget was abolished. The Education directorate in the highlands must pay more attention to this problem.<sup>94</sup>

The situation in Darlac was not any better. With the exception of the school in the provincial center, which had a dormitory, most other schools were left with only a few students. Many had returned to their villages because the schools could not provision them with food and daily living necessities.<sup>95</sup>

Despite these initial challenges, the government certainly paid much attention to the problem and developed better education facilities for the highlanders. More schools were built and on 18 December 1957, the government even established a teacher training college (*truong su pham*) to train highlander teachers.<sup>96</sup> Highlander students, after leaving primary school were given entry to the secondary level, and were not expected to pay for living expenses in the dormitories. Highlander students were also provided with school uniforms, stationary and textbooks.<sup>97</sup> Table 4.1 illustrates the developments in education for highlander students between 1955 and 1959. By the end

<sup>93</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16440.

<sup>94</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 29.

<sup>95</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 27.

<sup>96</sup> Dorohiem, 'Van de phat trien giao duc mien Thuong' [The Problem Of Education Development In The Highlands Region], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (18), pp 6-16, 1969, p 11.

<sup>97</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16182; *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, pp 95-6.

of the First Republic, there were a total of 193 elementary and primary schools in operation, 494 secondary school students, 8,441 primary school students and 7,941 elementary school students in the highlands for the year 1963 alone. The NCTXHMT could claim that it had reduced illiteracy among the highlander population by 27%.<sup>98</sup> In comparison, there were only 38 elementary schools, 12 primary schools and 1 secondary school in 1954.<sup>99</sup>

**Table 4.1 Developments In Education For Highlander Students Between 1955 And 1959**

		Total as of 1955-56	Total as of 1956-57	Total as of 1957-58	Total as of 1958-59
Elementary	Schools	70	84	98	250
	Students	2,547	4,926	10,665	28,464
	Teachers	99	129	152	197
Primary	Schools	8	9	12	17
	Students	1,245	2,209	6,853	7,794
	Teachers	21	31	43	56
Secondary	Schools	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a
	Students	n.a	n.a.	97	205
	Teachers	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a

n.a. = not available.

Source: *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, pp 85,91, 93 & 97.

The government recognized that in order for Kinh officials to carry out the tasks of government in the Central Highlands, they must learn at least some basic highlander languages. Gerald Hickey reports that when Le Van Kim was in charge of the *Dinh Dien* program in 1957, Kim and some of his officials were learning Rhade, the dominant highlander language in the Buon Me Thuot region of Darlac province.<sup>100</sup> Hickey, however, made no mention of whether if this practice was applied elsewhere. It turns out that other provincial administrations and government services were also

<sup>98</sup> Le Dinh Chi, 'Van de dong bao son cuoc tai Viet Nam Cong Hoa' [The Problem Of Mountainous Region Compatriots In The Republic Of Viet Nam], Luan An Tien Si Luat Khoa, Cao Hoc Luat Cong Phap, 1969, p 185.

<sup>99</sup> 'Van de phat trien giao duc mien Thuong', p 8.

<sup>100</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 42.

organizing highlander language classes for Kinh personnel. In Kontum, the province chief reported in November 1958 that the Public Security Service (*Ty Cong An*) have been organizing Bahnar language classes for a while already.<sup>101</sup> In Tuyen Duc, the municipality of Dalat began teaching the local highlander language to Kinh officials starting on 14 May 1959.<sup>102</sup> By late 1959, the government had developed several dual language primers, in Kinh and a highlander language, namely Rhade, Bahnar and Koho, to help Kinh officials learn to speak the languages.<sup>103</sup> The introduction to each primer states,

[i]n order to effectively implement the objectives of the government, it is pertinent that we must pay attention to the issue of learning highlander languages because at the present situation highlander compatriots are not yet able to speak and write fluently in the national language. If we ourselves do not know the highlander languages, how can we expect our highlander compatriots to understand us and to understand the objectives of the government, in order for them to know that the objectives are beneficial to them so that we can all contribute our efforts to achieve the desired results?<sup>104</sup>

It may seem that this introductory statement found in each primer implies that the need to learn local languages will gradually disappear. That is probably what was envisioned in the long run sometime far away in the future. But for the present then, learning local languages was an important facet of government in the highlands. Each primer is more like an easy-to-use phrasebook than a detailed methodological study for learning a new language. Anyone who reads Vietnamese can easily pick out a particular topic and ask the questions in Rhade, Bahnar or Koho. The topics in the primer included the practice of agriculture; the village; asking about well-being of the family; about the anatomy of the human body; health and sickness; trade; clothing and weaponry; food; education; government administration; counting of time, day and week; roads and routes; Kinh

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<sup>101</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 183.

<sup>102</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 295.

<sup>103</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17089.

<sup>104</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Sach hoc tieng Thuong Rhade* [Rhade Highlander Language Textbook], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959, p 6.

culture; climate and seasons; advantages of government programs; and propaganda against communism.<sup>105</sup>

Probably not all officials were enthusiastic about learning highlander languages. In February 1960, the province chief for Darlac reflected that,

although the issue of learning highlander language has been promoted, it is only as a form of encouragement and not as a compulsory practice. As such, we still could not achieve the desired results.<sup>106</sup>

By November 1960, Ngo Dinh Diem issued the directive stating that,

all civil servants serving in the Central Highlands must learn a highlander language. Beginning from 21 November 1960, officials must attend half an hour of class during office hours and half an hour of class after office hours. Senior officials must attend these classes three times a week, while junior officials must attend these classes twice a week.<sup>107</sup>

Learning highlander languages among Kinh officials was institutionalized. Kinh officials were also encouraged to socialize more with fellow highlander officials in order to practice the language and to help the highlander officials practice Vietnamese. I did not come across any official statistics tabulating the results of this endeavor to make Kinh officials learn highlander languages. As will be seen later in Chapter Six, the government continued to emphasize the need for Kinh officials serving in the highlands to learn these languages in later proposals on improving the government of the highlands.

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<sup>105</sup> *Sach hoc tieng Thuong Rhade*; Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Sach hoc tieng Thuong Bahnar* [Bahnar Highlander Language Textbook], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959; Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Sach hoc tieng Thuong Koho* [Koho Highlander Language Textbook], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959.

<sup>106</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 378.

<sup>107</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 397.

## Culture: Civilization & Accommodation

I noted earlier the First Republic government saw as its moral duty to both 'civilize' and improve the living conditions of the highlanders. Terms such as '*cam hoa*' (reform), '*khai hoa*' (civilize) and '*cai tien*' (improve) appeared frequently in government documents on policies relating to the highlanders. In particular, the government was most concerned with doing away what it perceived as the many superstitious practices (*tap quan me tin di doan*) among the highlanders.<sup>108</sup> Measures adopted by the government to 'civilize' the highlanders oscillate between attempts to abolish certain practices and attempts to incorporate other practices.

There were certainly attempts to curb certain practices that were traditionally perceived as common or even culturally representative among the highlanders. Part of the *Cai Tien Dan Sinh* program included teaching the highlanders to maintain a clean and modern appearance. This included giving free haircuts to the highlanders at every available opportunity, such as during the government organized periodic markets (see below) and at schools. Training for highlander cadres (which I discuss in the next subsection) included learning how to cut hair, tailor clothes and maintain personal hygiene.<sup>109</sup> Highlanders were encouraged to wear modern (westernized) attire, such as short and long pants, shoes, and short and long-sleeved shirts. There was even one regulation that prevented Kinh people from producing traditional highlander fabric for sale in the market. This was meant to keep supply of these fabric limited so that highlanders would substitute the modern attire for the loincloth.<sup>110</sup> More controversial perhaps was the unilateral decision of Kontum officials to impose a fine of \$5 piasters on highlander woman for bearing their upper body when entering Kontum city.<sup>111</sup> This was, however, in contradiction to *Thong Tu* (Circular) 515-BPTT/VP issued on 28 February 1958, which directed all provincial administration to encourage highlanders to put on 'decent' attire when entering the towns and cities. It emphasized that this must be

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<sup>108</sup> *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong sau 5 nam chap hanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 66-71.

<sup>109</sup> *Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, Tap san ve cong cuoc dao tao can bo Thuong cua Chinh Phu Viet Nam Cong Hoa* [Periodical About The Task Of Training Highlanders Cadres By The Government Of The Republic Of Vietnam], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1960.

<sup>110</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17086.

<sup>111</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 292.

done with tact.<sup>112</sup> The directive certainly did not sanction the use of fines. Ksor Dun, a highlander leader writing in the mid-1960s, agreed that highlanders should learn to dress in a modern manner in order to keep up with the changing social situation. However, he felt that no highlander should be fined for not doing so. Instead they should only be encouraged and constantly reminded to do so. Furthermore, he felt it was best left to highlander leaders to implement this practice in order to avoid any accusation of discrimination.<sup>113</sup>

Another matter that the government tried to curb was what officials perceived as the over-indulgence in alcohol among the highlanders. There was an 'oral directive' (*khau linh*) from Ngo Dinh Diem (probably a verbal order that was written down and disseminated) telling all provinces to ensure that shops and traders in highlander areas did not sell any alcohol to the highlanders.<sup>114</sup> This, however, needs a bit of clarification. A report from the Ministry of Finance, dated 10 October 1958, reveals the government recognized that '*ruou can*' (wine in jar sipped through a straw) was part of the culture among all highlanders, which they drank in copious amounts during important festivals and when entertaining guests. The ministry felt that there was no need to prohibit the practice of drinking or brewing of the traditional alcohol among the highlanders. However, highlanders were not allowed to brew '*ruou*' (*ruou de* or *ruou trang*, rice spirit) in the style of the Kinh people, and merchants and traders were not allowed to sell such alcohol to the highlanders.<sup>115</sup> Distilled alcohol was probably the one aspect of Kinh culture deemed detrimental to highlanders.

Other aspects of Kinh culture, however, were introduced to the highlanders. As noted earlier, the highlander language primer for officials included sections explaining what Kinh culture was like. Provincial administration also went about organizing various important Kinh festivals, such as *Tet Nguyen Dan* (Lunar New Year) and *Tet Trung Thu* (Mid-Autumn Festival), for the highlanders so that they could understand what these festivals were about. The government also showed films at the district and commune centers to entertain the highlanders and other inhabitants. The program during

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<sup>112</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728.

<sup>113</sup> Dun Ksor, 'Van de an mac cua dong bao Thuong vung Cao Nguyen' [The Problem Of Attire Of The Highlander Compatriots In The High Plateau Region], *Hoa Dong* [Harmony] (90), p 90, 1966.

<sup>114</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728.

<sup>115</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16744.



such film shows included movies and propaganda material about the government's programs and documentaries about Kinh and highlander cultures. Both Kinh and highlanders inhabitants in the area were invited to attend the film shows.<sup>116</sup>

There were two rather controversial measures adopted by the government of the First Republic to overcome the cultural barrier. The first was the government's position on the highlander customary law courts (*toa an phong tục Thuong*). As noted earlier, French officials extended the customary law courts from the province level down to the commune level during the Crown Domain period. Under the First Republic, discussions at the higher echelons of government led to a suggestion to attempt to abolish the customary law courts.<sup>117</sup> Archival documents reveal that the training program for village and commune chiefs included one segment about this.<sup>118</sup> Provincial reports said that each administration was tasked to sound out how highlanders would react to any such move.<sup>119</sup> According to Nguyen Trac Di, however, no decree officially abolished the customary law court. Funding for the law courts certainly ceased. As a result, most of the customary law courts could not operate by the early 1960s. The main customary law court in Ban Me Thuot, however, continued to be active throughout the First Republic period.<sup>120</sup> In January 1958, Darlac province reported that although the *Toa An Hoa Giai Rong Quyen* (Court of Reconciliation with Extended Jurisdiction) in Ban Me Thuot was already established, disputes between highlanders continued to be referred to customary law court.<sup>121</sup> In April 1958, the same province reported that,

because of staffing and customary reasons, the customary law court must continue to operate for some time.<sup>122</sup>

In August 1958, the same province admitted that the customary law court was still active but it no longer carried the same degree of importance among the highlanders because the policy of unifying legal regulations had been well disseminated.

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<sup>116</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 184.

<sup>117</sup> 'Viec bai bo Toa An Phong Tuc Thuong duoi thoi chinh phu Ngo Dinh Diem', p 4.

<sup>118</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17356.

<sup>119</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 181.

<sup>120</sup> 'Viec bai bo Toa An Phong Tuc Thuong duoi thoi chinh phu Ngo Dinh Diem', p 4.

<sup>121</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 182.

<sup>122</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 182.

No funding for customary law courts did not mean that the government wanted to negate customary laws within the villages. Nguyen Trac Di notes that officials who participated in the discussion on abolishment of the customary law court agreed that there was a need to take into account local customary regulations.<sup>123</sup> For instance, he points out that *Thong Tu* 2063/BNV/NC, dated 17 March 1959, directed

all actions by highlanders not considered as a crime by highlander customs, for example, not wearing clothes, wearing loincloth, drunkenness, etc. cannot be punished (*khong the trung phat duoc*).

It further directed all provinces to immediately stop any regulation that penalized the highlanders with monetary fines for such actions.<sup>124</sup> As a matter of fact, *Thong Tu* 804/TTP/DL dated 10 October 1958 directed that 'all matters concerning collection of money from highlander compatriots must seek the permission of the president first'.<sup>125</sup> Even up till 1960, the government still referred to the customary law courts to govern the behavior among the highlanders. For example, when domestic animals owned by highlanders wandered into the runway at Eakmat in Darlac and trampled into the nurseries operated by Eakmat agricultural station, the owners (highlanders) of the animals were referred to the customary law court instead of being penalized by the civil courts.<sup>126</sup>

A second controversial measure involves a document entitled '*Ke Hoach Dong Hoa Kinh Thuong*', which was proposed in February 1959 when Major Ngo Van Hung became director of the NCTXHMT. The title of the proposal '*dong hoa Kinh Thuong*' could be interpreted as 'assimilation' of the highlanders, but a proper translation is 'making the same of the Kinh and Thuong', 'evening out Kinh and Thuong' or 'assimilate Kinh and Thuong' (as one people). This proposal was most probably made in the aftermath of the Bajaraka movement. It proposed rather drastic measures, which would have amounted to assimilation of the highlanders, had all the measures been faithfully adopted. There is no further documentary follow-up of this proposal in the archive to suggest that all measures suggested in the proposal were implemented. There

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<sup>123</sup> 'Viec bai bo Toa An Phong Tuc Thuong duoi thoi chinh phu Ngo Dinh Diem', p 6.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p 7.

<sup>125</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11682.

<sup>126</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 397.

were three segments in the proposal, divided into language, livelihood and ethnicity. On language, the proposal strongly recommended that the government must ban all books written in dual Latinized highlander languages and foreign languages by the French and other foreign missionaries. These books continued to maintain for the highlanders a means of identification with the French or missionaries rather than with the Vietnamese nation. The education curriculum must follow one set by the national government rather than one designed by the French or foreign missionaries. Kinh officials, on the other hand, must learn Thuong language in order to perform their government duties properly. The proposal also recommended that the government gradually implement the policy of Vietnamizing names of individuals and places. On livelihood, the proposal recommended the government to continue encouraging highlanders to adopt clothing, culinary and agricultural practices like the Kinh. The government should also create more opportunities for Kinh and highlanders to interact and learn about each other. Thus, the government organized for the highlanders, visits to cities and towns in the lowlands; and vice versa for the Kinh people. Some Vietnamese who attended high school during the Diem era still recall such visits to the highlands organized by the schools.<sup>127</sup> Highlander students were encouraged to study in Kinh schools rather than be segregated into highlander schools. Kinh settlers were encouraged to settle among or near the highlander villages. Highlanders, on the other hand, were encouraged to migrate into the towns or cities, and even to the lowlands. The proposal recommended highlander cadres to be posted to the urban or lowland areas apart from serving in the highlands. Finally, it suggested the government should encourage intermarriage between Kinh and highlanders. These measures, it was believed, would soften the ethnic boundaries between Kinh and highlanders and create one common people living in the Republic.<sup>128</sup>

Banning of French or missionary produced highlander language textbooks, Vietnamization of names of highlander individuals and places, re-deployment of highlander cadres to the lowlands, adoption of practices contrary to traditional way of life, and changes to the traditional agricultural system were measures that critics see as forcing highlanders to assimilate into Kinh culture. Yet, teaching in highlander language was never something banned by the government. On the contrary, it was deemed as

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<sup>127</sup> Interview, Canberra, Australia, May 2006.

<sup>128</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17069.

necessary for the education of highlander school children. Even Kinh officials were to learn the language. Adopting a style of living similar to the Kinh did not necessarily mean becoming Kinh. Even Kinh people were adopting many western introduced practices, for example wearing of hats, pants and long/short-sleeve shirts. Sedentary agriculture and the use of mechanical tools, chemical fertilizers, irrigation pumps and improved seedlings were not exclusive Kinh practices. Posting highlander officials to urban or lowland areas did not necessarily make anyone more Kinh. Both highlanders and Kinh settlers seldom used Vietnamized names of places and individuals in everyday life. Only in areas mainly populated by Kinh, such as the refugee resettlement villages and Kinh only *Dinh Dien* centers, were the Vietnamized names really used.

Overcoming the cultural barrier did not mean negating existing cultural practices among the highlanders. Rather, there were conscientious attempts to learn what these cultural constraints were. In order to implement programs to '*khai hoa*' and '*cai tien dan sinh*' for the highlanders, provincial administrations and the NCTXHMT sent out officials to study highlanders. For example, in May 1958, Phu Yen province of the Trung Nguyen Trung Phan region submitted a very detailed report on the cultural practices among the highlanders living within the administrative boundary of the province.<sup>129</sup> The NCTXHMT went about to collect some basic ethnographic data about the cultures and customs of the highlanders. The resulting booklet included basic descriptions of the lifestyles, taboos and social organizations of the various ethnic groups in the highlands. Initially, it circulated internally among officials serving in the highlands but was officially published in 1959.<sup>130</sup> The booklet did contain many of the common biases found among Kinh officials, but it was nonetheless an attempt to know what were the taboos among the highlanders in order to avoid antagonizing them, and how officials could begin to introduce social reforms in the highlands. Through the booklet, officials at least gained a basic knowledge about the inhabitants in the highlands. Perhaps the background briefing provided by the district chief of Ba To, a Kinh official, about highlanders in his district is illustrative of this ambiguity. He reported that the ethnic Hre living in the high areas (*vung cao*),

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<sup>129</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>130</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Phong tục tập quán đồng bào Thuong* [Customs And Practice Of Highlander Compatriots], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959.

do not have any wet-rice fields (*ruong*) [and] only work on their swiddens situated along the slopes year round. As such, the Hre in the high areas do not live in a fixed location like the Hre in the lower areas. Usually after 2 to 3 years they have to move to another hill nearby to burn their swidden, then they will return in 5 to 10 years time, after the old swidden has regenerated.<sup>131</sup>

His description of the swidden cycle is perfectly in accordance with how these Hre people practice it and how anthropologists would describe it. It is a telling example of Kinh officials learning to understand how highlanders live. Understanding how a swidden system work does not entail accepting the system as good. However, a detailed examination of how the government attempted to regulate the practice of swidden in Chapter Six reveals that for all the discomfort it had for this system, swiddening was in fact accepted as a temporary and necessary 'evil'.

### **Cadres: Kinh & Thuong**

Two main solutions were adopted to overcome the two challenges of shortage of officials and the phenomenon of 'unwilling officials'. The first was to provide some incentives for civil servants posted to the highlands. This included a supplementary allowance to civil servants posted to the Central Highlands that was 25% more than officials in the lowlands received; houses for civil servants serving in the provincial centers and districts; and a rotational posting system.<sup>132</sup> Such incentives were justified because serving in the highlands was a 'hardship' posting because the 'highlands region has a bad climate and is both remote and distant' (*vung Thuong khi hau xau va xa xuai heo lanh*).<sup>133</sup> This set of preferential treatment apparently only referred to officials posted from other places to the highlands, and invariably Kinh. The government also took into account the salary benefits for the highlander officials. In August 1956, Y Ut, Nie Buon Rit, Quang Dai Minh, Ropa Hiar, Kre, and Rmah Pok, all being national assembly delegates for the highlanders and Cham, wrote to Ngo Dinh Diem and 'proposed' that highlander and Kinh civil servants should have the same salary scheme. During the Crown Domain period, highlander officials were placed under the secretary payroll (*ngach tham su*) because they were mainly assisting French residents and

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<sup>131</sup> *Duong Len Xu Thuong*, pp 8-9.

<sup>132</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 290.

<sup>133</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 181.

officials in the administration. By 1956, Kinh officials under the Republic were already placed under the national payroll (*ngach quoc gia*) as full status civil servants. As such, highlander officials were receiving less pay than the Kinh counterparts.<sup>134</sup> Senior provincial officials were aware of the problem. In March 1958, province chief of Darlac reported,

with regards to highlander civil servants [who had served the administration] from the past till the present, their benefits regime has been inferior when compared to Kinh personnel. I feel that this is unfair to them. In order to encourage them to work more diligently and to resolve any potential uneasiness, my province propose that highlander civil servants be granted the same benefits regime as Kinh civil servants.<sup>135</sup>

In October 1956, the central government had already decided to place civil servants serving in the highlands (formerly Crown Domain officials) into the national payroll. This decision included casual officials, meaning highlanders serving the administration paid on the daily basis (*cong nhat*). The transition was expected to complete in several phases sometime in late 1957.<sup>136</sup> An obstacle to completing this transition was that many highlander officials had been appointed to their current position even though they did not possess the required paper qualifications. Thus, in early 1958, the province chief of Darlac still noted the same disparity in some cases. The simmering Bajaraka movement helped to speed up the effort to place highlander and Kinh officials in the same pay scheme. In September 1958, Pham Nhu Phien reported,

my administration wishes to bring up again the issue of unequal rights and salary between Kinh and highlander civil servants. The salary of the canton administrator, which is based on the old payroll scheme, is lower than the Commune Council member, which is based on the new payroll scheme. This situation has caused some dissatisfaction among a number of highlander canton administrators and could produce undesirable effects, especially with the emergence of the movement for highlander autonomy recently. My

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<sup>134</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16182.

<sup>135</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 182.

<sup>136</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16182.

administration has submitted a special report on this matter and proposed that we increase the allowance of the canton administrators.<sup>137</sup>

In January 1959, Pham Nhu Phien, Government Delegate for the Central Highlands region, recommended all highlander civil servants be immediately placed in the national payroll despite the variation in paper qualifications between them and similarly ranked Kinh officials.<sup>138</sup>

President Ngo Dinh Diem believed that Kinh and highlanders have equal stature as citizens and officials in the republic. Whatever work a Kinh official could do, any highlander with similar capability could perform that function.<sup>139</sup> In fact, *Thong Tu* 1369-BPTT/VP/M, issued on 9 May 1958 (which was before the Bajaraka movement became public) stated that

Kinh and highlanders cadres must possess the same qualifications and ability [suitable to the appointment], and highlander personnel are also to serve in any region within the country.<sup>140</sup>

By 1959, this meritocracy ideal was somewhat compromised by the need to have highlander officials serving in the highlands provincial governments. On the one hand, highlander officials who did not possess the required qualifications continued to remain in their posts. Even in late 1956 when the government recognized that highlander officials might not have the appropriate training or qualifications for their appointments, it was not about to replace them with Kinh officials. Two *Thong Tu* (1704 and 2157-BPTT/VP) dated 5 November and 15 December 1956 respectively, directed provincial authorities to provide extra training for these highlander officials.<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, Kinh officials were given extra incentives to attract them to the highlands.

A second solution to resolve the problem of shortage of officials serving in the highlands was to train more highlander cadres. The government adopted a three-prong

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<sup>137</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 181.

<sup>138</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 290.

<sup>139</sup> *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 13; see also Chapter Two of this thesis.

<sup>140</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728.

<sup>141</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 1501.

approach. First, the government provided training for existing appointed village chiefs. The NCTXHMT organized training sessions lasting about ten days in the highlander districts. Trainers provided by the NCTXHMT included three cadres fluent in the local highlander language and two representatives from the provincial administration, one highlander and one Kinh. The first part of the training program consisted of distribution of clothes ('modern attire'), haircuts and a ceremony. Over the next nine days, the village leaders learned about the role and responsibilities of a village chief and the village council, the task of developing the village, the importance of education for children, regulation of swidden of cultivation and development of modern agricultural practices, the policy against superstitious practices, the policy about customary law courts, health care and disease prevention, and the denunciation of communism (*To Cong*). Through this approach, the government hoped to incorporate highlander villager elders or respected villagers as cadres.

Second, the government attempted to enlist as many highlander youths as possible to serve as ground level cadres. A Training Center for Highlander Cadres (*Trung Tam Huan Luyen Can Bo Thuong*) was established in July 1957 for this purpose.<sup>142</sup> The center was initially set up in Dalat but later was moved to Hue. These cadres were known as 'highland social work cadres' (*can bo cong tac xa hoi Thuong*) and consisted entirely of highlanders.<sup>143</sup> Trainees enlisted into the center ranged between 20 and 35 years old. A receiving station at Hue gave the students a 'make-over' of haircut and attire, and provided orientations to familiarize them with life in the center and in the lowlands. Trainees were organized into squads, platoons and company like in the military hierarchy. The training was divided into three phases, each lasting two months. The first phase focused on reforming everyday living conditions in the highlands, such as hygiene, sports, cooking, artisan skills, attire, haircuts, Vietnamese language, and basic military skills. In the second phase, the trainees were sent to the field for to learn to plough and do other modern agricultural techniques already adopted by the Kinh, to study animal husbandry, construct basic facilities expected of a model village, and learn administrative skills. For the third phase, the trainees returned to the center for theory lessons concerning the government's highlander policy, agrarian

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<sup>142</sup> n.a., 'Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh tai Cao Nguyen Trung Phan' [The Task Of Improving People's Livelihood In The Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (40), pp 5 & 7, 1957.

<sup>143</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16435.



programs for highlanders, administrative structures, arithmetic skills, and security measures. The center also provided separate training for medical and nursing cadres. Such training, however, were mainly provided for female highlander cadres.<sup>144</sup> The social roles of all these cadres were clearly stated,

these youths, full of ardor, trained as highland social work cadres, are pioneers bringing the light of civilization to the highlands region. The government's task of improving the livelihoods of highlanders have brought about much positive results, mainly due to the contributions of these pioneer youths. In the not too distant future, we believe that highlander society will be able to catch up with the lowlands.<sup>145</sup>

In addition, the government also provided training for highlander agricultural cadres at the two major agricultural training centers, one being the National Agricultural and National School of Agriculture, Forestry, and Animal Husbandry in Blao and the other being the Eakmat Center For Agriculture, Forestry and Animal Husbandry in Darlac.<sup>146</sup> At the training centers, highlander students were not required to take any entrance examinations and were given scholarships in order to complete the course. Entrance requirements for highlander students were further relaxed such that they did not need to possess the necessarily qualifications or meet the age requirement in order to study at the centers.<sup>147</sup> Table 4.2 shows the number and types of highlander cadres trained by the First Republic.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> *san ve cong cuoc dao tao can bo Thuong cua Chinh Phu Viet Nam Cong Hoa.*

<sup>145</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no.17362.

<sup>146</sup> n.a., 'Cao Nguyen Tien Bo: Gioi thieu Trung Tam Thuc Nghiem Nong Lam Suc Cao Nguyen Eakmat' [Advancement In The High Plateau: Introducing Eakmat Center For Agro-Forestry And Husbandry Animal Experimentation In The High Plateau], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (6), pp 54-55 & 57, 1967; Bo Canh Nong, *Trung Tam Thuc Nghiem Nong San Bao Loc* [The Centre For Agricultural Produce Experiment In Bao Loc], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Bo Canh Nong, 1960.

<sup>147</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16182.

<sup>148</sup> 'Van de dong bao son cuoc', p 186.

**Table 4.2 Highlander Cadres Trained By The First Republic**

	Total as of 1956	Total as of 1957	Total as of 1958	Total as of 1959
<b>Village Administration</b>	335	335	921	4,430
<b>Social Work</b>	93	93	447	1,705
<b>Information</b>	99	690	1,512	1,552
<b>Militia</b>	12	414	2,444	2,480
<b>Teachers</b>	65	104	161	274
<b>Medics</b>	n.a	7	121	193
<b>Animal Husbandry</b>	n.a	n.a	30	30
<b>Agriculture</b>	n.a	n.a	n.a	240
<b>Mid-wives</b>	n.a	n.a	n.a	25

n.a. = not available

Source: *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, pp 111 &125.

The third approach was to provide training at the National Institute of Administration (*Hoc Vien Hanh Chanh Quoc Gia*). The institute was essentially a training center for future high officials.<sup>149</sup> According to Gerald Hickey, the school provided special training for highlander officials beginning in 1955. Some highlander civil servants, who continued to be active after the fall of the First Republic, such as Y Dhuat Nie Kdam, Y Chon Mlo Duon Du, Rcom Rock, Pierre Yuk, Touneh Han Dang and Touneh Yoh attended this specialized training between 1955-58.<sup>150</sup> Munih Chuh Tronang reports that a total of 71 highlander officials (consisting of trainees from the Central Highlands, the Cham people and refugees from the northern highlands) graduated from the special classes conducted by the institute.<sup>151</sup> Hickey reports that Ngo Dinh Diem abolished the separate training for highlander civil servants at the National Institute of Administration after the Bajaraka affair.<sup>152</sup> In 1962, Y Hubb Eban wrote to the Ministry of Interior to intervene on behalf of highlander officials with the president to promote experienced and qualified highlander officials into more senior positions such as chief of province, director of services and senior military ranks. He also pleaded that some very experienced highlander officials, who had served in the provincial government for almost twenty years were still not placed under the national payroll

<sup>149</sup> *Vietnam: Politics And Public Administration*, p 349.

<sup>150</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 9.

<sup>151</sup> Munih Chuh Tronang, 'Van de dao tao can bo hanh chanh cap chi huy nguoi Thuong' [The Problem Of Training Highlander Cadres At The Commander's Level], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (2), pp 10-13, 1966, p 12.

<sup>152</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 59.

simply because they did not possess the necessary certificates.<sup>153</sup> Despite such proposals by highlander officials and earlier attempts to strike a balance between ethnic representation and meritocracy in the government of the highlands, no highlander officials were appointed to head a province or directorate under the First Republic. In fact, most province chiefs were senior military officers. Coincidentally, there were very few highlanders who were senior military officers under the First Republic.

### **Traders: Regulations & Markets**

Traders performed a useful role in helping to bridge the administrative gap between government and highlanders. They also performed the useful function of middlemen, bringing outside goods to complement the needs of highlanders, while bringing out things produced or collected by highlanders to other people. However, traders were also known to exploit highlanders by overcharging them and were often suspected of supplying provisions to the communist insurgents. One of the mandates tasked to the NCTXHMT was to ensure that highlanders living in outlying areas could also gain access to additional food, daily necessities and medicines in times of need. In addition, the government also felt that highlanders could benefit from learning the workings of the market so that they could get their worth for whatever products they have to sell. On 22 August 1957, the NCTXHMT implemented two measures to systematize trade between highlanders and outsiders and prevent traders from exploiting highlanders.

First, the NCTXHMT proposed that provincial governments establish periodic markets (*cho phien*) at suitable locations for highlanders living in the surroundings. The authorities were tasked to inform highlanders and traders on when and where a periodic market was in operation and to ensure that prices were fair. Prices for goods brought in by traders were to be clearly tagged and inspected by officials to ascertain that these goods were not over-priced. Highlanders, however, were allowed to auction their goods to the highest bidder. Officials were also tasked to guide highlanders on the use of money at these markets to ensure that they were not short-changed. The NCTXHMT hoped that this could gradually guide the highlanders to participate actively in the

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<sup>153</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17819.

market economy. These periodic markets also served as an occasion to implement programs to improve the living conditions of the highlanders. Authorities provided medical treatment and supplies, haircuts, and showed films to entertain the highlanders during market days. Authorities also made use of such occasions to collect data about the highlanders, issue identity cards and official permits, and receive requests from the highlanders.<sup>154</sup> Figure 4.5 shows the operation of one such periodic market.

Second, the NCTXHMT proposed that traders plying in the highlanders be subjected to regulation by the government to ensure that they did not exploit the highlanders and were not supplying provisions to the communist insurgents. Existing traders operating in the province were registered and had their background checked to ensure they were not *than cong* (sympathetic to the communists). They were then organized into teams and assigned a particular area where they could ply their trade. The amount of goods and prices of the goods traded in each particular trip were subjected to inspection. In return, the government supplied them with capital, facilities (such as periodic markets and transport) and secure trade routes. These traders were directed to sell to the highlanders, goods at the lowest possible market prices.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16770.

<sup>155</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16770.

Figure 4.5 Periodic Market In The Highlands



Source: PTTDeNhat File no. 16730.

## REFUGEES: PRELUDE TO DINH DIEN

I described earlier the three main groups of people on the Central Highlands frontier, namely old inhabitants, officials and the frontier traders. Another group was the newcomer settlers, which between 1955 and 1957 was composed of mainly refugees. The government in the south had to deal with the massive exodus of refugees (*di dan ty nan*) from the north, which under the Geneva Agreements were allowed to migrate to the non-communist South. These refugees are today colloquially referred to as the '54 northern migrants (*di dan Bac '54*). The government resettled some of the refugees in the Central Highlands beginning in late 1955. These settlements, known as *Trai Dinh Cu* (settlement camp), were meant to provision for the long-term integration of the refugees into the social sphere of the south under the republic. As often put in the Vietnamese language, this essentially meant to be able to '*an cu lac nghiep*' (to live in peace and be content with one's occupation) on the frontier. The government gave prime consideration to the viability of the settlements when resettling refugees in the Central Highlands. Only when the settlers set up a new home in the highlands, then could the government establish a presence in the highlands. The records show that most of the settlements were integrated into local administration within two years. In contrast, it would take an extended period and only after considerable effort, to establish a sense of government among the old inhabitants because of administrative challenges I discussed earlier. Yet, viability of the newcomers' settlements meant that familiar features typical of the majority Kinh settlements in the lowlands were never faithfully reproduced on the frontier. On the frontier, settlers had to adapt to the new environment.

Existing analyses explain that a combination of anti-communist sentiments among the would-be refugees, mainly the Catholics, and propaganda spread by American agents triggered the exodus of almost a million people in northern Vietnam to the south between 1954 and 1955.<sup>156</sup> The General Commissariat for Refugees, known in Vietnamese as the *Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan* (PTUDC), was established on 27 August 1954, to manage refugees coming to the south.<sup>157</sup> In Hanoi, PTUDC established thirty-

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<sup>156</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man In Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem: Religion, Race And U.S. Intervention In Southeast Asia, 1950-57*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004, pp 131-33.

<sup>157</sup> Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ti Nan, *Cuoc di cu lich su tai Viet Nam* [The Historical Migration Movement In Vietnam], Saigon: Cong Hoa Viet Nam, 1958, pp 68-9; Bui Van Luong, 'The Role Of Friendly Nations' in *Vietnam: The First Five Years*, pp 50-51.

three refugee reception centers in schools and public buildings, and French troops provided two military tents, able to hold 10,000 and 15,000 people respectively, as temporary holding centers for the refugees. Initially the French military provided transport for the refugees, mainly by air and sea, but number of refugees grew too much for them to handle. Ngo Dinh Diem requested help from the United States government, which dispatched ships to transport the refugees.<sup>158</sup>

Airplanes making a total of 4,280 trips transported 213,635 people to the south. Vietnamese, American, British, Taiwan and Polish ships together transported another 555,037 people. Many refugees crossed to the south by themselves.<sup>159</sup> According to PTUDC, more people crossed into the south after the 300-day period and by June 1957, there were some 888,503 refugees in the south.<sup>160</sup> This number excludes those who crossed to the south on their own and those who did not seek the help of PTUDC to settle down in the south. While Catholic communities from north have chosen to migrate to the South, such as from Phat Diem and therefore forming the majority of the refugees, there were also refugees of other faith, namely the Buddhists.<sup>161</sup> Among the refugees were also some 15,000 northern highland people, consisting of ethnic Nung, Thai, Muong, and Man. Most of the refugees were farmers who had given up their farmlands in the north. These refugees chose to abandon their homelands in the north and migrated to the south. For the government of the First Republic, these people, mainly Kinh, formed a loyal group of anti-communist citizens who possessed a familiar culture for government in comparison to the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands. Table 4.3 shows the composition of refugees in terms of ethnicity, religion and profession.

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<sup>158</sup> Commissariat of Refugees, *The Exodus Of The Northern Vietnamese*, Republic of Vietnam: Commissariat of Refugees, 1956; PTTDeNhat, File no. 18962.

<sup>159</sup> *The Exodus Of The Northern Vietnamese*; PTTDeNhat, File no. 18962.

<sup>160</sup> Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan, *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong* [Activities Of The Commissariat For Refugees In The Third Year Of President Ngo's Administration], 7/7/1957, pp 1-2.

<sup>161</sup> Commissariat of Refugees, *Why Have 800,000 Refugees Left North Vietnam?*, Republic of Vietnam: Commissariat of Refugees, 1956; PTTDeNhat, File no. 18962.

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<sup>158</sup> Commissariat of Refugees, *The Exodus Of The Northern Vietnamese*, Republic of Vietnam: Commissariat of Refugees, 1956; PTTDeNhat, File no. 18962.

<sup>159</sup> *The Exodus Of The Northern Vietnamese*; PTTDeNhat, File no. 18962.

<sup>160</sup> Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan, *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong* [Activities Of The Commissariat For Refugees In The Third Year Of President Ngo's Administration], 7/7/1957, pp 1-2.

<sup>161</sup> Commissariat of Refugees, *Why Have 800,000 Refugees Left North Vietnam?*, Republic of Vietnam: Commissariat of Refugees, 1956; PTTDeNhat, File no. 18962.



**Table 4.3 Composition Of Refugees (Only Those Managed By PTUDC) By Ethnicity And Religion And Profession**

		Numbers	Percentage
Ethnicity	<i>Kinh</i>	873,709	98.3
	<i>Nung</i>	13,306	1.49
	<i>Muong</i>	900	0.1
	<i>Man</i>	588	0.07
Profession	<i>Agriculture</i>	666,377	75
	<i>Fishery</i>	88850	10
	<i>Others</i>	133,276	15
Religion	<i>Catholics</i>	755,227	85
	<i>Buddhists &amp; Protestants</i>	133,276	15
<b>Total as of June 1957</b>		<b>888,503</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 3.

The most pressing problem upon receiving the refugees was the question of resettling them in permanent and stable communities. Between July 1954 and mid-1955, Ngo Dinh Diem's government was still embroiled in its own struggle of trying to find a foothold in the politically unstable south. With much of the Mekong Delta area still under the control of French and Vietnamese landlords, and the Central Highlands under the Crown Domain, most of the refugees were placed in temporary holding centers set up in public schools in the Saigon area and some who arrived by ships were placed in the holding centers in Rach Gia and Bien Hoa.<sup>162</sup> The PTUDC established permanent settlement sites in the later part of 1955 in Mekong Delta and outskirts of Saigon. Some of these refugees - all of the northern highland people and some Vietnamese - were eventually resettled in the Central Highlands after the Crown Domain was abolished. By late 1956, the PTUDC established 34 settlement camps (*trai dinh cu*) for 45,365 people in the Central Highlands, and by July 1957 the number of camps had increased to 50 with 64,342 people.<sup>163</sup> Table 4.4 shows the number of camps set up to permanently settle the refugees in the Central Highlands. Most of the refugees originating from the northern highlands were resettled in the Central Highlands, mainly in Tuyen Duc province.<sup>164</sup> In total, PTUDC resettled approximately 50,000 Kinh refugees in the highlands, adding to the existing estimated 30,000 Kinh already living in the highlands.

<sup>162</sup> *The Exodus Of The Northern Vietnamese*.

<sup>163</sup> *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 5.

<sup>164</sup> 'Dan so dong bao Thuong Du Bac Viet di cu tai mien nam nuoc Viet'.

**Table 4.4 Resettlement Camps And Population**

	<b>Camps</b>	<b>Population (9/1956)</b>
<b>Pleiku</b>	4	484
<b>Darlac</b>	15	14,725
<b>Tuc Trung, Gia Kiem &amp; Long Khanh</b>	5	6,770
<b>Tuyen Duc</b>	18	15,456
<b>Lam Dong</b>	8	12,796
<b>Total in September 1956</b>		<b>54,551</b>
<b>Total in July 1957</b>		<b>62,342</b>

Source: *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 5; Tran Van Dinh, 'Tim hieu cac cong cuoc dinh cu dan chung Viet Nam trong qua khu' [Understanding The Work Of Settling Vietnamese People In The Past], *Tap San Quoc Phong* [National Defense Journal] (45), pp 22-47, 1974, p 33.

The procedure for resettling the refugees involved three main stages.<sup>165</sup> The first stage concerned mainly reconnaissance for suitable sites. This involved the search for areas that were capable of accommodating the refugees according to their professions. For example, land meant for resettling farming communities must be suitable for cultivation, especially of rice; favorable points along coastline for fishermen; and areas near to cities or population centers were targeted for artisans. The PTUDC formed land survey committees, consisting of experts and refugee representatives, which were sent to the provinces to find suitable resettlement locations. In June 1956, Ton That Hoi, then Government Delegate for the Central Highlands (*Dai Bieu Chanh Phu Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*) reported to the President that he had already discussed with a few of the plantation owners in Darlac province on the issue of retrieving the uncultivated portion of the lands under their concessions for resettlement of some the refugees. He reported on two possible locations that could be reserved for resettling the refugees. The first location was about 9,200 hectares, left uncultivated within the concession owned by CHPI (French owners). It was near the provincial center, Ban Me Thuot, and situated between the two main roads leading towards Buon Ho and Mewal. Hoi estimated that this location could accommodate up to 10,000 settlers. The second location was about 4,656 hectares within the concession owned by CADA, situated along the main road leading to Ninh Hoa. Hoi estimated that the area could accommodate more than 3,000 settlers.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>165</sup> 'The Role Of Friendly Nations', pp 51-2.

<sup>166</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 9978.

**Table 4.5. Resettlement Of Northern Highlander Refugees**

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Areas Of Resettlement</b>
Nung, Tay, Thai	13,306	Tung Nghia, Song Pao, Phan Ri
Muong	900	Tuc Trung, Pleiku, Hoang An
Man	588	Ban Me Thuot

Source: Ngo Duc Trach, 'Dan so dong bao Thuong Du Bac Viet di cu tai mien nam nuoc Viet' [Northern Highlander Migrant Population In Southern Viet Nam], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (15), pp 48-50 & 56, 1968, p 49.

The second stage involved the movement of the refugees from their temporary holding grounds, mainly in Saigon to the selected site. Between 200-600 families, often belonging to the same village in their place of origins, or belonging to the same religious faith, were relocated to a single site although there were often exceptions. The government resettled northern highlander refugees according to their ethnic groups. Table 4.5 illustrates their location according to ethnicity. The third stage mainly involved the more complicated process of organizing the refugees into permanent communities on the sites. This involved the setting up of temporary housing and later the construction of permanent housing by the refugees themselves using materials and tools provided by the PTUDC. PTUDC also provided agricultural tools, daily ration subsidies and plow-animals (which were to be re-paid in installments later on. The PTUDC also helped to establish public amenities such as medical stations, schools and administration offices, while the refugees helped to construct roads, bridges and drill wells. The PTUDC provisioned for all these supports in the first nine months, after which each settlement was supposed to survive on its own without further subsidies or aid from the government.<sup>167</sup> In addition, the PTUDC also set up orphanages for children who were separated from their parents.<sup>168</sup>

With regards to refugees classified in the agricultural profession, the viability of the settlements in the long run meant having land suitable for the settlers to plant their crops. The PTUDC used machinery to clear the land to establish the main living area of the settlement and sufficient land for immediate cultivation of subsistence crops by the

<sup>167</sup> X.Y.Z., 'Viet Nam tu do tren duong xay dung chuong trinh dinh cu Pleiku' [Free Vietnam On The Road Of Establishing The Settlement Program In Pleiku], *Cai Tien* [Improvement] (3), 1956, p 19.

<sup>168</sup> *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 13.

refugees. The refugees had to adapt to the different agricultural environment in the highlands and had to learn to cultivate other crop types apart from wet-rice, the crop they were most familiar with while in the north. The PTUDC also took on the responsibility of finding the suitable crop types and distributing seeds to the settlers for free. Table 4.6 shows the amount of land cleared and types of crop planted by the refugee settlements in the Central Highlands. Once the new settlements were able to survive based on their own production output and the administrative operations were up and running, these settlements were 'localized' (*dia phuong hoa*), being administratively integrated into the local provinces. The settlements were then restructured as a village or hamlet of the district, and administered under the provincial budget.<sup>169</sup> Table 4.7 shows the results of this resettlement operation in the Central Highlands.

**Table 4.6 Land Cleared And Planted In Refugee Settlements In The Central Highlands**

	<b>Total As Of June 1957</b>
Land Area Cleared	3,997 hectares
Rice Crop Planted	650 hectares
Secondary Food Crops Planted	2,655 hectares

Source: *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan Trong Nam Chap Chanh Thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, pp 13-4.

**Table 4.7 'Localized' (*Dia Phuong Hoa*) Refugee Settlements**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Localized Settlements</b>
Dong Nai Thuong	8
Dalat	18
Ban Me Thuot	15
TOTAL number of 'localized' settlements as of June 1957: 41	

Source: *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan Trong Nam Chap Chanh Thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, p 26.

A government presence was quickly established through these settlements. But this was no mere one-sided transformation of the frontier. The settlers were undergoing 'reshaping' by the frontier environment. An article from *Chan Hung Kinh Te* provides a

<sup>169</sup> *Cuoc di cu lich su tai Viet Nam*, pp 307-12; *Hoat dong cua Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan trong nam chap chanh thu III cua Ngo Tong Thong*, pp 26-7.

travelogue along Route 20 in 1957 where some of these frontier settlements were just forming,

about two hundred kilometers from Saigon, after maneuvering through the Blao mountain pass and upon breathing in the cool fresh air, the traveler could immediately see the various settlements of Tan Ha, Tan Phat, Thanh Tam, Tan Bui, Da Hoa, Lam Son, Tan Hoa, and Tan Thanh, spreading for more than ten kilometers along National Highway 20 and extending inland for another three to four kilometers. A few markets, schools, medical station, and streets bustling with vendors happily trading their goods! Not inferior to the cities at all!<sup>170</sup>

Setting up home in the highlands was not as easy as ‘breathing in the cool fresh air’ for these lowlanders. The article notes,

[I]n reality, majority of the settler compatriots (*dong bao dinh cu*) were born and grew up in the northern midlands (*Trung Chau Bac Phan*); they are unfamiliar with life in the mountainous region, except for the highlander compatriots in the camps at Tung Nghia...<sup>171</sup>

In the attempt to set up home and ‘live in peace and be content with one’s occupation’ (*an cu lac nghiep*) in the highlands, the settlers significantly transformed the landscape. The forest was cleared, new crops were introduced, and a cultivated landscape replaced the ‘wild’ landscape. As settlements emerged along the main roads, a measure of rural urbanization interrupted the otherwise monotonous landscape of green (forest, then) and highlander villages. The article declares,

[t]he shadows of the Viet people today are no longer strangers in the wild and forested mountains. By bringing the nation’s culture to the highlander

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<sup>170</sup> n.a., ‘Ben le Hoi Cho Kinh Te Banmethuot: Thu nhin qua tinh hinh kinh te dong bao dinh cu tai Cao Nguyen’ [At The Banmethuot Economic Fair Festival: Examining The Economic Situation Of Settler Compatriots In The High Plateau], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (5), pp 19 & 22, 1957. Note, Ban Me Thuot was (still is) the administrative centre of Darlac province but was often written as ‘Banmethuot’ during 1950s and 1960s, and misleadingly adopted as the province name for Darlac as well.

<sup>171</sup> ‘Ben le Hoi Cho Kinh Te Banmethuot: Thu nhin qua tinh hinh kinh te dong bao dinh cu tai Cao Nguyen’. The ‘highlander compatriots’ in Tung Nghia were also 1954 northern refugees, but these were highlanders from the North-West mountainous region (*vung mien nui Tay Bac*) in northern Vietnam. The settlers in Tung Nghia were mainly Nung and Tay people. For details on population number and settlement locations of northern highlander refugees, see ‘Dan so dong bao Thuong Du Bac Viet di cu tai mien nam nuoc Viet’.

compatriots, the settler compatriots (together with the highlander compatriots) are also helping to fulfill the noble mission of building in the High Plateau (*Cao Nguyen*), a society that is secure and prosperous, and an economy that is stable and promising.<sup>172</sup>

The same article, however, also recounts how '*an cu lac nghiep*' in the highlands for most of the settlers meant leading a different life from what they had in the lowlands. They had to clear the land and plant different crops such as coffee, tea, and dry upland rice (*lua tria*). Like other inhabitants of the highlands, they had to depend on exploiting forest products while awaiting their harvests of the food crops. Game delicacy (*son hao* or *thit rung*) had become a common aspect - though not necessarily everyday - of their diet in the highlands, in place of fish and fermented fish or shrimp products (*cac loai mam*) in the lowlands. For many of the 1954 northern refugees (*di dan Bac Nam Tu*) who liked '*thuoc lao*' (tobacco, usually smoked with a water-pipe), they had to make do with what was produced in the highlands or had to purchase the imported stuff at an exorbitant price.<sup>173</sup> Meanwhile, some were experimenting with planting tobacco brought from the northern homeland.

According to Louis Wiesner, the United States provided 97% of the total financial assistance from foreign governments for the whole refugee operation. For 1955, it cost the United States about \$56,000,000 (US dollars) and in 1956, it cost \$37,000,000 (US dollars). Most of the money was spent on resettling the refugees in permanent settlements.<sup>174</sup> John Montgomery and William Henderson suggest that the refugee resettlement operations of the 1954-55 period planted the seed for what would become the Land Development Program (*Chuong Trinh Dinh Dien*).<sup>175</sup> Building on the experience of refugee resettlement operations, the Land Development Program was therefore 'less a novel experiment than an adaptation of plans and techniques already put to the test'.<sup>176</sup> The PTUDC had, after all, resettled the massive number of refugees into new 'homelands' within a short-time frame of two years. There is, however, a

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<sup>172</sup> 'Ben le Hoi Cho Kinh Te Banmethuot: Thu nhìn qua tinh hình kinh te dong bao dinh cu tai Cao Nguyen'.

<sup>173</sup> Apparently, some *thuoc lao* was still coming in from the north.

<sup>174</sup> Louis Wiesner, *Victims And Survivors: Displaced Persons And Other War Victims In Viet-Nam, 1954-75*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1988, p 12.

<sup>175</sup> William Henderson, 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages: The Republic Of Vietnam's Land Development Program' in *Problems Of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* edited by Wesley Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p 128; John D. Montgomery, *The Politics Of Foreign Aid: American Experience In Southeast Asia*, New York: Praeger, 1962, p 72.

<sup>176</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 128.

major difference between refugee resettlement operations and a grand operation such as *Dinh Dien*. The refugees had already made the choice to abandon their home than to submit to the communist government in the north. They formed a ready pool of migrants. *Dinh Dien* required the active recruitment of migrant-settlers. I discuss this in detail in the next chapter.

## CONCLUSION

State formation on the Central Highlands frontier under the First Republic began by authorities attempting to introduce a standardized national administrative structure. Socio-economic development was seen as the main means to integrate the frontier into the national political framework. To achieve this objective, policies were designed to realize the economic potential of the region, to gradually reform highlander society, and to gradually improve the living conditions of the highlanders. Critics of Vietnamese state formation under the First Republic tell us that these policies were essentially attempts at assimilation of the highlanders into the Vietnamese cultural sphere. In the process, the government discriminated against the highlanders. Highlander leaders who led what Gerald Hickey sees as the ethno-nationalist Bajaraka movement outlined a long list of grievances suffered under the First Republic. State formation, highland leaders said, was an attempt to ‘Vietnamize’ the Central Highlands.

I showed that the government was aware of these problems in the process of state formation. The government took actions to remedy the situation. Attempts at standardization of the administrative structure were in fact punctuated by compromises because of inherent particularisms in the highlands frontier. Highlanders were made to learn Vietnamese, but the government also recognized the need for highlander school children to learn highlander languages. Vietnamese officials serving in the highlands had to learn highlander languages. Officials pressed to give highlander officials the same pay as Vietnamese officials received. The First Republic’s government trained more highlanders to become officials, although none held the most senior positions in the provinces. The government tried to reshape highlanders’ cultures, but that did not necessarily negate those cultures. Republic officials sought to understand highlander cultures better and attempted to take into account these differences when implementing

policies. While attempting to implement a standardized administrative structure and a set of national legal regulation, the government took into account the importance of highlander traditional institutions such as the elders or influential men of prowess, and customary laws that traditionally governed the conduct of highlanders. The government of the First Republic also took steps to prevent traders from exploiting highlanders as the market economy spread into even the far corners of the highlands. Refugees arrived in the highlands and intensified the process of state formation on the frontier. I suggested that the formation of frontier settlements by these refugees transformed the environment, but the refugees had to adapt to the frontier environment as well. As will be seen in Chapter Six, Kinh settlers in the highlands had to adopt different methods of agriculture and the government shifted the focus of agriculture production from a subsistence-based one to a more market-oriented kind because of highlanders' responses to the *Dinh Dien* program.

The 'Vietnamization' paradigm identifies the conflicts that emerged out of the process of state formation on the frontier. The paradigm, however, fails to take into account these measures adopted by First Republic authorities to resolve such challenges. Although these attempts to ameliorate the tension of state formation might not have produced the desired outcome that critics hoped for, the important point is that the government was aware of the problems and tried to resolve the situation. (I discuss some of the reasons why attempts to resolve these administrative challenges failed to achieve the desired results in Chapter Six.) The evidence presented above indicates that in the process of trying to ameliorate the tensions, the state was continually being shaped and reshaped on the frontier, it was more hybrid than suggested by the Vietnamization paradigm.



# *'Clearing The Wild, Nourishing The Land'*

## NEWCOMERS

### CHAPTER 5

#### A FRONTIER TRAVELOGUE

Traveling along the roads of the Central Highlands had always been for me a most enriching past time. Whether I was looking out the window from a bus or from the back seat of a motorbike, the change of scenes passing in front of my eyes – in neatly distinct frames or in residual transition between frames – reads like a frontier history in rotary motion. Often, this 'silent reading' was accompanied by narration when I was riding on a *xe om* ('hugging car' or motorcycle taxi) and the drivers gave their accounts about the history of this or that particular place we were passing through. The scenes that passed before my eyes were of course, drastically different from descriptions inscribed with beautiful prose found in books written about the Central Highlands' past.<sup>1</sup>

Traveling along Route 14 today, one could cross four major provinces of the Central Highlands, starting from the south, Dak Nong, Dak Lak, Gia Lai<sup>2</sup> and Kontum.<sup>3</sup> On stretches along the route, I saw boundless sea of green – littered with wooden cabins or make-shift huts – that was sometimes comprised of neatly planted rows of coffee trees usually of the same height in one patch. Some patches were taller than the others, so the whole scene resembled the motion of waves upon a sea of green. If you came during the right season, a

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Gerald Hickey, *Window On A War: An Anthropologist In The Vietnam Conflict*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002; Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten The Forest: The Story Of A Montagnard Village In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Translated by Adrian Foulke. Original publication 1957; Georges Condominas, *Chung Toi An Rung* [We Eat The Forest], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban The Gioi, 2004. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc. Original publication, 1957; Nguyen Kinh Chi & Nguyen Dong Chi, *Moi Kontum* [Highlanders Of Kontum], Hue, 1937; Bui Dinh, *Duong Len Xu Thuong* [Road To The Highland Region], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Bo Cong Dan Vu, 1963; Ho Van Dam, *Quan Phong Tinh Darlac* [Travel Observations In Darlac Province], Saigon, 1967; Captain P. Cupet, *Travels In Laos And Among The Tribes Of Southeast Indochina*, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000. Translated by Walter E.J. Tips. Original publication, 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Gia Lai province was known as Pleiku province in the pre-unification period.

<sup>3</sup> I discussed in Chapter Four the frequent redrawing of provincial boundaries in the Central Highlands region.

layer of 'snow' (*mot lop tuyet*) that exuded a particular fragrance covered the entire sea of green. This would be when the flowers were blossoming on the coffee trees. In no time, the sea of green would sparkle with ruby-like redness under sunlight, as if reflecting in advance the night sky lit up by its many stars, when the coffee cherries were ripe for harvesting.<sup>4</sup> The green scenery was, however, not monotonous in this travelogue. I also saw the intense green of pepper vines wrapping around columns – log or cement – neatly planted as a fence surrounding the coffee groves or as a self contained pepper garden; sometimes in such quantities as to make up a sea of their own.<sup>5</sup> Then there were also the neatly aligned and almost never ending corridors of rubber trees. I did not remember sighting the forest from the highway during my travels. Occasionally, I thought I saw the forest still standing at the far end of the horizon, but the neat canopy and uniform shape of the trees betrayed them.<sup>6</sup> Figure 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate some common frontier landscapes I encountered. If you travel in other parts of the highlands, such as the plains of Kontum or Lak (in Dak Lak province), wet rice fields, sometimes in cascading steppes by the gentle slopes, occupied the landscape until the rolling hill terrains signaled another change of scene.

Set amidst the 'green' backgrounds was a variety of settlement landscapes. It was quite easy to guess when the settlements were formed by noting the architectural styles of the houses. The numbers such as '1991' painted at the top end of the front wall of some houses made guessing easy! These numbers could mean when the house was built or when the settler actually arrived in the highlands. Settlements from the pre-Doi Moi and Doi Moi periods carried different styles. The process of 'urban' renewal, especially after the coffee boom of the 1990s, meant that in many places, new houses were built atop demolished ones.<sup>7</sup> These settlements lined both sides of Route 14, sometimes only a few kilometers apart, other times almost 10-20 kilometers before coming across another cluster. These were mainly Kinh occupied settlements. Turning away from the highway and traveling along the intra-

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<sup>4</sup> On most clear nights, stars really spangle the night sky in the Central Highlands, especially in areas on higher elevations.

<sup>5</sup> Pepper vines on columns are often planted as shade trees or to shelter the coffee groves from strong winds.

<sup>6</sup> To access any standing forest, you have to travel along the dirt paths (*duong mon*) away from the main roads and go past beyond the standing settlements. For discussion on the state of the forest in the Central Highlands, see Rodolphe De Koninck, *Deforestation Of Vietnam*, Ottawa: IDRC, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The height or average diameter of the trunks of perennial trees, such as rubber or coffee, was useful in corroborating my guesses. Then of course, it helped most whenever I was able to talk to the locals.

provincial roads (*duong lien xa*), I observed a mix of settlement clusters formed during various political periods in the history of the Central Highlands.<sup>8</sup>

Pre-reunification settlements stood out from the post-reunification ones. There was one particular type (with many variations depending on which part of the highlands you were in), which must inevitably be the only ones noted by travelers in the years before French penetration.<sup>9</sup> I usually only saw this settlement type when traveling along the intra-provincial routes rather than the main highways.<sup>10</sup> On my trips, I saw wood-houses elevated above ground supported by solid timber pilings, reminiscing a style of old, but sometimes interrupted by a few ground level 'modern' concrete units, similar to those found in Kinh settlements. I also noticed the occasional elevated wooden-houses standing on concrete pilings in place of the traditional timbers, or cement-walled wooden houses standing on timber pilings (Figure 5.3). In some places, such as within the Ede (Rhade) dominant areas in Dak Lak, some of these houses on pilings extended for tens of meters.<sup>11</sup> In the Bahnar or Sedang areas of Kontum, from a distance away I could already see one particular house, the *nha rong* (communal house), with its grand roof towering above the rest in the settlement (Figure 5.4).<sup>12</sup> I often imagined that once upon a time, these communal or long houses, must have been built in a much grander fashion when these old inhabitants were mainly, the only inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> I was quickly brought back to reality when, ranging from a few meters to a few kilometers further along the road, I saw the comparatively more recent Kinh settlements.

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<sup>8</sup> See preface on my travels in the Central Highlands.

<sup>9</sup> Different highlander ethnic groups with nuanced cultural practices are found in different parts of the highlands. There are also many highlander villages reorganized by the government (then and now) into fixed settlements through the *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* program. See Chapter Two and Chapter Six.

<sup>10</sup> When the French built their '*penetrantes*', many of the highlander settlements moved or were moved away.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Free In The Forest: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp 20-24. For detailed discussions of traditional Central Highlander dwellings, see, Gerald Hickey, *Shattered World: Adaptation And Survival Among Vietnam's Highland Peoples*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993; Nguyen Khac Tung, *Nha Rong cac dan toc Bac Tay Nguyen* [Communal Houses Of Ethnic Groups In The North Of The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Hoc, 1991; Nguyen Khac Tung, *Nha o co truyen cac dan toc Viet Nam* [Traditional Houses Of Ethnic Groups In Viet Nam], Ha Noi: Hoi Khoa Hoc Lich Su, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> For photographic images of Sedang *nha rong*, see Dang Nghiem Van, *Les Sedang au Viet Nam*, Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban The Gioi, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> For detailed discussions of the traditional highlander world, see, Luu Hung, *Buon lang co truyen xu Thuong* [Traditional Villages Of The Highland Region], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Hoc, 1994; Gerald Hickey, *Sons Of The Mountains: Ethno-History Of Vietnam's Central Highlands To 1954*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

There was another type of pre-reunification settlements, a 'less recent' kind of Kinh settlements that possessed a certain feel and style different from the recent ones. In this settlement type, there usually stood some newly built concrete ground houses, but I also found a variety of architectural styles from the late 1980s or 1990s. In some cases, there still stood mud-walled or 'antique wooden' thatched houses (now used as store-house or kitchen, or simply abandoned), reminding of a further past to this particular settlement. On Friday and Saturday evenings in some of these settlements, I saw people smartly dressed, women in their *ao dai* and men in clean, pressed shirts (*ao somi*) and pants, converging at the visually conspicuous structure of a church, often of the Catholic faith.<sup>14</sup> In others, I came across a Buddhist temple or two.<sup>15</sup> These settlements were mainly formed by the '1954 northern refugees resettlement' program and the ambitious *Dinh Dien* program in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, some of the bustling urbanized towns found in the Central Highlands, such as Buon Ho and Quang Nhieu in Dak Lak were developed upon the foundations of these early settlements.

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<sup>14</sup> See Nguyen Hong Duong, *Nha tho Cong Giao Viet Nam* [Catholic Churches In Vietnam], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Hoc, 2003, for a very well informed discussion of Catholic Churches in the Central Highlands and other parts of Vietnam.

<sup>15</sup> Besides the Buddhist temples, I also saw a Cao Dai temple in Ban Me Thuot.

**Figure 5.1 Frontier Landscape I**



**Figure 5.2 Frontier Landscape II**



Figure 5.3 'Hybrid' Highlander House



Figure 5.4 *Nha Rong* of Bahnar



## INTRODUCTION

The travelogue brings us to the subject of this chapter, highland settlements formed by lowlanders. I look primarily at the less ‘recent settlements’, *Dinh Dien*, formed under the First Republic. Literally, the term ‘*dinh dien*’ means ‘nourishing’ (*dinh*) the ‘rice fields’ (*dien*), or ‘cultivating the land’. The terms ‘*dien*’ and ‘*ruong*’ usually refer to only one type of agricultural land use, ‘wet rice fields’. Historically, the term *dinh dien* refers to agricultural settlements formed by peasants on uncultivated or under-cultivated lands with the objective of bringing these lands into active agriculture production, or more specifically, wet rice production (*lam ruong*).<sup>16</sup> This form of agricultural expansion was often orchestrated by the court (*trieu dinh*), and other times spontaneously acted on by the peasantry, during the dynastic past of Vietnamese history.<sup>17</sup> Under the First Republic, Kinh settlers arrived in the highlands in unprecedented numbers within the short few years between 1957 and 1961 through the *Dinh Dien* program. Gerald Hickey compares this expansion of Kinh settlements and the Vietnamese state to the historical expansion of the Kinh people southwards, the Southern Advance (*Nam Tien*) and terms it the ‘Western Advance’ (*Tay Tien*).<sup>18</sup> As the Kinh settlements expanded, so did Kinh civilization and the reach of the Vietnamese state.

Hickey argues that the First Republic adopted the strategy of assimilation for nation building; *Dinh Dien* was one such nation building policy instrument.<sup>19</sup> Oscar Salemink concurs with Hickey and argues that under the First Republic, national integration of the Central Highlands and its inhabitants was to be achieved by, one, policies aimed at culturally transforming the highlanders to Kinh ways; and, two,

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<sup>16</sup> In existing literature and official translations, *dinh dien* is often translated as ‘land development’. I find this English rendering of the term dissatisfying. ‘Land development’ does not quite capture the package of specific meaning contained by the term ‘*dinh dien*’. Unable to find a better rendering in English, I will simply refer to this policy as *Dinh Dien* Program instead of Land Development Program, and the settlements as simply *Dinh Dien* centers or settlements instead of Land Development Centers.

<sup>17</sup> See for example the discussions in, Son Nam, *Lich su khan hoang mien Nam* [A History Of Pioneering The South], Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban Tre, 1979 and the special volume on agricultural pioneering in Vietnamese history of the journal *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* [Historical Research] (274), 1994.

<sup>18</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 45. The term ‘*Tay Tien*’ was also used in the move into the Viet Bac and Tay Bac mountainous regions in northern Vietnam.

<sup>19</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 5-12.

massive redistribution of Kinh people to the highlands.<sup>20</sup> Scholars often treat *Dinh Dien* as a ‘Vietnamese invasion’, ‘Vietnamization of the highlands’, ‘*Kinh hoa*’ (Kinh-ization) of the highlands, or simply ethnic assimilation (*dong hoa chung toc*). I group such criticisms as belonging to the ‘Vietnamization paradigm’ (see Chapter Two).<sup>21</sup> I interpret the picture painted by current scholarship as one of an expanding frontier that kicked up a storm of dust beneath the mist atop the mountains and when the dust settled, the land will be covered by Kinh people, Kinh ways and a Kinh state.

The above travelogue did not describe the kind of landscape one usually encounters in the plains; the traditional abode of the Vietnamese (Figure 5.5).<sup>22</sup> It is tempting to suggest that these landscapes are outcomes of Vietnamese state formation on the highlands and reflections of the degree of Vietnamization of the highlands. The landscapes I described are after all, inhabited by many Kinh settlers and featured agriculture of the sedentarized type. Kinh people brought along their culture to the frontier and they remained Kinh. Archival documents do not reveal if the Kinh settlers adapted their cultural practices while settling in the highlands. What I described above, however, are not the landscapes one finds in the lowlands. With modern technology and scientific-agricultural knowledge, a lowland landscape can be reproduced in the highlands to create a boundless sea of rice fields. The tale behind every tree planted, however, is not always simply about ‘invasion’, ‘domination’ or ‘assimilation’. Certainly market forces played an important role in attracting the flourish of coffee planting in the 1990s. Certainly the *Dinh Dien* settlements of the First Republic were in part motivated by attempts to counter the communist threat to the south, and to integrate the highlands and its inhabitants into the Republic. But a faithful reproduction of

<sup>20</sup> Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp 184-94.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Bernard Fall describes the settlement of Kinh people in the highlands as ‘a Vietnamese invasion’ in Bernard Fall, ‘Commentary on Wickert’ in *Vietnam: The First Five Years* edited by Richard Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959). Frederic Wickert reports the highlanders’ fear of losing their land to the Vietnamese and the State, “... the tribesmen consider the Vietnamese as a force that will lead to their eventual extermination. The Vietnamese are settling on their lands, with the best lands going first, and the tribesmen see themselves starved to death...”. For details, consult Frederic Wickert, ‘The Tribesmen’ in *Vietnam: The First Five Years*, p 126. See also, Bernard Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66*, New York: Praeger, 1966, pp 190-92.

<sup>22</sup> Think of the agricultural landscapes found in the northern delta region, central lowlands and the Mekong delta. See for example, Diep Dinh Hoa, *Nguoi Viet o dong bang Bac Bo* [Viet People In The Northern Delta], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000; Gerald Hickey, *Village In Vietnam*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964. In Gerald Hickey’s memoir, *Window On A War*, we can read in the same book, through Hickey’s own recollection from fieldwork, the contrastingly different Kinh settlement landscapes in the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta.



lowlands landscape was not made in the highlands. Why? And can we say the same about Kinh cultural practices? Unfortunately the latter question, I concede, is beyond the scope of thesis and the data collected given my fieldwork conditions (see Chapter One).

*Dinh Dien* is first and foremost a process of frontier formation, which I defined in Chapter Two as a process when newcomers begin settling in this zone of ambiguity located outside their traditional heartland, creating a zone of intensified convergence and interpenetration of peoples, cultures and economic interests. *Dinh Dien* was frontier formation driven by motivation of state formation. I argue in this chapter that all the more because frontier formation through *Dinh Dien* was implemented by the government, a primary concern was to ensure that newcomers (settlers) were able to survive, sink their roots in the new land, and stay. Only then could the process of state formation follow. To be able to stay, newcomers transformed the frontier environment. At the same time, they must also adapt their agricultural practices to suit the frontier environment. Recently available archival documents reveal that the settlers did just that. More significant perhaps, was that the government, after reviewing the physical conditions of the frontier environment and taking into account the early responses by the old inhabitants with regards to the *Dinh Dien* policy, actually made a conscientious decision to alter the initial strategy to stabilize the process of settlement. It seems then the process of frontier formation contained more than the simple stories of domination and subordination or ethnic chauvinism portrayed in existing analyses.

Figure 5.5 Typical Agricultural Landscapes In the Mekong Delta



## TRANSFORMING THE FRONTIER

*Dinh Dien* significantly transformed the Central Highlands. It was an important socio-economic policy instrument implemented by the government of the First Republic to help integrate the highlands, relieve population pressure in the Central Lowlands, and to counter the communist threat. Critics suggest that *Dinh Dien* was mainly composed of anti-communist Catholic settlers sent to secure the highlands. When not composed of anti-communist settlers, there is always the suspicion that many of these settlers were unwilling migrants forced to join the program. *Dinh Dien* also looked a lot like Vietnamization of the highlands because the program created many enclaves-like Kinh settlements (which persist till the present day) and the program significantly changed the demography of the highlands in ethnic terms. However, if we look at the grand scheme of things, *Dinh Dien* was implemented in the hope of bringing a better life to the program's participants. The program was underlined by such a concern and it ultimately reshaped the broader outlook of the process of state formation on the frontier.

### *Dinh Dien* In The Grand Scheme Of Things

Ngo Dinh Diem had a firm ideological vision to build a modern Vietnamese nation-state in the south, which would also serve as the blue print for the entire country when the communist North was defeated and the country united.<sup>23</sup> Diem sought to develop an alternative ideological path to Marxism (adopted by the communist North) and capitalism (which was tainted by French colonialism). He found the ideas advanced by French Personalism useful for the development of his 'Third Force' politics.<sup>24</sup> Philip Catton argues that Diem's national ideology, despite some of its foreign borrowings, merged with Vietnamese traditional ideals, and remained ultimately a Vietnamese one.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Edward Miller proposes that Diem's thinking about government was essentially the product of a kind of 'ideological alchemy'.<sup>26</sup> In fact, throughout Ngo Dinh Diem's reign, his political speech was littered with concepts and moral preaching

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude To America's War In Vietnam*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002, pp 39-47; John C. Donnell, 'Politics In South Vietnam: Doctrines Of Authority In Conflict', Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1964, pp 46-7.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Miller, 'Grand Designs: Vision, Power And Nation Building In America's Alliance With Ngo Dinh Diem', 1954-60, Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004, pp 53 & 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Diem's Final Failure*, pp 38-9.

<sup>26</sup> 'Grand Designs', p 215.

borrowed from Confucianism (*Khong Hoc* or *Nho Giao*) and Personalism (*Chu Nghia Nhan Vi*).<sup>27</sup> If Confucianism outlined the moral responsibilities of government and citizen (subject), then Personalism provided the organizational blueprint for Diem's nation building policies. This eclecticism meant that Diem's vision never adhered faithfully to the ideologies outlined by the original proponents.

Personalism is a doctrine developed by Emmanuel Mounier, a French lay Catholic philosopher.<sup>28</sup> He developed this doctrine as a critique to liberal capitalism in the aftermath of the Great Depression and to Marxism for its spiritual-less materialist precepts.<sup>29</sup> According to Personalist doctrine, capitalism and Marxism threaten the 'dignity' of the individual. On the one hand, in Marxism, the individual person is obliged to sacrifice everything for the material improvement of the larger community. Capitalism, on the other hand, corrupts the individual by encouraging selfish acts and excessive materialism.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Personalism focuses on the development of the total person, emphasizing both spiritual and material needs. John Donnell suggests that Personalism treats 'the person as a unique, creative entity in a collective whole'.<sup>31</sup> Personalism is a kind of communitarian ideology, which advocates the establishment of new kinds of communities so that spiritual development of individuals and well being of the collective will be mutually reinforcing.<sup>32</sup> Robert Scigliano succinctly outlines the essence of this doctrine,

Personalism lays its main emphasis on harmonizing the material and spiritual aspirations of the individual with the social needs of the community and political needs of the state, and seeks a middle path between capitalist individualism and Marxist collectivism.<sup>33</sup>

One major objective of Ngo Dinh Diem's social reforms was 'to improve the livelihood of the people', known in Vietnamese as '*cai tien dan sinh*'. One way to

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<sup>27</sup> 'Politics In South Vietnam', pp 40-46; 'Grand Designs', pp 220-227.

<sup>28</sup> Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952. Translated by Philip Mairet.

<sup>29</sup> 'Grand Designs', p 78.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Masur, 'Hearts And Minds: Cultural Nation-Building In South Vietnam, 1954-63', Ph.D. Thesis, The Ohio State University, Ohio, 2004, p 25.

<sup>31</sup> John C. Donnell, 'Personalism In Vietnam' in *Problems Of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* edited by Wesley Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), pp 36-8.

<sup>32</sup> 'Grand Designs', p 217.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963, p 76.

achieve this objective was to help make most of the Republic's citizens become a private owner of some property. This was what his government termed the 'propertization' (*tu san hoa*) of society.<sup>34</sup> Ngo Dinh Nhu, political consultant (*co van chanh tri*) to Ngo Dinh Diem, elaborated that this 'basic piece of property idea' could create a 'new conception of private ownership' and ultimately help harmonize 'the material and spiritual needs of the Person'.<sup>35</sup> According to Nhu, possession of a house on a piece of land from one to three hectares was essential for the citizen's independence of spirit and also as a means of subsistence. This could in turn lead to an increase in productivity for each family and therefore contribute to higher tax revenues and private capital for the development of the economy. Nhu also predicted that this could provide the families in the South with a means to absorb the influx of refugees when relatives in the impoverished north seek to escape to the more affluent south after the country was finally re-unified under the banner of the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>36</sup> With this objective in mind, Diem's agrarian reform program was launched in 1955.<sup>37</sup>

This agrarian reform program comprised of the three policy instruments of *Cai Cach Dien Dia* (Agricultural Land Reform), *Dinh Dien*, and *Nong Tin* (Agrarian Credit). Land Reform aimed to achieve a more equitable distribution of farmlands, especially in the Mekong Delta; *Dinh Dien* aimed to expand agricultural production by reclaiming abandoned land and pioneering new agriculture land; and the Agrarian Credit program aimed to provide a stable but trustworthy source of agricultural credit for peasants.<sup>38</sup> To achieve the Personalist objectives as explained by Nhu, the Land Reform program,

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<sup>34</sup> Viet Nam Cong Hoa, *Chinh Sach Dinh Dien, Cai Cach Dien Dia va Nong Tin* [The Policies Of Dinh Dien, Agricultural Land Reform And Agrarian Credit], Saigon: Van Huu A Chau, 1959, p 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ngo Dinh Nhu was also Ngo Dinh Diem's younger brother. For more about Ngo Dinh Nhu, see 'Politics In South Vietnam'; 'Grand Designs'; *Diem's Final Failure*. For short, insightful but very critical analysis of Nhu and South Vietnam politics, see Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political And Military Analysis*, New York: Praeger, 1963, pp 234-253.

<sup>36</sup> 'Personalism In Vietnam', pp 46-7; 'Politics In South Vietnam', pp 173-4.

<sup>37</sup> Thanh Viet, 'Tinh chat Dan Chu va tinh than ton trong Nhan Vi trong su thuc hien cong cuoc Dinh Dien' [Democratic Characteristic And The Spirit Of Respecting The Person In The Implementation Of The Work Of *Dinh Dien*], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (61), p 22, 1958.

<sup>38</sup> See *Chinh Sach Dinh Dien, Cai Cach Dien Dia va Nong Tin*; Wolf Ladejinsky, 'Agrarian Reform In The Republic Of Vietnam' in *Problems Of Freedom*; William Henderson, 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages: The Republic Of Vietnam's Land Development Program' in *Problems Of Freedom*; Tran Ngoc Lien, 'The Growth Of Agricultural Credit And Cooperatives In Vietnam' in *Problems Of Freedom*.

[r]eserve for every rural person a piece of land. This basic property is the most definite guarantee for social and political freedom, thus serving the Person (*phung su nhan vi*) of the ruralite (*dan que*).<sup>39</sup>

The Land Reform program, however, was considered an indirect process to realizing the 'basic property' objective.

On 23 April 1957, the government established *Phu Tong Uy Dinh Dien* (General Commission for *Dinh Dien*; hence forth, PTUDD) and launched the *Dinh Dien* program. PTUDD was in charged of resettling people in agriculturally under-developed areas such as the marshy lands of the Mekong Delta, the forested Central Highlands, and, abandoned fields and plantations, to bring the land into cultivation. The aim was to greatly increase production of rice and other food crops in these agriculturally rehabilitated lands. These settlements, or *Dinh Dien*, were to become the new home villages (*que huong*) for the settlers.<sup>40</sup> As the program was launched, writers on behalf of the state variously compared the wisdom of Ngo Dinh Diem with renowned historical Vietnamese figures that successfully carried out similar programs of agricultural expansion.<sup>41</sup> *Dinh Dien* was one of Ngo Dinh Diem's pet projects.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Ngo Dinh Diem's birth-date, 3 January, was declared as '*Dinh Dien Day*' in 1959.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The Agrarian Land Reform program (*Cai Cach Dien Dia*) is also known as 'Land to the Tiller' program (*Nguoi Cay Co Ruong Cay*). There were three parts to this Land Reform program. Decree No. 2 (8/1/1955) established a set of Tenant Farmer Regulations (*Quy Che Ta Dien*) that aims to provide regulated guarantees for the tenant farmer such as setting ceilings for rent and loan interest rates, and a minimal contract tenancy. Decree No. 7 (5/2/1955) provides the government with the right to take back land uncultivated or abandoned by landlords, and bring these lands into cultivation. Tenant farmers, migrants (*dong bao di dan*), demobilized soldiers (*cuu chien binh*) or anyone who wished to personally work these lands were given priority to tenancy of these lands. Decree No. 57 (22/10/1956) basically sets the conditions for the transfer of ownership to the smallholders. A ceiling of up to 100 hectares per landlord is set for landownership and the government would buy the remaining tracts of land to sell to the smallholders, who would then repay the government over a period of six years. See, *Chinh Sach Dinh Dien, Cai Cach Dien Dia va Nong Tin*, pp 35-41.

<sup>40</sup> n.a., 'Nhưng mục tiêu chính của chương trình Dinh Dien' [Main Objectives Of The *Dinh Dien* Program], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (71), p 15, 1958.

<sup>41</sup> These authors make references to figures such as Le Thanh Tong; Nguyen Anh (Emperor Gia Long), who appointed of Trinh Hoai Duc, Le Quang Dinh, Ngo Tung Chau and Hoang Minh Khanh as *Quan Dien Tuan* (Superior Land Mandarin) to bring land in the Gia Dinh area under cultivation; and especially, Nguyen Cong Tru, also known as *Dinh Dien Su* (Envoy for *Dinh Dien*), for his agricultural expansion projects in Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh in the northern coast. See n.a., 'Cong cuoc khuech chuong Dinh Dien Viet Nam ngay xua' [The Work of Agriculture Expansion In Vietnam In The Past], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (68), pp 12-13, 1958; n.a., 'Nhan viec thanh lap Phu Tong Uy Dinh Dien thu xem lai cong viec Dinh Dien cua ong Nguyen Cong Tru duoi trieu Vua Minh Mang Nha Nguyen' [Revisiting The Work Of *Dinh Dien* By Mr. Nguyen Cong Tru Under Emperor Minh Mang Of The Nguyen Dynasty On The Occasion Of Establishing The Commission General For Dinh Dien], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (13), pp 10 & 25, 1957.

*Dinh Dien* was seen as a more direct route than the Land Reform program to help realize the basic property objective.<sup>44</sup> Post-colonial South Vietnam faced a vast array of social problems that threatened the viability of the regime. The most daunting was population overcrowding in Saigon and the Central Lowlands (Trung Nguyen Trung Phan). There were very high numbers of landless and poor peasants. The Mekong Delta was a very rich farming region but had a very skewed land distribution ratio. The Central Lowlands provinces were crowded with 'minuscule-holders' or landless peasants, where four million people were cultivating on only 264,500 hectares of arable rice land, and rice was indeed the chief subsistence crop here. The First Indochina War had resulted in a great number of unemployed rural and urban workers, as well as demobilized soldiers.<sup>45</sup> Diem felt that only with the guarantee of a basic property as a means of subsistence could the human being live with dignity, contribute to the national economy and not succumb to communism. He believed that *Dinh Dien* could kick off a process of 'deproletarianization' by 'propertization', creating a class of property owning small farmers, and combat communist infiltration while increasing agricultural productivity at the same time.<sup>46</sup>

Diem also felt that *Dinh Dien* could bring about expansion and modernization of agriculture in Vietnam.<sup>47</sup> In the long term, this could enable Vietnam to have a stable agricultural base producing sufficient primary materials for Vietnam's industrial and domestic consumptions, and therefore reducing Vietnam's reliance on imports.<sup>48</sup> The government often stated that although the Central Highlands had a vast land area of more than 5,700,000 hectares, only 109,000 hectares of land were granted as concessions for exploitation under the Crown Domain (excluding the swidden areas cultivated by the highlanders!).<sup>49</sup> Even then, not all the land concessions were put under cultivation. *Dinh Dien* could bring such idle land resources into production and expand rice and other food crops cultivation. As we will see, engaging in cash crop production

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<sup>42</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 123.

<sup>43</sup> n.a., 'Dong bao di dan va Ngay Dinh Dien' [Migrant Compatriots And *Dinh Dien* Day], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (98), p 11, 1959.

<sup>44</sup> *Chinh Sach Dinh Dien, Cai Cach Dien Dia va Nong Tin*, p 9

<sup>45</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442; 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 124.

<sup>46</sup> 'Politics In South Vietnam', p 181.

<sup>47</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 125.

<sup>48</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442.

<sup>49</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442.

was one of the unexpected changes in the *Dinh Dien* program when it was rolled out in the Central Highlands.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Dinh Dien* As National Security**

*Dinh Dien* also supposedly served as an important national security policy instrument. The Central Highlands and the marshy plains of western Mekong delta were two main strategic regions highlighted as vulnerable to communist infiltration.<sup>51</sup> The program aimed to implant loyal Vietnamese villagers, especially the predominantly Catholic 1954 northern refugees, in all these areas in order to counter communist activities.<sup>52</sup> Communist historians term the *Dinh Dien* settlements as ‘anti-communism fortresses’ (*phao dai chong cong*).<sup>53</sup> It is debatable how much these ‘anti-Communism fortresses’ were actually made up of Catholics. As shown in Chapter Four, more than 85% of the 1954 northern refugees were indeed Catholics. 64,342 of them were settled in *Trai Dinh Cu* (settlement camps) in the Central Highlands, mainly in the southeastern provinces of the highlands, such as Tuyen Duc, Lam Dong, Phu Yen, and Phuoc Tuy. However, majority of the settlers who joined the *Dinh Dien* program from 1957 onwards were not Catholics. Of the 23 *Dinh Dien* established in the Central Highlands by June 1958, only 15% of the settlers were Catholics (Table 5.1).<sup>54</sup> If we were to place the locations of the *Dinh Dien* settlements in the context of the major cities and towns in the Central Highlands, it is possible to think that the *Dinh Dien* program actually established a defense buffer encircling the major centers of the districts or the provinces (Map 5.1).<sup>55</sup> On the flip side, we can equally reason that *Dinh Dien* settlements were only established in agriculturally viable areas that were also relatively secure. *Dinh*

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Opening Of New Lands And Villages’, p 133.

<sup>51</sup> The First Republic referred to all Vietnamese followers of communism as Viet Cong, and highlanders who followed the enemy’s ideology as Thuong Cong.

<sup>52</sup> John D. Montgomery, *The Politics Of Foreign Aid: American Experience In Southeast Asia*, New York: Praeger, 1962, p 73; ‘Opening Of New Lands And Villages’, p 124.

<sup>53</sup> See Nguyen Thi Kim Van, ‘Ban them ve van de ruong dat o Bac Tay Nguyen duoi thoi My-Nguy (1954-75)’ [Further Discussion About The Agricultural Land Problem In The North Of The Western Plateau Under The American Puppet Regime], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (328), pp 29-38, 2003; Nguyen Van Nhat, ‘Chinh sach ruong dat cua chinh quyen Sai Gon o Tay Nguyen truoc Ngay Giai Phong’ [Agricultural Land Policies Of The Saigon Regime In The Western Plateau Before Liberation], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (276), pp 9-15, 1994.

<sup>54</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author’s possession.

<sup>55</sup> Tran Van Dinh, ‘Tim hieu cac cong cuoc dinh cu dan chung Viet Nam trong qua khu’ [Understanding The Work Of Settling Vietnamese People In The Past], *Tap San Quoc Phong* [National Defense Journal] (45), pp 22-47, 1974.



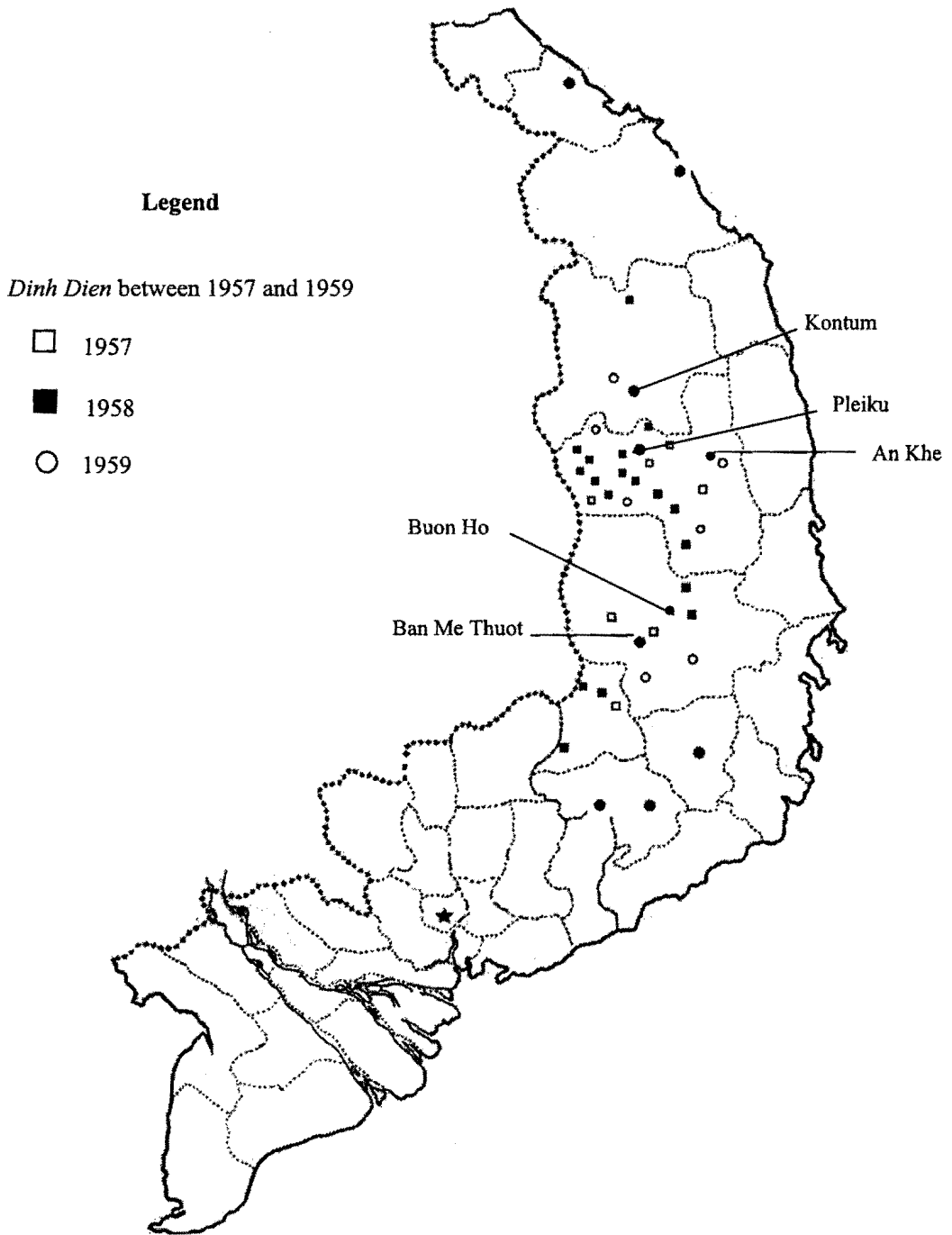
**Table 5.1 Numbers Of Catholic Settlers In Central Highlands *Dinh Dien*, June 1958**

No.	<i>Dinh Dien</i>	Settlers	Catholics	Catholic Priest Conducting Services	Church
1.	Pleipiom I	1,923	159	Nguyen Viet Nam	Under construction
2.	Pleipiom II	2,074	352	Truong Xuan Thanh	No
3.	Pleibangyam	1,342	335	Dinh Tien Khoa	Yes
4.	Pleikenngo	1,585	244	Gorrissen	Received subsidy for construction
5.	Traphan	1,500	302	Vo Quoc Ngu	Yes
6.	Chudron	937	60	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
7.	Pleideukla	1,759	59	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
8.	Pleithe	1,888	318	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
9.	Iakae	1,126	79	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
10.	Iakrel	2,668	119	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
11.	Pleigiraokop	1,465	167	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
12.	Iadrang	1,503	96	Vo Quoc Ngu	No
13.	Thanh Binh	610	200	Vo Quoc Ngu	Yes
14.	Iahai	1,196	40	n.a.	No
15.	Pleidel	791	15	n.a.	No
16.	Dakpsi	1,616	166	n.a.	No
17.	Daknong	1,155	300	Nguyen Manh	Under construction
18.	Eatul	2,544	763	Pham Quang Tao	Yes
19.	Bounkroa	1,499	388	Hoang Sinh	Yes
20.	Buon Banjang	511	15	n.a.	No
21.	Buon Treatu	1,032	258	n.a.	No
22.	Dakmol	479	52	n.a.	No
23.	Buon Bu M'Bre	1,678	335	n.a.	Under construction
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>32,881</b>	<b>4,813</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>

Source: PTTDeNhat<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

**Map 5.1 Locations Of *Dinh Dien* And Major Cities And Towns In The Central Highlands**



Source: 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 131.

*Dien* could fulfill such a security function only if the settlements were socially and economically viable; that was, if settlers actually lived there like in any normal villages.

Some settlements were established for totally strategic reasons.<sup>57</sup> The Security Bureau (*Nha Bao An*) established these strategically located settlements. These were known as *don dien*, or 'agriculture military-outposts'. Ten such *don dien* were established in early 1957 to secure border areas against communist insurgents and smugglers or defend the major administrative centers and installations in the Central Highlands.<sup>58</sup> For example, *don dien* Dak Dam, was located about 30 kilometers away from National Highway 14 towards the Cambodian border in the Dak Mil area. The *don dien* was located along the smuggling route frequented by opium smugglers crossing between Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>59</sup> According to Vu Huy Phuc, *don dien* was a common form of agricultural production unit in Vietnam's past. These units were organized specifically to farm and defend political territory. A *don dien* was either manned and farmed by soldiers, or pioneered by peasants who were then - often forced - trained to serve as soldiers.<sup>60</sup> During the early years of the First Republic, in spite of the strategic orientation of *don dien* in the Central Highlands, it was also hoped that the *don dien* could have positive influences among the local highlanders, such as improving their agricultural production methods and instilling loyalty towards the Republic.<sup>61</sup>

Most of the *don dien* established in 1957 were incapable of sustaining the outpost through its own agricultural production. In general, the locations were unsuitable for agricultural development. Morale was low in most of the highlands *don dien*. The Kinh soldiers were not used to pioneering work in the forested highlands. Many were already in their forties and waiting for demobilization to return to their home villages. Officers saw posting to these *don dien* as a cul-de-sac in their careers or punishment for poor performances.<sup>62</sup> Some of these *don dien* were brought into the

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<sup>57</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442.

<sup>58</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11741.

<sup>59</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10831.

<sup>60</sup> Vu Huy Phuc, 'Don Dien - Mot loai hinh to chuc san xuat nong nghiep quan trong nua dau the ky XIX' [Military Agriculture Colonies - An Important Form Of Agricultural Production Organization In The First Half Of The 19<sup>th</sup> Century], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (274), pp 20-25, 1994; see also, Nguyen Bao Tri & Nguyen Tan Hien, 'Chinh sach nong binh trong lich su Viet Nam' [The Policy Of Peasant Soldiers In The History Of Vietnam], *Tap San Quoc Phong* (74), pp 3-24, 1974.

<sup>61</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11741.

<sup>62</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11741.

*Dinh Dien* program when it was rolled out in the Central Highlands. There were, however, certain conditions for these *don dien* to be 'turned into *Dinh Dien*' (*Dinh Dien hoa*). First, only *don dien* located on sites suitable for agricultural development were considered for *Dinh Dien hoa*. Second, only when all the soldiers in the *don dien* had officially demobilized then was the *don dien* considered a *Dinh Dien*. Third, the *don dien* once brought into the *Dinh Dien* program was placed entirely under the direction of the PTUDD.<sup>63</sup> Three out of the seven *Dinh Dien* centers established in 1957 were *don dien* that had been *Dinh Dien hoa*. These were, Dak Nong in Darlac province, and Chudron and Pleibangyam in Pleiku-Kontum province.<sup>64</sup> In June 1958, another five *don dien* were transferred to the management of the PTUDD.<sup>65</sup> *Dinh Dien* could perform only a very limited security function. On the contrary, when the security situation deteriorated beginning from late 1960, many outlying *Dinh Dien* centers were abandoned.

### Organizing Frontier Formation

The *Phu Tong Uy Dinh Dien* (PTUDD) was directly supervised by the President's Office. Bui Van Luong was Commissioner-General of PTUDD from its establishment on 23 April 1957 till the end of the program in 1963.<sup>66</sup> PTUDD had its own special services (*ty chuyen mon*), such as agriculture and land survey teams. Nation wide, the *Dinh Dien* program had three regions (*khu*), the Central Highlands Region (*Khu Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*), the Southeastern Region (*Khu Dinh Dien Mien Dong Nam Phan*), and Southern Delta Region (*Mien Dong Bang Nam Phan*). Each region was subdivided into zones (*vung*). The Central Highlands had two zones in 1957, namely Banmethuot *Dinh Dien* Zone (*Vung Dinh Dien Banmethuot*) and Pleiku-Kontum *Dinh Dien* Zone (*Vung Dinh Dien Pleiku-Kontum*), but had increased to five

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<sup>63</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11713

<sup>64</sup> Viet Hung, 'Them may nong trung vua thanh lap tai Cao Nguyen Trung Phan (I)' [Adding Newly Established Farmsteads In The Central High Plateau], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (16), pp 13 & 16, 1957; Viet Hung, 'Them may nong trung vua thanh lap tai Cao Nguyen Trung Phan (II)' [Adding Newly Established Farmsteads In The Central High Plateau], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (17), pp 17 & 24, 1957; n.a., 'Su to chuc va dieu hanh cac trung tam Dinh Dien tai vung Cao Nguyen' [The Organization And Administration Of *Dinh Dien* Centers In The High Plateau Region], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (55), pp 12 & 17, 1958.

<sup>65</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11742.

<sup>66</sup> Bui Van Luong was also Interior Minister, and formerly Director for General Commission for Refugees (*Phu Tong Uy Di Cu Ty Nan*). Technically, the *Dinh Dien* program stopped in 1961 with the introduction of the Strategic Hamlet program.

zones in 1959. Each zone managed several *Dinh Dien* centers (*Dia Diem Dinh Dien*); and each center included several 'villages' (*lang*).<sup>67</sup>

Managing each *Dinh Dien* center was a Chief of Center (*Dia Diem Truong*), whose responsibility was similar to that of a regular Chief of District (*Quan Truong*). Candidates for Chief of Center were specially trained in a separate 'crash' course, lasting only ten days, organized by the PTUDD. The Chief of Center was responsible for planning layout of the settlements, overseeing preparation of land for arrival of the settlers, distributing stipulated aid and resources to settlers, developing agriculture and managing daily administration in the center. Once the settlers had begun the normal routine of living and planting in the settlements, the chief was also responsible for organizing local Commune Councils (*Hoi Dong Xa*), which were formed when the administration grouped several villages as a commune (*xa*). Each center was also allocated one secretary, one nurse, one mid-wife and one agricultural supervisor.<sup>68</sup>

Ngo Dinh Diem gave much urgency and priority to the *Dinh Dien* program. He frequently visited the Central Highlands and the *Dinh Dien* settlements.<sup>69</sup> He also suggested sites that could be used for *Dinh Dien* and sent technicians to conduct surveys on the feasibility of these sites. Priority granted to the *Dinh Dien* program could be seen in its administrative operations. The *Dinh Dien* program had its own budget and was exempted from the normal rigid Vietnamese civil service procedures inherited from the French colonial bureaucracy.<sup>70</sup> PTUDD staff was rapidly recruited to cope with the quick pace of the program by waiving civil educational requirements and suspending loyalty investigations.<sup>71</sup> This meant the PTUDD was able to quickly hire staff needed for the rapidly implemented program, but also led to susceptibility to nepotism and corruption, which inflicted the program. Staff was also granted higher and extra pay,

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<sup>67</sup> Upon '*dia phuong hoa*' (localization), each *Dinh Dien* center were supposed to become a separate '*xa*' (commune) and placed under the respective province's administration.

<sup>68</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10787. See also, Nam Chan, 'Nhiem vu cua Dia Diem Truong tai cac co so Dinh Dien' [Responsibilities Of The Chief Of Center In The *Dinh Dien* Establishments], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (60), pp 12 & 18, 1958.

<sup>69</sup> According to Robert Scigliano, between 7 July 1957 and 7 July 1958, Ngo Dinh Diem traveled 14,000 miles in Vietnam in 33 official Presidential visits to different parts of the republic, especially to the Central Highlands. See, *South Vietnam: A Nation Under Stress*, p 57. To reach many of the *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands, Diem walked (often for kilometers), traveled by tractors, and even stayed overnight at the temporary shelters of the settlers.

<sup>70</sup> I discussed some of these problems in Chapter Four.

<sup>71</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13486.

and had a 'liberalized per diem allowance provision' to enable them to carry out extended field operations in the *Dinh Dien* centers.<sup>72</sup> Finding suitable personnel to staff the many local administrative posts needed for each *Dinh Dien* center proved to be more difficult. The poor quality of many of these field-level officials often undermined the development of individual centers.

*Dinh Dien* operations were often under military management.<sup>73</sup> Military units often carried out initial ground operations such as transporting settlers from transit points at the foothills of the highlands to the selected *Dinh Dien* centers. These operations were marked by the kind of logistical efficiency expected of the military. Exact locations (complete with cartographical codes) of the pick up and rest points; clear international hours for time of departure and estimated time of arrival; and the specific units transporting and receiving the settlers were all clearly planned before hand and reported like a military operation.<sup>74</sup> In spite of the military involvement, *Dinh Dien* remained very much a civilian program. Settlers were treated like any member of normal villages. When the provincial police arrested several settlers who deserted Buon Bu Jang *Dinh Dien*, the minister at the President's Office directed that they should be immediately handed back to the center and should never had been arrested by the police in the first place. They did not break any civil law, merely the terms of the *Dinh Dien* program.<sup>75</sup>

The *Dinh Dien* program gave each settler household, consisting of three to five members, one hectare of land upon arrival and allowed it to cultivate up to five hectares, for which land ownership certificate were later granted. Each settler family received a garden of 2,000 square meters located within the residential quarter. The program also gave each adult twelve piasters per day and child six piasters per day as traveling

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<sup>72</sup> Normal civil service regulations under the First Republic only allowed a maximum of 14 days per diem reimbursements. PTUDD estimated that their technicians required at least 25 days per month out in the field to get the work of setting up *Dinh Dien* properly done. See, John Montgomery, *Cases In Vietnamese Administration – Truong hop hanh chanh Viet Nam*, Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1959, p 204; *The Politics Of Foreign Aid*, p 74.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Brigadier-general Le Van Kim, who was chief of staff for 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Montagnard) Division during the Indochina War, was the first *Quan Doc* (Director) for the *Dinh Dien* Region in the Central Highlands. Kim was also one of the main instigators in the successful military coup against Diem in 1963. Colonel Nguyen Cao succeeded him in 1958. See also, *Free In The Forest*, pp 42-45; *The Politics Of Foreign Aid*, p 73.

<sup>74</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>75</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11781. I am not sure if these deserters were originally 'unwilling' settlers forced to join the program.

allowance. During the first six months of resettlement, each settler received a living allowance of six piasters a day; then in the following three months, each received fifteen kilograms of rice per person, per month. The program also gave each family of five, \$1,500 piasters worth of materials to construct the residential house, as well as basic agricultural tools, seeds, fertilizers, salt, blankets and mosquito nets.<sup>76</sup> According to Tran Van Dinh, PTUDD reported the total cost required to settle one family of five was about \$27,430 piasters.<sup>77</sup> John Donnell, however, reports that according to the estimation of American aid officials, it actually cost \$40,000 piasters to settle one family in the Central Highlands.<sup>78</sup> The US government provided strong financial support for the *Dinh Dien* program. In April 1957, the US government signed a *Dinh Dien* project agreement providing US\$3,288,000 in aid and \$235,540,000 piasters in counterpart funds (money generated by the complex arrangement between the US government and the Vietnamese government in the latter's commercial import program).<sup>79</sup>

There were two phases in the process of establishing a *Dinh Dien*.<sup>80</sup> The first phase was planning and preparations. Agricultural technicians conducted land surveys and reported on the suitability of short listed sites for establishing a *Dinh Dien*. This included reporting on the physical conditions of the site relating to agricultural development, which during the initial period meant suitability for wet-rice cultivation; and local social conditions.<sup>81</sup> PTUDD repaired, expanded or cleared from forest, roads that led to the *Dinh Dien* sites. At this stage, PTUDD also coordinated with Bureau for Agricultural Equipment (*Nha Co Gioi Nong Cu*) to clear the land at the selected site. Sufficient land must be cleared for construction of the settlement center (to house administrative offices and public utilities) and for the settlers to build their houses and start planting their crops upon arrival. PTUDD also coordinated with the selected sending provinces, being mainly the Central Lowland provinces, on the recruitment of

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<sup>76</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13505.

<sup>77</sup> 'Tim hieu cac cong cuoc dinh cu dan chung Viet Nam trong qua khu'. According to Louis Wiesner's account, US\$1 was worth about \$35.5 piasters in 1955. Louis Wiesner, *Victims And Survivors: Displaced Persons And Other War Victims In Viet-Nam, 1954-75*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1988, p 7.

<sup>78</sup> 'Politics In South Vietnam', p 183.

<sup>79</sup> *Victims And Survivors*, p 20.

<sup>80</sup> The process of establishing a *Dinh Dien* is also well discussed in 'Tim hieu cac cong cuoc dinh cu dan chung Viet Nam trong qua khu'; 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages' and 'Su to chuc va dieu hanh cac trung tam Dinh Dien tai vung Cao Nguyen'.

<sup>81</sup> I discuss this in detail in Chapter Seven.

settlers. Finally, the recruited settlers were then transported to the centers. During the initial period, sea and rail modes of transport were arranged to bring settlers from the northern Central Lowland provinces to Qui Nhon or Nha Trang before traveling by bus or trucks to the selected centers in the highlands. From 1958 onwards, all traveling was done on land.<sup>82</sup>

The second phase began with the arrival of settlers. This phase was organized along the principle of 'Community Development' (*Phat Trien Cong Dong*), which aimed at fostering a strong collective spirit in every *Dinh Dien* community as envisioned by Ngo Dinh Diem's Personalism revolution (*cach mang nhan vi*).<sup>83</sup> Upon arrival, settlers constructed temporary housings and other public infrastructure such as roads, wells and schools in the centers. They also began planting in their own gardens and in the plot of land allocated under the program. A special feature of the *Dinh Dien* program was that the settlers practiced communal farming on the lands that were devoted to cash crops although they held the lands individually.<sup>84</sup> During this period, the settlers received guidance on the latest agricultural methods, including use of high yield varieties seeds, new cash crop type (such as keenaf), usage of chemical fertilizers, and were provided with farming machinery support arranged by the PTUDD. Once the settlement achieved a measure of normalcy in the agricultural cycle, meaning after reaping the first harvest, the PTUDD stopped issuing allowance subsidies to the settlers. The *Dinh Dien* was then 'localized' (*dia phuong hoa*) and integrated as an administrative unit within the province.<sup>85</sup>

## People

My name is Nguyen The (nickname Chanh Tong The), born in 1886 in Binh Giang commune, Binh Khe district of Binh Dinh province; and currently residing in Thanh Binh village, Pleiku province. I saw the communiqué issued by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam: 'whoever have any relatives, distant or close, with the intention to pioneer rice land and settle in Pleiku Highlands or Thanh Binh' [sic]. As such, I sincerely seek the government's

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<sup>82</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>83</sup> *Diem's Final Failure*, p 59.

<sup>84</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 132.

<sup>85</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442; see also, 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 129; *Cases In Vietnamese Administration*, p 204.



help to send this placard back to Binh Dinh province, Binh Khe district, Binh Giang and Binh Quang communes, as relatives from both my father's side and mother's side are residing in these two places. Those members with family who wish to move here to pioneer rice lands and settle down will be supported by the government ...

Nguyen The, 67 years old settler, 30 June 1957<sup>86</sup>

Nguyen The was probably one of the few Kinh settlers who migrated to the highlands prior to the *Dinh Dien* program. Since he originated from Binh Dinh, he was probably not a refugee either. His settlement was located along National Highway 19 (connecting Pleiku to Cambodia), 19 kilometers west of Pleiku town. For many, the benefits of pioneering a new home village through the *Dinh Dien* program was enticing enough for them to simply 'upped and go'. Ngo Dinh Diem often asked settlers in the Central Highlands to help spread word about the benefits of the *Dinh Dien* program when they write to or visit their relatives in the home villages.<sup>87</sup> Many settlers, like Nguyen The, heeded Diem's call to encourage fellow villagers (*dong huong*) to join the pioneering work in the highlands. Many came and brought with them the entire family. In Pleikeingo *Dinh Dien* (formed in 1958), a group of settlers arrived without their family but by July 1958 they were ready to bring up the rest of their families to join them in the highlands. PTUDD received 25 requests from these settlers, seeking help to arrange for the migration of the settlers' remaining family members from home villages. From the newborn of less than a year old to the aged of 64 years old, these people made up the members of the frontier settlement of Pleikeingo.<sup>88</sup> In 1960, a group of 1954 northern refugees residing in the vicinity of Dalat requested the authorities to arrange for them to join the *Dinh Dien* program in Tuyen Duc province. 23 families with a total of 103 people jointly submitted the request. Majority of the head of households were in the thirties, and some families were also planning to bring along their newborns. The matter was brought to the attention of Ngo Dinh Diem. There was no *Dinh Dien* in Tuyen Duc but Diem directed PTUDD to look for suitable locations such as in Bao Loc,

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<sup>86</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13510.

<sup>87</sup> n.a., 'Ngo Tong Thong thi sat cac trung tam Dinh Cu va Dinh Dien o Banmethuot' [President Ngo Inspects The Resettlement Centers And *Dinh Dien* In Banmethuot], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (44), p 4, 1957.

<sup>88</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13510.

he also reminded the officials to visit their current settlement to ascertain the settlers' backgrounds and general conduct.<sup>89</sup>

**Table 5.2 Number Of Individual Settlers Who Joined The *Dinh Dien* Program In The Central Highlands In 1957 And 1958**

Places of Origins	1957	1958	Total
Quang Nam	6,889	8,971	
Quang Ngai	1,084	9,798	
Thua Thien	1,771	508	
Quang Tri	620	3	
Binh Dinh	57	5,665	
Phu Yen		132	
Khanh Hoa		316	
Phuoc Tuy		472	
Da Nang	83		
Saigon	97		
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,601</b>	<b>25,865</b>	<b>36,466</b>

Source: n.a., 'Tinh hình chung về công cuộc *Dinh Dien* tại Việt Nam 1957-58' [General Situation About The Task Of *Dinh Dien* in Vietnam, 1957-58], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (74), p 5 & 10, 1958.

Most of the settlers were recruited from the crowded Central Lowlands.<sup>90</sup> Table 5.2 shows the number of settlers who joined the *Dinh Dien* program in the Central Highlands in 1957 and 1958.<sup>91</sup> PTUDD gave the 'sending' provinces an estimated quota of settlers they were expected to recruit. These provinces then set the quota for districts, and the districts set the quota for the communes. Each province set up its own recruitment committee and the committee was rewarded with a bonus of 100 piasters for every settler family (of at least three people) recruited. This bonus, however, was not publicized. The recruitment drive for the 1958 *Dinh Dien* program was only given a short time period of three months to recruit and transport the settlers to the highlands, in order to have the settlers there before the onset of the raining season.<sup>92</sup> It was easier to recruit settlers to go to the *Dinh Dien* in the Mekong Delta area than going up the highlands. Lowlanders, after all, were afraid of the forested highlands. The settlers felt that the place names of Pleiku or Banmethuot in the mountains sounded too distant and

<sup>89</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13508.

<sup>90</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 129; *The Politics Of Foreign Aid*, p 81.

<sup>91</sup> These are the only collated figures revealing place of origins of the settlers.

<sup>92</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11781.

strange; and they were more comfortable with working the wet-rice fields in the lowlands.<sup>93</sup>

After the first two waves of settlements, PTUDD organized visits by delegates from the sending provinces to *Dinh Dien* centers that were more 'stable'. The delegates saw for themselves the houses built by the settlers and crops planted on the land owned by the settlers. Some even brought back samples as proof to attract more settlers for the coming recruitment drive. One member of the visiting delegation even remarked,

... living below [the highlands] we are short of food and have to refrain from desires (*an thieu nhin them*), we could work the whole life (*lam ca doi*) yet cannot be sure if we could have a family inheritance (*gia tai*) as such!<sup>94</sup>

Settlers returning to visit home villages also helped to promote the *Dinh Dien* program in the highlands by virtue of being able to tell fellow villagers that they now have their own land.<sup>95</sup> PTUDD also made arrangements for settlers from the 1957 and 1958 programs to visit their home villages with souvenirs from their own fields or gardens, to show that the Central Highlands was indeed 'a promised land' (*vung dat hua*).

The program targeted the landless and poor. The government relied more on persuasion, if not appeals from 'dong huong' (fellow 'villagers') - although in this case, the term 'fellow villagers' was often expanded to encompass people from the same district or even province - rather than resorted to coercion to recruit participants. The most important criterion was that settlers must possess the 'good will to farm' (*thien chi canh tac*), or in other words, willing to be a pioneer peasant. In addition, only the able-bodied and those with families were encouraged to join the *Dinh Dien* program. There were constant reminders to the sending provinces from the PTUDD, Government Delegates (*Dai Bieu Chanh Phu*) for Central Highlands and Central Lowlands and the President office itself, to be more rigorous in the selection of settlers for the *Dinh Dien*

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<sup>93</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11781.

<sup>94</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11715. Free migrant settlers in the 1990s whom I interviewed in 1999 made similar remarks.

<sup>95</sup> n.a., 'Su thanh cong cua ke hoach Dinh Dien' [The Success Of The *Dinh Dien* Plan], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (69), p 18, 1958; n.a., 'Cuoc di dan dau 1958 len vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen Trung Phan' [The First Party Of Migrants In 1958 To Arrive In The Central High Plateau *Dinh Dien* Region], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (60), p 24, 1958.

program.<sup>96</sup> Reports from the sending provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh stated that most of the poor peasants volunteered to join the program, especially those located in the poorer areas. Some of the peasants even sold what little property they had to bring some capital with them to the frontier.<sup>97</sup>

There were also many settlers who were pressured to join the program by people in their respective villages, in order to meet the quota set from above. This included, first, the very poor peasants. Either a few members or the whole family was pressured to sign up for the program. Sometimes they were also forced to sell off their property to prevent them from returning to the village. Second, there were those who were pressured to join because they had family members who went north in 1954 to join the communists (*di tap ket*). Third, there were those who were social outcasts within their villages, and often this also included former communist party members, followers or sympathizers.<sup>98</sup> The *Dinh Dien* program also included political prisoners and military detainees who were sent as settlers to centers created specially for them. For example, in late 1957, a *Dinh Dien* for military detainees and political prisoners was established at Ea Adrang, about 20 kilometers northeast of Bannethuot along Route 14. This center in fact achieved a certain level of viability as a settlement. It was later localized and adopted the name Tan Dien.<sup>99</sup>

Some settlements developed quickly because of the hardworking ethic of pioneering peasants seeking a better life on the frontier. For example, Ngoc Dien (initially known as Buon Tis Sreng II) was a *Dinh Dien* located in the Lak Valley. This *Dinh Dien* was formed in 1959 by settlers from Tam Ky and Thang Binh districts of Quang Nam province. These settlers brought with them agricultural tools, seeds and a determination to build a new home village (*mot quyet tam xay dung que huong moi*). By 1962, the population of the settlement had increased to 1,757 people from 1,593 in 1959. Meanwhile, only 16 people deserted the settlement and another 10 had requested

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<sup>96</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11781; PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>97</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession; see also, 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 128.

<sup>98</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>99</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11740.

to return to Quang Nam.<sup>100</sup> However, not all the settlers who joined *Dinh Dien* possessed the 'good will to farm' or settle in the highlands. Some of the settlers were more than happy just surviving on the government subsidies; and were more than ready to return to their place of origins, and then sign up for another wave of *Dinh Dien*. Ngo Dinh Diem angrily remarked, in his '*but phe*' (penciled remarks) on one of the reports submitted by the PTUDD, that measures must be taken to stop these people from 'using the migration movement to go on a free tour' (*loi dung phong trao di dan de di du lich khong mat tien*)!<sup>101</sup> In the 1957, the *Dinh Dien* center chief (*dia diem truong*) for Dak Nong reported that 60% of the settlers were 'lazy, had contempt for discipline, collect their rice and money to pleasure themselves on gambling and refused to put in effort when farming'; 30% were suspected of planning to sabotage the program; and only 10% were hardworking settlers.<sup>102</sup>

Even demobilized soldiers, who the government often considered as the bulwark of the *Dinh Dien* program's anti-communist objective, sometimes disappointed the expectations of the authorities.<sup>103</sup> In late 1958, Ngo Dinh Diem actually ordered the PTUDD to cease recruitment from the pool of demobilized soldiers after witnessing less than encouraging attitudes and behavior among demobilized soldiers in several *Dinh Dien* he visited in the highlands. He only allowed continued recruitment among the demobilized soldiers after stricter guidelines were imposed. These included conditions such as, soldiers recruited for *Dinh Dien* were not demobilized for disciplinary reasons; they had volunteered for the migration; and showed 'good will to farm the land' (*thien chi canh tac*).<sup>104</sup> Recruitment for *Dinh Dien* continued to face challenges of fulfilling the quantity and quality of the settlers. First, it was difficult to recruit the number of settlers required for the many centers that the government wanted to establish. Second, fulfilling the required number of settlers became all the more difficult when the recruiters had to, at the same time, meet the strict criteria for the ideal settler in the form of a hardworking peasant with family, and definitely not sympathetic to the communists. This 'people' problem was not confined to recruitment of settlers. It was

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<sup>100</sup> Ton That Trinh, 'Nghien cuu ve su tien trien Dinh Dien dia diem Ngoc Dien' [Studying The Progress Of The *Dinh Dien* Center, Ngoc Dien], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (255), pp 13-4, 1962.

<sup>101</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11781.

<sup>102</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>103</sup> Catholic refugees were not always supportive of Diem's policies. The strained relation between groups of the 1954 northern refugees and the Diem regime is discussed in *Diem's Final Failure*, pp 60-1.

<sup>104</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

just as difficult trying to find suitable officials to manage the many *Dinh Dien* and the sub-units under one *Dinh Dien* center.

I (*tao*) am only here for a few years and then [will be] gone, why go through the trouble of building a good house!

Nguyen Hue,  
*Dinh Dien* Agricultural Supervisor, Le Phong II<sup>105</sup>

Nguyen Hue often made such remarks to other settlers in the *Dinh Dien*, Le Phong II. Naturally, the settlers began to worry if Le Phong II would work at all, or if all their hard work would go to waste and had to go home or join other *Dinh Dien* centers. In January 1960, a report was submitted to PTUDD on the state of administration in the *Dinh Dien* centers located in Pleiku. Many others in the Pleiku *Dinh Dien* Zone, holding the post of center chiefs, supervisors or village leaders, were under investigation for suspicion of being communist agents, or for corruption and abuse of official authority.<sup>106</sup>

The most notorious case must have been that of Phan Vy in late 1958. Phan Vy was the first appointed Chief of *Dinh Dien* Zone for Pleiku-Kontum (*Khu Truong Vung Dinh Dien Pleiku-Kontum*). He was known to be a capable administrator but also notorious for being a scheming character, adept at applying connivance (*thu doan*) when dealing with people. Before long, authorities received complaints and they noted irregularities in his administration, and similar behavior among other center chiefs (*dia diem truong*) he had brought into the program. Secret investigations (*dieu tra mat*) were ordered and revealed that Phan Vy had embezzled big sums of money meant for *Dinh Dien* development in Pleiku-Kontum and had been siphoning off subsidies meant for the settlers. The police arrested him and his case was sent to Saigon. Many of his subordinates mirrored his behavior and had similarly 'ate and dug from the public coffers' (*an xoi bot cong*).<sup>107</sup> Tran Dinh Nhi, center chief for Iakrel, was guilty of siphoning off monthly subsidies meant for the settlers, taking in a total of at least

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<sup>105</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13539.

<sup>106</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13539.

<sup>107</sup> The case of Phan Vy was reported mainly in the folder PTTDeNhat, File no. 13486. Individual cases of his subordinates were reported in other folders.

\$147,450 piasters. Phan Ba Phung, formerly center chief for Dakpsi then Pleigiraokop, embezzled money from both centers. Le Quang Vinh, store master for Le Ngoc I, secretly appropriated rice and other subsidies meant for settlers.<sup>108</sup> Nguyen Hoang Binh, center chief for Dakpsi, was arrested for embezzlement and rape of two girls, aged 19 and 17, who were daughters of a settler in his center. All these characters were later charged in court and punished.<sup>109</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Four, many civil servants refused to go to the Central Highlands. Those who were posted there saw it as a form of punishment. Quite often, officials sent to the highlands were those with poor performance or disciplinary records. Similarly, it was difficult to find the required quantity and quality of officials who could manage the many *Dinh Dien* centers being formed. With the amount of money and resources devoted to the program, the not-so-good officials saw it as a 'gold mine' waiting to be 'dug'. So they 'ate from the public coffers' ('*an cong*' or receive pay from public administration) and 'secretly dug' away the public coffers as well (*xoi bot cong*). Being located so far away from the center, or as Vietnamese put it, 'far from the sun' (*xa mat troi*), these officials often behaved as if they were chiefs in their little fiefdoms. For them, it was after all, as inferred to by the agricultural supervisor of Le Phong II, 'only a short tour of duty'. Finding suitable newcomers, both settlers and officials (representative of the State), to the highlands frontier beleaguered the *Dinh Dien* throughout the program's active years.

### Lowlanders In The Highlands

Figure 5.6 reveals the recipe for Thanh Nghe Tinh style soy sauce as done by a group of settlers in Ha Lan A (a settlement of northern refugees in Darlac province), who originated from Nghe An. In mid-1958, Ngo Dinh Diem visited the *Dinh Dien* in the Dakmil area of Darlac province and asked if anyone there knew how to make this particular type of soy sauce. The PTUDD was tasked to find out if settlers in other *Dinh Dien* or resettlement villages knew how to do this. This kind of soy sauce, I heard, had a unique taste and is still in demand in the lowlands. This was not the first time Diem was

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<sup>108</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13539.

<sup>109</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11716. Nguyen Hoang Binh, together with his subordinates in the center, Le Cong Dinh and two other men, had forcefully took the two girls from their house and drove off to hunt in the forest. While others were hunting, Binh and Dinh assaulted the girls in the car.

concerned if the settlers had brought along a bit of home into the frontier environment. Earlier in late 1957, Diem tasked the PTUDD to study the feasibility of planting watermelons so that the settlers could enjoy this fruit during the coming *Tet Nguyen Dan* (Lunar New Year). The watermelon fruit is symbolic of the Vietnamese New Year and is featured in several Vietnamese myths and legends. According to the report by agricultural technicians in PTUDD, settlements with access to irrigation sources could cultivate watermelons during the dry season and could harvest the fruit by the end of the third month upon planting. Studies were made as to which seed type was most suitable and produced a delicious fruit. Then, the PTUDD immediately distributed to the settlements, seedlings for watermelon and other vegetables usually consumed during *Tet*, and portable water pumps for areas in need of irrigation equipment.<sup>110</sup>

**Figure 5.6 How To Make Thanh Nghe Tinh Style Of Thick Soy Sauce (*tuong Thanh Nghe Tinh*) On The Frontier<sup>111</sup>**

To make 100 liters		
<b>Sweet type:</b>		
Glutinous rice	-	1 yen or 10 kilograms
Soybeans	-	1 and half yen or 15 kilograms
Salt	-	6 kilograms
<b>Salty type:</b>		
Corn	-	3 yen or 30 kilograms
Soybeans	-	2 yen or 20 kilograms
Salt	-	1 yen or 10 kilograms
It is critical that only earthenware be used for making this type of soy sauce. Ferment the glutinous rice in advance. Roast the soybeans until the skin is crispy and the inside is golden. Pound the roasted soybeans then soak it in water for nine days. Then mix in the fermented rice and salt, store for three days if making the sweet type, and five days if making the salty type. This can only be made during the sunny season. <sup>112</sup>		

Settlers attempted to transplant many aspects of life from the lowlands to the highlands. Everyday life such as cooking and living, festivals and rituals, were modeled

<sup>110</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>111</sup> Thanh Nghe Tinh refers to the provinces of Thanh Hoa, Nghe An and Ha Tinh. This type of '*tuong*' is different from Chinese soy sauce, or '*xi dau*'.

<sup>112</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11715



after life in the settlers' places of origins. Tea shops, meat stalls, fish stalls, provision shops, barber shops slowly emerged in the settlements, bringing familiarity of life in the lowlands to the pioneer front. These shops, however, often carried certain characteristics only found in the highlands. For example, these shops usually also carried items such as 'special' tea only grown in the highlands (e.g. *tra* Catecka), delicacies (*mon nhau*) readily available in the highlands such as game meat (*thit rung* or *son hao*) or even 'fox-shit' coffee beans (*ca phe cut chon*).<sup>113</sup> Even though they had to adapt to the different agricultural conditions in the highlands, many still made use of plow animals in the fields or to pull their carts from one place to another. The prevalence of plow animals-carts can still be noticed in some areas of the Central Highlands today. It is not simple coincidence that most of these areas were originally settlements formed under the First Republic's refugee resettlement operations or *Dinh Dien* program. The settlers left their village, but they did not leave behind their cultures.

Adaptations were made depending on what could be achieved in the highlands environment or what could not. One thing they could, however, was putting Vietnamese names in place of the local highlander ones for the settlements that were established. All the settlements initially used place names that were commonly referred to for that particular area by local highlanders. For example, Buon Kroa, the first *Dinh Dien* in Darlac province, was located in the vicinity of *Buon Kroa* (Kroa village), a Rhade (Ede) village. As one Kinh journalist noted in his write-up, these names were both strange and difficult to pronounce for Kinh people unfamiliar with the highlands, and hoped that one day there would be Vietnamese names for these settlements.<sup>114</sup> Settlers adapted the local place names informally at first. For example, the settlers referred to Giraokop *Dinh Dien* in Pleiku as '*Xia Rang Cop*' (pick the tiger's teeth).<sup>115</sup> By 1959, six *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands achieved self-sufficiency and were 'localized' (*dia phuong hoa*). PTUDD integrated these settlements into the respective provincial

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<sup>113</sup> Fox-shit coffee beans have its origins from the colonial times when the coffee groves were literally surrounded by wild forests. A particular type of fox, more likely a type of civet cat, would loiter around the coffee trees when the coffee cherries were perfectly ripen. The fox ate only the perfectly ripen cherries. A special enzyme in the fox's digestion system reacted with the undigested seeds (beans) and passed them out as shit. Legend has it that some plantation laborers noticed the undigested beans and collected them. The beans were sun-dried, roasted and ground into powder. Brewed as a drink, it tasted much more superior than normal coffee. This is based on field interviews conducted in Dak Lak in 1999.

<sup>114</sup> Viet Phong, 'Day, Khu Dinh Dien Banmethuot' [Here, Banmethuot *Dinh Dien* Area], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (74), pp 11-14, 1958.

<sup>115</sup> Lam Son, 'Moi dia diem mot bai tho' [A Poem For Each Center], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (74), pp 15 & 24, 1958.

hierarchy, which re-organized the settlements into districts and communes. These settlements also took on new and Vietnamized names.

There was a certain formula to finding new names for the settlements. The President personally directed that the new place name should contain one of the two words from the majority group of settlers' place of origin and this word should be enjoined with another word that carried a certain meaning about the place or people. In Pleiku, three names were proposed for Chudron *Dinh Dien*. The first was 'Quang Tan', meaning the settlers who were from Quang Nam (*Quang*), and were determined to strive towards a new (*Tan*) life. The second was 'Quang Thuong', meaning the Quang Nam settlers who had now settled in the highlands (*mien Thuong*) and were helping to foster a closer relationship with the highlanders (*dong bao Thuong*). The third was 'Ky Thang', after the two districts (*quan*), Tam Ky and Thang Binh, where the settlers originated.<sup>116</sup> Finally, Chudron was officially replaced by the name 'Thang Duc'. Unfortunately, there was no explanation how the name was finally decided. It probably had something to do with the place of origin of the settlers (*Thang* referred to the place of origins of the majority of the settlers in this center) and the moral ideal that Diem hoped the new settlement could signify for the government's program (*Duc* meant 'virtue').<sup>117</sup>

In Darlac province, Buon Kroa had by 1961 become known as Dat Ly, which today has a thriving market just outside inner Ban Me Thuot city. Ea Tul became Quang Nhieu, and present settlers are doing very well in the coffee and pepper 'booms'; and you can get an authentic bowl of 'mi quang'!<sup>118</sup> Dak Nong became known as Gia Nghia, the current provincial center (*thi xa*) of Dak Nong province.<sup>119</sup> Table 5.3 shows the original names and the names adopted after '*dia phuong hoa*' for some of the *Dinh Dien* by the end of 1961. However, Kinh and highlander inhabitants did not actually use the Vietnamized names for all the settlements. To the best of my knowledge, nobody really refers to Banmethuot as Lac Giao. Locals (Kinh and highlanders) still refer to

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<sup>116</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11797.

<sup>117</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 1200.

<sup>118</sup> 'mi quang' is a popular noodle dish that originates from the central region.

<sup>119</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 1200.

Buon Ho (in Dak Lak) as Buon Ho, although the Vietnamized name Cung Kiem is still used occasionally. In other words, the new names quite often ‘failed to stick’.<sup>120</sup>

**Table 5.3 Original Names And Names Adopted After ‘*Dia Phuong Hoa*’ Of Some *Dinh Dien* in Darlac Province**

Original Name of <i>Dinh Dien</i>	Name After ‘ <i>Dia Phuong Hoa</i> ’
Buon Ale	Vu Bon
Buon Kroa	Dat Ly
Ea Uy	Thang Thanh
Buon Rok	Quang Cu
Tham Trach	n.a.
Buon Knir Y Hiai	Thuan Hieu
Daknong	Gia Nghia
Buon Hang	Phuoc Trach
Dinh Hoa	n.a.
Ea Kniach	Thien Hanh
Khue Dien	Buon Tis-Sreng I
Ngoc Dien	Buon Tis-Sreng II
Chur Su	Thang Tri
Buon Yang Bong	Le Giao
Tham Trach II	Quang Trach
Ea Hiu	Thang Tien
Ea Knong	Hue An
Eatul	Quang Nhieu
Quang Nhieu II	Phu Hoc
Ea Adrang	Tan Dien
Buon Dut	Dao Te
Ea Ba	Ich Thien
Ea Drong	Kien Thien
Buon Ho	Cung Kiem
Buon Blang	Chi Thien
Buon Kuang	Tu Cung

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 1200, 14360 & 14368

<sup>120</sup> According to David Marr of the Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, Australian National University, many villages in the Red River Delta also have two or three names. These are names that locals traditionally refer to the particular village, names given by the state, or even informal names that people give to the village. Personal communication, February 2006.

## The Frontier Landscape

The long list of name change for places symbolized a tremendous transformation of the demographic and build-up landscapes of the Central Highlands. The *Dinh Dien* program was most active for the years between 1957 and 1959, but continued to be prominent until 1961, when the Strategic Hamlets program became national policy (*quoc sach*). In 1961, 146 *Dinh Dien* centers were established countrywide, 89,126 hectares of land were cleared and some 210,460 settlers had arrived in the centers.<sup>121</sup> For the Central Highlands, the seven *Dinh Dien* managed by two zonal directors in 1957 had grown into 37 centers managed by five separate zonal administration. Table 5.4 shows the state of the *Dinh Dien* program in the Central Highlands in 1959.<sup>122</sup>

The absolute number of people settled in the Central Highlands under the *Dinh Dien* program pales in comparison to the population transfers organized by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the post-reunification years and caused by the free-migration movement in the Doi Moi years.<sup>123</sup> Table 5.5 shows the comparison. Nonetheless, given the available resources and difficulty of travel in the Central Highlands during the 1950s, the *Dinh Dien* results were quite remarkable. In 1954, Kinh only made up about 15% of the estimated 600,000 people in the Central Highlands. *Dinh Dien*, together with northern refugee settlements, changed this significantly. For example, in Pleiku province, by 1964, there were 59,993 Kinh and 102,570 highlanders. Of this number of Kinh, some 34,959 were brought in by 27 *Dinh Dien* centers. *Dinh Dien*, together with the northern refugees resettlement program, planted the seeds for further increase of Kinh people. According to Toan Anh and Cuu Long Giang's estimation, Kinh people made up for close to 37% of the population in the Central Highlands by the late 1960s. Table 5.6 shows Toan Anh and Cuu Long Giang's estimation for population distribution between Kinh and highlanders.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442.

<sup>122</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 136.

<sup>123</sup> For migration of Kinh people to the highlands, see Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants And The State In The Highlands Of Vietnam*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003; Matthieu Guerin, Andrew Hardy, Nguyen Van Chinh and Stan Tan Boon Hwee, *Des montagnards aux minorites ethniques: Quelle integration nationale pour les habitants des hautes terres du Viet Nam et du Cambodge?*, Paris: L'Harmattan; Bangkok: IRASEC, 2003.

<sup>124</sup> I must remind the reader to take the population statistics for illustrative purposes only. The perpetual redrawing of provincial boundaries in the Vietnam meant that it is really difficult to compare the numbers for one province across the years.

**Table 5.4 State Of The *Dinh Dien* Program In The Central Highlands In 1959**

	Quang Duc	Banmethuot	Pleiku I	Pleiku II	Kontum	TOTAL	
<i>Dinh Dien</i>	6	8	10	11	2	37	
<b>Population</b>	4,610	9,799	11,615	15,089	2,712	43,825	
<b>Houses Constructed</b>	1,010	1,871	2,752	3,558	585	9,776	
<b>Land Area in Hectares</b>	<b>Land Cleared</b>	950	2,548	3,135	3,870	573	11,076
	<b>Rice</b>	54	135	137	275	n.a.	601
	<b>Secondary Food Crops</b>	252	881	822	766	153	2,874
	<b>Cash Crops</b>	180	274	838	915	38	2,245
	<b>Fruit Trees</b>	42	119	96	80	1	338

Source: 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 136.

**Table 5.5 Comparing Number Of Settlers Arriving In The Central Highlands Under Programs Of *Dinh Dien*, New Economic Zone And Free Migration**

Program	Time Period being considered	Estimated Total No. of Settlers	Average No. of Settlers Per Year
<i>Dinh Dien</i> +	1957-1959	43,825	14,608
New Economic Zone◇	1976-1980	450,000*	90,000
Free Migration◇	1990-1997	348,600	43,575

\* This refers to the number of people who went. It is a well-known fact that many migrants under the New Economic Program deserted the new settlements soon after arrival.

+ Source: 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 136.

◇ Source: Bui Minh Dao, Vu Dinh Loi & Vu Thi Hong, *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen* [Ownership And Utilization Of Land In The Provinces Of The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000, pp 80 & 122.

**Table 5.6 Estimation Of Population Distribution Between Kinh And Highlanders In The Late 1960s By Toan Anh And Cuu Long Giang**

Province	Kinh	Highlanders
Darlac	75,000 (62,000 were from <i>Dinh Dien</i> and northern refugee resettlement program)	131,000
Quang Duc	13,872 (mainly from <i>Dinh Dien</i> )	19,204
Pleiku	59,990 (mainly from <i>Dinh Dien</i> )	102,600
Kontum	34,203	69,864
Tuyen Duc	31,532	50,863
Lam Dong	37,764	27,747
Phu Bon	7,108	39,254

Source: Cuu Long Giang & Toan Anh, *Cao Nguyen Mien Thuong*, Saigon: Viet Nam Chi Luoc, 1974.

In Darlac province, there were 35,000 Kinh and 76,000 highlanders in 1954. By 1973, there were 127,546 Kinh and 125,067 highlanders.<sup>125</sup> In general, *Dinh Dien* program created Kinh enclaves wherever the *Dinh Dien* centers were located.<sup>126</sup> For example, in 1964, Pleiku province was organized into three districts, Le Trung, Le Thanh and Phu Nhon. Le Trung district was organized into 15 distinctly Kinh communes and 13 highlander cantons (*tong*) (which contained 48 highlander communes). Le Thanh district was organized into 17 distinctly Kinh communes and 3 highlander cantons (which contained 17 highlander communes). Phu Nhon district was totally inhabited by highlanders, organized into 4 cantons of 10 communes.<sup>127</sup> These distinctly Kinh communes in Pleiku were also former *Dinh Dien* established between 1957-63.<sup>128</sup> In Darlac province, in 1973, there were 8 distinctly Kinh communes and 10 Kinh-highlander communes with separate villages, out of the total 48 communes. The rest were all highlander communes. Similarly, it was no coincidence that the Kinh enclaves were formed by *Dinh Dien* and the earlier northern refugee resettlement programs. For example, Dat Ly and Quang Nhieu were two Kinh enclaves that were also the first two *Dinh Dien* in Darlac province. Ea Knir and Buon Ho were another two major *Dinh Dien* that had also grown into Kinh-enclaves within highlander-dominated communes.<sup>129</sup>

The Kinh enclaves were often more densely populated than the highlander communes. Highlander communes usually contained many villages spread out over a wide area. Villages in Kinh communes were located in closer proximity. Rather than establishing public services and infrastructure in existing lightly populated areas, which meant spreading limited resources thinly across a wide area, the government tried to organize the settlements into agglomerations with population ranging between 2,000 and 3,000 people. The government also established schools, medical centers, markets and area administration offices in these settlements. The rationale behind this demographic and administrative planning was to achieve a certain economic of scale when establishing public services such as schools; and forestall communist insurgent

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<sup>125</sup> Ty Thong Tin Tinh Darlac, *Tinh Darlac Dia Phuong Chi: 1973* [Darlac Province Bulletin: 1973], Darlac: Toa Hanh Chanh Tinh Darlac, 1973, p 11.

<sup>126</sup> With the exception of a few, most of the *Dinh Dien* centers consisted primarily of Kinh settlers.

<sup>127</sup> Ty Thong Tin Pleiku, *Pleiku Ngay Nay* [Pleiku Today], Pleiku: Toa Hanh Chanh Tinh Pleiku, 1964, pp 28-36.

<sup>128</sup> After the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, all *Dinh Dien* and *Ap Chien Luoc* became known as '*Ap Tan Sinh*'. See *Pleiku Ngay Nay*, pp 58-61.

<sup>129</sup> *Tinh Darlac Dia Phuong Chi: 1973*, pp 12-13.

activities.<sup>130</sup> Although Catholics did not necessarily make up the majority in most of the *Dinh Dien* established from 1957 onwards, Ngo Dinh Diem nonetheless directed PTUDD to give each *Dinh Dien* \$10,000 piasters for the construction of a church.<sup>131</sup> These population enclaves were also marked by a relatively more built-up landscape.

When the French established the colonial order in the Central Highlands, 'penetrantes', or penetration roads were constructed to connect the highlands to the lowlands, and between major administrative and economic centers in the highlands. In Darlac province alone, the French built 608 kilometers of dirt roads and trails with wooden bridges. The French also constructed colonial route 14, the major route that today run across the heart of the Central Highlands. Construction of route 14 began in 1918.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, frontier formation under the First Republic was accompanied by the development of a complex network of roads. The government 'upgraded' – broaden and flatten – all the old colonial routes whenever possible (meaning when not harassed by communist attacks). It also renamed the colonial routes as National Highways. The government also constructed new roads to link the major *Dinh Dien* centers with existing administrative centers or future administrative centers. For example, it constructed in 1959, a new route connecting Sung Duc to Gia Nghia (previously Dak Nong *Dinh Dien*), the administrative center for Quang Duc province.<sup>133</sup> By 1958, the PTUDD had constructed 73.4 kilometers of roads and 16 bridges connecting the established *Dinh Dien* with the major administrative centers.<sup>134</sup> By 1963, a total of 117.23 kilometers of rural roads (*huong lo*) was either constructed or repaired, still mainly dirt roads, to connect the new settlements in Pleiku province alone (Table 5.7).<sup>135</sup> This complex network of roads extended the reach of the government. Inhabitants, old and new, also traversed along these roads as their community circles

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<sup>130</sup> n.a., 'Tong Thong thi sat dia diem Dinh Dien Buon Bu'M Ke' [The President Inspects Buon Bu'M Ke *Dinh Dien* Center], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (65), pp 5 & 33, 1958.

<sup>131</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession. As showed in Chapter Four, most of the 1954 northern refugees were Catholics.

<sup>132</sup> *Sons Of The Mountains*, p 303.

<sup>133</sup> n.a., 'Viec phat trien he thong duong sa va mo mang vung Cao Nguyen' [The Work Of Developing The Road System And Opening The High Plateau Region], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (103), p 20, 1959.

<sup>134</sup> 'Di tham vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen'. A total of 1,318 kilometers was constructed or repaired in all *Dinh Dien* regions (highlands and lowlands) by July 1963. See, n.a., 'Quoc Sach Dinh Dien trong 9 nam qua' [The National Policy Of *Dinh Dien* In The Last 9 Years], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (339), pp 6-7 & 33, 1963.

<sup>135</sup> *Pleiku Ngay Nay*, pp 21-2.



expanded and intersected in the fast transforming frontier. These roads were also built for strategic reasons to counter the communist insurgency.

**Table 5.7 Roads Constructed To Connect *Dinh Dien* Centers In Pleiku**

Roads Built Between		Distance (km)
Le Ngoc I	Le Ngoc II	24
Le Phong I	Le Khong II	8
Thang Duc I	Thang Duc II	5
Pleilung	Yarangn	4
Le Kim	Sung Le	13.3
Pleiku	An My Thuong	3
Sung Thien I	Sanh Duc	4.3
Cuty	Yacham	20
	Sanh Duc	2
	Mang Yang	8.2
	Mt. Suoi Doi	10.7
	Mt Chutomoch	7
	Chau Khe	6.5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>117</b>

Source: *Pleiku Ngay Nay*, pp 21-2.

...

The primary concern when setting up a *Dinh Dien* center was the suitability of the sites for establishing a stable and productive agricultural settlement. Despite its auxiliary security objective, strategic positioning gave way to this primary concern. In contrast, *don dien* were located on sites even if the location could not sustain these outposts. The majority of the participants in the *Dinh Dien* program were probably not Catholics, in contrast to the refugee resettlement program. Instead, the government looked to the peasants found in the overcrowded Central Lowland provinces. It specifically looked for people with the 'good will to farm' (*thien chi canh tac*) and gave preference to those migrating with their families. However, recruitment in the local sending areas often ended up choosing political and social outcasts to fulfill the quota set by the higher echelon of the government. The problem of finding people to join the program also beleaguered the administration of the *Dinh Dien* program. Yet, for all the problems encountered in the *Dinh Dien* program, the primary consideration during implementation was to ensure that settlers could survive, stay and finally '*an cu lap nghiep*' (live in peace and be content with one's occupation) on the frontier. *Dinh Dien* managed to transform the landscape and living environment in the highlands. The

demography of the highlands changed significantly and Kinh enclaves emerged. Settlers tried to transplant a familiar lifestyle in the highlands. Yet, this was only one facet of the process of frontier formation. As will be seen below, newcomers - both state and settlers - had to make adaptations as well.

## ADAPTATIONS ON THE FRONTIER

Behind the transformed landscapes on the frontier are stories of adaptation by the settlers and reconsiderations of the most suitable strategy to stabilize (*on dinh*) the *Dinh Dien* settlements by the government. Settlers were, after all, mortal, and life on the frontier was quite precarious. The Vietnamese government took extra measures to ensure that the settlers survived the tough frontier environment. Plains and hills dwellers may live under the same sky but the climate in the highlands is significantly different. Different soil structure and other ecological factors combined to set a precondition for settling on the frontier, and people must adapt. Contrary to recommendations made in late 1956, there was no attempt to immediately set on the path of expanding agricultural land through cash crop production (see Chapter Four). Agricultural technicians found a way to advance the initial objective of the project, being expansion of wet-rice cultivation, or *dinh dien*. But that also required the practitioners to make adaptations on the frontier to realize it. It was, however, uneconomical in terms of benefits and land use needs. Finally, the government set on using cash crop production as the primary means to stabilize the frontier settlements. This meant that the settlers had to make double efforts at adaptation in order to settle on the frontier. The government went the extra mile to help these settlers to settle by providing technical aid and subsidies. Another major reason the government decided to alter its strategy was because it took into account the responses by the old inhabitants, who did not react well to the frontier expansion program. The landscape that began to take shape from 1958 was in fact something quite different from the original intention of the project (as indicated by its name), original strategy of stabilizing the settlements, and how it was implemented elsewhere in the country (for example in the Mekong Delta). This was because of the particularisms encountered in the highlands.

**Figure 5.7 ‘Stuck In Mud’**



**‘Heaven, Earth And The Mortal’**

I remember that for two or three weeks in July 1999 when I first conducted fieldwork in Dak Lak province (Darlac under the First Republic), the sky was covered by an unbroken, dark overcast. Rain was pouring unrelentingly. Now and then, the view through the window was uninterrupted by the intense, pouring rain when rainfall was reduced to very slight drizzle, or just stopped. But the clouds did not break and rain soon returned with a vengeance. I do not remember actually seeing the sun. The dirt paths connecting the pioneer front settlement where I was staying were impassable to motor vehicles. My friends could not tend to their coffee trees or plots of cultivated hill-rice. I was all too familiar with scenes of mud clogging the rim of the wheels of a motorcycle, or trucks and cars getting stuck in the mud (Figure 5.7). It was not a wise thing to take a walk unless you want to waddle across the red, muddy ground, or shower in the rain. That was one wet-season in the Central Highlands I did not forget. The chief of center for Dak Nong *Dinh Dien* described a similar scene in 1957,

at Dak Nong center, it began to rain from 6 August 1957, and till today, 15 September 1957, have yet to stop. The water level has increased by 1.5 *thuoc*<sup>136</sup> and all the leveled lands assigned to the settlers for cultivation are flooded from two *tac*<sup>137</sup> to 1 *thuoc* and 20 *tac* high; only the higher grounds are not inundated.<sup>138</sup>

Life in the highlands is basically organized around the two monsoons that annually blow across the mountains. The Central Highlands is distinctly different from the lowlands, the traditional domain of the Kinh. The wet season (*mua mua*) begins in late April or early May when the southwest monsoon brings the heaviest precipitation to the windward western slopes and ends in early October. Temperature during the wet season is usually quite hot in the day (when it is not raining) but very cool when the rain falls (it can get a bit chilly at night). The northeast monsoon usually begins in late October and subsides by the end of March. Although it is normal to experience occasional heavy monsoon rains between December and February, this period is generally viewed as the dry season (*mua kho* or *mua nang*).<sup>139</sup> I still remember wondering to myself, while visiting Dak Lak during the dry season for the first time and comfortably lodged in my seat on the night bus, why were these people at the highway toll stations wearing such thick jackets and wrapping thick mufflers around their necks? I learnt the reason when I alighted the bus at my destination, trembling and shivering, at about a quarter to four in the morning. The dry season is also the colder season. The southern and western parts of Central Highlands have prominent undulating and rolling reliefs, especially on the plateaus such as Darlac or Pleiku.<sup>140</sup> On the plateaus are found reddish brown latasols, commonly called 'red soil/earth' (*terres rouges*), which supposedly prompted the French colonialists to establish coffee and rubber estates in the highlands.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Vietnamese meter, about 0.4 meters.

<sup>137</sup> One tenth of a Vietnamese meter.

<sup>138</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>139</sup> *Shattered World*, pp xvii-xviii; Ngo Van Ly & Nguyen Van Dieu, *Tay Nguyen: Tiem nang va trien vong* [The Western Plateau: Potential And Prospects], Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1992, pp 23-27.

<sup>140</sup> F.R. Moorman, *The Soils Of The Republic Of Vietnam*, Saigon: Ministry of Agriculture, 1961 cited from *Shattered World*, pp xvii-xviii.

<sup>141</sup> When Giran, who succeeded Sabatier as the resident of the Darlac province, announced the opening of the Darlac region for colonization in 1926, there were reportedly some 27 demands for a total of 167,845 hectares of land, almost the entire province of Darlac. See, *Sons Of The Mountains*, p 321. See also the comprehensive discussions on development of colonial plantation economy in Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development Of French Indochina*, London: Oxford University Press, 1944; Martin Murray,

The old inhabitants (the highlanders) are all too familiar with the climate and land in the Central Highlands and had long ago adapted their agrarian life accordingly.<sup>142</sup> The Kinh settlers could adopt two methods to overcome their traditional predilection for the lowlands and for wet-rice agriculture when they upped-and-go to the highlands, which they also traditionally consider as a place where the ‘forest is haunted and water is poisonous’ (*rung thieng nuoc doc*).<sup>143</sup> One was to transplant their way of civilization in the lowlands to the highlands. The other was to learn to adapt.

PTUDD conducted meticulous surveys to gather all kinds of information to determine the suitability of the selected area to establish a viable settlement. These surveys informed the planners about the physical and social limitations for that particular site. Unfortunately, most of the settlers from the first wave of *Dinh Dien* in 1957 arrived in the highlands only in the middle of the year, or rather, during the rainy season.<sup>144</sup> Table 5.8 lists the Central Highlands *Dinh Dien* established in 1957 and 1958. Just before the onset of the rains, PTUDD only managed to clear some 340 hectares of land. Table 5.9 shows the land area cleared for each settlement in comparison to the total land area that was supposed to be cleared in advance of the arrival of settlers in 1957.<sup>145</sup>

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*The Development Of Capitalism In Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)*, Los Angeles, London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

<sup>142</sup> For detailed descriptions, see *We Have Eaten The Forest; Chung Toi An Rung; Dam Bo, Mien Dat Huyen Ao* [The Illusory Land], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Hoi Nha Van, 2003. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc. Original publication 1950; Jacques Dournes, *Rung, Dan ba, Dien loan* [Forest, Woman And Follie], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Hoi Nha Van, 2003. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc. Original publication, 1978; Anne De Hautecloque-Howe, *Nguoi Ede: Mot xa hoi mau he* [Ede People: A Matrilineal Society], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa Dan Toc, 2004. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc & Phung Ngoc Cuu. Original publication, 1985.

<sup>143</sup> *Shattered World*, p xiv.

<sup>144</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>145</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10816.

**Table 5.8 List Of Central Highlands *Dinh Dien* Established In 1957 And 1958**

Year	Banmethuot <i>Dinh Dien</i> Zone	Pleiku-Kontum <i>Dinh Dien</i> Zone
1957	Buon Kroa Eatul Daknong	Plei Bangyam Pleipiom I Pleipiom II Chudron
1958	Treatu Buon Ban Jang Dakmol Buon Bu M'Bre Tan Dien	Iakrel Iahai Pleithe Traphan Giraokop Iadrang Pleikenngo Dakpsi Plei Deukla Lakae Pleidel Thanh Binh

Source: n.a., 'Di tham vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen' [Visiting The High Plateau Dinh Dien Region], *Chan Hung Dinh Dien* (74), pp 6-8, 1958.

**Table 5.9 Land Area Cleared At Each *Dinh Dien* August 1957**

<i>Dinh Dien</i> Center	Land Area Cleared (hectares)	Land Area Supposed To Be Cleared In Advance (hectares)
Eatul	75	555
Pleipiom I	60	505
Pleipiom II	35	
Pleibangyam	25	155
Chudron	40	205
Buonkroa	40	305
Daknong	40	305

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 10816.

Despite the availability of heavy-duty tractors and rollers to clear land, level it and plow the soil, the factors of seasonal weather, soil-type and geography combined to restrict groundwork preparations for *Dinh Dien*. Although the dry season generally stretches between January and April, there are still occasional heavy rains between December and February. More important for agricultural production was that land plowing was best done between March and April so that farmers could begin planting in May or June, during early part of the wet season. In addition, it was not advisable to clear or plow the land with heavy-duty tractors during the wet season. This was

especially true on undulating grounds because of susceptibility to soil erosion. Technically, the Bureau for Agricultural Equipment and Machinery could only deploy its fleet of tractors and teams of technicians for two months of optimal work in the highlands. During those two months, it was difficult for the bureau to deploy her fleet and personnel evenly to all the planned sites stretched out across the whole of the Central Highlands region and yet able to meet the targeted prepared land area for individual sites.<sup>146</sup> Nonetheless, the use of heavy machinery to pioneer the land enabled the PTUDD to establish settlements at a much more efficient rate than simply depending on human physical strength.<sup>147</sup>

For the 1957 settlers, arriving in the highlands during the break into the wet-season was probably rather miserable. Besides the land area cleared at the designated administrative center of the *Dinh Dien*, they were basically surrounded by the much-feared forests. Many could not begin planting until the next planting season. In August 1957, PTUDD sent three officials to distribute seeds (mainly food crops) to the settlers in Darlac, Pleiku and Phuoc Long. In Phuoc Long, the settlers were still busy building their houses, the land was not plowed and the 500 kilograms of seeds issued earlier was still stored in warehouse. In Eatul of Darlac, settlers were just finishing the construction of houses and were not ready to begin planting. In Dak Nong, land for building of houses was not even flattened yet!<sup>148</sup> Crop production schedules planned by PTUDD could not proceed as intended. In October 1957, Bui Van Luong reported to the President that earlier plans to plant hemp and castor-oil plant in selected *Dinh Dien* had to be postponed to 1958 because they had already missed the optimal planting season. In addition, the bridge at Tuy Hoa collapsed, making it impossible for the trucks transporting hemp seeds from La Hai (of Phu Yen province) to cross into the highlands. Luong received reassurance from Diem, who replied that if they could not plant both types of crop this year, they should wait till next year's season.<sup>149</sup> Meanwhile, PTUDD continued to extend subsidies to the settlers.

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<sup>146</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10273.

<sup>147</sup> n.a., 'Ket qua tot dep cua cong cuoc khan hoang canh tac bang nong cu co gioi tai cac vung Dinh Dien' [Good Results In The Work Of Pioneering And Cultivating By Agricultural Machinery In The Dinh Dien Regions], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (85), pp 15 & 26, 1958.

<sup>148</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>149</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

The PTUDD tried to bring in the 1958 settlers in time for the planting season.<sup>150</sup> They were, however, unable to clear sufficient land for the settlers to be able to survive on their own production, subsidies had to be extended for another season as well.<sup>151</sup> For the 1959 program, the PTUDD learnt from experience and decided to bring in the settlers beginning from November 1958 so that they would have enough time to build the houses and prepare the land for cultivation. It was hoped that this could help to reduce the number of settlers who deserted the program or wished to withdraw because of the immense hardship brought about by the work of pioneering and especially, poor co-ordination of the program with the weather and soil conditions in the highlands.<sup>152</sup> In mid-1958, the PTUDD examined the possible reasons that resulted in settlers deserting the settlements. One was the difficulties and hardships discussed above. The other reasons were, first, lack of explanation in the settlements to help the settlers understand the difficulties and the political rationale behind the *Dinh Dien* program; second, Viet Cong propaganda causing unrests in some settlements; and third, that some of the settlers were in fact pressured to join the program or were 'trouble' characters in the first place. Efforts were then made to address the organizational shortcomings of the program; set up a network of informers to weed out communist agents; and organize 'inter-family groups' (*lien gia*) to develop better cooperation among the settler families and enhanced surveillance.<sup>153</sup> Exact number of settlers who withdrew was not available, but I estimate that close to 3,000 settlers or 8% of the total left during the first two years of the program.<sup>154</sup> In addition, the PTUDD often tried to quickly bring in additional settlers to fill the numbers that left.

Pioneering work was tough, and dangerous, too. This was especially the case in the Central Highlands. In mid-1957, Pham Nhu Phien, the Government Delegate to the Central Highlands, inspected the *Dinh Dien* established in his domain. He reported on

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<sup>150</sup> n.a., 'Phong trao di dan va ke hoach phat trien Dinh Dien nam 1958 tai Cao Nguyen' [The Migrant Movement And The Plan To Develop *Dinh Dien* In The High Plateau In 1958], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (54), pp 22 & 26, 1958.

<sup>151</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11724. John Montgomery makes a similar observation, "...extreme haste of the project led to extreme hardships during the early months, settlers moved into the highlands during the wet season where houses could not be built and farming could not begin..." in *The Politics Of Foreign Aid*, p 74. On the issue of state subsidy for the settlers, John Donnell notes that in practice subsidies continued longer than the stipulated time frame. See 'Politics In South Vietnam', p 182.

<sup>152</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13486.

<sup>153</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11779.

<sup>154</sup> This estimation is based on number of people who joined the program from the sending provinces, and the number of settlers still residing at the centers. See Table 5.11.



the general health and medical situations in the Central Highlands and *Dinh Dien* centers in August 1957,

during the period of inspection, from 12 May 1957 to 17 May 1957, I witnessed a very critical situation, especially in the *Nong Truong* [*Dinh Dien*], 40% of our compatriots suffered from typhoid fever, cough, and dysentery...

... In Pleipiom (Pleiku) *nong truong*, from 15 July to 21 August 1957, already five people died in the hospital, and one adult and a child died in the *nong truong* because of the various illnesses mentioned above.<sup>155</sup>

There was also, in general, a shortage of medical supplies and personnel in the provinces, and the situation was worse in the *Dinh Dien* centers. In September 1958, Bui Van Luong wrote to Brigadier-general Tong Quan Tri, chief of the Malaria Eradication Program to seek his help in accelerating the implementation of that program in the *Dinh Dien* centers of the Central Highlands. He reported that because most of the settlers originated from the Central Lowlands, many have had suffered malaria before. Arriving in the climatically different, forested and malaria prone environment of the Central Highlands, many suffered relapses while others were infected for the first time. Between 20% and 40% of the settlers in some of the *Dinh Dien* suffered from malaria. Table 5.10 shows the reported statistics. He requested that medication be quickly distributed to the *Dinh Dien* to prevent the malaria situation from worsening.<sup>156</sup>

**Table 5.10 Percentage Of Settlers In Some Central Highlands *Dinh Dien* Suffering From Malaria In September 1958**

<i>Dinh Dien</i>	% Population of Settlers Suffering Malaria
BuonBanJang	19.54
Pleidel	38.18
Pleideukla	32.35
Pleithe	46.88
Iakae	49.46
Iakrel	34.20
Traphan	59.40

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 16696.

<sup>155</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16696.

<sup>156</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16696.

## Planting

The term '*Dien*', as discussed earlier, refers specifically to 'wet-rice fields'. With the exception of some areas such as Lak (in Dak Lak province) or Kontum, the physical environment in the highlands, however, was more suitable for very different crop types (including rice) and very different land use methods. In mid-1957, PTUDD calculated the annual basic subsistence needs for a household of five, when converted into monetary terms, worked out to be about \$24,797 piasters (see Table 5.11). If each household was given one hectare of land for residence and agriculture, cultivated a variety of subsistence crops, such as rice, maize, beans, and some fruit trees, *relied solely on labor within the household and work very hard (chui kho lam viec)*, they could possibly reap a benefit - when converted into monetary terms - of about \$25,100 piasters; meaning they could barely subsist (see Table 5.12). They could also cultivate annuals such as cotton, kee-naf or castor-oil plant, which could reap higher benefits.

**Table 5.11 Estimated Annual Basic Subsistence Needs Of A Settler Family In The Central Highlands**

Item	Cost (Piasters)
Rice: 6 piasters x 912 kg (0.5 kg x 5 people x 365 days)	5,472
Other food stuff: 6 piasters x 5 people x 365 days	9,125
Clothing: 4 sets x 2 adults + 6 sets x 3 children (200 piasters x 4 + 150 piasters x 6)	1,700
Medicine: 200 piasters x 5	1,000
Schooling Costs	1,500
Socializing	1,500
House Maintenance	2,000
Agriculture Equipment	1,000
Seeds	500
Extraordinary Expenses	1,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24,797</b>

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 10856.

**Table 5.12 Estimated Annual Income Of A Settler Family In The Central Highlands By Subsistence Farming On One Hectare Of Land**

Land Area & Crop Type	Harvest & Price	Income
0.5 hectare x Rice	600 kg x 4 piasters	2,400
0.3 hectare x Corn & Beans	500 kg x 3 piasters 100 kg x 12 piasters	1,500 1,200
0.2 hectare x house & fruit trees (40 trees)	40 trees x 500 piasters	20,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>25,100</b>

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 10856.

Agricultural technicians from PTUDD, however, warned that when planting food crops such as rice or maize, and annuals such as cotton or keenaf, it was necessary that the land be allowed to 'rest' after two to three years of cultivation because of the soil condition in the Central Highlands. They cautioned that if the settlers did not practice rotational farming to rest the land, then the soil would be totally 'exhausted'. Under such circumstances, they would have to move to another place to pioneer another piece of land, thus practicing shifting cultivation similar to the highlanders.<sup>157</sup> The technicians calculated that practicing a bi-annual form of rotational farming (*nhi nien luan canh*) should be sufficient to allow the land to recuperate. For example, the settlers could spend two years on food crops (*hoa mau*), or one year on groundnuts or sunflowers, and let the soil recuperate for one year by mulching on site. In other words, if each household required at least one and a half to two hectares of land to achieve basic self-sufficiency, then each household must be given at least double that amount of land area, or at least three hectares of land, in order to practice a form of sustainable agriculture -- using rotational farming - on the fixed parcel of land.<sup>158</sup>

Alternatively, if the settlers practiced specialized cash crop farming, such as tea, coffee, pepper, or fruit trees, they would not need to practice rotational farming. In fact, a household of five were only able to look after, at most, one hectare of such cash crops and only if they work very hard. They could easily reap an income of more than \$40,000 piasters worth in monetary terms (see Table 5.13). However, they would have

<sup>157</sup> The report described highlanders as practicing 'burning the forest to make swidden' (*dot rung lam ray*).

<sup>158</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10856.

**Table 5.13 Estimated Annual Income Of A Settler Family In The Central Highlands By Specialized Cash Crop Farming**

Crop per hectare	Harvest	Output (Piasters)	Input (Piasters)	Net Income (Piasters)
Tea	4,000 kg x 16 piasters	64,000	20,000	44,000
Coffee	900 kg x 70 piasters	63,000	20,000	43,000
Fruit Trees (Orange or Mandarins)	400 trees x 400 piasters	160,000	30,000	130,000

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 10856.

to wait three to five years before reaping the first harvest and had to learn about the different cultivation techniques, crop requirements and establish marketing networks.<sup>159</sup> The fact that industrial cash crops could fetch a higher income than traditional subsistence crops was not lost to *Dinh Dien* planners and readers of the economic periodical, *Chan Hung Kinh Te*, as one article compares the possible benefits of both crop types (see Table 5.14).<sup>160</sup>

In the early period of *Dinh Dien* formation, agricultural technicians from the PTUDD suggested that fruit trees and pepper vines were the most economically beneficial and land-area saving cash crops. In the case of fruit trees, the PTUDD had by mid-1958, distributed some 11,000 saplings of orange, mandarins and lemon trees, 35,000 of pineapple saplings and 8,000 banana and coconut saplings to the *Dinh Dien* settlers in the Central Highlands. These trees were traditionally planted in parts of the lowlands and also in the plantations of the Central Highlands.<sup>161</sup> Most settlers, however, were not used to planting just these crops in place of rice.

<sup>159</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10856; see also, n.a., 'Tim hieu chu trong trong cay ky nghe tai cac dia diem Dinh Dien' [Understanding The Policy Of Planting Industrial Cash Crops In The *Dinh Dien* Centers], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (93), p 12, 1958.

<sup>160</sup> n.a., 'Cay ky nghe voi doi song nong dan' [Industrial Cash Crops And The Livelihoods Of Peasants], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (16), p 27, 1957.

<sup>161</sup> n.a., 'Su tien trien cua viec trong cay an trai tai cac dia diem Dinh Dien' [The Progress Of The Work Of Cultivating Fruit Trees In The *Dinh Dien* Centers], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (92), p 27, 1958.

**Table 5.14 Comparison of Possible Income From Traditional Subsistence Crops and Cash Crops**

Crop Type		Ouput/Hectare	Highest Price (Piaster)	Income/Hectare (excluding input) (Piaster)
Subsistence Crops	Rice	1,200 kg	\$200/100 kg	\$2,400
	Corn	1,000 kg	\$250/100 kg	\$2,500
	Sesame	300 kg	\$12/1 kg	\$3,600
	Soy beans	400 kg	\$14/1 kg	\$5,600
	Mung beans	300 kg	\$26/1 kg	\$6,000
	Groundnuts	400 kg	\$16/1 kg	\$6,400
Cash Crops (Annuals)	Cotton	600 kg	\$10/1 kg	\$6,000
	Castor Oil	1,000 kg	\$7/ 1 kg	\$7,000
	Hemp	500 kg	\$15/1 kg	\$7,500
	Tobacco	800 kg	\$25/1 kg	\$20,000
	Sugarcane	25 tons	\$1500/ton	\$37,000
Cash Crops (Perennials)	Coconut	800 kg	\$15/ 1kg	\$12,000
	Rubber	1,000 kg	\$37/1 kg	\$37,000
	Pepper	300 kg	\$100/1 kg	\$50,000
	Tea	500 kg	\$100/1 kg	\$50,000
	Coffee	700 kg	\$80/1 kg	\$56,000
	Fruit Trees	3,000 kg	\$20/1 kg	\$60,000

Source: n.a., 'Cay ky nghe voi doi song nong dan'.

In the case of pepper, the government had already begun studying the feasibility of expanding pepper cultivation in the Central Highlands in late 1955, when the Crown Domain was abolished. About 50 hectares of pepper was already under cultivation in the Central Highlands, 50 hectares in the Central Lowlands and another 100 in the southern lowlands (mainly in the foothills area of the Central Highlands such as in Quang Ngai and in parts of the Delta). About \$1,200,000 piasters worth of pepper was imported annually from Cambodia for domestic consumption. In late 1956, the government sent a delegation of agricultural technicians to Cambodia to study pepper production. Other preparation work was put into action, including conducting experiments in the Center for Agricultural Produce Experiment in Bao Loc (*Trung Tam Thuc Nghiem Nong San Bao Loc*); producing seeds in the various nurseries operated by PTUDD; and drawing up cultivation method pamphlets to be distributed to the farmers by Bureau for Agriculture. By April 1958, the Government Delegate for the Central Highlands ordered all provinces in the highlands to encourage cultivation of pepper.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>162</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11724.

The technicians did not recommend cash crops already produced in the Central Highlands, such as coffee, tea and rubber.<sup>163</sup> In the case of coffee, there was a limited market demand because much of the coffee produced in Vietnam was of the robusta variety, already dominated by private plantations and was mainly supplied to the domestic market.<sup>164</sup> In the 1950s, the demand for robusta in the global coffee market was still limited.<sup>165</sup> Tea would require a sophisticated up-stream processing infrastructure and therefore made it unsuitable during the infancy period of the *Dinh Dien* program.<sup>166</sup> The technicians were not sure about the profitability of rubber production by smallholders without strong government support and subsidy. However, as time passed, settlers in different *Dinh Dien* localities, through their own means and networks diversified into producing these traditional cash crops. For example, settlers in Eatul *Dinh Dien* (later known as Quang Nhieu) began planting coffee as early as 1958; and settlers in Ea Kniach planted a total of 10 hectares and Buon Ho planted 15,000 coffee saplings by mid-1961.<sup>167</sup> In the case of coffee, Luong Quan Thach estimates that in 1970, small-holders produced some 61% of the total coffee output. Middle-holders with farm area between three and ninety-nine hectares produced 37% of the total and large plantations of above 100 hectares farm area produced the remaining 2%.<sup>168</sup>

Most of the settlers, who were rice farmers from the lowlands, were familiar with neither cultivating most of the cash crops (annuals and perennials) suitable to the conditions of the highlands, nor specializing in cash crop production alone. The technicians reported that this was in fact a big challenge to their proposed agricultural development blueprint for *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands because

<sup>163</sup> n.a., 'Ben Le Hoi Cho Kinh Te Banmethuot: Cao Nguyen la vung trong cay ky nghe' [At The Banmethuot Economic Fair Festival: The High Plateau Is A Region For Planting Industrial Cash Crops], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (1), pp 23 & 28, 1957.

<sup>164</sup> For insights on coffee production in Vietnam in the 1950s and early 1960s, see Luong Quan Thach, 'Tiep thi ca phe Viet Nam' [Marketing Coffee In Vietnam], Khao Luan Ca Nhan, Sai Gon: Vien Dai Hoc Da Lat, 1973; n.a., 'Tinh hình ngành trong ca-phe tai Viet Nam' [The Situation Of Coffee Farming In Vietnam], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (62), pp 14-5, 1958.

<sup>165</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the global coffee market, see John Talbot, 'Grounds For Agreement: The Political Economy Of The Coffee Commodity Chain', Ph.D. Thesis, School of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, 1997; for the case of Vietnam and the coffee market in the 1990s, see Stan B-H Tan, 'Coffee Frontiers In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam: Networks Of Connectivity', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* (41), pp 51-68, 2000.

<sup>166</sup> For some insights on tea market in Vietnam during the 1950s, see, n.a., 'Phong tho o Cao Nguyen thich hop cho viec trong tra' [The Climate In The High Plateau Is Suitable For Planting Tea], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (7), pp 13 & 24, 1957.

<sup>167</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14360.

<sup>168</sup> 'Tiep Thi Ca Phe Viet Nam'.

... old fashion prejudices and cultivation methods among the compatriots cannot be replaced in one 'short day'...<sup>169</sup>

Adapting to the new crops and new agricultural environment of the highlands would not be easy, and would take time.<sup>170</sup> This proved to be true when the agricultural technicians tried to introduce keenaf.

Keenaf was first recommended for the *Dinh Dien* program in the Central Highlands by an American technician with USOM. In late 1957, Ton That Trinh, a French trained technician in-charge of PTUDD's Technical Division began to plan for expansion of keenaf cultivation in *Dinh Dien*.<sup>171</sup> The two main industries in Vietnam, fishing and rice farming, required extensive use of fiber for production of fishing nets and rice sacks. Although jute was already being produced locally, Vietnam still needed to import 5,000 tons of jute per year to supplement shortfall in supply. For rice alone, Vietnam would need at least 2 million rice sacks per year. Keenaf provided the fiber that could be used for making fishing nets and rice sacks.<sup>172</sup> Keenaf only required a period of three to five months from planting to harvest. It also fetched a higher profit than rice and other subsistence crops.<sup>173</sup>

In early 1958, PTUDD announced that 160 hectares of keenaf was to be planted in selected *Dinh Dien*. The settlers in the *Dinh Dien* affected protested. Although the agricultural technicians tried implementing the plan by means of persuasion, but at times, they admitted they had to adopt the 'policy of threat' such as '*neu khong trong ki nap se cat tro cap*' ('if you don't plant keenaf, we will cut subsidies'). Settlers were not the only ones who were averse to change or risks. The Ministry of Economy was not convinced by the feasibility of the crop and delayed release of the funds for expanding keenaf production. Only when the vice-President (Nguyen Ngoc Tho) stepped in to

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<sup>169</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10856.

<sup>170</sup> See also, 'Tim hieu chu trong trong cay ky nghe tai cac dia diem Dinh Dien'.

<sup>171</sup> *Cases in Vietnamese Administration*, p 216.

<sup>172</sup> n.a., 'Cay ki nap, mot nguon loi cua dong bao lap nghiep tai vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen' [Keenaf, A Source Of Profit For Compatriots Settling In The High Plateau *Dinh Dien* Region], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (92), p 22, 1958.

<sup>173</sup> 'Cay ki nap, mot nguon loi cua dong bao lap nghiep tai vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen'.

intervene was a plan for gradual substitution of keenaf for jute import worked out.<sup>174</sup> By August 1958, some 182 hectares of keenaf was planted in the *Dinh Dien* centers of Plei Bangyam, Chudron, Plei piom I and II, and Iakae,<sup>175</sup> and by 1959, a total of 2000 hectares was planted in the highlands.<sup>176</sup>

There were also other problems faced by PTUDD in its attempts to steer the focus of agriculture production in the Central Highlands *Dinh Dien* towards industrial cash crops. First, there was a shortage of agricultural technicians within the country to sufficiently cater to the many *Dinh Dien* that were set up in the highlands. Second, there was a lack of agricultural experiment centers to run trials on the new crops and methods of cultivation. Third, lack of agricultural nurseries to supply seeds and saplings for such a massive agricultural expansion project. Furthermore, there was also the need to look into the marketing networks for expansion of cash crops. In the case of keenaf, the PTUDD even arranged to transport keenaf from the *Dinh Dien* centers (in the highlands) to Saigon to be marketed.<sup>177</sup>

Meanwhile, settlers in the Central Highlands *Dinh Dien* established in the first two years of operation, 1957 and 1958, were balancing between subsistence and cash crop productions. Settlers in settlements of which the subsidy period would expire by 1959, such as Duc Hung in Pleiku, were uncertain about continuing to expand production of cash crops. They felt insecure because there would be no more rice subsidy from the government and they were uncertain about daily subsistence if they did not plant their own food.<sup>178</sup> There was a total of 24 *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands by 1958. Of the 1,212 hectares already put into cultivation, only about a quarter was devoted to the main subsistence crop, rice. The rest was used for industrial cash crops, fruit trees and secondary subsistence crop. Table 5.15 illustrates the state of the *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands in June 1958.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> It was also reported in John Montgomery's case study that foreign exchange was still allocated for the import of jute, and the firm holding the monopoly of jute import deliberately imported cheap and low quality jute to 'kill' the keenaf expansion plan. *Cases In Vietnamese Administration*, pp 222-4.

<sup>175</sup> 'Cay ki nap, mot nguon loi cua dong bao lap nghiep tai vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen'; see also, n.a., 'Khu Dinh Dien Pleiku-Kontum' [Pleiku-Kontum *Dinh Dien* Zone], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (74), pp 16-21 & 26, 1958.

<sup>176</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 133; *The Politics Of Foreign Aid*, p 81.

<sup>177</sup> *The Politics of Foreign Aid*, p 81.

<sup>178</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13539.

<sup>179</sup> n.a., 'Di tham vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen' [Visit To The High Plateau *Dinh Dien* Region], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (74), pp 6-8, 1958.



**Table 5.15 State Of The *Dinh Dien* Program In The Central Highlands By June 1958**

	<b>Banmethuot <i>Dinh Dien</i> Zone</b>	<b>Pleiku-Kontum <i>Dinh Dien</i> Zone</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Number of <i>Dinh Dien</i>	8	16	24
Number of Settlers Arrived	10,601	25,865	36,466
Number of Settlers Currently Residing	9,394	23,367	32,761
Houses Built	1,676	4,013	5,689
Total Land Area Pioneered	1,289	1,905	3,194
Rice	50	297	329
Fruit Trees	183	11	194
Other Cash Crops	82	195	277
Secondary Subsistence Crops	139	273	412
Agricultural Equipment Distributed e.g. hoe, spade, and rake...	18,095	60,023	80,118
Buffaloes	9	n.a.	9
Cows/Oxen	593	565	1,158
Pigs	683	319	1,002
Chickens	4,760	4,580	9,340
Ducks	200	200	400
Seeds	23,507 kg	44,892 kg	68,399 kg
Chemical Fertilizers	308,930 kg	391,785 kg	700,715 kg
Schools Built	12	12	24
Medical and Maternity Centers	7	18	25
Wells Drilled	134	127	261
Dams, Ponds	9	18	27
Water pumps	10	16	26
Roads	46.3 km	26.1 km	73.4 km
Bridges	7	9	16

Source: 'Di tham vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen'.

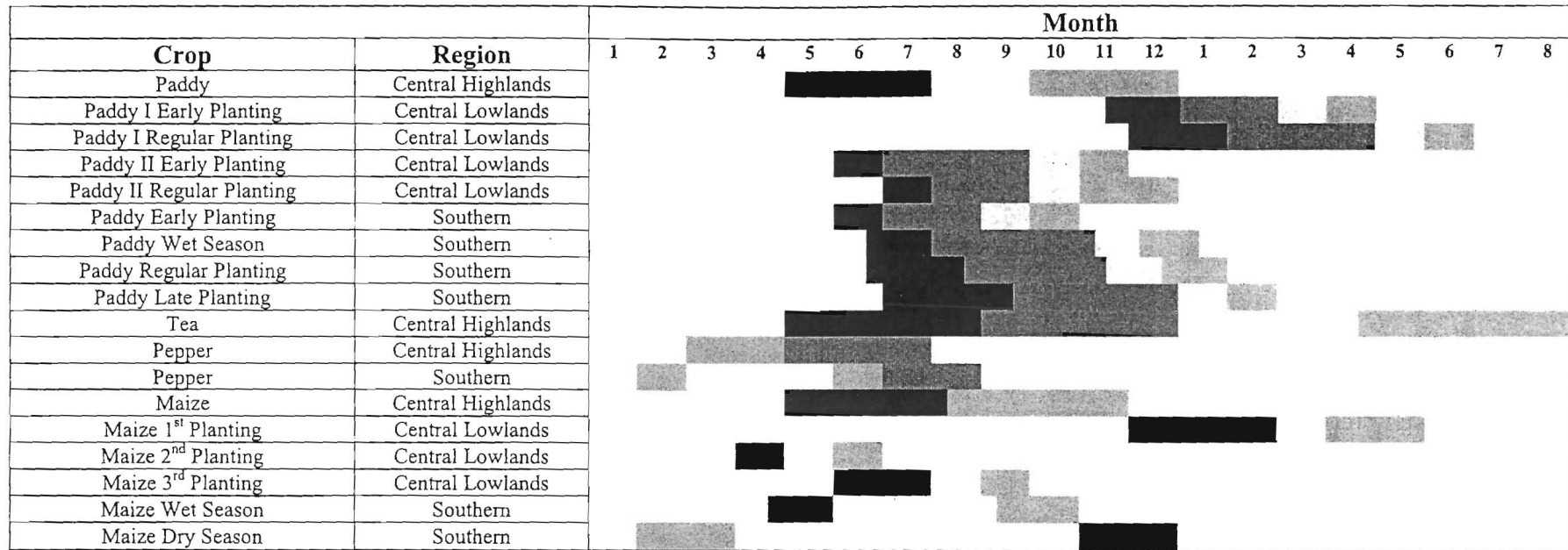
Studies conducted by PTUDD and experiences learnt early in the *Dinh Dien* program made it clear that settlers going up the hills of the Central Highlands must learn to adapt to the different agricultural conditions. First, different climate conditions meant that settlers must adapt to planting seasons and conditions different from the lowlands (see Figure 5.8). Second, soil conditions in the highlands meant that very different land-use methods must be adopted if the *Dinh Dien* settlements were to be sustainable and to become the new home village (*que huong*) for the settlers. Third, the combination of soil type and climate in the highlands meant that the certain crop-types were much more suitable, and at the end of the day, beneficial, in agro-economic terms. Beyond the picture of *Dinh Dien* as a Vietnamese 'invasion' of the highlands, we should also take note that frontier formation in this case did not simply mean a transplantation of Kinh civilization from the lowlands to the highlands, much adaptation was required and was made in the process by the newcomers (settlers and state). Relying on mere adaptation of farming methods to produce subsistence crops in the highlands proved inadequate to sustain the *Dinh Dien* settlements, and the settlers had to rely on government subsidies.<sup>180</sup> The expansion of a commercial agricultural economy was a turning point for the *Dinh Dien* program in the highlands.<sup>181</sup> It also meant a steeper process of adaptation for the settlers.

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<sup>180</sup> 'Opening Of New Lands And Villages', p 133.

<sup>181</sup> *The Politics Of Foreign Aid*, p 81.

Figure 5.8 Comparison Of Planting Seasons In The Central Highlands, Central Lowlands And Mekong Delta



Legend:

- Sowing period
- Planting or plowing period
- Flowering period
- Harvesting period

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded but a photocopy in author's possession.

Even the government was required to adapt to the frontier environment. In reality, the government could not just transfer the *Dinh Dien* scheme directly from drawing board to ground. Concerns over finding an agricultural system that demanded less land-area for settling one household was genuine, despite the propagandistic pronouncements of the Central Highlands as a resource rich but low population density frontier. In the study on crop-type feasibility and land-use method discussed earlier, technicians recognized existing limitations meant that it was difficult to direct *Dinh Dien* settlers in the Central Highlands to immediately begin farming the cash crops they recommended. An alternative solution had to be adopted for the time being. The technicians recommended planting of food crops and other annuals that could quickly help the settlers to settle down. This solution, however, meant that the government must allocate more land to each settler household. Bui Van Luong, the *Tong Uy Dinh Dien*, noted in a report dated 4 June 1958 that for one *Dinh Dien* site to be able to support a settler population of about 300 families and practice the bi-annual rotational farming system as recommended by the technicians, they had to make available a vast amount of land area one *Dinh Dien* alone, not to mention for the 20 *Dinh Dien* that were established by mid-1958. This, he emphasized, was difficult to fulfill because

... based on the responses of the highlanders recently, it has proven that it is very difficult to find a piece of land with such a spacious land-area.<sup>182</sup>

Luong recognized that many local highlanders did not respond well to the clearance of land to resettle the *Dinh Dien* settlers. There was a need to minimize the amount of land needed to stabilize the settlement of each household, and yet the agricultural method adopted must at the same time be economically beneficial.

Luong reported to the President the original solution outlined by his technicians, which recommended each *Dinh Dien* to focus on planting of perennials that required only limited land area but with high returns, such as fruit trees, pepper, coffee, rubber, etc.; as well as the difficulties of implementing this solution. His proposal to adopt this solution was accepted by the president. As a temporary measure, Diem gave the PTUDD an extra two million piasters to quickly implement one of the recommendations made by the technicians, planting fruit trees to complement food crop agriculture. There

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<sup>182</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11724

was a ready market for the fruits and settlers could reap the benefits soon after the end of the stipulated period of government aid. The PTUDD was tasked to procure seeds for a variety of fruit trees with the extra money and quickly distribute the seeds to settlers so that they could plant a small orchard near to their home and 'feel comforted by the home orchards while awaiting harvest season'.<sup>183</sup> Meanwhile, to make up for a lack of support facilities to realize the (new) plan for commercial agricultural expansion in the highlands through *Dinh Dien*, the government set up agricultural nurseries in various locations in the highlands, including Eakmat Center.<sup>184</sup> The Center for Agricultural Products Experiment in Bao Loc was placed under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture to focus on agricultural development in the highlands.<sup>185</sup> Meanwhile, the landscape that was being shaped was one of diversified agricultural landscape, quite contrary to the original vision of *Dinh Dien*.

## CONCLUSION

By 1961, the National Liberation Front began to launch its offensive in the South. According to John Donnell, the *Dinh Dien* program had to slow down by about 50% due to deteriorating security in the rural areas in 1961.<sup>186</sup> Darlac province reported that 'Viet Cong' only emerged once in one of the 24 *Dinh Dien* during June of 1961. In October, five *Dinh Dien* reported heightened activities, including an incident in Buon Yang Buon where Viet Cong entered the settlement to demand rice from the settlers. By December 1961, Viet Cong guerrillas attacked five *Dinh Dien* in the province. Quang Nhieu II suffered nine intrusions, including three armed attacks. In general, there were increased Viet Cong activities in areas surrounding the *Dinh Dien*, especially among neighboring highlander villages.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11724.

<sup>184</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10814 & 11726. Eakmat Center later developed to become the most important Agricultural Extension Center in the Darlac area. After reunification, the center developed to become the Institute of Coffee Research, and later became the Western Highlands Agriculture and Forestry Science Institute. See, n.a., 'Cao Nguyen tien bo: Gioi thieu Trung Tam Thuc Nghiem Nong Lam Suc Cao Nguyen, Eakmat' [The High Plateau Progresses: Introducing The Eakmat Center For Agro-Forestry And Animal Husbandry Experiment In The High Plateau], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (6), pp 54-5 & 57, 1967.

<sup>185</sup> Bo Canh Nong, *Trung Tam Thuc Nghiem Nong San Bao Loc* [The Center For Agricultural Produce Experiment In Bao Loc], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Bo Canh Nong, 1960.

<sup>186</sup> *Politics In South Vietnam*, pp 182-3.

<sup>187</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14368.

Ngo Dinh Diem, at the advice of Ngo Dinh Nhu, decided that the more civilian-agricultural oriented operations of the *Dinh Dien* must be adapted to counter the deteriorating security situation. The plan was to arm and fence up all the established settlements, thus converting these civil-agricultural settlements into strategic hamlets (*ap chien luoc*), or combats hamlets (*ap chien dau*), the more offensive form of strategic hamlet.<sup>188</sup> By the end of 1961, all *Dinh Dien*, *Trai Dinh Cu* (settlement centers for highlanders), and *Khu Tru Mat* (agrovilles) were to be 'converted into strategic hamlets' (*ap chien luoc hoa*) to counter increasing guerilla-attacks by the communists.<sup>189</sup> When in 1957 several agricultural military-outposts (*don dien*) were '*dinh dien hoa*' into civilian-agricultural operations, a much bigger-scale reversal of operations was underway in 1961.<sup>190</sup>

Despite the national security and nation-building objectives of *Dinh Dien*, it was fundamentally a socio-economic project. In other words, *Dinh Dien* would provide for socio-economic development, which in turn would be of service to security objectives. It was not meant to first and foremost provide for security. After receiving substantial extra funds to procure seeds and saplings of fruit trees to distribute to the settlers in the Central Highlands, Bui Van Luong wrote, in his report to the President,

... this plan has helped to strengthen the resolve of our compatriots to permanently settle here. My commissariat hopes that the Vietnamese peasant can one day, walk out the doors of a beautiful house and a well-planted, fresh garden, although the first step is tough.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> For a detailed outline of the policy of Strategic Hamlet program, see, Nha Tong Giam Doc Thanh Nien, *Quoc Sach Ap Chien Luoc* [The National Policy Of Strategic Hamlets], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Nha Tong Giam Toc Thanh Nien, 1963; *Diem's Final Failure* is the most recent study on the Strategic Hamlet program that makes use of both American and Vietnamese archival sources; see also *Free In The Forest*, pp 74-89, for detailed account of the program in the Central Highlands.

<sup>189</sup> 'Quoc Sach Dinh Dien Trong 9 Nam Qua'. For discussions on the agrovillage program, see, Joseph Zasloff, *Rural Resettlement In Vietnam: An Agrovillage In Development*, Saigon: Michigan State University Advisory Group, 1961; Joseph Zasloff, 'Rural Resettlement In South Vietnam: The Agrovillage Program', *Pacific Affairs* (XXXV: 4), pp 327-40, 1963. For some insights about the communist's strategy against the Strategic Hamlet program, see Tran Thi Thu Huong, *Dang lanh dao cuoc dau tranh chong pha Quoc Sach Ap Chien Luoc cua My-Nguy o mien nam Viet Nam, 1961-65* [The Party Leading The Fight Against The National Policy Of Strategic Hamlets Of The American Puppet Regime In South Vietnam], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003 and other local party histories such as, Ban Chap Hanh Dang Bo Tinh Gia Lai, *Lich Su Dang Bo Tinh Gia Lai: Tap 1, 1945-75* [Party Committee History Of Gia Lai Province: Volume 1, 1945-75], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 1996.

<sup>190</sup> *Quoc Sach Ap Chien Luoc*, p 29.

<sup>191</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11724.

*Dinh Dien*, after all, was about the formation of agricultural settlements on the frontier. In the process of frontier formation, newcomers (both state and settlers) had to want to stay and be able to do so, too. At all times, the government was concerned that settlers be able to plant their crops, have sufficient food, survive the elements and have shelter. Many newcomers stayed on. They transformed the frontier and injected into the highlands landscape a similarity to life in the lowlands. But that was only one half of the story. The newcomers also went through the process of adaptation to the new environment. How much socio-cultural adaptation the newcomers made, however, cannot be gauged based on materials from the government archive. But we cannot simply take for granted that they did not make any such adaptations. The discussion above showed that the government recognized the responses of the highlanders. Highlanders, in general, did not respond well to seeing land being carved out for the resettlement of the lowlanders. I will examine in detail how the government managed the land question in Chapter Seven. In this chapter, we learnt that the government adapted its strategy of stabilizing the *Dinh Dien* settlements so as to use less land area per household. Agricultural production was also more market-oriented than initially planned. The Central Highlands was far from being 'lowlandized'. Instead, the state form that took shape through the *Dinh Dien* program was altered as a result of interpenetration of interests on the frontier.

# 'Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations And Villages'

## OLD INHABITANTS

### CHAPTER 6

#### FOREST FIRES IN DASAR<sup>1</sup>

16 December 1957. Approaching 4 pm. The wind carried a strong whiff of burning wood from the direction of Dasar forest. Line of sight towards the tree lines in that direction seemed to bend a little as if swaying to the mesmerizing rhythm of a snake charmer. Perhaps it was the smoke fluttering skywards that was playing trick on Nguyen Van Phuc's eyes. Phuc knew something was wrong because he had received news, a little earlier, that the forest at Dasar was burning. Soon, he had mobilized all his men in the forestry station and they sped towards the Dasar forest. They did not return until after ten in the evening. Somehow, they had managed, with the help of some locals, to control the fire from spreading and prevented further destruction to the forest. Nonetheless, some 300 hectares of the forest burnt down. For the next two months, a series of forest fires plagued the forests of Dasar. Dasar was located within the administrative district of Dran, which in 1957 was part of Dong Nai Thuong province.

Ngo Dinh Diem questioned Le Ta, Chief of Province for Dong Nai Thuong, on the occasion of an official visit to the Central Highlands in February 1958, about the high incidences of forest fires in Dran.<sup>2</sup> Diem had earlier, on 12 December 1957, instructed all provinces in the Central Highlands to take measures to prevent the cutting down and burning of forests by the

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<sup>1</sup> This section is re-constructed – with some literary liberty (such as the 'snake-charmer') – from several reports concerning the forest fires in Dasar between December 1957 and March 1958, with the most serious one happening on 16 December 1957. The reports are contained in the folder PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922.

<sup>2</sup> Dong Nai Thuong became known as Lam Dong province in 1958. See Toa Hanh Chanh Lam Dong, *Dia Phuong Chi Lam Dong* [Lam Dong Province Bulletin], Lam Dong: Toa Hanh Chanh Lam Dong, 1963. The issue of administrative boundaries is discussed in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.



highlanders in preparation for the coming swidden planting season; and to think of long term solutions that could redress the problem henceforth. Le Ta's immediate response to Diem's question was that the district officials failed to rein in the highlanders who continued to burn the forests despite orders from his office. Le Ta, upon returning to Dong Nai Thuong, immediately wrote to question why, Nguyen Linh Kinh, Chief of District for Dran, did not prevent the highlanders from burning the forests in Dasar.<sup>3</sup>

Nguyen Linh Kinh, Chief of District for Dran (*Quan Truong Dran*), was disappointed with the accusations made by Le Ta. He knew for sure that highlanders in his district did not cause the forest fires between December 1957 and February 1958. He immediately conducted joint investigations with the Chief of Forestry Station in Dalat (*Hat Thuy Lam Dalat*) and Chairman for Highlander Administration in Dran (*Chu Tich Hanh Chanh Thuong Dran*), to ascertain his facts. Mr. Kinh refuted the accusations in an official report dated 3 March 1958.

First, he cited a separate investigation report by Nguyen Van Phuc, Chief of Forestry Station in Dalat, on the huge forest fire at Dasar on 16 December 1957. It was actually caused by a particular Nguyen Tam, who was an assistant to the driver of a bulldozer belonging to the Bureau of Public Works (*Ty Cong Chanh*). Tam and the team of workers from Public Works were tasked to clear the land for roads in that area. On that day, Tam had deliberately made a fire to burn the secondary vegetation in order to make the work of clearing the roads, easier and faster. There were six highlanders, one of them Ha Bong, working at the same construction site and one of them had warned Tam, "*Aren't you afraid of being arrested by the forestry rangers (kiem lam) for burning the forests?*" to which Tam retorted, "*My superior allowed me to burn, what's there to be afraid of! (ong xep cho tao dot, so gi)*".<sup>4</sup> The fire went out of control. Ha Bong and five of his mates later helped to fight the fire with Nguyen Van Phuc and his forestry staff. They also recorded their witness statements about Mr. Tam lighting the fire, which they signed on 18 December. Second, the other fires, according to Mr. Kinh's investigations, were found to be in proximity to other road construction sites, one was near a military live-

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<sup>3</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922.

<sup>4</sup> The report did in fact use such a colloquial language, which was supposed to reflect what was exactly said by Tam, although the author of the report knew that the president might read it.

firing area, and another even burnt through the wet-rice fields belonging to the highlander villages of Dang Thien Lieng and Da Deung.

Mr. Kinh reflected to Le Ta in his letter, "*one thing worth noting is that wherever the bulldozer goes, burnt vegetation follows along both sides of the path; in many places, smoke was still rising right on the construction site because burning wood-fire for cooking was not even extinguished*". He unequivocally refuted the charges that highlanders caused the forest fires. Mr. Kinh reasoned that first, highlanders in the vicinity of some of the burnt areas practiced wet-rice cultivation (*ruong*) and did not practice fire clearing for new swiddens (*ray*). Second, as declared by other local highlanders in an attached signed statement, this period (December-February) was not yet the 'burning season'. Third, since orders from the President to prevent and control forest burning in December 1957, the highlanders had been informed that they must seek the local administration's permission before clearing and burning the forest. Fourth, when burning to make swiddens, highlanders set clear perimeters for their swidden and make firebreaks to prevent the fire from spreading.<sup>5</sup> Fifth, highlanders who practiced swiddening had their swidden areas in the valleys, whereas the fires occurred on the hills. Sixth, there have been no fire in Dasar over the last few years and the fires only occurred when road works began.

Mr. Phuc signed off by stating that the highlanders were very disciplined people and they respect the government's laws. They would never act out of order. The Forestry Office had so far yet to record any case of forest fire caused by highlanders; rather, in most of the recorded cases, the culprits were Kinh people! The local highlanders had in fact joined the forestry officials in fighting the fires and now they were blamed as the culprits! This, Mr. Phuc stated to Le Ta, was really a case of injustice (*oan uong*).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The swidden clearing process is very vividly described in details by Georges Condominas. See, Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten The Forest: The Story Of A Montagnard Village In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Translated by Adrian Foulke. Original publication, 1957, pp 176-207. For a succinct analysis of swidden practice in the Central Highlands, see Bui Minh Dao, *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen* [Traditional Cultivation Of Autochthonous Ethnic Groups On The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000, pp 41-139.

<sup>6</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922.

## INTRODUCTION

The first half of the above story is indicative of the standing verdict on the First Republic's policies towards the Central Highlanders. The part about Ngo Dinh Diem's orders to control 'burning forest to make swiddens' (*dot rung lam ray*) and Le Ta's instinctive blame on the highlanders as culprits responsible for the series of forest fires reflects the point scholars make about the Vietnamese state's erroneous notion that all, if not most, highlanders practice a primitive form of swidden agriculture, which was both destructive and nomadic.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, this misperception was in turn fuelled by a prevalent ethnocentric discourse among Vietnamese (Kinh) of the highlanders as 'savages' (*moi*); who could only be made into proper Vietnamese citizens of the Vietnamese state by bringing civilization (*van minh*) to them.<sup>8</sup> Thus, under the First Republic, state formation among the old inhabitants of the Central Highlands, as current analyses inform us, was an assimilation process where the highlanders were resettled and forced to adopt Kinh ways of doing things. Georges Condominas, after revisiting his old field site of Sarluk in 1958, coined the term 'ethnocide' to describe the policies adopted by the First Republic as a systematic annihilation of the highlanders' cultural identities.<sup>9</sup> For these critics of the Vietnamese state, I would interpret that state formation was essentially an attempt to bury the traditional highlander world under a layer of dust, whipped up by the various 'development' or 'civilizing' projects, beneath the mountain mist.<sup>10</sup>

In Chapter Three, I defined state formation as the process in which the effect of the state is created and sustained, both in the abstract and empirical sense, through its

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Dournes, *Minorities of Central Vietnam: Autochthonous Indochinese Peoples*, London: Minority Rights Group, 1980, pp 12-16; Gerald Hickey, *The Highland People Of South Vietnam: Social And Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967, p 94; Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p 243, 267-8; Anonymous, *The Montagnards Of South Vietnam*, London: Minority Rights Group, 1974, pp 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders In Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1971, pp 26-7; Gerald Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethno-history of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp 6-8; Gerald Hickey, *Window On A War: An Anthropologist In The Vietnam Conflict*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002, p 6; Nancy Dorcas Volk, 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World: A Montagnard Resettlement Area In Southern Vietnam', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Washington, Washington, 1979, pp 72-82; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 184-92.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Condominas, *Sarluk: L'exotique est Quotidienne*, Paris: Plon, 1965, p 469.

<sup>10</sup> The Vietnamese state would naturally want to perceive its development policies for the highlanders as bringing 'civilization' - a better, bright and shining tomorrow - to them.

various agencies and by the construction of a particular mode of social ordering among the population on which it lays claim.<sup>11</sup> The process can be quite frictional and some things are lost when the government implements a mode of social ordering to effectuate its presence. But something new or hybrid could also arise out of the process. The second half of the above story seems to suggest that beyond the facet presented by the standing verdict, there could be room for a concurrent alternate view. Three points in the story are worth reflecting upon. First, the part about Mr. Kinh's response to Le Ta tells us that at least one official's perception regarding highlanders' agricultural practices appeared better informed than suggested by official rhetoric. He demonstrated an understanding of highlanders' agricultural practices as more varied and systematized. Second, although there were official attempts at curbing swidden agriculture, the story reveals an officially sanctioned but regulated practice of swidden agriculture. How did this work out with concurrent official programs at 'sedentarization' and 'resettlement'? Third, the story also reveals that the process of state formation could possibly be an accumulative one, where things learned on the ground could serve to re-inform decisions or course of actions. Officials do go out to learn more about people they profess to govern. Officials, too, are at the same time influenced by the opinions of the people they 'govern'. Mr. Kinh went out to investigate the actual causes of the fires and reaffirmed that highlanders did not cause the fires. Blaming highlanders, as culprits responsible for all forest fires would have been more convenient; to Mr. Kinh, it was simply injustice (*oan uong*).

This chapter highlights features suggested in the second part of the story that might have been overlooked in the existing analyses of Vietnamese state formation in the Central Highlands under the First Republic. The government rolled out programs to alter the lives of the highlanders, and ultimately resulted in a fundamentally much changed living landscape before the fateful break out of intensified insurgency in 1961. The government of the First Republic envisioned a process of modernization for the highlanders. This ideal vision entails a neat transition from the primitive to the modern, old to the new. The government introduced policies to train cadres, guide the highlanders to participate in the wider economy and to develop education for highlanders. I have discussed some of these measures in Chapter Four. This vision of

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<sup>11</sup> See my discussion on state formation in Chapter Three.

modernization for the highlanders, however, was to be realized primarily through a process of engineered agrarian change, which is the subject for this chapter. Agrarian change for the highlanders basically meant the introduction of advanced methods of agriculture, regulation of swidden agriculture, reorganization of agrarian life through sedentarization or resettlement, and finally the establishment of model villages set within the administrative hierarchy. I use the term 'sedentarization' when referring to attempts by the government to 'fix' highlanders' agricultural and residential practices. This does not mean that I see highlanders' practices as 'nomadic'. I use the term 'resettlement' when referring to the relocation of highlanders from places of origins to more distant settlements by the government, such as *Dinh Dien Thuong*, or measures taken to remove highlanders from communist active areas.

In the next section, I discuss how this vision of the government is criticized in the current literature. Basically, criticisms targeted at the government falls within the binary formula of domination and subordination through assimilationist measures. I suggested in Chapters Two and Three that this position is framed by conceptual underpinnings that see the state as an *a priori* formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier. This approach would see the state as having tried to assimilate the highlanders. Assimilation, based on my reading of the literature, is understood as a one-sided transformation wherein the minority group is forced to adopt cultural traits of the majority group. The majority group or agent of change – in this case, the state, – undergoes no compromise in its content or form. In such a process, the First Republic state encountered resistance, escape and organized public objection (such as the Bajaraka movement) from the highlanders. It also encountered obstacles in the form of competition from the communist insurgency and internal failings because of incapable government officials. Any modifications would be because of such failings rather than because of mutability in the process of state formation. Within such a conceptual framework, the First Republic was from the beginning already - and in the process still remained - an assimilationist state.

In this chapter, I attempt to present an alternate story. In doing so, I am *not* suggesting that existing interpretations of state formation in the Central Highlands are wrong. I am also *not* suggesting that highlanders' lives are better as a result of Vietnamese state formation. Rather, I suggest that the situation was probably not as

bleak as painted by the existing literature. Agrarian change among the highlanders neither occurred according to the ideal vision of the First Republic's government nor happened in the ethnocentric fashion such as outlined by the critics. For all the assimilation tendencies one may identify in the First Republic's highlander policies (*chinh sach thuong*), we may find recurring middle ground practices that soften this rather conflictual story of state formation on the frontier we know so far. State formation is not necessarily pre-deterministic, vectored by mere attempts of governing the conduct of the people (in this case, the highlanders) emanating from a center (the post-colonial Vietnamese state). State formation is possibly a mutable process where the 'conduct' of the 'rulers' are also very much governed by those they profess to govern. As a result, policies are modified and the state form is reshaped. Perhaps these modifications failed to achieve the desired results by the government or live up to the expectations of the critics. But the state form that was continually being reproduced for the period I cover, 1955-61, was not that image painted in existing literature. The dust beneath the mist, at the end of the day, also settles on the newcomers who tread the frontier to remold the place and people.

### THE ETHNOCENTRIC STATE

The period between 1955 and 1961 is perhaps the least examined period of post-colonial state formation in the Central Highlands. Gerald Hickey, the anthropologist who spent much of his career in the Central Highlands, is regarded as one of the foremost scholars about the area. Even then, Hickey devotes only a very brief chapter on the First Republic's highlands policies and one chapter on Bajaraka movement in *Free in the Forest*.<sup>12</sup> There is also no specific and detailed description of the First Republic's policies in his other works, too.<sup>13</sup> In his two volume ethno-history of the Central Highlanders, Hickey's cover of the First Republic's policies in the Central Highlands is conspicuously thin in comparison to the pre-1955 years in *Sons of the*

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<sup>12</sup> *Free in the Forest*, chapter 1 and 2.

<sup>13</sup> Hickey discusses the policies between 1955-61 only briefly in his other works that I have come across, for example, *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders; The Highland People Of South Vietnam*. Similarly, he only mentions the policies briefly in the ethnographic descriptions of adaptations by ten ethnic groups during the Second Indochina War, see Gerald Hickey, *Shattered World: Adaptation And Survival Among Vietnam's Highland Peoples*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

*Mountains* and the post-Diem period in *Free in the Forest*. This is probably because Hickey was 'officially discouraged' from conducting further fieldwork in the highlands after 1957, after which he proceeded to conduct his study of a Vietnamese village, Khanh Hau, in the Mekong Delta.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Hickey's works remain our main sources of reference to date.

Hickey tells us that the unofficial policy under Ngo Dinh Diem's First Republic was to 'assimilate the highlanders into the Vietnamese cultural sphere'. The government implemented two programs, *Dinh Dien* that brought Kinh settlers to the highlands and resettled highlanders in selected *Dinh Dien* centers, and the 'Highlander Resettlement Plan', which 'forced highlanders off their ancestral lands into reservations' to integrate the highlands and its inhabitants into national framework. When looking through the archival documents of the First Republic, however, I did not come across one single program designed to reform highlanders' agricultural practices that could be translated or interpreted as 'Highlander Resettlement Plan', the term being used by Hickey. Instead, archival materials reveal an array of measures to effect agrarian change. According to Hickey, the government viewed *Dinh Dien* as a program to better develop the agricultural potential of the highlands, which at the same time could help to bring about influences to the highlanders from the culturally more civilized Kinh settlers. On the other hand, resettlement - through both *Dinh Dien* and the 'Highlander Resettlement Plan' - was meant to eradicate the highlanders' nomadic existence in order to socially develop the primitive highlanders.<sup>15</sup> Both programs, Hickey says, were carried out without regard for highlanders' claims and preferences for their ancestral lands. Whole highlander villagers were uprooted and forced to resettle in valley or areas closer to Kinh settlements to facilitate the total assimilation of highlanders.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Hickey concludes, *Dinh Dien* and the 'Highlander Resettlement Plan' contributed to the simmering bitterness among the highlanders over Diem's assimilation policies and finally led to the formation of pan-highlander ethno-nationalist movements in the Bajaraka and FULRO.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Window On A War*, p 8. For Hickey's study on Khanh Hau, see Gerald Hickey, *Village In Vietnam*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders*, pp 5 & 26-7; *Free In The Forest*, p 18; *Window On A War*, pp 54-55; see also, 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World', pp 73-77.

<sup>16</sup> *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders*, pp 26-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p 64. See also, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 190.

Despite the limited study conducted on the topic, most analyses, more often than not quoting Hickey, concur that the Vietnamese state under the First Republic was basically ethnocentric and her highland policies were simply 'forced assimilation'.<sup>18</sup> This is with the exception of one article, which appraised Ngo Dinh Diem's highland policies in 'positive light'.<sup>19</sup> This one article was quickly dismissed by Bernard Fall as 'poppycock' written by an 'unabashed apologist' of the Ngo regime.<sup>20</sup>

Vietnamese writings that I have reviewed from the Republic years, with the exception of Nguyen Trac Di's contributions, almost always only briefly mention policies under the First Republic. These works usually summarize how Diem's assimilation policy caused disaffection among highlanders and led to the formation of the Bajaraka movement.<sup>21</sup> The Vietnamese author, Nguyen Trac Di, however, provides a more nuanced point of view. Nguyen Trac Di is the pseudonym of Nguyen Ba Long, one of the pioneering officials in the *Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong* (Directorate for Social Work in the Highland Regions) under the First Republic. Under the

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<sup>18</sup> All other writings that touched on the First Republic's highlander policies condemned Ngo Dinh Diem's policies as ethnic assimilation that led to bitterness among the highlanders. See for example, Bernard Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66*, New York: Praeger, 1966, pp 190-96; Bernard Fall, 'Commentary on Wickert' in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years* edited by Richard Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959); Charles Joiner, *The Politics Of Massacre: Political Processes In South Vietnam*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1974, pp 195-207; Larry Jackson, 'The Vietnamese Revolution And The Montagnards', *Asian Survey* 9 (3), pp 313-330, 1969; Mark McCleod, 'Indigenous Peoples And The Vietnamese Revolution, 1930-75', *Journal Of World History* 10 (2), pp 353-89, 1999; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 184-194.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Buttinger, 'Ethnic Minorities In The Republic Of Vietnam' in *Problems Of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* edited by Wesley Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-66*, p 193.

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Paul Nur, *Ve chinh sach Thuong vu trong lich su Viet Nam* [On Highland Policies In The History Of Viet Nam], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1966; Paul Nur, *Duong Len Xu Thuong* [Road To The Highlands], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1970; Viet Nam Cong Hoa, *Chinh sach phat trien sach toc cua Chinh Phu Viet Nam Cong Hoa* [Policies For Ethnic Development of the Government of the Republic of Viet Nam], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1970; Cuu Long Giang & Toan Anh, *Cao Nguyen Mien Thuong* [High Plateau Of The Highland Region], Saigon: Viet Nam Chi Luoc, 1974; Tran Quang Vinh, 'Sac toc thieu so trong cong dong quoc gia Viet Nam' [Ethnic Minorities In The National Community Of Viet Nam], Khao Luan Ca Nhan, Truong Chanh Tri Kinh Doanh, Vien Dai Hoc Dalat, 1968; Mai Thi Duong Chi & Vo Quang Son, 'Chinh sach doi voi nguoi Thuong cua Viet Nam' [Policies Towards Highlanders In Viet Nam], Khao Luan Tot Nghiep, Ban Su Dia, Vien Dai Hoc Hue, 1974; Hoang Van Loc, 'Tim hieu nhung dau tranh tri cua dong bao Thuong mien nam Viet Nam' [Understanding The Political Struggles of Highlander Compatriots In Southern Viet Nam], Khao Luan Ca Nhan, Truong Chanh Tri Kinh Doanh, Vien Dai Hoc Dalat, 1968. Ngo Quoc Anh presents a more nuanced analysis of policies under the First Republic. He argues the real problem lies in the implementation process. See, Ngo Quoc Anh, *Thu tim mot duong huong cho van de Thuong* [Attempting To Find A Direction For The Highland Problem], manuscript. Le Dinh Chi is one of the few who actually devotes a significant chapter in his thesis to discuss policies under the First Republic. Even then, his discussion about sedentarization and resettlement of highlanders, and the *Dinh Dien* program, is also very brief. See Le Dinh Chi, 'Van de dong bao son cuoc tai Viet Nam Cong Hoa' [The Problem of Mountainous Region Compatriots In The Republic Of Viet Nam], Luan An Tien Si Luat Khoa, Cao Hoc Luat Cong Phap, 1969.



pseudonym Nguyen Trac Di, he perhaps contributed the highest number of publications concerning the highlanders and policies of the southern Vietnamese government in the pre-reunification period.<sup>22</sup> His monograph on FULRO suggests that assimilation policies of the First Republic brought about the birth of Bajaraka then FULRO.<sup>23</sup> However, he reveals in other articles and monographs, rather subtly, that policies under the First Republic were more varied and less harsh.<sup>24</sup> Nguyen Trac Di was supposed to publish a volume detailing the highlands policies of the First Republic, but it apparently never made its way to the bookshelves.<sup>25</sup> One thing remains clear, the government's policies of sedentarization or resettlement programs for the highlanders and even the *Dinh Dien* program is not discussed in detail either in the English or Vietnamese literature.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that highlander policies were strongly motivated by both political and strategic objectives. Yet, this does not necessarily explain why the

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Nguyen Trac Di, *Dong bao cac sac toc thieu so Viet Nam (Nguon Goc va Phong Tuc)* [Vietnamese Ethnic Minority Compatriots (Origins And Customs)], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1972; Nguyen Trac Di, *Hoi dong cac sac toc: Mot tan dinh che dan chu cua De II Cong Hoa Viet Nam* [Council of Ethnic Groups: A New Democratic Regime Of The Second Republic Of Viet Nam], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1970; Nguyen Trac Di, 'Viec bai bo Toa An Phong Tuc Thuong duoi thoi Chinh Phu Ngo Dinh Diem' [The Abolishment Of The Highlanders Customary Court During The Period Of Ngo Dinh Diem's Government], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* [Highland Affairs Monthly Periodical] (15), pp 4-7, 1968; Nguyen Trac Di, 'Phu Dac Uy Thuong Vu trong no luc giai quyet van de Fulro va xay dung tinh than doan ket Kinh Thuong' [The Special Commission For Highlands Affairs In The Efforts To Resolve The Problem Of Fulro And Construct Spirit Of Unity Between Kinh And Highlanders], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (5), pp 21-8, 1967; Nguyen Trac Di, 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)' [A Briefing on Development Projects for Mountainous Villages in the Past and Present], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (6), pp 22-25 & 49, 1967; Nguyen Trac Di, 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (II)' [A Briefing on Development Projects for Mountainous Villages in the Past and Present], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (9), pp 40-5, 1967; Nguyen Trac Di, 'Nhung ngay dang ghi nho cua nganh Thuong Vu' [Memorable Days in the Field of Highland Affairs], *Nguyet San Thuong Vu* (5), pp 37-39, 1967; Nguyen Trac Di, 'Thu tim hieu dan toc Viet Nam qua cach thuc sinh hoat va to chuc xa hoi cua dong bao Thuong' [Attempt To Understand Ethnic Groups Of Viet Nam Through The Ways Of Life And Social Organization Of The Highlander Compatriots], *Dac san Cao Nguyen Hoi Than Huu Kinh Thuong* [The Association For Friendship Between Kinh and Highlanders: High Plateau Special Issue], pp 18-23, 1966.

<sup>23</sup> Nguyen Trac Di, *Tim hieu phong trao tranh dau FULRO (1958-69)* [Understanding The Political Struggle Movement of FULRO (1958-69)], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1969.

<sup>24</sup> See for example, 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'; 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (II)'; 'Viec bai bo Toa An Phong Tuc Thuong duoi thoi Chinh Phu Ngo Dinh Diem'; *Hoi dong cac sac toc: Mot tan dinh che dan chu cua De II Cong Hoa Viet Nam*.

<sup>25</sup> The book was provisionally entitled, *Thu tim hieu Chinh Sach Thuong Vu cua Chinh Phu Ngo Dinh Diem* [Attempting To Understand Highlands Policies Of The Government Of Ngo Dinh Diem].

<sup>26</sup> Even current scholars in Vietnam seldom focus on the 'puppet regime' (*nguy quyen*). In recent years, there were two articles in *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* that examine the issue of land policies in the highlands under the 'puppet regime'. See, Nguyen Thi Kim Van, 'Ban them ve van de ruong dat o Bac Tay Nguyen duoi thoi My-Nguy (1954-75)' [Further Discussion About The Agricultural Land Problem In The North Of The Western Plateau Under The American Puppet Regime], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (328), pp 29-38, 2003; Nguyen Van Nhat, 'Chinh sach ruong dat cua chinh quyen Sai Gon o Tay Nguyen truoc Ngay Giai Phong' [Agricultural Land Politics Of The Saigon Regime In The Western Plateau Before Liberation], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (276), pp 9-15, 1994.

government adopted such a hard-line approach as current literature argues. Winning over the highlanders' allegiance was vital in helping to secure the highlands. The regime, after all, faced very strong competition from the communist insurgents who had scored tremendous success among the highlanders in the later years of the First Indochina War. It was also strategic, in the sense that resettling the highlanders within the administrative reach of the government could help to monitor or even eradicate communist insurgent activities in highlander villages. At the same time, simply because such concerns were political in nature, the government had to take measures to - as often phrased in the archival documents - 'avoid losing the faith' (*khoi that nhan tam*) of the highlanders, who could easily turn to the communist insurgents. Government officials knew they were standing on a knife's edge when implementing their highlander policies.

Several questions are not satisfactorily answered by existing literature. Why were there two different programs, *Dinh Dien* and the 'Highlander Resettlement Plan', to resettle the highlanders? Second, what was happening to those not directly involved in the resettlement programs? Third, were there no attempts to modify the programs when highlanders reportedly responded less than positively? Fourth, was the Vietnamese government (and Kinh people) really so ethnocentric?

### **EARLY HIGHLANDER AGRARIAN PROJECTS: 1955-57**

Government programs for agrarian change among the highlanders began at a rather modest scale and pace. The primary concerns between 1955 and 1956 were consolidation of the young and vulnerable regime, and resolving the massive issue of permanent resettlement for the northern refugees.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Nguyen Trac Di points out that when the First Republic took over the administration of the Crown Domain, most of the records of the French administration in the highlands were not handed over to the newly established Office of Government Delegate for Central Highlands (*Toa Dai Bieu Chanh Phu Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*). This effectively rendered the

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<sup>27</sup> Initial challenges to the Diem regime are discussed in detail in Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled: Volume II, Vietnam At War*, New York: Praeger, 1967. I discussed briefly the challenge of refugee resettlement in Chapter Four.

government to have to start from scratch on the best ways to govern the Central Highlands and its inhabitants.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, the two conceptual master plans to develop the Crown Domain by Nguyen De (Bao Dai's chief of cabinet), '*Plan d'action social pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*' and '*Plan de developpement economique pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*', provided certain pointers to the new administration.<sup>29</sup> In particular, measures suggested in the plans to bring in lowlanders to realize the development potential of the region and raise the standard living of highlanders through sedentarization resonated in the programs developed under the First Republic.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, the state treaded slowly.

There were some sedentarization (*dinh cu*) projects during the years between 1955 and 1956. Statistics from the Directorate for Social Work in the Highlands Region (*Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong*, henceforth NCTXHMT) reveal that 1,891 people were 'sedentarized' in six centers in 1955; and that by 1956, the numbers had expanded to 2,800 people in nine centers.<sup>31</sup> Gerald Hickey makes a similar report (he refers to the process as 'resettlement') but notes that it is not clear whether these were northern highlander refugees.<sup>32</sup> Georges Condominas notes that the villagers of Sarluk were asked to take part in a resettlement project in 1956 but they did not join.<sup>33</sup> There was, however, no coordinated or large-scale plan for highlander sedentarization or resettlement yet.

The Directorate for Agriculture in the Central Highlands (*Nha Canh Nong Cao Nguyen*) was established to help realize the agricultural potential of the Central

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<sup>28</sup> 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyen De, *Plan de developpement economique pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*, Saigon: Editions de la Delegation Imperiale du Domaine de la Couronne, 1952; Nguyen De, *Plan d'action social pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne*, Saigon: Editions de la Delegation Imperiale du Domaine de la Couronne, 1952.

<sup>30</sup> 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'. See also, *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders*, pp 24-7; *Free In The Forest*, p 17; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 170-1.

<sup>31</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh cho dong bao Thuong: Sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong* [The Task of Improving People's Livelihood for the Highlander Compatriots: After 5 Years of Assuming Government By President Ngo], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1959, p 35. Gerald Hickey makes a similar observation in *Free In The Forest*, p 45.

<sup>32</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 45.

<sup>33</sup> Sarluk: *L'exotique est Quotidienne*, pp 456-7 cited from 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World', p 87.

Highlands when the region was formally placed within the national territory of the Republic. Its mandate was to steer the region's agriculture sector towards cash crop production and improve the cultivation methods of the farmers, especially the highlanders.<sup>34</sup> In 1956, the directorate designed for the highlanders an agricultural extension scheme that gradually introduced new and advanced methods of cultivation, including a more systematic production of old crops and the introduction of some cash crops to increase highlanders' cash income. This extension scheme was manifested in the form of the 'Pilot Garden' (*Vuon Huong Dan*).<sup>35</sup>

Established on 18 October 1956, Kao Kuil Pilot Garden in Dong Nai Thuong province was one of the earlier projects of this scheme. This project was set in the vicinity of a highlander village of the same name, located in Di Linh district and only about eight kilometers away from the provincial center (*tin h ly*). The Pilot Garden served as a 'school' where highlander villagers were trained in new methods of cultivation. Crops already familiar to the highlanders were cultivated with new techniques, and new crops were introduced as well. The Garden was also a farm nursery, supplying the village with new seed types and saplings. By late 1957, Kao Kuil Pilot Garden had expanded to 2.8 hectares, showcasing traditional food crops and cash crops cultivated by the new methods in neatly allocated plots. It was then the largest Pilot Garden in the highlands.<sup>36</sup> By 1957, the Directorate for Agriculture had established a total of twenty Pilot Gardens in the highlands and the NCTXHMT had established two.<sup>37</sup>

There were three phases in the Pilot Garden scheme. During the first phase, the program set up a model garden (*vuon kieu mau*) in the village. Agricultural cadres were tasked to guide members of the village on the use of agricultural tools such as the pick (*cuoc*), the flat-blade hoe, the ploughshare (*luoi cay*), and fertilizers (*phan bon*) to

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<sup>34</sup> Viet Hung, 'Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh vung Cao Nguyen Trung Phan (I)' [The Task of Improving People's Livelihood in the Region of the Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (34), pp 16-7, 1957.

<sup>35</sup> The term '*huong dan*' means guidance, and '*vuon*' means garden. Since the garden also served as a demonstration plot, I find it more meaningful to translate the scheme as 'Pilot Garden'.

<sup>36</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11726; see also, Viet Hung, 'Cong cuoc cai dan sinh vung Cao Nguyen Trung Phan (II)' [The Task of Improving People's Livelihood in the Region of the Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (35), pp 16-17, 1957.

<sup>37</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922. Gerald Hickey mentions that the Director for the National School of Agriculture, Forestry, and Animal Husbandry in Blao told him the highland students were trained to maintain 'model gardens' for the 'model villages' that were planned for 1957. These were probably the Pilot Garden projects operated by the *Nha Canh Nong Cao Nguyen*. See *Free In The Forest*, p 31.

systematically cultivate traditional food crops and cash crops in specific plots within the garden. The harvest was divided into two halves. One half was distributed among the villagers and the other half contributed to a public village fund (*cong quy lang*), which was used to help purchase agricultural tools, fertilizers and seeds, and to contribute to the establishment of village amenities such as schools, medical station, etc. In the second phase, when participants learnt the fundamentals of the new methods and crop types, the agricultural cadres helped each participant to establish household garden and animal husbandry shed. In the third and final phase, when the villagers grasped the methods and crop-types introduced in the earlier phases, the whole village was mobilized to put into practice the methods and crop-types introduced. In essence, the highlanders in this village were then gradually sedentarized by the third phase. The village was then deemed as a 'model village' (*lang kieu mau*).

As the *Dinh Dien* program rolled out in April 1957, concurrent attention was paid to bring about more in-depth fundamental changes to the living conditions among the highlanders. Experience gained from resettlement of northern refugees in the highlands had shown that without accompanying transformation in agricultural practices among the highlanders, the government was severely restricted in implementing her intended programs to develop and secure the highlands.

In October 1956, a report by a special committee to study potential challenges to develop the Central Highlands emphasized that the contrasting agricultural practices between the highlanders and the Kinh was a major issue to be resolved if the government was to implement such development plans.<sup>38</sup> The report stated that a full swidden agricultural cycle, meaning from the time a swidden was cleared, cultivated, left to fallow, and returned to start another cycle of cultivation, usually occurred between 15 and 20 years.<sup>39</sup> It estimated for Darlac province alone, the highlanders required about 225,000 hectares of forested land to complete one swidden cycle. But the report also noted that of the 1,094,000 hectares of land in Darlac, there were only about 350,000 hectares of remaining forest with at least 150,000 hectares of inaccessible tracts or old forest that should be preserved. In addition, much of the good lands had been claimed by the French plantations, which had either 'leased' the lands from the

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<sup>38</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10853.

<sup>39</sup> A complete swidden cycle varies between localities and the groups practicing it. See Chapter Two.

highlanders or simply appropriated the land through colonial government concessions. Meanwhile, highlander villagers in the vicinity of the resettlement centers, for example Kim Chau and Kim Phat in Darlac, and Phu Tho in Pleiku (near Pleipiom village), had already protested against the clearance of forest in their village territories by the settlers. The old inhabitants had basically laid claims to large tracts of the forested lands, reasoning that these were lands left by their forebears.<sup>40</sup>

Agricultural extension oriented schemes, such as the Pilot Garden project, would have to be expanded in both scale and scope to remold the highlanders' agrarian world to facilitate state formation. In the report cited earlier, the authors suggested that the government should allow highlanders to continue practicing swidden agriculture (*lam ray*) in their existing cultivation areas, including 'old swiddens' (*ray cu*), but at the same time implement programs to reform and improve their agricultural practices.<sup>41</sup> Huynh Cong Tinh, the first director appointed for NCTXHMT, recognized that converting the highlanders from swidden to wet-rice or sedentary cultivation, as well as regrouping highlander settlements into larger agglomeration units were extremely difficult 'due to age-old customs and practices'. Nevertheless, Tinh felt that 'long-term mobilization' (*van dong lau dai*) to encourage them, together with aid and guidance from the government, the highlanders might respond positively.<sup>42</sup>

## THE DIRECTORATE FOR SOCIAL WORK IN THE HIGHLAND REGIONS

In early 1956, Lieutenant-Colonel Huynh Cong Tinh, then deputy commander of the Fourth Military Area (*De Tu Quan Khu*), ordered his staff to draft a 'Project for Highland Campaign' (*Du An Thuong Van*) in order to establish better local relations in the recently reclaimed territory of what was formerly the Crown Domain. The activities in his campaign included providing hunger and medical relief to the locals and post-war reconstruction of some highlander villages. One such project involved the construction of a dam in the Kado area to help irrigate 200 hectares of wet-rice fields for the local

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<sup>40</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10853.

<sup>41</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10853.

<sup>42</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16449.

farmers.<sup>43</sup> These early experiences of conducting ‘social relief work’ among the highlanders by the military command under Huynh Cong Tinh reaped encouraging results and identified the necessity for a specialized agency dealing with highland affairs. This was brought to the attention of the President’s Office in a report submitted mid-1957. On 12 June 1957, a delegation led by Huynh Cong Tinh went to Malaya to study the management of highland policies (such as among the *orang asli*). Finally, on 3 July 1957, Decree 302/NV was passed to establish the Directorate for Social Work in the Highland Regions (NCTXHMT), with Huynh Cong Tinh appointed as the first director.<sup>44</sup>

As the name ‘social work’ (*cong tac xa hoi*) suggests, the directorate was initially formed to better co-ordinate ‘aid relief’ (*cuu te*) for the highlanders. In fact, some officials referred to the directorate as ‘*Nha Cuu Te Mien Thuong*’ (Directorate for Aid Relief in the Highlands)! Despite the seeming misnomer, the directorate was actually mandated to design and coordinate *long-term* solutions in order to improve the living conditions of the highlanders. This objective of the directorate was in some way influenced by early administrative experiences in the highlands immediately after the Crown Domain was abolished.

From the experiences of working with the highlanders earlier, Huynh Cong Tinh had learnt that the highlanders seemed to suffer from chronic seasonal shortage of rice. In fact, the immediate task facing the newly created NCTXHMT was to resolve the problem of food shortage among the highlanders reported by various administrative chiefs in the highlands. For example, in mid-1957, Tran Phat Minh, Chief of District of Tan An in Pleiku province, had personally visited all highlander villages in his district and reported about critical shortages of food and medical supplies in these villages. From other reports received in the same month, with the exception of areas in Darlac and Kontum where the highlanders practiced wet-rice cultivation, most of the highlander villages had ran short of rice and were supplementing their diet with corn

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<sup>43</sup> n.a., ‘Ngo Tong Thong dac biet chu trong toi cong cuoc khuech truong nong nghiep va chan hung kinh te Cao Nguyen Trung Phan’ [President Ngo Places Special Importance on the Task of Developing Agriculture and Restoring the Economy of the Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (16), pp 2 & 27, 1957. Gerald Hickey also reports on aid provided by the military in Dong Nai Thuong to help resettle northern highlanders refugees who had migrated south in the refugee movement. See *Free In The Forest*, p 11.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Nhưng ngay dang ghi nho cua nganh Thuong Vu’.

and cassava. In the highland region of Phu Yen, Huynh Cong Tinh's field officials reported that up to 25% of the highlander population had in fact completely ran out of rice.<sup>45</sup> This anxiety among the officials (probably Kinh) is understandable. Shortage of rice in Kinh peasant communities is tantamount to a food crisis. For highlanders practicing swidden, there are months when the main source of carbohydrates comes from secondary food crops such as cassava.

Tinh did note in a separate report, after having personally conducted a field visit to Pleiku and Kontum, that despite the current shortage in rice, the coming harvest looked promising.<sup>46</sup> Tinh, however, felt that they needed a long-term solution to this seasonal shortage of rice towards the end of the period between planting and harvesting (*giap hat*). He described this chronic rice shortage as a form of 'social calamity' (*tai nan xa hoi*) caused by rudimentary agricultural practices, superstitious beliefs (for example reluctance to use manure as fertilizer for fear of angering the spirits), short-term planning, and 'laziness' in terms of not trying to produce more for reserve (rather than as being plain 'lazy').<sup>47</sup> In this sense, the directorate was established to resolve this 'social calamity' among the highlanders and the name '*cong tac xa hoi*' was not so much of a misnomer after all!

By late 1957, the NCTXHMT developed one scheme after another to reform the agrarian world of the highlanders. In contrast to *Dinh Dien*, which was heavily funded with US financial support to quickly expand frontier settlements in the highlands (and Mekong Delta), highlander projects were expected to take effect with a longer span of time and had less funding. The fundamental objective guiding the design and implementation of these schemes, as outlined by Huynh Cong Tinh, was to

... help and urge the highlander compatriots themselves to take on the primary role in the work of improving their own living conditions with the means provided and methods guided by the government.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16447.

<sup>46</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16449.

<sup>47</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16447.

<sup>48</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16435. See also, n.a., 'Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh tai Cao Nguyen Trung Phan' [The Task Of Improving People's Livelihood In The Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (40), pp 5 & 7, 1957.



From the basic agricultural extension scheme in the form of the Pilot Garden project, a three-prong approach to effect agrarian change among the highlanders soon emerged from 1957 onwards. This approach simultaneously aimed at redefining forest use for swiddening, agricultural sedentarization or resettlement, and establishing model villages.

## REFORMING THE HIGHLANDERS' AGRARIAN WORLD: 1957-61

### Swidden

We learnt in the opening story that in December 1957, Ngo Dinh Diem ordered all highland province chiefs, the Government Delegate for the Central Highlands (*Dai Bieu Chanh Phu Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*) and the NCTXHMT, to control 'burning forest to make swiddens' (*dot rung lam ray*) by the highlanders and think of long-term solutions to resolve the 'problem'. At the same time, Diem ordered the implementation of temporary sedentarization measures, such as encouraging the highlanders to plant perennial cash crops, for example, coffee or fruit trees in existing swiddens, provided they were situated on suitable lands. He directed local authorities to provide aid to the highlanders in the forms of materials, money and guidance so that the highlanders could 'settle down permanently' (*dinh cu vinh vien*).<sup>49</sup> NCTXHMT, in January 1958, directed its survey teams studying land use among the highlanders to encourage the highlanders, whenever possible, to plant coffee trees in their swidden, along side the rice crops; and to draw up a list of areas that could adopt the practice and the amount of seedlings and aid required.<sup>50</sup>

To comply with Diem's directives, in December 1957 the NCTXHMT suggested that the government introduce regulation for the practice of 'burning forest to make swiddens'. Burning for swidden could only be practiced with permission from the

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<sup>49</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922. Diem also pointed out that such measures could be implemented immediately, especially in Kontum with the help of the Catholic missionaries. In the mid-1950s, Vietnamese Protestant Missionaries were also making in-roads to proselytize in the highlands. For example, Pham Xuan Tin, a Protestant priest, had been proselytizing in the Pleiku region since 1937. In 1957, Tin published a monograph about highlander groups in that region to facilitate missionary efforts. See, Pham Xuan Tin, *Phong tục đồng bào Thuong* [Customs of Highlander Compatriots], Dran, 1957.

<sup>50</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16780. The PTUDD, however, disagreed with this method of mixed cultivation. This was because coffee was only suitable for cultivation on certain soil-type and conditions.

local administration. District officials were tasked to set up markers to indicate areas permitted for swidden and areas prohibited. Only old swidden areas (*ray cu*) were permitted for burning. However, in order to quickly implement the new regulation before the onset of the burning season in 1958, highlander 'village chiefs' (*chu lang*) were tasked to immediately mark these areas and were delegated the responsibility of approving the permits.<sup>51</sup> Huynh Cong Tinh, director of NCTXHMT, felt this could serve as an effective temporary measure to regulate the problem. He further proposed that those who failed to follow the new regulations be subjected to fines, adding that highlanders were intimidated by 'fines'.<sup>52</sup> When Mr. Kinh, district chief for Dran wrote to refute Le Ta's accusations, such measures were already implemented (see beginning of chapter).

The same proposal from NCTXHMT put forth a medium-term solution to further control the situation because the practice of swidden agriculture was an issue that could only be resolved through an extended period of 'appropriate and patient' implementation of programs. It suggested that when possible, each highlander household be designated two swidden plots, for which they were encouraged to practice dry rice cultivation (*ruong kho*). In Kontum, locals (highlanders) termed this form of dry rice fields, 'o', meaning rice fields that were being plowed and fertilized but not irrigated. The highlanders were guided to practice rotational farming, of rice and other secondary food crops, on these plots of land and each adult was granted two hectares for this cultivation method. This way, the government could in the medium term greatly reduce the practice of traditional swidden agricultural among the highlanders, while awaiting other solutions to take effect.

Huynh Cong Tinh believed that to ultimately eradicate the practice of swidden among the highlanders required long-term solutions. The NCTXHMT had earlier designed a *Dinh Dien* program specifically for highlanders (see below). For the government, this program, together with existing efforts, such as the Pilot Garden, were seen as the long-term solutions that could slowly guide the highlanders to new methods of cultivation on permanent plots. Tinh also pointed out the need to extend agricultural credit provided by the National Agricultural Credit Bureau (*Nong Tin Cuc Quoc Gia*) to

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<sup>51</sup> Administration in highlander villages is discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>52</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922.

the highlanders. This source of credit provided by the government could help the highlander-farmers gradually develop the capacity for wet-rice or even cash crop farming. However, Tinh noted the procedures to secure the credits demanded too much paper work and required collateral, both of which represented huge obstacles for most of the highlanders, who were generally illiterate and had no certified documents of property ownership. In such cases, Tinh recommended the NCTXHMT be granted the authority to provide references on behalf of highlander-farmers to the Bureau to secure the needed agricultural credit.<sup>53</sup>

Ngo Dinh Diem approved all the suggestions made by Huynh Cong Tinh but directed that highlanders who flouted the new regulations be handed over to the 'responsible highlander officials' (*nha chuc trach nguoi Thuong*) to meet out the necessary punishments according to their own customs, instead of exacting monetary fines.<sup>54</sup>

In 1958, NCTXHMT prepared a comprehensive program entitled 'Plan to Counter the Ills of Burning Forest to Make Swidden' (*Ke Hoach Chong Nan Dot Rung Lam Ray*), to gradually eradicate the 'danger' posed to the forest reserves by swidden agriculture.<sup>55</sup> The manual for this plan began by describing the practice of swidden agriculture. According to this account, most highlanders practiced a very rudimentary form of agriculture whereby land that was cleared from the forest was cultivated for one to two years. After that, the cultivators shifted to another tract of forest in the vicinity to repeat the process of clearance, burning, and cultivation. When the forest in the surrounding area had been used, the entire village moved to a more distant location. In fifteen to twenty years' time, the villagers returned to a former swidden previously left to fallow and restart the entire cycle. It should be noted that there was nothing erroneous about this description of the swidden cycle. The manual recounted the importance of the forest with regards to the highlanders' livelihood, being an essential source of resources; the general importance of the forest in affecting the climate and water catchment; and the value of forest resources such as timber for economic exploitation. It

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<sup>53</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16449.

<sup>54</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922.

<sup>55</sup> 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'; Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Ke hoach chong nan dot rung lam ray* [Plan To Counter The Ills Of Burning The Forest To Make Swidden], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1958.

also estimated that 66,000 hectares of forested land was burnt for swidden annually; and it would cause the government \$30,000 piasters per hectare to reforest the cleared areas. Basically, the handbook outlined the harmful effects caused by swidden agriculture, which we now know are inaccurate under the optimum conditions that traditionally existed (see Chapter Two).

The plan took into account that swidden agriculture was closely integrated with the beliefs, 'superstitions' (*di doan me tin*) and level of technological know-how of highlander societies. To remedy the situation, the manual emphasized the importance of a 'detailed and long term plan' (*ke hoach ti my lau dai*) and 'skilful' (*kheo leo*) implementation.<sup>56</sup> Similar to earlier responses to curtail forest burning to make swiddens, the plan called for two sets of actions, immediate regulations and long-term reforms. The authors recognized that the government cannot and should not 'prohibit overnight' (*nhat dan cam han*) highlanders from burning the forest and that temporary measures could instead be adopted to regulate the situation. In other words, swidden agriculture should not be absolutely banned before highlanders have been 'agriculturally and residentially sedentarized' (*dinh canh dinh cu*), which required long term mobilization (*van dong lau dai*).

The plan prohibited highlanders from making 'new swiddens' (*lam ray moi*) in forests, meaning lands that were not previously left to fallow after burning-cultivation. Highlanders were allowed to continue with the practice in old swiddens (*lam ray cu*). The authors noted that 'old swidden' (*ray cu*) probably could not give as good yields as 'new swiddens' (*ray moi*), but the highlanders were allowed to make bigger swiddens if need be to support their community. The highlanders only needed to seek permission from the commune administration (*hanh chanh xa*). They were to ensure that in the selected area there were no trees of width measuring 5-10 *thuoc* and to clear a proper perimeter of firebreak.<sup>57</sup>

'Old swiddens', I learnt later, from the minutes of meetings for highland officials held in Darlac province in 1960, included swiddens left to fallow for even *over twenty years*. The highlanders were also not completely banned from opening new

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<sup>56</sup> *Ke hoach chong nan dot rung lam ray*, p 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p 24

swiddens. They could do so when granted permission by the district authorities. At the same time, the highlanders were not totally banned from moving their places of residences. They could still officially do so with the permission of local authorities.<sup>58</sup> This was meant to facilitate the longer-term reforms to counter the 'ills of burning forest to make swidden'.<sup>59</sup> Longer-term reforms encompassed various sedentarization (*dinh canh dinh cu*), resettlement (*Dinh Dien Thuong*) and extension projects, which will be discussed in detail below.

When in mid-1958, the Directorate for Forestry in the Central Highlands began drawing up the plan to protect the forest reserves in the Central Highlands, one of the issues discussed was the appropriate time period to sanction the use of fire to clear the forest for cultivation. Each provincial chief pointed out differences in the period (before the on-set of the rains) when highlanders in their provinces would start the burning, and therefore the difficulty in setting a fixed window of time across the board when the use of fire for clearing could be officially sanctioned.<sup>60</sup> This observation by the provincial chiefs was correct. When to clear a forest, light the fire and begin planting often depended on the village elders or specific person tasked with this role (see Chapter Two). Whether the government officials were well aware of this is one thing. What matters, I think, is that they recognized that it was unwise to fix a standardized practice as to when clearing by fire should be allowed. Meanwhile, such regulations on swidden agriculture continued to be in force on the eve of the Strategic Hamlet program in 1961.<sup>61</sup>

### Resettlement

In the months between August and September 1957, there was panic and confusion among highlanders in the highland areas of Ninh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, Dong Nai Thuong and Binh Tuy. Word was spreading that the government would forcibly relocate all highlanders to the lowland areas and force them to practice sedentary

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<sup>58</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 397.

<sup>59</sup> *Ke hoach chong nan dot rung lam ray*, p 25.

<sup>60</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11922. There were also discussions on banning civilians from entering the forest and officially fixing routes for use by civilians when crossing forested areas. Most provincial chiefs rejected the strict prohibition of entry into the forest because that would be of great inconvenience to the locals and officials would never be able to oversee the many dirt paths (*duong mon*) criss-crossing the forests. There was agreement, however, over the need for strict rules on use of fire when in forested areas

<sup>61</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 397.

cultivation like the Kinh. What happened was that Ninh Thuan province had indeed resettled a big group of highlanders to the lowlands in the Ba Rau area. A few hundred highlanders refused to be resettled and sought refuge in Dien Khanh district (Khanh Hoa province); some of them escaped to the Tanh Linh area in Binh Tuy and even areas in Dong Nai Thuong.<sup>62</sup> The main reason that Ninh Thuan province implemented this sudden and large-scale operation was to remove the highlanders from the influence of communist cadres hiding in the highlands and weed out communist infiltrators.

Tran Ba Loc, district chief of Dien Khanh, disagreed with this measure. He wrote,

... doing something against the wishes of people, for example our actions (resettlement in Ninh Thuan), in spite of the good intentions, is to LOSE THE PEOPLE'S FAITH (*that nhan tam*) [emphasis in original]. This will definitely create and spread disaffections, whether openly or secretly, especially with regards to the highlanders ... in addition, with the 'whispers and urgings' (*su ri tai xui duc*) by the opponent currently, the locals will even publicly oppose us in order to self defend and protect their ideals, villages and natural individual characteristics ... As such, my district is very worried about allowing the Ninh Thuan government to use such absolute measures with 'lightning speed' (*chop nhoang*). Rather than achieving good results, the opposite effects will spread to Khanh Hoa and other highland areas.<sup>63</sup>

He did not, however, altogether oppose the resettlement of highlanders. Rather, he felt there was no need to move the highlanders to the lowlands and force should never be used to pressure the highlanders to abandon their 'villages, swiddens and spirits'. Instead, the government needed to take the time to explain to (*giai thich*) and educate (*giao duc*), the highlanders about such policy measures. Resettlement could also be implemented within the highlands by gradually resettling the highlanders in bigger settlements with appropriate living conditions and located in more accessible areas.

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<sup>62</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16751. Homer Dowdy recounts how 'missionized' Cil in the Dalat region reacted to a similar rumor in 1957 with panic, anger and fear; and planning to organize suicide feasts until the government announced that the 'rumored' resettlement was not to place after all. See Homer Dowdy, *The Bamboo Cross*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964.

<sup>63</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16751.

Huynh Cong Tinh concurred with Tran Ba Loc. Although it was strategically necessary to resettle the highlanders, such a policy must be implemented with *supple (mem deo)* and *skill (kheo leo)*, but most of all, 'avoid openly conflicting the customary practices and beliefs of the highlanders'. Neither force nor haste should be adopted. Instead, the policy must be well planned with in-depth explanation to the highlanders so that they would be motivated to voluntarily participate in resettlement.<sup>64</sup> The strategic and political motivations behind the policy to resettle the highlanders were emphasized right from the start. Resettlement was strategic in bringing highlander villages within the administrative reach of the state, away from communist controlled areas. It was political because if state policies could improve the living conditions of the highlanders, then the state was more likely to win the hearts and minds of the highlanders. Up till 1960, there were continued reminders from the central government that the key to success in highlander resettlement and sedentarization programs was reforming their agricultural practice, and this must be achieved by the highlanders themselves rather than forced upon them. This was, as Bui Van Luong reminded all related authorities, a political (*chinh tri*) program, and not an economic development program like *Dinh Dien* involving mainly Kinh people.<sup>65</sup> The same motivations also led to continual revision of the policy to find the most appropriate models to adopt when resettling the highlanders.

In late 1957, NCTXHMT proposed a version of *Dinh Dien* designed specifically for the highlanders, known as '*Dinh Dien Thuong*'. In 1958, the 'Plan for Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Residence of Highlander Compatriots' (*Ke Hoach Dinh Canh Dinh Cu Dong Bao Thuong*) was introduced. At the same time, variations of such plans were also implemented.<sup>66</sup> A major feature of these sedentarization programs was to encourage the highlanders to adopt modern agricultural methods in permanent fields and penned animal husbandry, like the Kinh people (*theo loi Kinh*). At one stage, Diem even directed through a circular dated 17 March 1958, that officials resettle Kinh people near to the highlander villages in order to set examples on how the permanent field methods were more productive. The authorities, however, were to find ways to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts between the Kinh settlers and highlander villagers when

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<sup>64</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16751.

<sup>65</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17343.

<sup>66</sup> For an outline of the series of highlander resettlement projects, see 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'; 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (II)'; *Hoi dong cac sac toc: Mot tan dinh che dan chu cua De II Cong Hoa Viet Nam*, pp 83-100.

implementing this.<sup>67</sup> The government placed much emphasis about the political nature of these agrarian programs. Authorities were directed to carry out the programs gradually and 'gently'. The strategic nature of resettlement, however, was to take precedence from late 1960 onwards, when the government faced problems in coping with the rapidly escalating insurgency activities in the highlander areas.

### *Dinh Dien Thuong...*

Despite the same pre-fix in the name, *Dinh Dien Thuong* was meant to be fundamentally different from the *Dinh Dien* program that resettled Kinh people in the highlands and the Mekong Delta. *Dinh Dien Thuong*, according to the original design by NCTXHMT, was essentially an expanded form of the Pilot Garden. It was based on two fundamental assumptions. First, highlanders had for a long time adapted to living conditions in the forested highlands and therefore would not readily embrace sudden changes. Second, use of force would lead to disaffection among the highlanders since they would not bear to abandon their swidden and houses. Thus, *Dinh Dien Thuong* aimed to introduce highlanders to the new methods of permanent field agriculture, leading eventually to voluntary resettlement in the selected site.

The proposed *Dinh Dien Thuong* program established a large scale 'agricultural camp' (*nong trai*) - which was really a model farm - in a location with suitable farming conditions. This location should be ideally as close to the nearby highlander villages as possible. This *nong trai* served as a kind of 'agricultural school' similar to the earlier Pilot Garden scheme.<sup>68</sup> The program selected between 50 and 100 highlander villagers in the 18-45 years old age group, meaning mainly youths and reputable villagers, as participants. In the event that their absence from the villages resulted in shortage of farming labor, the government compensated in kind such as rice, salt, etc. In the first fifteen days of the 'training', the participants engaged in the construction of houses, fences, and organization of the camp. Then, in the next 75 days, they learnt various new methods of agriculture, such as plowing, fertilizing and irrigating the fields, fenced animal husbandry, systematic cultivation of secondary food crops and suitable industrial

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<sup>67</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728.

<sup>68</sup> The document did not specify who the instructors were. I think the instructors would probably comprised of cadres from the NCTXHMT and provincial service cadres, composing of both highlander and Kinh officials.



cash crops, hygienic methods of cooking and living, and also basic Vietnamese and arithmetic.

Upon completion of the course, participants could choose to resettle, with their families, in the vicinity of the *nong trai*. In this case, settlers were given seeds, agricultural tools, food and aid in the construction of houses. The program gave them access to governmental agricultural credit, which was only repayable after four years of loan. It was expected that with every course conducted, some trainees would stay behind and establish a small hamlet of which three hectares were cleared by the authorities. With every course conducted, this new settlement was supposed to grow and finally become a highlander farmstead (*nong truong Thuong*). Alternatively, the participants could choose to return to original villages. In that case, they would at least have been exposed to the new methods of cultivation and living conditions. Even then, the program gave them new seeds, agricultural tools and a small amount of foodstuff such as rice and salt. It was hoped that they could slowly adopt, in their original villages, the methods imparted in the course.<sup>69</sup>

In theory, *Dinh Dien Thuong* as proposed by NCTXHMT, recommended persuasion to recruit the highlanders, operated on a small scale, and proceeded gradually. It even expected a certain degree of 'failure', since not all highlanders would voluntarily resettle at the end of the course. It was essentially a form of agrarian change through technical extension followed by possible resettlement.

...In Practice...

One of the first *Dinh Dien Thuong* to be established was located in the Tanh Linh area of Binh Tuy province. The PTUDD (*Phu Tong Uy Dinh Dien*) operated this *Dinh Dien Thuong* and it was directly managed by the Director (*Quan Doc*) of Southern *Dinh Dien* Region I (*Vung Dinh Dien Nam Phan I*), Lieutenant-Colonel Le Van Buong, who was also the Chief of Province for Binh Tuy. This *Dinh Dien Thuong* began on a small scale, recruiting from among 80 highlander households to develop the *nong trai*. It did not hastily resettle the highlanders in the settlement.<sup>70</sup> All these seemed to follow

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<sup>69</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16434.

<sup>70</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11763.

according to the plan outlined by NCTXHMT. In reality, Le Van Buong implemented a crash program to resettle the highlanders. He had right from the beginning, already planned to resettle 1,000 highlanders in the selected area, which he claimed were 'waiting to join the program'.<sup>71</sup> Before the first center was fully operational, Le Van Buong had already discussed with the PTUDD to expand the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program in Binh Tuy to absorb a further 2,000 highlanders.<sup>72</sup> The first site was located in a heavily forested valley with no existing roads connecting it with the provincial highway. Because of the location and planned scale of the site, much effort and resources were spent clearing the forest, and constructing houses, roads and offices to establish this *Dinh Dien Thuong*.<sup>73</sup>

By January 1958, three *Dinh Dien Thuong* projects were already in operation with six more in the pipeline.<sup>74</sup> In Binh Tuy province, another three more *Dinh Dien Thuong* centers were to be added to the one established in Tanh Linh.<sup>75</sup> Despite claims of adopting the tactics of persuasion, Le Van Buong in fact accelerated the program by resettling about 1,000 highlanders in each center within a few months of operation. By 1959, Buong resettled about 4,000 out of the estimated 6,000 highlanders in Binh Tuy province in the four centers.<sup>76</sup> It was clear that in practice, the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program operated by PTUDD ran counter to the principles outlined in the theoretical model designed by NCTXHMT.

Apparently, the first *Dinh Dien Thuong* implemented by Le Van Buong was done in such a way that all highlanders of the selected area were included in the program. Buong also did not expect the highlanders to actually reject the reforms introduced and return to the old villages and traditional ways of living. In contrast to the theoretical model, this was agrarian change through resettlement. The results were probably not encouraging at all. Pioneering a new settlement was costly (as was already

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<sup>71</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10858.

<sup>72</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10858.

<sup>73</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10858

<sup>74</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16752. The first three *Dinh Dien Thuong* in operation were located in the Ba Rau area of Ninh Thuan province; Tanh Linh area of Binh Tuy province; and Buon Knach in Darlac province.

<sup>75</sup> John Montgomery, *Cases In Vietnamese Administration – Truong hop hanh chanh Viet Nam*, Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1959, p 166.

<sup>76</sup> n.a., 'Hon bay ngan dong bao tinh nguyen lap nghiep tai khu Dinh Dien Binh Tuy da neu guong tang gia san xuat trong cuoc thu dua canh tac' [More Than Seven Thousands Compatriots Who Volunteered To Settle in Binh Tuy *Dinh Dien* Area Had Already Set The Example For Increasing Production In A Cultivation Competition], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (120), p 20, 1959.

seen in the normal *Dinh Dien* program) and resettling in a totally new environment caused too much strain on the highlanders' traditional beliefs (which was anticipated in the original plan!). In short, the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program in Binh Tuy was implemented in the fashion of *Dinh Dien* for Kinh people rather than the model proposed by NCTXHMT.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, NCTXHMT pressed ahead with the version of the scheme originally proposed, in a selected site in the Buon Knack area of Darlac province in early 1958.<sup>78</sup>

### Modifications

By March 1958, lessons learnt from the experience of the early *Dinh Dien Thuong* program were sufficient for the government to modify the practice. Citing the examples of the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program in Ninh Thuan, Binh Tuy and Darlac, Ngo Dinh Diem told all concerned officials that it was not necessary to concentrate the highlanders in one designated resettlement site. Instead, if possible, the highlanders could remain in the areas close to their original villages, while 'bringing' the reforms to their doorsteps.<sup>79</sup> The two *Dinh Dien Thuong* models in practice, one by PTUDD and the other by NCTXHMT, were too costly (if projected for implementation to all highlanders) and responses by highlanders were not too encouraging. The *Dinh Dien Thuong* project in Buon Knack was thus abandoned in April 1958, as a result of this directive.<sup>80</sup> When Kontum province sought to resettle 935 highlanders living in the border area between Vietnam and Lao, the province was told by PTUDD to follow the new orders to avoid 'big' movements of the highlander population or 'regrouping' (*tap trung*) in one area but to look for suitable land near their original villages so as to guide them in new agricultural practices.<sup>81</sup>

Since the theoretical model proposed by NCTXHMT and the 'proto-type' established by PTUDD in late 1957, *Dinh Dien Thuong* program was modified. In the

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<sup>77</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12680.

<sup>78</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16434.

<sup>79</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11763. Apparently the *Dinh Dien* program was also implemented in Binh Thuan province, too.

<sup>80</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16752. At the same time, Nguyen Trac Di suggests that another reason the project was not continued was due to the change of directors at the NCTXHMT. See 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'.

<sup>81</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16752.

modified model, there were two possible forms, which later *Dinh Dien Thuong* could take.

The first involved *resettlement* in a 'newly' pioneered population center selected for the program, which had all the suitable conditions for developing wet-rice cultivation. The second involved *sedentarization* in an area that was already inhabited by highlanders or close to their original locations. This selected site, however, must possess sufficient land area to bring in more inhabitants from the vicinity to practice permanent field agriculture. It was estimated that each nuclear household with an average of five people required at least 2.6 hectares of rice land to subsist. Similar to the original, this modified version emphasized the importance of persuasion in recruiting the highlanders. In addition, the plan called for resettlement of highlanders possessing certain commonalities in the same site. For example, they should ideally be of the same ethnic group, religious belief, or originally lived in the same vicinity. The modified model, however, stipulated a population number of between 200 and 500 people for each *Dinh Dien Thuong*, in contrast to the large population model practiced in Binh Tuy. Also, the plan emphasized those groups that specialized in only swidden agriculture and located in poorer areas should be set as the priority group to be brought into *Dinh Dien Thuong* program.

Similar to the original model designed by NCTXHMT, the selected highlander village was to send a few members from each household to help clear the land and began planting under guidance from agricultural cadres in the selected site. While awaiting the harvest in the old swidden, more members of the village were mobilized to construct houses in the site. When the new houses were completed and the crops in the old swiddens harvested, the entire village moved into the center.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the entire resettlement or sedentarization process took up one whole agricultural season. There was, however, no fixed period to mobilize the highlanders to join the program.

The 'proto-type' *Dinh Dien Thuong* centers, such as in Binh Tuy, continued to operate while the modified program was implemented. In 1958, survey teams were sent to several areas in Pleiku for the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program. One such area was Jappau

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<sup>82</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17055.

in Kontum, which Kinh in the vicinity termed 'Tau Dau'. This area was formerly inhabited by Viet Cong units and also by a small number of Kinh war refugees.<sup>83</sup> These settlers had since left but much of the land area had been converted into rice fields, although abandoned. The location posed no problem to the work of irrigation, or '*dan thuy nhap dien*' (irrigating the rice fields). There were five highlander villages located in the area surrounding the site. Interestingly, the authorities had no detailed information about two of the five villages. The survey team estimated that the site could accommodate 100 households (with an average of 5 members per nuclear household), with sufficient land for them to practice permanent wet-rice fields.<sup>84</sup> Jappau was established in 1959, but according to Nguyen Trac Di, this *Dinh Dien Thuong*, along with a number of others, finally failed as the settlements could not sustain the envisioned livelihood depicted by the program and the highlanders gradually deserted the centers.<sup>85</sup>

### Sedentarization

Ngo Dinh Diem was convinced that swidden agriculture alone could not resolve the chronic food shortage inherent in highlanders' traditional form of livelihood.<sup>86</sup> Diem wrote in his 'pencil remarks' (*but phe*) in an exchange with Bui Van Luong (General Commissioner of PTUDD),

swidden fields worked by highlanders are insufficient; the land will lose its fertility by the beginning of [next] year. As such, should find some ways to live through the following year (meaning wet-rice fields), together with that plot of swidden, which could bring some benefits, enough for the highlander compatriots to enjoy, so that they could avoid abandoning that place and stop clearing new swiddens.<sup>87</sup>

Diem wanted these highlanders to begin planting in fixed fields, while simultaneously working on their current swidden fields. He felt that the success of sedentarization

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<sup>83</sup> It is not clear where the Kinh refugees, who previously settled in Tau Dau, were from. The document only reveals that they were seeking refuge from fighting between French and the Viet Minh.

<sup>84</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11766.

<sup>85</sup> 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'.

<sup>86</sup> For most Vietnamese officials at that time, this meant rice.

<sup>87</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11741.

depended very much on the new methods and new site being able to provide them with sufficient rice throughout the year. He was, however, worried that the transition period might not yield the ideal results to prove the new methods were better. He reminded Bui Van Luong,

as for highlanders, before moving them [make sure] there are enough rice fields [to cultivate] and rice for them to eat. As for swidden fields near to the wet-rice fields, let them build houses but must at the same time do some planting, corn for example.<sup>88</sup>

Diem soon accepted that sedentarizing highlanders via wet-rice cultivation would not be possible. The *Dinh Dien Thuong* program was not expected to be applicable to all highlander villages.

#### *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu...*

On 18 July 1958, Diem issued two significant orders concerning sedentarization of highlanders. First, all province chiefs were ordered to conduct surveys, together with district officials, of the highlander villagers in their respective provinces and submit detailed reports on the situations of the highlanders' living conditions. The province chiefs were to report whether there was enough suitable lands in the vicinity of the highlanders' villages to sedentarize them via wet-rice cultivation. Second, in the case of highlanders for which this option was not possible, Diem directed,

... highlander compatriots for whom we have yet to find land to cultivate wet-rice in order to allow them to be settled permanently, the number of which naturally makes up the majority. In order to save the forests, [officials] must immediately tell them to inform which are the areas that they had previously burnt to make swidden, but presently forested, and if they re-cultivate would also provide them with rice to eat. Near to the swidden season, direct them to cultivate only in those areas but they must keep a cleared path around the

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<sup>88</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11741.

perimeter to prevent the fire from spreading into the surrounding area during burning. This is only a temporary plan to curb the ills of forest burning...<sup>89</sup>

Permanent wet-rice fields would sedentarize the highlanders but this measure could not be applied throughout the highlands. It was clear that the attempt to remold the agrarian world of the highlanders must include the option of regulated swidden agriculture and another alternative option.

When the NCTXHMT introduced the *Ke Hoach Chong Nan Dot Rung Lam Ray*, it was also at the same time introducing another scheme, *Ke Hoach Dinh Canh Dinh Cu Dong Bao Thuong* (Plan for Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Residence of Highlander Compatriots).<sup>90</sup> This program, when implemented contained centers that were individually at a smaller scale than *Dinh Dien Thuong*, but was actually more ambitious in that it would ultimately be applied to all highlanders practicing swidden agriculture.

In general, the program replicated the main characteristics of the modified version of *Dinh Dien Thuong*, with the exception of two features. First, the transition process was extended to take up to two years, approximately two agricultural seasons, which was significantly longer than *Dinh Dien Thuong*. Survey and trials for the selected site took up two months. Preparation for the site, which included training of local villagers as cadres, organizing logistics and mobilizing the villagers for the project began in the second month. The whole preparation period took up five months. Clearing land, constructing the new site, and moving to the new site took up another nine months. This was followed by another nine months of further extension services before the project could be considered as complete.<sup>91</sup> Second, in case there was no suitable land in the vicinity of the highlander villages for conversion to wet-rice cultivation, the program recommended bringing advanced cultivation methods to the highlanders. The program prescribed the practice first presented by Huynh Cong Tinh in late 1957, where the highlanders were encouraged to fertilize and plow an existing swidden plot, and

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<sup>89</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of the document in author's possession; see also, PTTDeNhat, File no. 16728.

<sup>90</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Ke hoach dinh canh dinh cu dong bao Thuong* [Plan For Fixed Cultivation And Fixed Residence Of Highlander Compatriots], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1958.

<sup>91</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Cong cuoc Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* [The Work Of Fixed Cultivation And Fixed Residence], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1960.

practice rotational cultivation with another old swidden plot, or what locals in Kontum called 'o' fields. In this way, the highlanders without access to suitable land for wet-rice fields could also be 'sedentarized' by means of fixed, rotation fields.<sup>92</sup>

Between mid and late 1958, provinces with highlander populations began conducting surveys of highlander villages to determine how the '*Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*' program could be implemented. In August 1958, Le Ta reported that most of the highlander areas in his province (Lam Dong) were unsuitable for expanding wet-rice cultivation. In those areas that met the conditions required for sedentary wet-rice farming, for which a number of highlanders were already practicing wet-rice farming anyway, he had begun establishing Pilot Gardens, and in one case, even preparing to establish a Model Village (*Lang Kieu Mau*). In most cases, Le Ta had begun the work of delineating areas sanctioned for swidden cultivation as ordered by the President.<sup>93</sup>

In mid-October 1958, two sites, Plei Krong and Pleibong, were surveyed in Kontum. Both sites were already occupied by several highlander villages, and in the case of Pleibong there was one Kinh village (*lang Chau Khe*). The survey team reported that there was currently only one highlander village with a population of 230 people in Plei Krong. The land in this area was reportedly suitable for expansion of wet-rice fields and the surveyors estimated that the area was wide enough to absorb another 800 people from highlander villages in the vicinity. As for Pleibong, the surveyors felt that the area was already sufficiently populated given the suitable amount of land for wet-rice field expansion and there should be no further resettlement. The villages in this area, however, could use more agricultural extension services.<sup>94</sup>

### Modifications

The *Dinh Dien Thuong* and *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* programs underwent further modification in late October 1958. Earlier, in September 1958, the Bajaraka Movement had sent shock waves throughout the Central Highlands (see Chapter Two). This time, Ngo Dinh Diem instructed, through another of his '*but phe*',

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<sup>92</sup> *Ke hoach dinh canh dinh cu dong bao Thuong*, pp 24-5.

<sup>93</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16746.

<sup>94</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11765.



... during this period, the highlander compatriots still possess much complex and superstitious prejudice, [and are] easily manipulated and incited by Viet Cong and rebels. Thus, [you] should not establish large-scale fixed settlements. Only establish small ones, but [proceed] gradually and gently. Provinces with highlander compatriots will look for places with rice-fields and encourage those who are progressive and trustworthy to bring them there to till the land, together with a few families of Kinh people to guide them. If the highlander compatriots feel that it is easy to make a living there, willing to settle near the rice-fields, help them by all possible means. If this is able to attract other highlander compatriots, then gradually expand that site.<sup>95</sup>

Meanwhile, apart from *Dinh Dien Thuong* projects already underway, the PTUDD stopped planning any further projects to resettle the highlanders on a large-scale basis. Individual provinces, however, continued to implement their own *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* programs.

In early 1959, Ngo Dinh Diem reviewed the programs implemented for the highlanders. This came to be known as the 'Eleven Point program' (*Chuong Trinh Muoi Mot Diem*).<sup>96</sup> Seven out of the eleven points concerned the need for improvements in training highlander cadres. Two points addressed the need for improvement of administration in highlander villages. Two addressed the need for further work in agrarian reforms for highlanders. The last two points, which is of concern here, stated the need to provide more oxen to highlanders, especially those with contributions to the work of 'improving livelihood of the people' (*cai tien dan sinh*); and to improve the organization of farmsteads (*nong truong*) for the highlanders.<sup>97</sup> Some provinces, for example, Darlac, responded by planning to include highlander villages within the operations of nearby *Dinh Dien* to introduce advanced agricultural methods to the highlanders; others responded by expanding the scope of the sedentarization program.

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<sup>95</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded but a photocopy of the document in author's possession.

<sup>96</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17056; see also 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (I)'.

<sup>97</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17056.

### ...In Practice

In late 1959, Quang Duc province began implementing its sedentarization program.<sup>98</sup> It began by selecting four sites easily assessable via the intra-provincial roads. The documents did not reveal how far were the highlanders' original villages located from the new sites. The new sites were selected primarily because of administrative accessibility, although the province chief claimed that these sites had better agricultural prospects. Fixed cultivation, however, was to be implemented on these sites by rehabilitating abandoned swiddens through fertilization of the soil, and practicing the rotational 'o' fields. Vo Huu Khanh, Chief of Province, planned to complete the whole sedentarization program within only six months, contrary to the 24 months stipulated by NCTXHMT.<sup>99</sup> By mid-1960, the province had already planned, with some already in operation, a total of 45 sedentarization sites, termed '*dia diem tap trung*' (regrouping centers), for 172 selected highlander villages. This effectively included 13,510 of the 19,393 highlander population in the province. This meant that each sedentarization center average about 300 people per center. It is perhaps of interest to note that although most of the sites were accessible via intra-provincial roads, they were not located near the main roads on the personal orders of Diem.<sup>100</sup> This is in contrast to security driven modifications to the sedentarization programs beginning in late 1960. Meanwhile, we will look at the third pillar of the highlander agrarian program, the Model Village (*lang kieu mau*).

### Model Village

When the Directorate for Agriculture implemented the Pilot Garden scheme, villages that had gradually absorbed the new methods of agriculture introduced in the scheme were considered as 'model villages' (*lang kieu mau*). A model village was, naturally, also considered a sedentarized village. Regulation of swidden agriculture and sedentarization of agricultural practices were ultimately meant to create similar villages in the highlands. The creation of such a village therefore formed the third pillar of the effort to transform the highlander agrarian landscape. In January 1958, NCTXHMT

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<sup>98</sup> Quang Duc province was created from the southwestern districts of Darlac province in 1959.

<sup>99</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 14356.

<sup>100</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13507.

planned a systematic development of such villages in the highland regions. *Ke Hoach Lang Kieu Mau* (Plan for Model Village) was meant to complement other on-going agrarian programs discussed above. Accordingly, highlanders affected by *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* or *Dinh Dien Thuong*, were to help construct the appropriate 'model village' during the second and third phase of resettlement or sedentarization.

The model village served as the physical manifestation of the government's highlander agrarian reforms, which sought to provide the highlanders with a modern and well-equipped village. The program listed a number of basic household amenities that must be built, such as a small front-yard (for drying agricultural products or clothes), garden, latrine, waste pit, rubbish pit, fertilizer pit and animal pens. If the model village was established on a new site, the program prescribed the orderly layout of the houses, the direction that houses should face, and when possible, should be built in the Kinh style. The village should have at least 50-60 households with 30 to forty houses.<sup>101</sup> It is perhaps of interest here to note that in late 1957, the President Office had directed that highlanders involved in any resettlement scheme should be allowed to build their houses according to their cultures and customs.<sup>102</sup> Also included, were the construction of public facilities such as water wells, fishpond, administrative offices, medical station, school, sports field, village fence and gate, and a proper road connecting the village with the provincial road network. A Pilot Garden was also established in the village. The model village served as a 'training center' for village leaders from surrounding villages sent for training in the new agricultural methods and exposure to modern village living.

The first trial site selected was Klong village in Lam Dong province. Klong was originally a small Koho village with a population of slightly over 100 people in Dran district. The villagers originally practiced wet-rice cultivation in a valley area. The survey report noted that the area surrounding the village was suitable for expansion of wet-rice cultivation. Because these were '*ruong cao*' (elevated fields), there was also a need to establish an irrigation system in order to bring more land into cultivation since NCTXHMT planned to resettle in Klong, additional highlanders from nearby villages.

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<sup>101</sup> Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, *Ke hoach xay dung lang kieu mau* [Plan For Establishing A Model Village], Saigon: Nha Cong Tac Xa Hoi Mien Thuong, 1958, p 7.

<sup>102</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10858.

The village was retrofitted as prescribed in the program.<sup>103</sup> By 1959, NCTXHMT identified three types of Model Village that had been established. First, the original village was expanded by resettling highlanders from the vicinity to form a Model Village because it was located on good lands (for wet-rice cultivation) that were not fully exploited, such as in Klong. Second, the entire Model Village was established from scratch on a piece of suitable land by resettling highlanders in the vicinity. Third, villages that were already optimally inhabited were developed into a Model Village by establishing the basic household and communal amenities prescribed in the plan.<sup>104</sup>

### THE CHANGING HIGHLANDER AGRARIAN LANDSCAPE

By June 1959, a total of 80,159 highlanders were 'sedentarized' in 108 sedentarization centers (*dia diem dinh cu*) under the *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* program. In these sedentarized centers, a total of 29,592 hectares were put into cultivation. In other words, the average land area per household (of five people) was approximately 1.85 hectares, which was close to the stipulated 2.6 hectares. Only about 17% of the total highlander population was involved in the sedentarization program by 1959.<sup>105</sup> Of the sedentarized highlanders, only 11% was in the highlander heartland provinces of the Central Highlands (namely provinces in the region of *Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*) and the rest in the fringe region located in Central Lowlands (*Trung Nguyen Trung Phan*) and Southern Provinces (*Nam Phan*).<sup>106</sup> There are no reliable figures on the total number of highlanders sedentarized through *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* on the eve of the Strategic Hamlet program and the highlander refugee (*dong bao Thuong ty nan cong san*) resettlement program, both of which affected a far higher number of highlanders after 1961. Le Dinh Chi reports there were 596 strategic hamlets in the highlands, which resettled 153,422 highlanders. In addition, there were 483 resettlement centers for

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<sup>103</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded but a photocopy of the document in author's possession. See also, n.a., 'Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh tai Cao Nguyen Trung Phan' [The Work Of Improving the People's Livelihoods In The High Plateau Of The Central Region], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (56), pp 7 & 9, 1958.

<sup>104</sup> *Cong cuoc cai tien dan sinh sau 5 nam chap chanh cua Ngo Tong Thong*, pp 65-66.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p 35.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p 43.

214,533 highlander refugees.<sup>107</sup> As for the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program, only 7,195 highlanders were resettled in seven centers operated by the PTUDD as of 1961.<sup>108</sup>

### Grand Scheme of State Control

A typical critique of Vietnamese formation in the highlands most probably read like something as follows. The government's efforts to transform the highlanders' agrarian world between 1955 and 1961 can easily be interpreted as a broad stroke to remold highland societies into, what James Scott terms, a legible grid of high modernist control.<sup>109</sup> State formation among the highlanders - rationalized by the First Republic as 'improving people's livelihood' (*cai tien dan sinh dong bao thuong*) and 'civilizing the highlanders' (*khai hoa nguoi thuong*), which Oscar Salemink sums up as the 'Vietnamese modernization discourse' - simply meant 'resettlement'.<sup>110</sup> When the highlanders previously roamed 'free in the forest' of their village-swidden territories, they were now rooted under a state defined triangle of 'old swiddens', 'permanent agricultural fields' and 'model villages'. Worse, this legible grid was an attempt at duplicating the Kinh's system of agricultural practice and living. Thus, state formation also meant assimilation of the highlanders into the Kinh cultural sphere.

Each village had possessed its own particular agricultural and social practices that vary depending on location and ethnic affiliation. Generations past generations, each village had found the best ways and methods, with the given cultural and technological know-how, to subsist through agriculture in the forested mountains. The diversity and exclusive (to villagers) knowledge of these 'practices of every day life' or 'local ways of doing things', what Michel De Certeau refers to as 'metisés', meant a high degree of illegibility to outsiders and hence a hindrance to state control.<sup>111</sup> Sedentarization through *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* and *Dinh Dien Thuong* sought to reduce this illegible mess into a standardized practice across the highlands. The village was 'reconstructed' according to a master plan, the 'Model Village'. Old houses were retrofitted to adhere to a standard model and the entire village layout was reshaped

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<sup>107</sup> 'Van de dong bao son cuoc', p 184.

<sup>108</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 442.

<sup>109</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, pp 183-191.

<sup>110</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 189.

<sup>111</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice Of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

according to one master conceptual plan. When entirely reconstructed on a new site, houses were built in straight lined blocks, faced a designated direction, and conformed to a master architectural design; in other words, a very legible layout. Gone were the primitive, idiosyncratic and illegible villages that were distinctly different between ethnic groups or locations.

Making the highlands legible involved a systematic ordering of the wider landscape, the forest. A forest regime was created to facilitate better state control over use of resources and surveillance of population movement. This, as studies in other places tell us, often come in the guise of economic and social development projects backed by a perceived scientific rationality. Swidden agriculture was therefore perceived as primitive, destructive and wasteful. The practices must be delimited and ultimately curbed in order to civilize the practitioners and maintain sustainable, yet efficient exploitation of forest resources. Thus, certain tracts of the forest were considered off-limits and swidden agriculture, when officially sanctioned, could only be practiced within the delimited 'area'. The delimited area, often defined through bureaucratic procedures, usually meant a significant closing in on traditional swidden territories that have kept the system at an optimal equilibrium. Swidden practices under such circumstances therefore gradually deteriorated in yields and self-sustainability as forests failed to regenerate sufficiently after extended use and shortened fallow. When the dust settles from such development projects, the highlanders were buried underneath the dirt of state formation.

### **Practices on the Middle Ground**

If the opening story about forest fires in Dasar is of any significance to our existing understanding of state formation in the Central Highlands under the First Republic, then the analytical picture just presented may also have omitted some ongoing dynamics. There were instances of middle ground practice, where the expanding state form met existing social forms - and sometimes also physical forms - halfway in the process and modified the shape, scope and implementation of state formation programs.

In the arena of government-delimitation of forest use and the resulting restriction of swidden practices, we find there was a similarity to the forestry regime under the French colonial state. Mark Cleary argues that the French colonial government, in the guise of economic and social development (respectively *mise en valeur* and *mission civilisatrice*), banned burning of the forest to make swiddens but delimited areas for continued practice of 'ray' in previously burned tracts of forest. Only forests that were subjected to burn in the previous 15 years were permitted for practice of 'ray'. Cleary argues that this effectively undermined the self-equilibrium of swidden agriculture because the regeneration period required was 45 years. State formation therefore meant 'shifting the cultivators' into state-specified areas and ultimately, the slow death of a traditional way of life.<sup>112</sup>

The First Republic recognized that not all highlanders practiced swidden. For those who did, the government was well aware that swiddeners actually returned to the same plot after a full cycle lasting between 15 and 20 years. Such a practice was termed 'nomadic' simply because the same plot of land was not permanently under cultivation. Villagers may actually, for a period during the full swidden cycle, reside somewhere else away from the original location. Most Central Highlander swiddeners, in fact, did practice a full cycle ranging between 15 and 25 years. For example, Bui Minh Dao reports that the Bahnar in the An Khe area traditionally see secondary forests, known as 'bri lang' in Bahnar language, with trees between 15 and 20 years of growth, as ideal for swidden. Older forests or primary forests, known as 'Bri Duynh' in Bahnar language, were not ideal swidden grounds because these were believed to be the abodes of spirits, and would require too much effort to clear.<sup>113</sup> Jean Boulbet reports that the Ma in Blao practiced a 15-year swidden cycle!<sup>114</sup> The forest regime practiced by the First Republic, theoretically, could leave the swidden cycles of most highlander groups intact.

The First Republic also recognized that eradication of swidden must go hand-in-hand with highlander agrarian reforms. The systematic regulation of swidden

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<sup>112</sup> Mark Cleary, 'Managing the Forest in Colonial Indochina c.1900-1940', *Modern Asian Studies* 39 (2), pp 256-84, 2005.

<sup>113</sup> *Trong trot truyen thong cua cac dan toc tai cho Tay Nguyen*, p 55.

<sup>114</sup> Jean Boulbet, 'Le Miir, Culture Itinerante avec Jachere Forestiere en Pays Maa', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient* 53 (1), pp 77-98, 1966 cited from 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World', p 141.

agriculture through the 'forest regime' was meant to allow a controlled practice of traditional swidden agriculture before any of the intended reforms could take effect. When the First Republic began regulating swidden practice, it was highlander representatives who were tasked to delimit what and where were 'old swiddens'. The authorities knew they were handicapped by a lack of knowledge of local practices. Ngo Dinh Diem also specifically directed provincial chiefs to conduct surveys with the help of local officials to have the highlanders clearly point out the 'old swidden' areas. In addition, we learnt that in 1960, when sedentarization programs were in full momentum, swiddens left to fallow for even over 20 years, were still considered as old swidden and allowed for re-cultivation. This suggests that as much as the government authorities wished to extend control over the territory and its inhabitants, they were very much governed by the considerations of whether the highlander subjects could still maintain a decent level of subsistence through their traditional livelihoods, before agrarian programs reach them and take effect.

Sedentarization (and resettlement) was no doubt strongly motivated by strategic reasons. The drastic resettlement operation in Ninh Thuan province in 1957, attest to such concerns very early in the process of state formation. But resettlement or sedentarization was also fundamentally political in nature; it was about winning the allegiance of the highlanders. Thus, government authorities gave as much attention, if not more, to concerns about the viability of the programs - in terms of producing higher yields for subsistence - as they did to strategic placement of population away from communist hotbeds. Ngo Dinh Diem was worried that the transition process might not yield the results expected of the new farming methods in the new settlement and encouraged continued cultivation in the old swiddens, as well as in the new permanent fields. Survey reports placed much emphasis on the suitability of the land for practicing permanent wet-rice fields, or potential to absorb more highlanders for rotational farming. Not all settlements were expected to move nor were those that moved, resettled on the main roads to facilitate control. Moving the settlements to the main roads only happened later when security reasons took priority over all else as guerilla fighting intensified.

Everyday politics of citizens can make or break state policies. The state may respond by tightening enforcement when results did not meet expectations, or the state



may respond by modifying the programs to fit the situation. Because the primary motivation was political, there were continual modifications to the programs. And continual modifications were made because of highlander responses to the programs. *Dinh Dien Thuong* was initially designed based on negative responses from resettlement in Ninh Thuan. It was further modified when the versions in practice (both in Binh Tuy and Darlac) were found to be too large in scale and distant relocation of highlanders demanded too much of highlander customary beliefs. The program was modified, making the settlements smaller; and reducing the extent of relocation by establishing *Dinh Dien Thuong* at the original village or in its vicinity. *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* itself amounted to the government's admission that the prior vision of sedentarization via permanent wet-rice fields was pure imagination. Sedentarization was further adapted to accept as a permanent feature, the practice of rotational farming on fixed swidden plots (the 'o' fields solution proposed by Huynh Cong Tinh in late 1957).

When introduced, *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*, took into account the need for a longer period of implementation than what was prescribed or practiced in the earlier models of *Dinh Dien Thuong* or brash resettlement (in Ninh Thuan). Right from the early days, NCTXHMT had stated it would take a long time for such agrarian programs to take effect. As seen in the case of the *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* program in Quang Duc province, these prescriptions were unfortunately, not always adhered to by individual provincial administrators.

Encouraging highlanders to imitate Kinh agricultural practices and construction of houses and villages were probably too plain 'assimilating' for an alternate view. This did not, however, preclude attempts or reminders to respect the cultures and customs of the highlanders when implementing the programs. There were continual reminders from the upper echelons of government and in the various program manuals, about the need to implement the programs gradually and avoid conflicts with local customs.<sup>115</sup> In the Pilot Garden, Model Village and *Dinh Dien Thuong* programs, recruitment began with selected highlander youths or heads of households. Youths were expected to be more open to change, while local elders were supposed to be more effective in mobilizing others to take part in these programs. The main rationale was to impart the new methods

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<sup>115</sup> 'Van de dong bao son cuoc', p 183.

of cultivation to these members of highlander communities so that they could in turn help to convince others, and avoid a head-on clash of cultural beliefs between local practices and government programs. Critics may point out Le Van Buong's (director of *Dinh Dien Thuong* program in Binh Tuy) alarming ignorance of highlanders' cultural beliefs, especially for someone who was in charge of highlander programs.<sup>116</sup> Le Van Buong's recruitment practices were questionable. But according to John Montgomery's case study, Buong and his staff nonetheless made the effort to take into account the highlanders' cultural beliefs (superstitions) when trying to persuade the advantages of alternative agricultural methods.<sup>117</sup>

During early resettlement operations, new villages were constructed by the provincial authorities according to a government-determined design of houses, usually in 'Kinh style' with walls flush to the ground. In December 1957, the President's Office directed the provinces that highlanders should be allowed to construct their own houses during resettlement. This was because, according to their customary practices, they preferred to build their own houses rather than follow a general model built by outsiders and in this case designed by the state.<sup>118</sup> This perhaps explains why houses in some *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* villages were constructed with walls flush to the ground, while others stood on pilings similar to traditional practices of some groups (see Figure 6.1). It is debatable if this particular program to remold residential practices (walls flush to the ground, etc.) was meant to make the highlanders become more 'Kinh'. The main objective of the 'Model Village' program was to provide highlanders with the benefits of better hygiene practices and modern amenities. If we have to insist this was a form of assimilation, then we have to accept that most Kinh people in present-day contexts would have ditched their 'Kinhness' when they built their houses in different styles. And when the present day Vietnamese government began building high-rise flats in the suburban areas of the major cities (known as *Do Thi Moi*, meaning 'new city'), is it then trying to 'de-Kinh' the Kinh people?

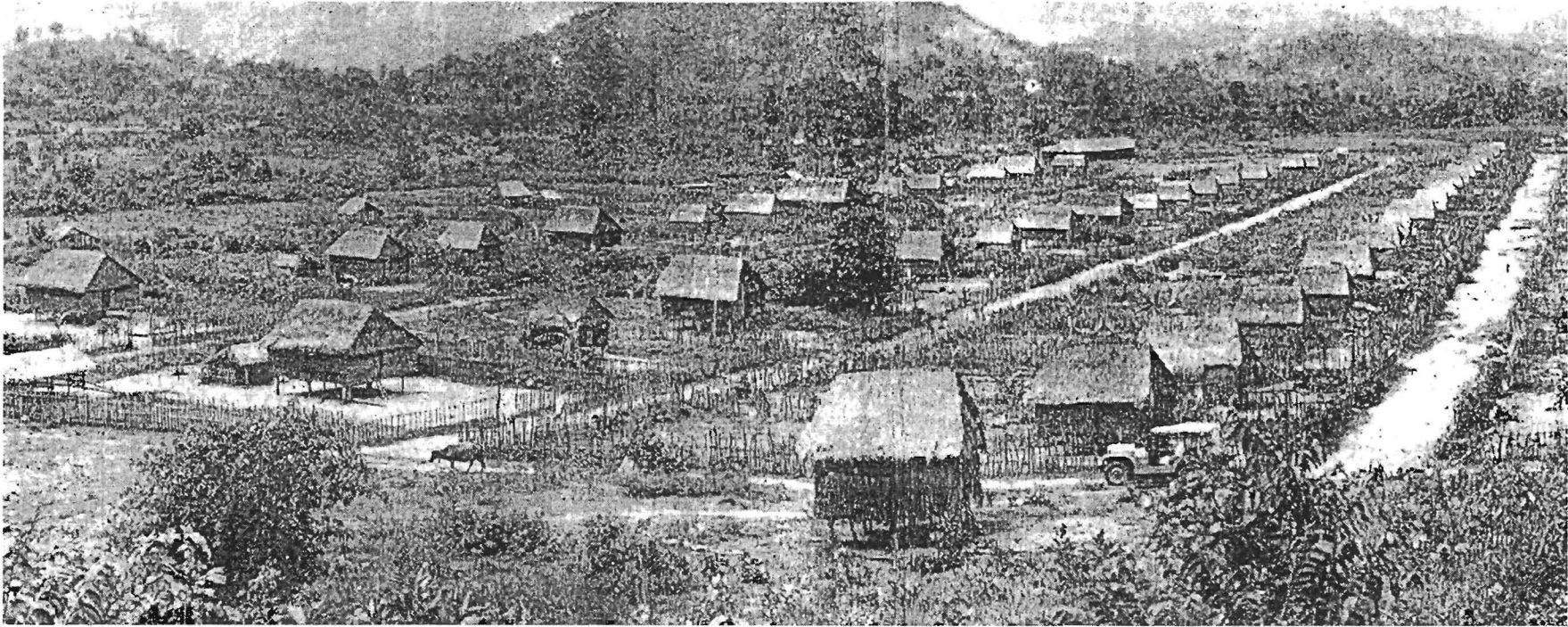
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<sup>116</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 188.

<sup>117</sup> *Cases In Vietnamese Administration*, p 165.

<sup>118</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10858.

Figure 6.1 Illustration Of Model Villages.



Source: *Cong cuoc Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*, centerfold pullout with no page number.

The point is, we should take note that 'Kinh ways' were also subjected to on-going adaptations in the highlands, as seen in the experiences of Kinh settlers in the *Dinh Dien* program. Despite bringing much of Kinh civilization with them, their everyday living and in particular, practices of agriculture, were slowly adapting to the environment of the highlands. Besides, the drive towards agricultural modernization and commercialization, such as adoption of chemical fertilizers, new seed types, specialized commercial crop farming, aid of mechanical tools, and introduction of new crop types, were also new to the Kinh farmers. In certain cases – for example, cultivating coffee, tea or rubber – these crop types were more familiar to some highlanders than to most Kinh!

### Quick Fixes for the Short Term

The programs did not always translate as well on the ground despite repeated modification of the programs. Quite frequent, officials tended to adopt quick fixes for the short term to show to superiors the policies were well carried out. When the government programs proved unpopular or were poorly carried out, highlanders responded. Avoidance and even simply 'voting with their feet', were some of the less drastic forms of resistance towards the programs. When Quang Duc province first implemented its sedentarization programs in Bich Khe and Buon Tah in 1959, highlanders recruited for the program helped to construct the houses on the selected sites. The highlanders, however, refused to move in permanently. They only turned up on selected days when the local authorities went around to distribute the program subsidies, such as rice, salt and other foodstuff, or building materials. After that, the centers were deserted. The highlanders there were not ready to adopt the agricultural methods introduced. In addition, the surrounding land area meant for cultivation was not plowed until much later.<sup>119</sup> In other cases, after moving into the centers, the highlanders gradually deserted because the centers were poorly managed and the new living conditions failed to live up to what officials had promised when recruiting the highlanders. For example, 181 Koho were reported to have deserted Bac Ruong, a *Dinh Dien Thuong* in Binh Tuy, and sought refuge in Lam Dong in late 1958. They complained of poor living conditions and the center requiring too much work, in terms

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<sup>119</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12680.

of clearing the land and construction of houses and roads. The 181 Koho were not forced to return to Binh Tuy, but were allowed to join resettlement program in Bao Loc nearer to their original villages.<sup>120</sup>

Another common way out for highlanders in the face of sedentarization programs that were 'enforced' by the local authorities was simply to flee into the forests.<sup>121</sup> For example, highlanders from the villagers of Chom and Ca Bong, of Van Canh district in Binh Thuan, fled into the forested hills to avoid the resettlement program of Binh Thuan province in January 1959. The highlanders were 'intercepted' by the local authorities and later agreed to return to their villages.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps one of the most innovative tactics that highlanders used to avoid sedentarization campaigns operated by a particular province or district was to quickly move into in a neighboring province or district where the programs were less ambitious or had better reputation. Upon crossing the 'border', the highlanders quickly met up with local authorities to seek permission to be placed under their charge, or claimed that they were previously from this side of the district or provincial boundary.<sup>123</sup> At times, when this tactic seemingly failed, the highlanders even threatened to adopt drastic measures to avoid joining the programs.

On 20 June 1960, the villagers of Cro'lao Da Srang and Cro'lao Da Kop wrote to Bui Van Luong to seek his intervention to prevent them from being placed under the administration of Binh Tuy province and regrouped into the *Dinh Dien Thuong* program of that province. The villagers stated that they were more familiar with the people, territory and administration of Lam Dong, and had relatives in the villages of Rhang Pot, Kondrum, Pung Ko'ho and Con Cha, which were all under Tan Lu commune of Lam Dong province. As such, the villagers of Cro'lao Da Srang and Cro'lao Da Kop would rather join the Tan Rai *Dinh Dien* program in Lam Dong.<sup>124</sup> The letter ended by stating that should the authorities from Binh Tuy come forcing (*ep buoc*) them to join

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<sup>120</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13504.

<sup>121</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13504.

<sup>122</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13504.

<sup>123</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13504. This folder contains reports of several cases where highlanders resettled in neighboring provinces to 'escape' from the unpopular sedentarization programs being carried out in their own province.

<sup>124</sup> Note that there was no '*Dinh Dien Thuong*' program in Lam Dong. Tan Rai was actually a model village established in 1959 and the provincial government had constructed an irrigation system in the area to expand wet-rice cultivation in the surroundings of Tan Rai model village.

the province and regroup in the *Dinh Dien Thuong* centers, they would all commit suicide (*tu tu*).<sup>125</sup> The villagers had in fact sent another letter, dated 10 May 1960, to the President to seek his intervention on the same issue, although they did not threaten there the drastic actions of mass suicide.<sup>126</sup>

Both letters were originally written in Latinized highlander language (Koho) complete with the thumbprints of all the villagers. The first letter (10 May 1960), however, only reached the President's Office in the first week of June. According to the stamp on the letter, it was only translated on 31 May 1960 and, for some strange reasons, by the police department in Darlac province. Cro'lao Da Srang and Cro'lao Da Kop were originally under the administration of Bao Loc district of Lam Dong. On 9 May 1959, the boundaries between Lam Dong and Binh Tuy were re-demarcated and the two villages were placed under the administration of Hoai Duc district of Binh Tuy. Lam Dong province reported that the villagers' ancestral gravesites were located on the side of Lam Dong province after the re-demarcation and the villagers were already familiar with their administration. The Government Delegate was sympathetic about their situation and felt there was no need to force them to be placed under Binh Tuy's administration. In the end, Bui Van Luong agreed to allow the two groups of highlanders to be placed under the administration of Tan Lu commune in Bao Loc and left them out of Binh Tuy's *Dinh Dien Thuong* program.<sup>127</sup>

In November 1960, a NCTXHMT report titled, '*Ke Hoach Thuong Van va An Ninh Vung Thuong*' (Plan For Highland Campaign and Security in the Highland Region), candidly reviewed the reasons for the failures of the highlander programs implemented to date. It considered the intentions and schematic planning of the various highlander programs as strengths in the state's highlander policies. Implementation of the programs, however, was often botched by undesirable practices within the bureaucracy and incapable cadres. According to the report,

... the ways of working in some localities are unfortunately still 'childish' (*au tri*), bureaucratic (*quan lieu*), [in the manner of which] 'office desk sits far from the people' (*ban giay xa cach dan chung*), focused on appearance, 'refused to

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<sup>125</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 2200.

<sup>126</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 2200.

<sup>127</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 2200.

face reality', hide things that are poor to make the report sounds good - for example, hiding the fact about highlander compatriots abandoning the centers or quickly replacing the numbers with other highlander compatriots from elsewhere in order to report to the superiors that the highlanders have all regrouped - ... a few officials even took advantage of the trust of the superiors, and naïvete and sincerity of highlander compatriots, to 'contrive up some scheme' (*to chuc xoay so*) or to 'seize the opportunity to exploit' (*dau co boc lot*) [the people] in order to enrich themselves .<sup>128</sup>

The report added that some officials tended to adopt 'harsh' measures when recruiting the highlanders into the programs, while others tend to be more tactful. It emphasized that the Viet Cong had intensified their activities among the highlanders since early 1960. The poor implementation of what were already politically sensitive programs among the highlanders, which could win over or completely lose their support, must be addressed.

In a follow-up proposal to 'pacify' and construct the highland region, titled '*Ke Hoach Binh Dinh va Xay Dung Mien Thuong*' (Plan for Pacification and Construction of the Highland Region), which was submitted to the President in early 1961, NCTXHMT revealed further problems with earlier implementation and administration of the government's highlander programs. The report admitted that due to unfamiliarity and lack of understanding with local cultures, languages and life styles, government and military officials, and even *Dinh Dien* settlers, had often acted in ways that brought about disaffection among the highlanders. It singled the way sedentarization and resettlement programs were carried out. Sedentarization and resettlement of highlanders were expected to cause drastic disruption to the traditional cultures and customs of the highlanders. Thus, the programs specifically stipulated three phases of implementation, namely 'preparation', 'clearance-construction', and 'movement'. Many local authorities, however, forced the highlanders to regroup during military maneuvers or made false promises in order to lure the highlanders to voluntarily regroup. In general, the local authorities either expediently 'skipped' the phases of implementation or 'under-implemented' each phase (Quang Duc's total implementation period of only six months comes to mind). Thus, when in the initial stages of resettlement the new fields

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<sup>128</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17328.

failed to yield the expected harvest promised, the highlanders lost faith in the program, of which they were probably skeptical of in the first place.<sup>129</sup>

Just before the fall of the First Republic, NCTXHMT submitted another report in 1963, entitled '*Du An Thanh Lap Cac To Chuc Cai Tien Dan Sinh Thuong*' (Project For Establishing Organizations to Improve the Highlander Living Conditions). This time, the NCTXHMT went as far as stating that one major reason behind past failures in the government's highlander programs was due to the 'superiority attitude' (*thai do ke ca*) among Kinh people, both officials and settlers, when interacting with the highlanders. Kinh people often behaved with a superior attitude towards the highlanders. On the part of the settlers, this attitude had contributed to division between Kinh and highlanders, allowing the communist agents to mobilize the highlanders to either join the communist or be ambivalent, if not resistant, towards the First Republic's programs. On the part of the officials, this had contributed to adoption of inappropriate measures when implementing the programs, such as simply enforcing sedentarization or resettlement rather than try to persuade the highlanders about the advantages of the programs.<sup>130</sup>

Besides making continual modifications to the highlander programs, government agencies were also constantly reviewing the actual process of implementation. Undeniably, implementation was much weaker than formulation (and modification) of the programs. This, however, does not mean that instead of successfully integrating the highlanders, state formation in the years between 1955 and 1961 only 'succeeded' in creating an opposing ethno-nationalist movement among the highlanders. Some of the programs implemented did go according to plan. And as I will show below, some of the intended effects did come about in the late 1960s.

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<sup>129</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 17582. The proposal suggested that the state must immediately address the cadre problem in the highlands. More highlander cadres must be trained to serve in the highlands. Kinh cadres must be much better prepared for working in the highlands environment and stop sending ill-disciplined or poor cadres to the region. Finally, the proposal suggested that a special commissariat, the *Phu Dac Uy Thuong Du Vu* (Special Commission For Highland Affairs), must be established in place of the NCTXHMT, to research, design and implement programs for call highlanders.

<sup>130</sup> 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (II)', pp 40-5; *Hoi dong cac sac toc: Mot tan dinh che dan chu cua De II Cong Hoa Viet Nam*, pp 85-6.



## In The Long Run

The agrarian programs introduced, besides expanding the reach of the state, also sought to bring about fundamental adaptations in the agricultural practices of the highlanders. In essence, these programs aimed at replacing extensive agriculture practiced by most highlanders with intensive agriculture that utilized modern agricultural inputs (such as tools, plow-animals, organic and chemical fertilization, new seed types and mechanical aid), and gradual diversification of subsistence farming into cash crop production. Early deliberations over the direction of agrarian programs for the highlanders noted it would take a long period to actually see any positive results. Ironically, it is through Gerald Hickey, who is so critical of the First Republic's policies that we come to know about a number of adaptations made by the highlanders in the late 1960s. Many of these adaptations were exactly the kind promoted by the policies under the First Republic.

Some highlanders were already exposed to commercial cash crop farming when the French began establishing plantations specializing in coffee, tea, rubber, etc. from the 1920s onwards. Some highlanders began planting coffee or other cash crops during the colonial period, others began shifting to cash crop farming in the late 1950s. Y Ju Nie Kdam, a Rhade farmer began planting coffee in 1957 after working in the Roussi coffee estate for 22 years.<sup>131</sup> Y Sok Eban of Buon Kmrong-Prong, one the first Rhade civil servants in French colonial government, also picked up coffee farming in the 1950s. Hickey records some 326 registered highlander coffee planters in Darlac during the late 1960s. Their estates total 531 hectares.<sup>132</sup> Expansion into industrial cash crop farming was also actively encouraged during the First Republic through the Pilot Garden and Model Village programs. At the same time, resettlement and sedentarization programs such as *Dinh Dien Thuong* and *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*, also actively guided and encouraged the production of cash crops whenever the soil conditions were suitable for such endeavors.

Another major aspect of the First Republic's agrarian programs was to gradually introduce the use of modern inputs for agriculture. Besides the agrarian programs

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<sup>131</sup> *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders*, p 38.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p 11.

designed for highlanders, the government also actively established agricultural centers such as Eakmat Center in Ban Me Thuot and the National School of Agriculture, Forestry, and Animal Husbandry in Blao (later known as Bao Loc) to bring in modern agricultural methods to the region. In addition, the various agrarian programs also developed agricultural nurseries to make available new seed types and crop types to the farmers in the highlands.

Hickey reports a particular Y Yong Nie Ktuol, who expanded into coffee farming while planting dry rice in his swidden plot. Y Yong later also expanded into wet-rice farming with 'American' rice seeds, and later experimented with IR-5 and IR-8 rice varieties, purchased from Eakmat Center. He purchased a type of chemical fertilizer called 'Amophosko' for use in his wet-rice field. When Hickey interviewed him, he even planned to buy a Kobota Rotiller, which had become a rather common practice among young Rhade farmers in the 1960s.<sup>133</sup> Another Rhade farmer, Y Ngung Knuol, who also planted coffee, had established a rice milling enterprise for which the bran collected was sold to Vietnamese farmers in the neighboring settlement of Kim Chau.<sup>134</sup> Kim Chau, if we remember, was one of the earlier northern refugee settlements in Darlac. Highlanders in the vicinity were then protesting against the clearance of the forest for this settlement back in 1956. Yet, in the 1960s, such inter-connected economic relations were already established between the Kinh and Thuong.

Hickey also notes that highlander farmers were gradually adopting the farming methods used by the Vietnamese settlers. He notes that the Chrau people in Xuan Loc of Long Khanh province practiced wet-rice farming with methods borrowed from Vietnamese living in the vicinity.<sup>135</sup> According to Hickey, the Sedang in Kon Horing saw the higher yields in the wet-rice fields of Vietnamese settlers who came in 1957. They were impressed by the yields and gradually adopted wet-rice farming. When the war intensified, their swidden area contracted and they turned to wet-rice farming in secure areas.<sup>136</sup> In Buon Ki, villagers also picked up the Vietnamese practice of constructing chicken coops and pigsties for animal husbandry.<sup>137</sup> Hickey also recalls

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, pp 39-40.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p 40-1.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p 36.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p 44.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p 42.

how in 1962, Touneh Ton, Deputy Chief of Canton in Dran, tried the Vietnamese system of transplanting and chemical fertilization for wet-rice cultivation. He succeeded and others in the village began to follow his example.<sup>138</sup> The First Republic had hoped that resettling Vietnamese in the highlands could help bring about some influences to the highlanders in terms of agricultural practices. The programs also targeted youths or influential highlanders such as Touneh Ton, to adopt the new methods in the hope that they would set an example for others to follow.

In the realm of swidden cultivation, Hickey records that some highlanders were beginning to experiment with new methods, too. Mr. Katouilly Plowatt, a Rhade who worked for a long time at the *Nha Canh Nong Tinh Darlac* (Bureau for Agriculture in Darlac Province), found a method for extended cultivation of swidden plots, which was made possible by a combination of plot-rotation, fertilization and planting of cover crops to provide mulching.<sup>139</sup> At the same time, Hickey also reports that highlanders were adopting new seed types purchased from Eakmat Center for use in their swidden fields.<sup>140</sup> Extended farming on fixed 'swidden plots' through fertilization and rotational farming were in fact some of the earliest measures introduced to sedentarize the highland swiddeners during the First Republic. This was the method practiced by some highlanders in Kontum, which were called 'o' fields by the locals. Even the *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* program incorporated this practice as one of the possible means to sedentarize the highlanders.

In his 1971 report, Hickey recommends finding means to improve cultivation methods among the highlanders to gradually help them diversify into or expand existing cash crop farming.<sup>141</sup> He also recommends developing a system of agricultural credit for the highlanders already engaged in more advanced farming or non-farming economic activities.<sup>142</sup> The former could be done through 'demonstration plots' in the villages so that the villagers could see how the new methods were employed in a familiar setting.<sup>143</sup> The same measures were adopted in the agrarian programs deployed in the highlands during the First Republic. Hickey recognizes that some of the adaptations were due to

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p 50.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, pp 42-3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p 43.

<sup>141</sup> This would be quite futile in the early 1970s because of the worsening war conditions.

<sup>142</sup> *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders*, p 3.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p 15.

influences from Kinh settlers who came with the *Dinh Dien* program. Under the First Republic, some *Dinh Dien* were indeed established in proximity to highlander villages; some of the highlander villages were resettled near Kinh settlements; and some villages were incorporated into the activities of the *Dinh Dien* program. All these were done in the hope that highlanders could see for themselves the methods employed and the results achieved by the methods the government was trying to introduce.

Much of the adaptations discussed above were in fact the targeted changes that the programs discussed earlier sought to achieve. Officials had recognized that these changes could only be achieved after a long period of implementation. Somehow, when implemented under the First Republic, these programs were interpreted as ‘assimilating’ the highlanders. But after the fall of the First Republic, and when the highlanders themselves took on such changes (which was, again, the intention of the programs), these were endorsed as ‘innovative adaptations’. Not all highlanders, at the end of day, opposed ‘sedentarization’. Yet, this is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the literature. Touneh Han Tho actually complements one such sedentarization center (*dia diem dinh canh dinh cu*) in Tuyen Duc province that went by the name Dame-Dampao. He notes that the Cill people in this center had learnt how to practice wet-rice cultivation with modern inputs and were well integrated with the market economy. Thanks to this center, he continues, the Cill people there ‘could live well-provided’.<sup>144</sup> I do not venture to suggest the ‘adaptations’ and ‘changes’ that occurred among some highlanders during the 1960s were essentially due to the ‘seeds of change’ planted during the First Republic. It is, however, fair to say that the nature of these programs was much less assimilating than so far concluded in existing literature.

## CONCLUSION

In October 1960, Viet Cong units launched a series of attacks on the South Vietnamese military outposts at the Laos border area in Kontum and a major attack on

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<sup>144</sup> Touneh Han Tho, ‘Quan niem ve so huu dat dai va thuc trang sinh ke cua cac sac dan Thuong’ [Conceptions Of Land Ownership and Living Situations of Highlander Ethnic Groups] in *Dong bao cac sac toc thieu so Viet Nam*, p 201.

Tra Bong in Quang Ngai.<sup>145</sup> Hickey reports that it was no longer safe to travel on the roads in the highlands as Viet Cong began launching frequent attacks and laid ambushes. Offensives and counter-actions launched by both sides led to an increasing number of highlanders seeking refuge from the fighting. Then in 1961, thousands of highlanders in Kontum began fleeing their villages and sought refuge in safer places or by the main roads. As the numbers of highlander refugees began to rapidly increase, the government began setting up highlander refugee resettlement centers.<sup>146</sup> In August 1961, the NCTXHMT began a project to resettle highlanders on strategic routes to preempt attacks by communist forces.<sup>147</sup> In mid-1961, the Americans had officially entered the insurgency theatre with the Village Defense and Mountain Scout programs.<sup>148</sup> In late 1961, all *Dinh Dien* (Kinh and Thuong) and sedentarization centers (*Dia Diem Dinh Canh Dinh Cu*) were in the process of being converted into Strategic Hamlets or Combat Hamlets.<sup>149</sup> The focus on agrarian change to achieve the political and strategic objectives during relatively peaceful years of 1955-60 had by 1961, given way to the priority of strategic deployment for counter-insurgency warfare. About 370,000 highlanders were variously resettled through either the Strategic Hamlet or highlander refugee resettlement programs in the years between 1961 and 1963. These were the results of policies driven by strategic reasons.

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Existing literature posits that the First Republic's resettlement programs, both of Kinh in the highlands and the highlanders themselves, spearheaded the government's drive to assimilate the highlanders. This was motivated by strategic and political concerns above all else. I showed that the 'Highlander Resettlement Plan' (the term

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<sup>145</sup> For details on the uprising in Tra Bong, consult Pham Thanh Bien & Nguyen Huu Nghia (eds.), *Cuoc khoi nghia Tra Bong va mien Tay Quang Ngai* [The Uprisings In Tra Bong And Western Quang Ngai], Ha Noi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1975.

<sup>146</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 69-71.

<sup>147</sup> 'Luoc qua cac du an xay dung son thon xua va nay (II)'.

<sup>148</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 73-89; see also, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, pp 194-203.

<sup>149</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 73-89. For details about the Strategic Hamlets program, see, John Donnell & Gerald Hickey, *The Vietnamese Strategic Hamlets: A Preliminary Report*, Santa Monica: RAND, 1962; Nha Tong Giam Doc Thanh Nien, *Quoc Sach Ap Chien Luoc* [The National Policy Of Strategic Hamlets], Viet Nam Cong Hoa: Nha Tong Giam Toc Thanh Nien, 1963; Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude To America's War In Vietnam*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002; Milton Osborne, *Strategic Hamlets In South Vietnam: A Survey And A Comparison*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1965.

used by Hickey) was in fact a multi-approach 'grand scheme' to gradually remold the agrarian world of the highlanders. No doubt this 'grand scheme' sought to make the frontier 'legible' to facilitate state control. The process, however, was at the same time replete with instances of middle ground practices, where state forms met local social and physical forms. This 'grand scheme' underwent several modifications in the hope of better reception by the highlanders and gradually developed into an eclectic formula for state formation. From a simple sedentarization formula, it finally came to be composed of resettlement, sedentarization, rotationally farmed swidden fields, regulated swidden plots and model villages of several varieties. Advocating the adoption of advanced methods of agricultural practice, often involving fixed field farming, and new residential forms were often made in reference with the ways practiced by the Kinh people. But these practices were not cultural prerogatives of the Kinh. Even for the Kinh, many of such practices, for example, the style of houses being built and farming methods such as use of new seed varieties, modern tools and chemical fertilizers, were recent adaptations. It is highly debatable to suggest that policies implemented for the highlanders began with an aim to make them more 'Kinh'. What I presented above showed that these policies, when implemented, gradually took into account the practices of the highlanders and ended up with more hybrid forms. State formation on the frontier was no 'black or white' phenomenon where the expanding state, like a black ink spot on sheet of white paper, gradually blackens the edges. Instead, there were discolorations as the formula content of the ink underwent mutations. There was a bit too much ambiguity in the process for it to be simply labeled as assimilation.

# *'Practices on the Middle Ground'*

## LAND

### CHAPTER 7

#### 'CINNAMON FOREST'

Lieutenant Nguyen Minh could not miss the reported tract of 'cinnamon forest' about which he was tasked to collect data. He had the coordinates for the location and of course, the fragrance of the cinnamon trees to guide him. Earlier in July 1958, a squad of Civil Guards (*Bao An*) from Kontum province had reported about the chance discovery of the cinnamon forest near the highlander villages of Gongal, Dak Saba, Roro and Kodo in the northeastern end of Kontum province. The central government wanted to know who cultivated these cinnamon trees and what could be done about it. Nguyen Minh was tasked to conduct the mission with a squad of Civil Guards on 27 July 1958 and reported back to the province on 16 August 1958.

Highlanders from the villages in the vicinity planted these cinnamon trees. Nguyen Minh reported there was a total of 1,597 trees in the area, with 884 trees ready for 'harvest'. The cinnamon trees, however, were planted in a fashion typical of swidden agriculturalists and were spread out across the forested area rather than concentrated in a particular plot.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the trees were planted in the period before 1946. Thus, most of the trees were at least 15 years old but some were as old as 100 years. There were also saplings that had been planted in the previous few years. According to the locals, the cinnamon bark was traded to *Kinh lai buon* (itinerant traders) in the Quang Nam region during the French colonial period. These *Kinh* traders came to the villages to buy or exchange the cinnamon for clothes, blankets or foodstuff with

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<sup>1</sup> I discussed practices of swidden agriculture systems by Central Highlanders in Chapter Two. For details, consult Jonathan Spencer, *Shifting Cultivation In Southeast Asia*, Los Angeles: University of California Publications, 1966; Harold Conklin, *Hanunbo Agriculture: A Report On An Integral System Of Shifting Agriculture In The Philippines*, Rome: FAO, 1957; George Linwood, *An Analysis of Swidden Cultures In Southeast Asia*, Minneapolis, 1970; Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten The Forest: The Story Of A Montagnard Village In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Translated by Adrian Foulke. Original publication, 1957.

the highlanders. The highlanders, however, did not peel off the cinnamon barks themselves due to local beliefs. The Kinh traders 'harvested' the cinnamon themselves. When the First Indochina War broke out, trading subsided. The highlanders told Nguyen Minh they were willing to trade with the government for food, blankets and clothes, and that they had to survive on cassava, corn and bananas for up to four months in a year due to shortage of rice.

On 16 October 1958, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, Minister for the Economy, wrote to Pham Nhu Phien, Government Delegate for the Central Highlands, about this issue. Tho wrote that the government considered the trees as 'privately owned' (*tu huu*) by the villagers. Phien was tasked to organize periodic markets (*cho phien*) as near as possible to the highlander villages to facilitate the revival of cinnamon trading for these villagers. I discussed, in Chapter Four, the particular program of organizing markets for the highlanders during the First Republic. In this program, the markets were usually organized on a scheduled periodic basis at fixed locations. Prices for sale items were marked according to market rate and clearly indicated. Government officials were also stationed at the markets to ensure that the highlanders were not cheated of their money by traders because of unfamiliarity with paper money. In addition, the organized markets also helped the government to control potential flow of goods and needed supplies to communist insurgents based in the highlands. Nguyen Ngoc Tho reasoned that this course of action could help to improve the livelihoods of the highlanders, develop the cinnamon trade for export, and facilitate the government's effort to organize social relief programs for the highlanders.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11723.



## INTRODUCTION

The above story is relevant for our discussion about the management of the 'land question' during the process of state formation in the Central Highlands under the First Republic. To aid my discussion on this topic, I find Benedict Kerkvliet's usage of the concept of 'land regime' helpful. He says a land regime constitutes of questions about 'contending values of how land should be governed, who may use it, do what with it and with what rights and obligations'.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Two, I discussed how state formation in the Central Highlands frontier is often portrayed as imposition of an externally defined land regime that is based on documented cadastral register (*dia ba*), land-use certificates (known as 'little red books' or '*so do*' by farmers after the Doi Moi reforms), government determined legal regulations (*luat phap*), and private ownership of property (*tai san tu huu*) or ownership of the primary means of production (*phuong tien san xuat*), over the traditional land regimes practiced by individual communities, that were in contrast based on the diverse and rich oral traditions of customary laws (*luat toc phap*), harmonic relations in the cosmology of nature-humans-supernatural, and communal responsibilities over the use of the forested land.

State formation on the Central Highlands frontier during the First Republic was most severely criticized for the way the 'land question' was managed. Existing literature tells us that besides plots of land under active cultivation by the highlanders, the government considered all other land to be 'no man's land' and was therefore categorized as public land, which means that swiddens under fallow and the traditional forested gardens such as the above cinnamon forest were considered as public land. As a result, *Dinh Dien* was implemented without regard for highlanders' claims to the land and highlanders' lands were appropriated to resettle Kinh people from the lowlands. The resettlement-sedentarization of highlanders themselves was implemented without regard for the drastic disturbance to their traditional agricultural systems and land regimes. The opening of the frontier also led to increase in incidences of land grabbing by the Kinh people, adding further grievances among the highlanders.<sup>4</sup> Most concrete of

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict Kerkvliet, *Land Struggles And Land Regimes In The Philippines And Vietnam During The Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam: CASA, 1997, p 2.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Preliminary Research Report On The High Plateau (PMS)*, Saigon: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1957, p 1; Gerald Hickey, *The Highland People Of South Vietnam: Social And Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1967, p 75; Gerald Hickey,

all evidences, current literature informs us, was the legal denial of highlanders' claims to rights of land ownership through three notorious 'decrees', namely Official Letter (*Cong Van*) 3169-BDT/VP, Decree (*Du*) 513-a/DT/CCDD and Circular (*Thong Tu*) 981-BT/DC, under Ngo Dinh Diem's government.<sup>5</sup> The first two 'decrees' supposedly prohibited highlanders from selling their land, while the third 'decree' was actually an official circular that stated highlanders only possessed user rights to the land but not ownership rights. The imposition of the government defined land regime simply meant washing out the highlanders' claims to rights of landownership according to their traditions and customs.

The 'cinnamon forest' story suggests that this government defined land regime was sometimes practiced with a certain degree of ambiguity that did not, in absolute terms, deny highlanders' claims to rights of landownership according to their traditions and customs. Officials, in the case of the above story, did not take for granted that because the cinnamon forest was situated in seemingly wild forest, belonged to nobody. Instead, a survey mission was sent to determine who planted the trees. The government proposed (since I am not sure if the authorities managed to actually do so) to organize a periodic market (*cho phien*) to help the highlanders trade the cinnamon barks. This suggests that there seems to be *de facto* recognition by the government of highlanders' rightful claims to land besides plots under active cultivation (*swidden*). There was, however, no unequivocal *de jure* recognition of the highlanders' claims to land rights according to their traditional land regime. I suggest in this chapter that contention between the two forms of land regime, one defined by the government and the other by highlander communities, was less conflictual than previously believed. There was

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*Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders In Economic Development*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1971, p 57; Nancy Dorcas Volk, 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World: A Montagnard Resettlement Area In Southern Vietnam', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Washington, Washington, 1979, pp 116-121; Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp 190-1; Anonymous, *The Montagnards Of South Vietnam*, London: Minority Rights Group, 1974, p 9.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethno-history of Vietnam's Central Highlands, 1954-76*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, p 59; *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders In Economic Development*, p 56; *The Montagnards Of South Vietnam*, p 10; 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World', pp 117-8; Cuu Long Giang & Toan Anh, *Cao Nguyen Mien Thuong* (High Plateau of The Highland Region), Saigon: Viet Nam Chi Luoc, 1974, p143; Nguyen Van Can, 'Van de kien dien dat dai canh tac cho dong bao Thuong' [The Issue Of Establishing Cultivation Land For Highlander Compatriots], *Tap San Thuong Vu* [Highland Affairs Periodical] (1), p 40, 1966; Y Khap Nie, 'Vai tro quan trong cua dong bao Thuong trong cong cuoc chong Cong San xam lang tai Cao Nguyen' [The Important Role Of Highlander Compatriots In The Task Of Countering Communist Invasion In The Highlands], *Tap San Thuong Vu* (1), pp 57-60, 1966.

instead a grey area littered with middle ground practices, where state form met local forms, which at times created hybrid practices on the frontier.

## THE LAND QUESTION DURING FRONTIER FORMATION

When the First Republic's government began resettling northern refugees in the Central Highlands, it had already encountered protests and resistance by the highlanders. In late 1956, highlanders living in the vicinities of the resettlement centers of Kim Chau and Kim Phat in Darlac province and Pleipiom in Pleiku had protested against the clearance of the forests by the settlers.<sup>6</sup> In other instances, highlanders blocked the paths of bulldozers to prevent construction workers from clearing the land. Even as late as mid-1959, such objections continued against the *Dinh Dien* projects, for example in Le Ngoc II of Pleiku.<sup>7</sup> Other times, highlanders adopted the strategy of quickly expanding cultivation on fallow fields in order to lay claim to these lands to deter the *Dinh Dien* projects from being established. This was reported to have taken place in Dak Psi *Dinh Dien* center in mid-1958.<sup>8</sup> Analyses made after the fall of the First Republic argue that this fundamental conflict over the land question between government organized frontier formation and local inhabitants' claims, was one of the main reasons behind the formation of Bajaraka.<sup>9</sup> Anyhow, the Bajaraka leaders were able to use such incidents to recruit followers and mobilize more highlanders to participate in the protest demonstrations of September 1958. In a police statement from one of the Bajaraka members, he recalled what a particular Nur Y Jur said about *Dinh Dien*,

when the government established *Dinh Dien*, they already took away land from the highlanders. *Dinh Dien*, they have earth-rollers and tractors, if they want to establish *Dinh Dien* then [they should] go elsewhere. Here in the forest, the

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<sup>6</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10853.

<sup>7</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12680.

<sup>8</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11769.

<sup>9</sup> Bajaraka is the acronym for the Highlander movement for political autonomy that emerged in 1958. The word Bajaraka represents the four major tribal highlander groups, Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade and Koho. See Chapter Two of this thesis. For further details on Bajaraka, see Nguyen Trac Di, *Tim hieu phong trao tranh dau FULRO (1958-69)* [Understanding The Political Struggle Movement of FULRO (1958-69)], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1969; *Free In The Forest*, p 47-60; Norman Charles Labrie, 'Fulro: The History Of Political Tension In The South Vietnamese Highlands', Master Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1971, pp 56-71.

highlanders have houses and are living here, yet they come and plow the land without asking the permission of the highlanders and therefore the highlanders have to go hungry. Places that are affected by *Dinh Dien* as such are dissatisfied because that is a form of exploitation! [sic]

19 August 1958<sup>10</sup>

For Hickey and other critics of the First Republic's highlands policy, the Bajaraka movement thus symbolizes the fundamental conflict between highlanders' land claims and frontier formation organized by the Vietnamese government under the First Republic.<sup>11</sup>

### **Appropriation Of Highlanders' Lands**

Scholars point out that Vietnamese officials and their American advisors considered most of the land in the Central Highlands - still thickly forested - was 'empty'.<sup>12</sup> They often emphasize this perception by citing Wolf Ladejinsky's comments on the highlands as nothing 'but wilderness inhabited by roaming nomads' and 'Bao Dai's private hunting reserve'.<sup>13</sup> Gerald Hickey, among others, is convinced that Vietnamese officials (American officials, as well) misunderstood the 'land tenure system' (which is the term Hickey use in his report for the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group) of the highlanders. Hickey reports the comment made by the province chief of Darlac during his field trip in April 1957,

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<sup>10</sup> Recollection by a member of the Movement for Highlander's Autonomy (*Phong Trao Doi Tu Tri Dong Bao Thuong*), also known as BAJARAKA movement, in the Pleiku province chapter's committee of what was said by a particular Nur Y Jur during a meeting on 15 August 1958. This was recorded in his statement to the police after he was arrested on 19 August 1958. Statement was recorded in '*tieng Thuong*' (Highlander language) but translated into Vietnamese by another Highlander civil servant. Translated into English from Vietnamese by author. PTTDeNhat, File no. 16731.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, *Free In The Forest; Tim hieu phong trao tranh dau FULRO (1958-69)*; 'Fulro: The History Of Political Tension In The South Vietnamese Highlands'; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam; The Montagnards Of South Vietnam*; 'Van de kien dien dat dai canh tac cho dong bao Thuong'; 'Vai tro quan trong cua dong bao Thuong trong cong cuoc chong Cong San xam lang tai Cao Nguyen'.

<sup>12</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 44; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 184.

<sup>13</sup> Wolf Ladejinsky, 'Agrarian Reform In The Republic Of Vietnam' in *Problems Of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* edited by Wesley Fishel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p 306.

... the highlanders believed that they owned all of the land and everything on it, and conflict ensued when Vietnamese sought to settle on the land or fish in some of the streams.<sup>14</sup>

John Montgomery reports that Le Van Buong, Chief of Province for Binh Tuy, described the highlanders' conception of land ownership as demarcated by 'one's view to the edge of the horizon' (*quan niem quyen so huu cho den tran troi*).<sup>15</sup> Frederic Wickert notes that in some instances the French had issued some crude land deeds to the 'tribes people' but the Vietnamese authorities did not recognize these as legal.<sup>16</sup>

I suggest that Hickey's use of the term 'land tenure system' to describe the traditional land regime of the highlanders is rather problematic. In Chapter Two, I show how most of the highlanders traditionally perceived land as part of their cosmology, being the abode of the spirits. They might have made certain custodial claims of the territory, but use of the earth for swiddening was always temporary in nature. They might exchange user rights with fellow villagers but they could never do so with outsiders. Traditional land regime practices among the highlanders bore no resemblance to the notion of owning or holding of land as a kind of property that might be termed 'land tenure system'.

These scholars also argue that the Vietnamese government, when implementing *Dinh Dien*, either never attempted to find a long-term solution to resolve potential land claims by the highlanders who possessed their own land regimes, or simply ignored it. Gerald Hickey notes that during the early beginnings of the resettlement of Kinh people in the highlands, American advisors had drawn attention to land rights issue. He cites a report from the USOM Agricultural Division, dated 22 January 1957, recommending that 'there should be a clear, just policy regarding Montagnard rights' because the 'Montagnard tribes by tradition have certain rights to the land...that such rights have never been formally defined and recorded'.<sup>17</sup> Hickey himself reports that 'land tenure systems' among individual highlander communities were well defined and generally

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<sup>14</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 35.

<sup>15</sup> John D. Montgomery, *Cases In Vietnam Administration – Truong Hop Hanh Chanh Viet Nam*, Saigon: Michigan State University Advisory Group, 1959, p 351.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic Wickert, 'The Tribesmen' in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years* edited by Richard Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959), p 134.

<sup>17</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 19.

acknowledged by neighboring highlander villages. He also points out that the highlanders' 'land tenure systems' only laid claim to parts of the highland region and the remainder were actually unclaimed.<sup>18</sup> He reports that recommendations of this type were both ignored by the Vietnamese government and American aid officials.

Frederic Wickert's commentary on the resettlement of Kinh people in the highlands is perhaps the most critical. He equates this influx of Vietnamese settlers to a 'Vietnamese invasion' of the highlands. He argues that this led to the dying out of the tribesmen, and describes his visit to 'dying villages' as a distressing sight.<sup>19</sup> Wickert sums up the highlanders' fear of losing their land to the Vietnamese and the government,

... the tribesmen consider the Vietnamese as a force that [will] lead to their eventual extermination. The Vietnamese are settling on their lands, with the best lands going first, and the tribesmen see themselves starved to death...".<sup>20</sup>

Bernard Fall also reports,

...using the refugees to 'Vietnamize' the highlands is another highly controversial measure...the aboriginal population complains bitterly about this 'intrusion' on its hunting grounds....<sup>21</sup>

Oscar Salemink argues that *Dinh Dien* settlers and northern refugees were resettled in the Central Highlands on lands, which the Montagnards considered were theirs. Salemink succinctly sums up the verdict when he writes,

Montagnard land claims were not recognized, and their lands were confiscated by the state to resettle migrants from the North and the coast.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Preliminary Research Report On The High Plateau (PMS)*, pp 2-4, cited from *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 244. See also, *The Highlanders Of South Vietnam*, pp 76-102.

<sup>19</sup> *The Tribesmen*, p 135.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Fall, 'Commentary On Wickert' in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, p 126.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p 94.

<sup>22</sup> *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 187.

Thus, existing analyses concur that the government of the First Republic simply appropriated lands for *Dinh Dien* and northern refugee settlements without regard for local highlanders' claims of the lands. These scholars tell us that the government, working on the basis that highlanders did not have documented records of land ownership, considered most of the land, apart from the actively cultivated plots, as national public land. The government therefore was free to occupy the land as needed.<sup>23</sup> According to the existing verdict, government organized frontier formation effectively deprived highlanders of land for traditional swidden territories that were usually clearly defined through their oral customary laws (*luat tục phap*). It also deprived highlanders of important non-swidden forested grounds, of which Hickey's reports were 'unclaimed', that traditionally provided highlander communities with important food and material resources besides their swidden plots.

### In Search Of 'Lush Land'

In early January 1957, which was during the early stage of planning for *Dinh Dien* in the highlands, Le Van Kim suggested that when the selected site (for resettlement) was located on land or swidden claimed by highlanders, the government should compensate them by providing them with another parcel of land that was already cleared for residence and agriculture. This way, he argued, the government could on the one hand help to raise the standard of living of the highlanders and on the other hand, 'execute the plan to clean out the rebels' (*thi hanh ke hoach vet dau loan*).<sup>24</sup> A press release by the government in mid-1958 reported a similar practice that was prescribed by Kim earlier,

the government always respects the ownership rights of everyone. With regards to highlanders' lands, although they do not have documents to validate ownership rights [but] if any *Dinh Dien* site is established on any part of their land, the government has already negotiated and exchanged with them another piece of land that was already cleared by tractors and flattened by land-rollers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Highlanders Of South Vietnam*, pp 76-102; *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam*, p 244.

<sup>24</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10853.

<sup>25</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 18560.

Hickey, however, reports of highlander leaders who complained that in many areas, such compensation never materialized.<sup>26</sup> He reports that according to Bui Van Luong, highlanders whose lands were expropriated by the government for *Dinh Dien* purposes received compensations in the form of a water buffalo or jar of rice alcohol.<sup>27</sup> Besides the solution suggested by Le Van Kim, I did not come across any archival documents that actually reported a different form of compensation to the highlanders for lands used for *Dinh Dien* projects. There were, however, monetary compensations made to highlanders who were affected by other projects, such as dam construction. But the government knew she had to adopt measures to prevent the volatile situation created by conflicts between her resettlement programs and the highlanders' land claims from boiling over.

### *From The Files About Surveys For Dinh Dien*

Vo Doan Minh, an agricultural technician with the *Phu Tong Uy Dinh Dien* (PTUDD), went up to Kontum on 2 October 1957. Ngo Dinh Diem had personally sent him to survey various sites that had been short-listed for establishing *Dinh Dien*. First upon his list was the site at Kon Horing, located about 40 kilometers away from Kontum city in the direction of the road leading towards Dak To.<sup>28</sup> He was also tasked to investigate three other sites, one at Kaijai; another at Pleijorap for a proposed military agricultural post for Civil Guards (*don dien bao an*); and the fourth at Vo Dinh, which was a highlander village, where the military command had proposed to construct a model village (*lang kieu mau*) for the highlanders.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Some Recommendations Affecting The Prospective Role Of Vietnamese Highlanders In Economic Development*, p 57.

<sup>27</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 44-45.

<sup>28</sup> Dak To was an area in Kontum that was fiercely contested between communist forces and the Americans/South Vietnam government. For an inside account of how the communist fought against the American and South Vietnamese forces, consult Ban Chap Hanh Dang Bo Tinh Kontum, *Lich su dang bo tinh Kontum: Tap II 1975-2000* [Party Committee History Of Gia Lai Province: Volume II 1975-2000], Da Nang: Nha Xuat Ban Da Nang, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Vo Dinh was a one of a kind 'model village' established by the Third Military Zone command. It was established on the site of a local highlander village, which had about 100 families living in it. The military command resettled 100 Kinh families and another 100 soldiers with their families on this site. The military command established all kinds of amenities, such as schools, market, wells, etc at this model village. See n.a., 'Cuoc kinh ly cua Tong Thong Cong Hoa tai Cao Nguyen Trung Phan' [The President Of The Republic's Visit At The Central Highlands], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (62), pp 6-7, 14-15 & 33, 1958, p 7.



Mr. Minh, together with a Lieutenant-Colonel Lac and the Chief of Province for Kontum, set off in the early morning of 3 October 1957 to study the proposed site at Kon Horing. He wrote in his report:

this area begins from the highlander village of Kon Horing, extending across Dak Pai bridge, then follows along Dak Poko river to the highlander village of Dak Pao Peng, with an area of about 1000 hectares; of which about 250 hectares are of alluvium soil-type along the banks of Dak Pai river and the left bank of Dak Poko river. The remaining area is located on higher ground of reddish or white sandy soil-type that is not very good, but still can be use as 'swidden' like the local highlanders are doing...*On the alluvial land along the river there are many swiddens belonging to the highlanders, about 30-40 hectares, if we set up any farms here we must leave to the highlanders all the swiddens that they currently possess, we still have a remaining land area of about 200 hectares for the farms (according to Chief of Province) [my emphasis].* We went to take a look at the swiddens of these two areas and observed that the rice and corn planted grew very well...<sup>30</sup>

At first glance, the standard checklist for a typical *Dinh Dien* survey trip by the agricultural technicians appears to focus more about the practical aspects of whether the selected site was suitable for establishing an agricultural community. The checklist reminded the surveyors to take note of details pertaining to:

- 1) Age of existing forest on selected site
- 1) Existing types of vegetation
- 1) Access to water sources, especially during dry season
- 1) Suitability of soil types for wet-rice or industrial crops
- 1) Accessibility of site
- 1) Obstacles to irrigation if site is for wet-rice cultivation
- 1) Requirements for special technical assistance if land is to be put into cultivation
- 1) Population (tribe (*bo lac*) and number of people) and state of land use on existing selected site<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

<sup>31</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855. See also, Nha Ky Thuat, 'Nhưng địa điểm đã được lựa chọn để khai thác tại vùng Banmethuot và Pleiku trong một cuộc tìm đất của phái đoàn chuyên môn nhà kỹ thuật' [The

In an article detailing the process of survey for the first *Dinh Dien* of Darlac province, situated at Buon Kroat, the survey report for the site included the following segments,

**Existing Villages and Population:** The location have four villages, Buon Y Diou, Buon Kroat, Buon Chuon Dang, Buon Kmrang Prong and two hamlets, Buon Kroat Yda and Buon Kroat Mdranch. Population is about 2,185 people and there are about 440 adult males who can be hired for labor (the women are unwilling to work as laborers).

**Existing Land Area brought under cultivation:** *The estimated number of highlander families in this area is about 400, each family cultivating a swidden approximately one hectare for three years and will return to the same piece of land after about ten years; as such, we can reserve for each family about four hectares of land per family [my emphasis].* Thus, the amount of land to be set aside for the highlander compatriots is:

$$4 \text{ hectares} \times 400 = 1,600 \text{ hectares.}$$

Setting aside a further ten percent of the remaining land (total land area of this site is 5,000 hectares) for residential purposes, the total land area available for exploitation is about 3,000 hectares.<sup>32</sup>

Coincidentally, Gerald Hickey reports that the highlander land guardian (in the Rhade language, *polan*) of Buon Kroat (village of Kroat), H'Deo Eban, told him that she was never consulted about using the land under her care for the first *Dinh Dien* settlement in Darlac.<sup>33</sup> Hickey tells us that Le Van Kim, Director of *Dinh Dien* Region in the Central Highlands (*Quan Doc Vung Dinh Dien Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*) in 1957, was aware of the land problem in the *Dinh Dien* program because of the Rhade land claims.<sup>34</sup> Kim was familiar with the Rhade land guardian system and had made efforts to resolve the problem by forming a committee comprising of himself, several of

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Various Sites That Have Been Selected For Development In The Banmethuot and Pleiku Regions During A Land Search Trip By A Specialist Delegation From The Bureau For Technology], *Chan Hung Kinh Te* [Economic Restoration] (14), p 13, 1957 and *Chan Hung Kinh Te* (15), p 25, 1957.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 42-3; Gerald Hickey, *Shattered World: Adaptation And Survival Among Vietnam's Highland Peoples*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p 30.

<sup>34</sup> Le Van Kim was one of the few officials in the First Republic whom scholars believed have a much better disposition towards the highlanders. See Bernard Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66*, New York: Praeger, 1966, p 191; *Free In The Forest*, p 42; Gerald Hickey, *Window On A War: An Anthropologist In The Vietnam Conflict*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002, pp 65-7. Coincidentally, Kim was also a member of the group that plotted the successful overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, see *Window On A War*, pp 106-9.

his Vietnamese officials, the district chief and some notables from local Rhade villages to look into the matter.<sup>35</sup> But Hickey reports that Kim also did not consult H'Deo Eban about using the land near Buon Kroa for *Dinh Dien*.<sup>36</sup> Hickey further tell us that Kim had made cash payments (we are not told to whom) for land appropriated for *Dinh Dien*, and by mid 1957 had expended 30,000 piasters, which supposedly annoyed Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu.<sup>37</sup> One of the archival documents, however, reveals that Le Van Kim was being investigated for spending a lot of money outside the specified *Dinh Dien* projects. These expenditures were not reported to the Auditing Bureau (*Nha Kiem Soat Uoc Chi*). He spent \$52,564 piasters on entertainment expenses; \$193,603 piasters on rewards and gifts for soldiers and civilians; and \$300,000 piasters for building two highlander long houses for exhibition during the Ban Me Thuot Economic Fair.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, the survey reports did not mention anything about compensation for use of the land for *Dinh Dien*. In spite of the technical orientation of the survey reports, it is also clear that the reports included sufficient information to draw the reader's attention to the existing situation of land use by the local highlander population. In another survey report on two selected sites in Pleiku-Kontum conducted in late 1957 submitted to the President, Diem's usual vermilion pencil remarks (*but phe*)<sup>39</sup> was replaced by a circle on the section,

land area: about 6,000 hectares, subtracting land area occupied by various highlander villages and swiddens, there remain about 5,000 hectares.<sup>40</sup>

Without attempting to second-guess what went on in Diem's mind at that time, we at least know that he, too, was aware about the situation of land use by the highlanders at

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<sup>35</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 42-3.

<sup>36</sup> During this trip, Hickey also learnt that some French plantations were located on clan or village land. These lands were leased for 99 years from the Po Lan, usually for the symbolic price of a pig, large old jar or a woman's skirt. *Free In The Forest*, p 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Free In The Forest*, pp 42-45.

<sup>38</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11715.

<sup>39</sup> Diem was renown for his '*but phe*', comments or criticisms handwritten, usually written with a vermilion pencil on the documents submitted to him by his officials. Naturally, the '*but phe*' was interpreted as a directive and action was quickly taken by the officials. One can say that Diem's '*but phe*', often written in vermilion pencil, bears much resemblance - in the way it was acted upon by subordinates - to the '*chau ban*' of the kings in the past.

<sup>40</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10855.

this site. *It is also clear from the report that the surveyors took into account the amount of land to be reserved for the highlanders to continue with their traditional rotational agricultural practice, while establishing Dinh Dien near their villages and swiddens.* When policies specifically designed to resettle the highlanders were developed, for example *Lang Kieu Mau* (Model Village), *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* (Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Residence) or *Dinh Dien Thuong* (*Dinh Dien* for highlanders) projects, proposals for these projects began to replace the segment on 'land to be reserved for existing local highlander population'.<sup>41</sup>

### Discussion

The point I want to make here is that the government was aware of the need to avoid antagonizing the local highlanders when implementing the refugee resettlement and *Dinh Dien* programs. Senior government officials were aware of the volatility of the land problem due to the convergence of new and old inhabitants on the highlands frontier. They tried to reduce potential conflicts over land claims, while implementing the plan to resettle Kinh people in the highlands. In March 1957, Pham Nhu Phien, the Government Delegate for the Central Highlands, reflected to the President's Office about the intricacy and political sensitivity on planning for resettlement of Kinh people in the highlands,

... although we know the land here is vast but to find a piece of land that is suitable, is a difficult matter; and to arrange it in such a way so as to avoid complaints from the highlander compatriots is much more difficult.<sup>42</sup>

The most concrete step taken was, as we learnt in Chapter Five, when implementing the *Dinh Dien* program in the Central Highlands, the government in fact revised the strategy for stabilizing the *Dinh Dien* settlements. The PTUDD (*Phu Tong Uy Dinh Dien*, General Commission for *Dinh Dien*) encouraged settlers to focus on industrial cash crops so that each settler household was only required to pioneer a smaller land area to settle down in the highlands. In contrast, the original strategy of focusing on food crops (namely rice) such as in the Mekong Delta would require the PTUDD to

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<sup>41</sup> I discussed government programs designed specifically for highlanders in Chapter Six.

<sup>42</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 10857.

give each settler household more land to settle down in the highlands. This revision of strategy in the highlands was adopted in order to avoid using too much land and risk further antagonizing the highlanders, who had already shown much misgiving about the *Dinh Dien* program.

As more Kinh settled in the highlands, the use of forest resources became an issue of contention. In August 1960, the Government Delegate ordered all provinces to prohibit Kinh people from entering the forest to harvest bamboo shoots (*mang le*), which had resulted in disputes between Kinh and highlanders. Highlanders had traditionally been dependent on additional food sources from the forest, such as bamboo shoots, during the end period between planting and harvest (*giap hat*). The high number of Kinh settlers in the highlands meant increased exploitation of such forest resources, causing the highlander to suffer the loss (*thiet thoi*) of an important source of livelihood. The Delegate specifically ordered all 'districts should prohibit Kinh compatriots from entering the forest to harvest bamboo shoots in order to avoid losing the people's faith (*khoi that nhan tam*)'.<sup>43</sup>

In this section, I showed how the government took into account land use by the highlanders when conducting surveys for *Dinh Dien* sites. Oversights occurred and less than tactful measures were adopted when actually implementing the *Dinh Dien* program. There were continual reminders about the volatile nature of the land problem. In June 1958, the issue concerning highlanders' land claims was again discussed, this time in a meeting called by the Government Delegate for the Central Highlands. It was agreed that the PTUDD would henceforth have closer coordination with the individual provinces when selecting sites for *Dinh Dien*. This was to avoid complication of matters should the selected location encroached on highlanders' lands or swiddens. The provinces were tasked to make the necessary negotiations with the highlanders before any *Dinh Dien* centers were established. Furthermore, all provinces were instructed to treat any problems relating to highlanders' claims to land with tact (*kheo leo*) and flexibility (*mem deo*) to avoid complications.<sup>44</sup> The government might not have recognized *de jure* the land claims of the highlanders but in practice, when implementing the *Dinh Dien* program, the government recognized *de facto* these claims.

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<sup>43</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 397.

<sup>44</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 246

Instead of simply ignoring their claims, government officials sought ways to lessen potential conflicts, took into account land under cultivation and fallow (in the early surveys), and reformulated the strategy of establishing *Dinh Dien* in the Central Highlands. It is perhaps useful to be reminded at this point that I have pointed out in Chapter Six, the government implemented a policy of regulating swidden agriculture instead of outrightly banning the practice. *Highlander officials* or *highlanders village representatives* were tasked to help the government identify where were the 'old swiddens' - which included swiddens left to fallow for even over twenty years - for continual practice of swidden cultivation. They were only prevented from making 'new swiddens', that was to pioneer areas that were not previously burnt, cultivated and left to fallow.<sup>45</sup>

### Land Encroachment By Settlers

Tensions over land use in the process of state formation on the frontier did not just occur between government and highlanders. It also occurred between settlers and highlanders, among settlers, and between government and settlers.<sup>46</sup> For example, northern refugee settlers in My Thach B, Darlac province, were reported to have used their own resources to purchase land from highlanders.<sup>47</sup> Hickey reports that reverends Robert Ziemer and Edward Mangham had received complaints from their Rhade Christian converts that Vietnamese settlers from Ha Lan A and B, two large resettlement villages set up in 1956 to house northern refugees, had moved onto land that the neighboring Rhade villagers had cleared in preparation for planting.<sup>48</sup> In Pleiku *Dinh Dien* Area II, officials reported several incidents of land disputes between settlers and highlanders in the vicinity before the relevant authorities managed to resolve the disputes (it was not reported how). There were also reports on how 'free range' animal

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<sup>45</sup> See Chapter Six of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> Bui Minh Dao et al and Dang Nghiem Van make a similar observation of the land problem in the Central Highlands in the post-reunification period till the present. See Bui Minh Dao, Vu Dinh Loi & Vu Thi Hong, *So huu va su dung dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen* [Ownership And Use Of Land In The Western Plateau Provinces], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2000; Dang Nghiem Van, 'Van de dat dai o cac tinh Tay Nguyen' [The Land Problem In The Western Plateau Provinces] in *Mot so van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi buon lang cac dan toc Tay Nguyen* [A Few Issues On Economic-Social Development Of Villages Of Ethnic Groups In The Western Plateau], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2002. See also, Chau Khac Chuong, Ngo Duc Thinh & Nguyen Huu Tri, ed., *Van de phat trien kinh te xa hoi cac dan toc thieu so Dac Lac* [The Issue Of Social-Economic Development Of Ethnic Minorities Of Dac Lac], Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1990, pp 65-86.

<sup>47</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11769.

<sup>48</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 36.

husbandry practices by highlanders led to further disputes with settlers when the free roaming animals caused damage to the planted fields of the settlers. In Thanh Giao, a settler was reported to have caused fire damage to the houses of a nearby highlander village when he tried to clear the land with fire. The settler was arrested and ordered to pay damages to the highlanders.<sup>49</sup> In Lam Dong, Huynh Cong Tinh (who was appointed as Chief of Province in late 1958), reported appropriation of land by northern refugee settlers in Tan Thanh, Tan Phat and Tan Bui (all were settlements established for northern refugees) and also land disputes among the settlers themselves. These land disputes among the settlers in fact led to violent confrontations where the authorities had to step in and intervene.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, highlanders were reported to have bought land from other highlanders through improper means (see below).

In general, the government frowned upon pioneering and appropriation of land outside its resettlement programs. In April 1960, during a meeting of highland officials in Darlac, the Government Delegate ordered all province chiefs to thoroughly investigate incidences of 'illegal appropriation of land' (*chiem dat bat hop phap*) by Kinh people.<sup>51</sup> There were also incidents of land disputes between government and settlers. In 1962, when settlers in Kim Chau and Kim Phat expanded their cultivation area by planting coffee trees outside the settlement boundaries and into the land area of Ea Mta plantation, which was co-owned by the government, they were ordered to cease further expansion. Ngo Dinh Diem directed, through his usual '*but phe*' that,

...there are already directives stating that pioneering land (*choan dat*) is out of bounds of the laws, must prosecute for damages...the *Dinh Dien* program calls for recruitment every year, there is no lack of land or help, but must follow the national program for protecting the forest resources...<sup>52</sup>

Although ordered to cease further expansion of cultivated land, the settlers were compensated for the number of coffee trees destroyed on plots of land that were returned to the plantation.

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<sup>49</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12680.

<sup>50</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13620.

<sup>51</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 397.

<sup>52</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 15240.

During this period, there were also a number of 'free-migrants' who settled in the highlands outside the government's migration program. Although the government frowned on these practices, it was also concerned about the livelihoods of these settlers. Measures were taken to regulate the formation of these settlements. But soon, the government also realized that frontier formation had led to a 'land rush' in the Central Highlands. Settlers (both within and outside government migration programs), highlanders, and government officials, were privately appropriating lands outside the *Dinh Dien* program. When Ngo Dinh Diem called for a thorough investigation of these forms of land appropriation, he realized the need to adopt stringent measures to prevent the situation from worsening. This began in June 1958, when officials were deliberating about what to do with the free-migrant settlement in Dinh Quan. This story of the free-migrant settlement in Dinh Quan is crucial to understanding how the government's land regime was later compromised, taking on a hybrid practice on the frontier, contrary to what existing analyses assert.

### *Story Of The Free Migrant Settlement In Dinh Quan*

Lanh Van Cha was born in the year 1917, in the northern province of Lang Son. He was a Private Second Class in the French colonial army before being demobilized because he was already over the age-limit. Sometime in late 1956, he and his family had arrived in the Dinh Quan area and started clearing the land at point Kilometer (Km) 138 of National Highway 20 (which linked Saigon and Dalat). By early 1959, he had already planted one *sao*<sup>53</sup> of *khoai*<sup>54</sup> and cleared about one hectare of the land.<sup>55</sup>

A total of 65 families had settled in this area by April 1959. They were located on the plot of land between point Km 137 and Km 140 of National Highway 20 at the Dinh Quan area. There were initially 82 families here, but 17 had since left when the government ordered the settlers to cease further pioneering. This lot of land was located across the jurisdiction boundary of the two provinces, Lam Dong and Long Khanh. Of the 65 families, 51 were families of ex-soldiers below the rank of sergeant; 11 were from local militia or civil guard units; and three were civilian families. Of all the settlers, it was

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<sup>53</sup> One *sao* is approximately 360 square meters or one tenth of a Vietnamese hectare (*mau ta*).

<sup>54</sup> The document only mentioned *khoai*, which could be taro (*khoai so*), sweet potato (*khoai lang*), manioc (*khoai mi*), or even potatoes (*khoai tay*).

<sup>55</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a copy of original document in author's possession.



found that one (from one of the three civilian households) had planted on a plot of swidden left to fallow by local highlanders. The rest had cleared the land from wild forest. The majority of the settlers were from the north and the rest originated from the Central Coast areas. Most of the settler-households had claimed one hectare of land each, except for one who claimed five. Some households managed to plant between one and four *sao* of *khoai*, maize or groundnuts. A few managed to plant between two and four *sao* of dry rice, while others had ventured into planting fruit trees such as oranges. In total, the settlers pioneered 69 hectares of land and hoped that the government would officially approve their claims.<sup>56</sup> These settlers had migrated outside the government's *Dinh Dien* program. The settlement was what current studies of migration in the Central Highlands would term, a 'free-migrant settlement'.<sup>57</sup>

On 10 July 1957, the Blao Provincial Association for War Veterans (*Tinh Hoi Cuu Quan Nhan Blao*) submitted an application for land concession to Long Khanh province for a lot of land about 314 hectares, located on both sides of National Highway 20 between points Km 137 and Km 140, to settle about 200 ex-soldiers and their families. This lot of land was located at the Dinh Quan area, running across the boundary between the provinces of Lam Dong and Long Khanh. The association planned to organize a *nong truong* (farmstead) to be settled by demobilized soldiers and their families.<sup>58</sup> On 22 October 1957, Lieutenant-General (*Trung Tuong*) Nguyen Ngoc Le, president of the Vietnam Association of Veterans (*Hoi Cuu Quan Nhan Viet Nam*), submitted a more ambitious proposal on the same location to the Ministry of Land and Land Reforms (henceforth, MLLR) (*Bo Dien Tho va Cai Cach Dien Dia*). He proposed that the government grant the association a land concession of about 600 hectares to set up *Nong Truong Phu Lam* (*Phu Lam Farm*), reserved for demobilized soldiers. Nguyen Ngoc Le reasoned that 90% of the soldiers in the Republic's army were peasants who, after demobilization, would go back to farming. He added that organizing these demobilized soldiers into

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<sup>56</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a copy of original document in author's possession.

<sup>57</sup> For details on current studies of frontier formation in the Central Highlands, consult Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants And The State In The Highlands Of Vietnam*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003; Matthieu Guerin, Andrew Hardy, Nguyen Van Chinh & Stan B-H Tan, *Des montagnards aux minorites ethniques: Quelle integration nationale pour les habitants des hautes terres du Viet Nam et du Cambodge?*, Paris: L'Harmattan; Bangkok: IRASEC, 2003; Stan B-H Tan, 'Coffee Frontiers In The Central Highlands Of Vietnam: Networks Of Connectivity', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* (41), pp 51-68, 2000.

<sup>58</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12733.

the communal living provided by a *nong truong* could help to build the foundations for a Personalist economy (*nen kinh te nhan vi*).<sup>59</sup>

The MLLR sought the opinion of PTUDD upon receiving the letter from the association. PTUDD sent its agricultural technicians to survey the land. They reported the soil quality there was poor, and therefore unsuitable for establishing a *nong truong*. On 28 November 1957, MLLR informed the veteran association that the application was rejected for two reasons. First, the lot of land cannot be *dinh dien hoa* (bring into the *Dinh Dien* Program) because the land there was unsuitable for agricultural expansion. Second, Decree 57-D issued on 24 October 1956, specifically restricted any new construction or development within 400 meters from both sides of National Highway 20 on the stretch of the road between Dinh Quan and Dalat. Following this decision, Nguyen Ngoc Le wrote to request the MLLR to officially grant land already pioneered by the thirty-five families, who had relocated there since 1956. The ministry then directed both provinces of Long Khanh and Lam Dong to set up a Land Inspection Committee (*Uy Ban Kham Dat*) to survey the settlement and report on the actual number of settlers and families located on the lot of land, their background, amount of land cleared and planted by each family, and type and number of houses already built. The provinces were also to ensure that the settlers ceased pioneering the land.<sup>60</sup>

In June 1958, three issues concerning land use in the highlands outside the *Dinh Dien* program were brought to the attention of Ngo Dinh Diem. The first issue concerned the high number of sales of land located on both sides of National Highway 20 that joined Dalat with Saigon. The second issue concerned unfettered exploitation of the forests by these new 'owners' of the recently purchased land, which caused serious deterioration of the forest and national scenic spots (*thang canh quoc gia*) in these areas. The third issue concerned the right of the government to confiscate these lands should the land sales be considered illegal. The MLLR was tasked to put up a paper on these issues.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12733.

<sup>60</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12733.

<sup>61</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

The MLLR reported to Diem on these matters in *Cong Van* (official letter) 3169-BDT/VP dated 26 August 1958. It reported that since the introduction of Decree 57-d, the ministry had not approved any application for land grant or development along National Highway 20 between Dinh Quan and Dalat. For instance, they had rejected the application by Vietnam Association of Veterans to develop a *nong truong* for demobilized soldiers at the Dinh Quan area. But the ministry soon discovered that some demobilized soldiers had already settled there when the association requested the ministry to officially recognize (*hop thuc hoa*) that settlement. *Cong Van* 3169 also reported that this was no isolated incident and similar developments had been taking place in the highlands,

... recently, there were many places that were pioneered without seeking the permission of anyone [government offices] and in many provinces, provincial chiefs had - within the jurisdictional authority of the province - approved land sales below 20 hectares, although most of documents [submitted] were not in accordance to regulations, or inform our ministry (*bo chung toi*) as required by law. This had led to the situation where the government (*chanh phu*) was 'left with no choice but to' (*du muon du khong*) find a solution to officially recognize the rights to the land [purchased or pioneered] by these people who had already put in efforts to pioneer the land, in order not to lose the faith of the people (*khoi that nhan tam*).<sup>62</sup>

The report also included an extended section on the 'phenomenon' (*hien tuong*) of people buying land from local highlanders, often through contrive (*thu doan*). I will discuss this in detail in another story below.

In mid-1959, Ngo Dinh Diem agreed to officially recognize the land claims of the settlers at Dinh Quan but with a few conditions.<sup>63</sup> First, the settlers were not to pioneer or lay further claims to any more land in the area. The MLLR was charged with the responsibilities of mapping the boundaries of the individual settlers and the settlement, and accord the land to the settlers in the form of 'limited concession for rural public land' (*tam trung cong san thon que*). Second, the settlers were to demolish their current housings and relocate at least 50 meters away from the main road. The Bureau

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<sup>62</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>63</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 15236.

of Construction and Urban Planning (*Nha Kien Thiet va Thiet Ke Do Thi*) was tasked to design an 'economic but aesthetic' (*re tien nhung my quan*) model of housing design and coordinate with the respective provinces to ensure the houses were rebuilt according to the design. The respective provinces were also tasked to plant flora along the highway to maintain the aesthetics of the highway scenery where the free-migrant settlement had formed.<sup>64</sup> A Land Inspection committee was sent to survey the settlement. As noted earlier, each settler-household claimed only one hectare of land, with the exception of one settler. This settler had managed to get the approval from the district chief of Bao Loc (*Quan Truong Bao Loc*), Nguyen Van Quang. Nguyen Van Quang, was one of various officials in Lam Dong being investigated for participation in questionable land sales in the province.<sup>65</sup>

## IMPOSING THE GOVERNMENT DEFINED LAND REGIME

### Three 'Decrees'

In late 1957, Nguyen Van Tich, Chief of Province of Darlac, received requests from several highlanders to certify their ownership rights for parcels of land under active cultivation. According to the highlanders, these were lands located within the territorial boundaries of their villages and were passed down to them from their forebears. Nguyen Van Tich wrote to seek the approval from the MLLR in a letter dated 5 November 1957. He noted that highlander compatriots had traditionally relied on the 'outmoded' (*loi thoi*) Polan land regime (*che do polan*), where the Polan performed the role of land guardian managing all matters concerning land use within the designated territory of a village or a clan. Land use under the Polan regime was based on the oral customary laws of that particular village or clan, and only the Polan was most familiar with these laws since these were passed down to them from their predecessors. As such, the Ede people never had any documented forms of certification to prove their claims to the lands.<sup>66</sup> Receiving these requests from the highlanders, Nguyen Van Tich pointed out, was a good opportunity to 'sedentarize' the highlanders by granting them

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<sup>64</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12733.

<sup>65</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 12733.

<sup>66</sup> See Chapter Two of this thesis for a discussion on traditional land regimes among the Central Highlanders.

certificates of landownership. At the same time, the government could gradually 'alter' (*dieu chinh*) land use and land claims among the highlanders.<sup>67</sup>

Nguyen Van Tich's suggestion was rejected in an unsigned letter, dated 10 April 1958, by an un-named 'director of cabinet' (*dong ly van phong*) of the MLLR. The letter stated that the lands were 'public lands' and could only be granted as 'concessions' based on a government decree dated 27 March 1929 (from the colonial period). The letter also stated that the request was rejected because the highlanders did not have any form of documented proofs to certify that they legally own the land.<sup>68</sup> This reply from the MLLR was rather peculiar and contradicted earlier concerns of the regional government delegate. In an earlier circular, dated 14 July 1957, the Government Delegate for the Central Highlands had stated the urgency of drawing up detailed cadastral registers from the village level onwards for every province in the Central Highlands. He specifically directed that it was pertinent to conduct surveys of the highlanders' agricultural and village land areas so that they could develop the concept of 'private property' (*tai san tu huu*).<sup>69</sup>

As pointed out by most scholars, the First Republic failed to issue any clear legislation to reaffirm the landownership rights of highlanders. Cuu Long Giang and Toan Anh, who give Ngo Dinh Diem's highland policies a fair assessment, concur with most critics on the way this land question was managed when they write,

[a]fter the revolution (overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963) people accused Ngo Dinh Diem of advocating assimilation of the highlanders, such as abolishing the Customary Law Tribunals, banning the teaching of highlander languages, etc., in actuality, Diem's government only made the mistake of denying rights to ownership of land of the highlanders ...<sup>70</sup>

On the regime's denial of rights to ownership of land by the highlanders, Cuu Long Giang and Toan Anh, as with most Vietnamese writers, are specifically referring to the introduction of the three infamous 'decrees' that governed land sales involving

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<sup>67</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>68</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>69</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11849.

<sup>70</sup> *Cao Nguyen Mien Thuong*, p143.

highlanders. *Cong Van* (official letter) 3169-BDT/VP dated 26 August 1958 prohibited all land sales between highlander and Kinh people (specifically, highlander selling land to Kinh) in all Central Highlands provinces until further decision by the government. On 12 December 1958, Decree 513-a/DT/CCDD was issued, which directed all land sales between highlander and Kinh, regardless of land area, must seek the prior approval of the President. Finally, *Thong Tu* (Circular) 981-BTC/DC, issued on 28 May 1959, stated that 'highlander compatriots only have user rights but not ownership rights to the land'.<sup>71</sup> Y Khap Nie concludes,

I do not know if it is stupidity or intentional, Ngo Dinh Diem's regime bluntly refused to recognize rights to ownership of land cultivated by them [the highlanders] and only allowed them [the highlanders] to enjoy the fruits of their labor on the land...In undertaking to establish *Dinh Dien* and construction of public infrastructure, the regime and Kinh compatriots neither bother to consult the respective *Po Lan*, nor to find out who is the rightful owner of the land, whose ownership is publicly recognized by three generations highlander compatriots...This is how resentment and hatred pile up like mountains in their hearts day by day.<sup>72</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, the three infamous 'decrees' originated from concerns over the developing 'land grabbing' situation in the Central Highlands. Below is the story of how and why the 'decrees' came about, pieced together from several official reports filed in the archive of the First Republic.

### *Story Of The Three Infamous 'Decrees'*

In order to facilitate investigations on land sales between Kinh and highlander compatriots (during the period from 1954 to end of 1958) that have already begun in the province, the government issued Decree 513-a/DT/CCDD dated 12 December 1958, which that directed all concerned parties must submit land sale documents at the Provincial Administration Office of Lam Dong. This is to help establish a name-list that will be submitted to the Investigation Committee. As such, all private individuals, French nationals (including societies and

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<sup>71</sup> 'Van de kien dien dat dai canh tac cho dong bao Thuong'.

<sup>72</sup> 'Vai tro quan trong cua dong bao Thuong trong cong cuoc chong Cong San xam lang tai Cao Nguyen'.

companies, etc.) or other foreign nationals who have purchased lands from highlander compatriots in the time period mentioned above must submit the necessary documents within two months from the date of issue of this notice. All documents submitted after the deadline will not be eligible for consideration.

Provincial Notice  
4 September 1959  
Issued by  
Huynh Cong Tinh  
Chief of Province, Lam Dong<sup>73</sup>

On 28 July 1960, about ten months after the above notice was issued, Huynh Cong Tinh sent out a second. This time, he granted a final one-month extension to all parties who had purchased lands that originated from highlanders, regardless of whether they had bought the lands directly from highlanders, or indirectly by buying from Kinh people who had first bought the lands from highlanders, to submit their land sales documents at the provincial administration office.<sup>74</sup> In late August 1958, Huynh Cong Tinh, as with all province chiefs in the Central Highlands, had received orders from the President's Office to compile a comprehensive record of all land sales between highlanders and Kinh and to investigate the nature of the land sales.

The orders originated from *Cong Van* (official letter) 3169-BDT/VP dated 26 August 1958.<sup>75</sup> *Cong Van* 3169 also advised the prohibition of all land sales between highlander and Kinh until further notice. This was because the ministry discovered that the procedures for certification and registration of land sales in the Central Highlands were rather unsystematic. It could be easily manipulated for 'improper and private gains'. In the Central Lowlands and Southern Region, commune councils (*Hoi Dong Huong Chinh Xa*) served as the institutional authority to verify land sales within its respective territories and thus, all land sales were duly certified and registered. In the Central Highlands, especially Lam Dong province, the ministry discovered many cases where land sales bypassed local verifications by the commune councils and were

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<sup>73</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13604.

<sup>74</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13604.

<sup>75</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

instead, certified and registered with the Land Registrar in Saigon or Dalat. The problem was that among the highlander villages, commune councils were only a recently introduced administrative institution.

The ministry also discovered there were high incidences of land speculation in the Central Highlands, especially beginning from 1955 when the political situation began to stabilize with the conclusion of the First Indochina War in 1954. It reported that land sale between highlander and Kinh was still governed by regulations dated from the colonial era. Based on these existing legal regulations, Kinh people could easily purchase land, often at a very low price, from highlanders because they only needed the approval of the Chief of Province (under French colonial government it was the Resident) who could approve any land sale of up to 20 hectares without further reference to higher authorities. Upon registering the purchased land at the Land Registrar in Dalat or Saigon, the buyers became the new permanent owners of the land and could make a windfall selling the land at much higher prices to others.

Concerning the speculators, the ministry reported that many Kinh people bought land from highlanders by contriving up some 'quick and easy profit' (*mau le va de kiem an*) schemes. Typically, these speculators sought out a few highlanders who had claims to certain plots of lands, and bought the lands at very low prices. Alternatively, they searched for good public lands that were unoccupied, or located on abandoned French plantations. Then, they collaborated with some highlanders who were paid to pretend to be the owners or descendents of the original owners, who had agreed to sell the lands to them. The speculators then brought the papers to be certified by the district or province chief, and became the new legal owners of the lands. Concerning the highlanders, the ministry reported that it was difficult to investigate the origins of the lands and proofs of ownership. Among the highlanders, there were no written documented proofs of ownership and individual ownerships were often vaguely defined. The report further pointed out that because of the highlanders' nomadic lifestyle and cultivation system, they had pioneered a lot of land and if the government recognized all their land claims, they would be owners to a lot of land in the highlands. The report added in brackets,



*... in reality, they are recognized as owners of the lands in the highlands (tren thuc te ho duoc nhan la chu dat o vung thuong).*<sup>76</sup>

Most of the lands were sold at very low prices. That was even when the highlander sellers indeed owned these lands and were not collaborators in some schemes for quick profits. It usually cost the buyer (often Kinh) only a few thousand piasters for a parcel of land that could be up to 20 hectares. In one investigation concerning the purchase of land by Kinh from highlanders in Lam Dong province, a particular Nguyen Van Vinh was found to have paid only \$4,000 piasters for about 16 hectares of land situated along Km 184 of National Highway 20 from highlanders of Konhin Dang village on 28 Oct 1955. The same Nguyen Van Vinh also bought another parcel of land, about 19 hectares, from the same villagers a year later for a slightly higher price. A committee sent to investigate the matter found that the plots of land were of very good quality and the former plot of land had an estimated worth of \$53,884.8 piasters! They could not, however, determine if highlanders from Konhin Dang village actually sold the plots of land. In all, three other people participated in this scheme of buying land at this locality 'from highlanders'.<sup>77</sup>

*Cong Van* 3169-BDT/VP recommended that the government immediately issue the following orders:

- 1) Prohibit all land sales between highlanders and Kinh until a new regulation is formulated.
- 2) Order all provinces in the highlands to make a list of land sales involving highlanders from 1955 onwards, because by 1955 the political situation had stabilized and many people were seeking land concessions.
- 3) Investigate the origins of lands sold by highlanders. Investigations must take note of the locations of the lands and the locations of the highlanders' villages.
- 4) All relevant offices to send to the ministry documents relating to the issue of land rights and land sale concerning highlanders. This is to help find a solution to the problem of ascertaining their (highlanders) property rights and therefore regulate land sale between highlanders and Kinh.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>77</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 15236.

<sup>78</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

In June 1958, the Government Delegate of the Central Highlands reported to the President that he had ordered all highland provinces to look into the matter of Kinh people buying land from the highlanders at very low prices. He reminded all provincial chiefs that the enemy (*Viet Cong*) could spread propaganda against the government about such practices, which could have negative effects on the 'brotherly relations' (*tin huyh de*) between Kinh and highlanders.<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile, before any solution was formulated by MLLR, the Presidential Office issued Decree 513-a/DT/CCDD on 12 December 1958, ordering that:

- 1) All land sales or transfers between highlander and Kinh compatriots, regardless of land size area, must seek the prior approval of the President.
- 2) All prior stipulations contrary to this decree are abolished.
- 3) Minister of Interior, Minister of Land and Land Reforms, and all Chiefs of Province are tasked to implement this decree.<sup>80</sup>

This decree, rather than out-rightly denying land ownership rights by highlanders - as pointed out by most critics of the First Republic - in fact forced all land sales involving highlander sellers to undergo verification by the local authorities, beginning with the Highlander Chief of District (*quan truong thuong*), or Canton Chief (*tong truong thuong*) relevant government offices and Chief of Province, and ultimately, approval by the President.<sup>81</sup> Le Tan Nam, the Inspector-General for Civil Administration (*Tong Thanh Tra Hanh Chanh*), was ordered to conduct investigations on the land sales after the President had received *Cong Van* 3169-BDT/VP. This stopgap measure, namely Decree 513-a/DT/CCDD, must have been in some ways influenced by his investigations. He had reported to Ngo Dinh Diem in person sometime in late 1958 before the investigation report was officially circulated on 10 January 1959.

The Inspector-General's investigations concurred with the analysis of *Cong Van* 3169-BDT/VP. He reported that in Lam Dong province alone, during the period 1955-1957, there were 102 cases of questionable land sales between highlander and Kinh compatriots in the manner outlined by *Cong Van* 3169; and a further 85 cases in 1958

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<sup>79</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 246.

<sup>80</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 16776.

<sup>81</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

alone. He also pointed out there were probably many more such cases that went unreported in other Central Highlands provinces. On the part of the highlanders who sold the lands, Le Tan Nam reported that they were not so much harmed by land sales because they themselves had either cleared the lands or had inherited the lands, or were simply incited by Kinh buyers to pretend as owners for the scheme to work. Through these deals the highlanders (sellers) suddenly received a windfall of a few thousand piasters. The government, however, would not be able to supervise land use in these areas because these would become private lands outside the jurisdiction of the government. In addition, the government would be caught in the difficult situation when these new landowners seek official recognition of permanent ownership to these lands yet no official legal proofs could be submitted. More worrying for the reader (i.e. President), I guess, was when the report went on to say,

... many cases of such land sales occurred... because local authorities had a hand in this land speculation (*nhung tay vao viec dau co dat dai nay*), including:

- ex-Chief of Province of Lam Dong, Ho Tran Chanh (currently in Phan Rang)
- Incumbent Chief of Province of Lam Dong, Le Ta
- Ex-Chief of District of Blao, Nguyen van Quang (currently in Ministry for Interior)
- Ex-Chief of District of Blao, Le Van Lan (incumbent Deputy Chief of Province of Lan Dong)
- Incumbent Chief of Land Registry Bureau of Lam Dong Province, Nguyen Xuan Hong<sup>82</sup>

According to one informant, a Mr. Doan Van Phuc, these officials participated in the questionable land sales in three ways. First, they took advantage of their official positions by recommending relatives and friends to buy the lands from the highlanders. Second, they earned commissions by acting as middlemen for the land sales. And third, they bought the lands for themselves, often at a very low price and later re-sold the land to others at much higher prices. In addition, there were also several cases where plantation concessions held by French owners were submitted for return to the

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<sup>82</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

government, but were instead appropriated by the officials. Le Ta, the Chief of Province of Lam Dong, did not submit several such applications to the central government. Instead, he claimed to want to return the lands to the highlanders, but later forced the highlanders to sell off cheaply to him or his cronies. The report pointed out that it was difficult to gather concrete evidence to bring the culprits to justice. Nonetheless, Tran Van Phuoc, Mayor of Dalat cum Director of Bureau of Police and Public Security in Central Highlands (*Nha Canh Sat va Cong An Cao Nguyen Trung Phan*) was already ordered to start covert investigations of the matter because many of the suspected culprits were serving officials in the provinces.<sup>83</sup>

When Huynh Cong Tinh was appointed as Chief of Province of Lam Dong to replace Le Ta, one of his first tasks was to carry out the orders of *Cong Van* 3169-BDT/VP. He also began covert investigations regarding the questionable land sales that occurred under Le Ta. The investigations had to be covert because Le Van Lan, one of the chief suspects behind the questionable land sales, was still the Deputy Chief of Province. In all, there were three major groups of questionable land sales. The first concerned the parcels of land confiscated from plantation concessions belonging to Nam Phuong, former Empress of Annam; the second concerned land appropriated from the Center for Agricultural Produce Experiments in Bao Loc; and the third concerned about 194 hectares of land located around Km 182 of National Highway 20, purchased by Le Van Lan, Le Ta, their relatives and friends. There were also other isolated cases of land sales between Kinh and highlanders.<sup>84</sup>

Huynh Cong Tinh discovered that Le Van Lan had rushed through the approval of many applications for land sale certification and even doctored the dates of several files to show that they were submitted before the circulation date of *Cong Van* 3169-BDT/VP to all Central Highlands provinces. Total land area in the sales approved by him came to about 1,075 hectares. In January 1959, some of the applicants brought the documents to be registered at the Land Registrar in Da Lat, but failed to have their applications duly registered. Three of the applicants, namely Trieu Van Yen (application no. 128), Tan Thi Duc (application no. 140) and Luu Thi Huong (application no. 150), brought their documents to the Land Registrar in Saigon and

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<sup>83</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

<sup>84</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13604.

successfully registered their ownership of the lands. Worried that their superiors (central government in Saigon) would be suspicious about the large number of files that were still awaiting verification by the Registrar, Le Van Lan and Le Ta instructed the clerks at the provincial administration to erase the entries from the filing records in the provincial document registry book.<sup>85</sup>

**Table 7.1 Examples Of Various Land Sales Between Highlanders And Kinh People In Lam Dong Province Reported In Colonel Huynh Cong Tinh's Report**

Seller	Buyer	Location	Land Area (hectares)	Piasters
K'Hoi, K'Brong, K'Brieu, K'Te, K'Dut, K'Briu, K'Breo Brenh, K'Brui, K'Dieu, K'Bras	Ly Thi Mai	Km 179 National Highway (NH) 20	29.25	\$11,700
K'Khoa, K'Briu, K'Bret	Ha Xuan Dieu	Near Km 178 NH 20	8.9	\$2,000
K'Brin, K'U, K'Thiu	Nguyen Thi Tanh	Near Km 229 NH 20	10	\$1,500
K'Toc, Briu, Broi, Teo	Tran Van Tri	Across Km 182 NH 20	15	\$6,400
K'Kras, Breu, Brong, Te, Dieu	Nguyen Duc Bich	Between Km 178 & 179 NH 20	9.36	\$3,744
K'Brop, Broi K'Yang, Nong, Gih, Beoh, Brong, Briu, Sio*	K'Nhui	Between Km 226 & 227 NH 20	4	\$1,800
K'Nyet, Bron, Leu, Dung	Touneh Phan	Km 6 Inter-Provincial Highway No. 8 between Dilinh and Ban Me Thuot	17.1	\$3,000
K'Lan, Dek, Deo, Srang, Lun, Tho	Pham Thi Lanh	Km 155 NH 20	29.3	\$5,500

\*This group of people sold in total 4 parcels of land totaling 32 hectares to different group of buyers.

Source: PTTDeNhat, File no. 13604.

When Huynh Cong Tinh submitted his report, he had already compiled details of all the questionable land sales that he was aware of. He had the names of all the sellers and buyers of the lands, locations and areas of the land parcels, origins of the land parcels, and resume of the people involved (see Table 7.1 for examples). The land sales investigated dated from the beginning of 1955. Majority of the land sales were between highlanders and Kinh. There were thirteen cases of transactions between Kinh and Kinh, after initial purchase from highlanders; two cases between highlanders and highlanders; and two cases between French nationals and highlanders. As reported in

<sup>85</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13604.

the preliminary investigation by the Inspector-General, the whole saga implicated many high-ranking civil servants, military officials, and their relatives and friends, with Le Van Lan and Le Ta being the main propagators.<sup>86</sup>

On 28 May 1959, the Minister of Finance issued the infamous *Thong Tu* (Circular) 981-BTC/DC, which advised the Minister of Land and Land Reforms that regarding the 152 cases of land sales in Lam Dong province that,

... highlander compatriots only have user rights but not ownership rights to the land; all sale contracts are therefore ineffective.<sup>87</sup>

The minister proposed that MLLR form a committee to re-evaluate the land sales individually. Lands that were not yet exploited should be reclaimed as public lands.

By 15 June 1959, the MLLR formulated a systematic procedure to regulate land sales involving the highlanders and sent out Circular 25-BD/TT to all province chiefs. The procedure included the usual detailed recording of individual particulars and about the parcel of land in question. Application for land sale must be made public. Notices of the proposed land sale must be posted for a period of one month at the provincial, district, commune, and village administration offices where the parcel of land was located. During this one-month period, any complaints or objections to the proposed land sale must be submitted to the provincial administration for further investigation. A land survey committee (*Uy Ban Kham Dat*) must be formed after the one-month period. This committee comprised of the Chief of Province or an appointed representative, Chief of Provincial Land Registrar, Highlander Chief of District (*Quan Truong Thuong*) or a notable of the highlander community (*than hao nguoi Thuong*), a representative of the Commune Council where the land parcel was located, provincial administrative secretary and the highlander landowner. This committee was charged with the responsibilities of investigating the origins of the land parcel, résumé of the declared landowner, location and size-area of the land parcel, the agreement between the highlander (owner) and the Kinh (buyer), complaints or objections filed during the one-

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<sup>86</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 13604.

<sup>87</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. not recorded by author but a photocopy of document in author's possession.

month period, and assessment of how the land sale would affect, or be affected by future, government development plans in the area.<sup>88</sup>

### Discussion

Analyses about the First Republic's land policies pertaining to the highlanders suggest that the 'three decrees' effectively denied rights to landownership by the highlanders according to their traditions and customs. The above story reveals that the 'decrees' originated from attempts to prevent the 'land-grabbing situation' from worsening in the Central Highlands. Gerald Hickey suggests that Decree 513-a/DT/CCDD and *Thong Tu* (Circular) 981-BTC were the government's legal 'response' to the Bajaraka affair.<sup>89</sup> In fact, Decree 513 originated from recommendations made in *Cong Van* 3169, which was dated 26 August 1958, before the Bajaraka affair came to a head. *Cong Van* 3169 in turn originated from orders to MLLR to study the problem of land appropriation outside *Dinh Dien* program in the Central Highlands. There was no doubt that Kinh people and officials were the main culprits in land grabbing. The story also reveals that the problem of land grabbing in the highlands was not based on a simple formula of Kinh versus highlanders. Highlanders were also involved in the act of 'exploiting' other highlanders. Those who participated in 'land-grabbing' were accumulating land by buying cheaply from fellow highlanders, or pretended to be landowners, or privately selling away the land, a practice that was contrary to their traditional land regime. The decrees also reflected attempts by Ngo Dinh Diem's government to attempt to 'clean up the act' of wayward officials in the highlands, who abused their positions for improper private gains through land speculation.

Existing studies seemed to be unaware of Circular 25-BD/TT or they overlooked the significance of this directive. This directive effectively sanctioned the sale of land by highlanders, but only after undergoing through a rigorous procedure of checks and verifications. This directive also brought to the fore, the *de facto* recognition that highlanders were rightful owners to most of the land in the highlands. This *de facto* recognition in fact had already governed the way *Dinh Dien* was carried out and the government's extreme unease over other kinds of 'land use' outside its official

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<sup>88</sup> PTTDeNhat, File no. 11261.

<sup>89</sup> *Free In The Forest*, p 59.

programs. Without clear *de jure* recognition on the status of landownership rights by highlanders, however, the land question remained ambiguous. This reluctance was probably because, as the minister for MLLR admitted, if the government *de jure* recognized all such claims, the highlanders would officially claim most of the lands in the Central Highlands. Nguyen Trac Di also notes that if the highlander land policy introduced under the Second Republic was properly implemented, which granted to each highlander family 10 hectares of land under active cultivation and a further 20 hectares for land under rotational cultivation, then approximately 5,000,000 hectares of the total 7,500,000 hectares of land in the highlands would be claimed by highlanders.<sup>90</sup> Of course, the chaotic war situation in the highlands from the mid-1960s onwards meant that this policy initiative under the Second Republic would never be properly implemented.

Most significant, I think, is the way Circular 25-BD/TT stated how the procedure for land sales between highlander and Kinh was formulated. This formula worked on the basis that representatives from the highlander villages participate as 'witness' to the land sale. According to the procedure, a local highlander official or a highlander village notable and a highlander representing the commune council must bear witness to verify the landownership status of the seller. As discussed in Chapter Four, highlander officials were usually selected from among 'men of power' (*chua vung*) in the highlander villages. Highlander village notables refer to village elders, who were recognized by the villagers for their seniority or strengths according to local beliefs. Village notables, in contrast to highlander officials, were not appointed by the government. In addition, the various levels of checks installed and requirement of different groups of witnesses to verify the sale as stipulated by the procedure outlined in Circular 25-BD/TT, bears much similarity to a particular form of traditional land transfer practiced by some highlanders. For example, the Chru in Dran were known to practice land transfer by inviting members from the village, comprising of three generations of people, the young, adults and elders, to verify and bear witness to the

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<sup>90</sup> Nguyen Trac Di, *Dong bao cac sac toc thieu so Viet Nam (Nguon Goc va Phong Tuc)* [Vietnamese Ethnic Minority Compatriots (Origins And Customs)], Saigon: Bo Phat Trien Sac Toc, 1972, pp 130-131. It was of course impossible to implement this policy because by the late 1960s, the NLF had successfully claimed control over a good part of Central Highlands. Relocation, both voluntary and forced, of highlanders and Kinh inhabitants, started by the First Republic in fact picked up further momentum under the Second Republic. See Nancy Volk's excellent ethnography of a relocated settlement comprising of different highlander groups and Kinh settlers, 'A Temporary Community In A Temporary World'.



validity of the transfer of land from one person to another.<sup>91</sup> I did not come across further documentation concerning the actual operation of Circular 25-BD/TT. Several speculative explanations are possible. First, the impact of Decree 513-a/DT/CCDD was so lasting that very few land transactions came out into the open. Second, the security situation had worsened significantly by the 1960 so that land speculation also reduced. Nonetheless, it is possible to perceive this at least as an attempt at pursuing a form of a middle ground practice between the government defined land regime and traditional practices.

## CONCLUSION

I agree with most analyses that the First Republic did not pass any legal resolutions to affirm the land rights of the highlanders according to their traditional customs. The government was more interested in applying a national land regime defined by legal regulations and cadastral register. There were, however, attempts to take into account the land claims of the highlanders when implementing frontier formation programs. Archival documents suggest that the government took into consideration the amount of land required by highlanders to sustain a form of rotational swidden cultivation. Establishment of *Dinh Dien* was also supposed to be complemented by highlander agrarian reform projects. Officials were repeatedly reminded about the sensitivity of the land issue on the highlands frontier. More significant perhaps was that the government ultimately reshaped the strategy of frontier formation by adopting a different approach to stabilize the livelihoods of the *Dinh Dien* settlers. The government also adopted a strict stance against land pioneering and land appropriation outside official programs. It tried to effectively curb land grabbing on the frontier by introducing drastic regulations to halt the undesirable practices. As a rule of thumb, as the Ministry of Land and Land Reforms admitted later, highlanders were recognized *de facto* as owners of the lands in the Central Highlands. When Circular 25-BD/TT introduced the procedure for land sale between highlander and Kinh, it effectively brought this *de facto* recognition to the fore. The procedure also replicated

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<sup>91</sup> Tounh Han Dang, 'Quan niem ve so huu dat dai va thuc trang sinh ke cua cac sac dan Thuong' [Concepts of Landownership And Real Situation Of Livelihoods Of Highland Ethnic Groups] in *Dong bao cac sac toc thieu so Viet Nam*, pp 196.

the practice of verification and witness similar to some highlander groups. Instead of the sharp contention between one land regime against another, the land question was essentially managed by middle ground practices. Certainly in terms of the question of land, highlanders suffered losses in the process of state formation on the frontier. But we must recognize that there were no outright brute attempts of dispossession, assimilation or subordination. The government tried to take into account the well-being of the highlanders by ensuring that they have enough land for cultivation but at the same time tried to bring new agricultural methods to them. The government also tried to prevent further loss of land by the highlanders because of frontier land grabbing and introduced drastic measures to stop land transactions outside official programs altogether. These measures, however, were interpreted by critics of the government as acts of denial of highlander landownership rights.

# *State Formation On The Frontier*

## CONCLUSION

### CHAPTER 8

I argued in this thesis that state formation on the frontier is a mutable process which produces a state form that is hybrid and recombinant. My argument is framed by what I call a 'recombinant model' of state formation on the frontier. This model is underpinned by specific understandings of the concepts of frontier, state, government, power, modes of orderings, and respective formation processes of frontier and the state. This does not mean that state formation on the frontier is free of tensions and conflicts. As shown in Chapter Two, the prevailing approach, which I call the 'diffusion model', has served us well by highlighting the tensions and conflicts of state formation on the frontier. The diffusion model conceptualizes the state as an *a priori* formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier. It explains the underlying issues that led to the breakout of conflicts between the state and highlanders in the Central Highlands under the First Republic. In the process, it paints a very bleak picture of Vietnamese state formation during this period. Archival documents I have examined, however, reveal a more nuanced story about what happened during this process. The story that I reconstructed from these documents does not fit well with the diffusion model. The recombinant model that I developed in Chapter Three provides a theoretical framework that better fits this evidence.

I defined the frontier as an ambiguous zone of political rendering, where peoples, cultures and economic interests converge and interpenetrate. Frontier formation is understood as the process when newcomers begin settling in this zone of ambiguity located outside their traditional heartland, creating a zone of intensified convergence and interpenetration of peoples, cultures and economic interests. I showed in Chapter Four that the First Republic inherited a frontier in the Central Highlands when the region was included within the proper sovereign territory of the state in 1955. Integrating the region within the national administrative framework was no simple

reproduction of a standardized administrative structure. Instead, the government took into account local cultures, languages and social institutions. I showed in Chapter Five and Seven, when the government implemented *Dinh Dien*, the frontier formation program, it took into account traditional practices of land use among the highlanders, responses of the highlanders towards this program and ecological limitations on the program. A different strategy for stabilizing the *Dinh Dien* settlements was adopted and the agrarian landscape in the highlands frontier that was reproduced through *Dinh Dien* was quite different from initial plans.

I proposed that the concept of the state is connected to a broad notion of government, which I understood as the multiplicity of relations at play in shaping the conduct of people, both rulers and ruled. Securing the well-being of the population through regulation of behavior is essentially part of the tasks of rulers. In the process, the conduct of the ruler is also reshaped by this attempt to regulate the behavior of the ruled. I also proposed that power should not be perceived as simple quantitative capacity nor as mere legitimate right. Both notions of power suggest that power, when enacted (through the consent of free will people in the case of power as legitimate right), can travel unadulterated. Power as legitimate right, as I showed in Chapter Three, is predicated on the condition of people being 'autonomous free beings'. People, however, are essentially 'governed by habits of thoughts and behavior' and in reality, our behavior is governed by multiple modes of ordering such as customs, religious beliefs, familial upbringing, state laws, etc. I suggested that it is more useful to perceive the exercise of power as contingent upon how different actors perform their role in relation to the spread in time and space of a certain objective. Actors must persuade, or be persuaded that it is worth their while to perform the act of keeping the momentum of the objective going. In the process, actors may modify, resist, enhance or even sabotage the objective. The end product is more akin to a hybrid or recombinant hedge work.

Thus, I defined the state as an abstract overarching political entity that claims control of conduct of the population within its sphere of influence. State formation is the process in which the effect of the state is created and sustained, both in the abstract and empirical sense, through its various agencies and by constructing a particular mode of social ordering among the population it lays claim on. I set two caveats to the process of state formation.

First, the state may have a specific vision of government that is to be produced through the process of state formation. But this does not mean that the state formation process faithfully produces a singular effect among the population. The conceptualization of power relations that I raised earlier suggests that such an outcome is simply illogical. The empirical discussion in Chapters Six suggests that state formation through agrarian change was experienced differently by highlanders in different districts and provinces. Some were not persuaded by the agrarian programs and others were. Those who were not persuaded, resisted by abandoning the sedentarization and resettlement centers, simply escaped by moving into a neighboring administrative territory with a less ambitious program, or moving deeper into the forests or mountains. Some simply joined the communist insurgents. Others probably found the programs beneficial; benefits of such reforms, or similar initiatives implemented after the First Republic, were realized later.

Second, my conceptual discussion suggested that the state itself is an object of transformation. I showed in Chapter Four that learning highlander languages became a requirement for officials serving in the highlands despite the momentum of administrative standardization. The need to maintain highlander officials in the bureaucracy compromised the meritocratic principle of appointments in the civil service. I showed in Chapter Six that reforming the agrarian world of the highlanders was no simple formula of resettlement in fixed villages. Instead, the formula was continuously reworked to comprise of regulated swiddens, a variety of resettlement programs, a variety of sedentarization programs and a variety of model villages.

State formation on the frontier in 1955-61 therefore was a dynamic process of recombination with different modes of ordering. Extending the authority of the government was underlined by concerns of securing the well-being of the people. Implementing the matrix of government structure was recombined with local institutions. I showed in Chapter Seven that this was exactly how the land question was managed. Critics of the First Republic's highland policies tell us that the government denied the highlanders' claims to landownership rights according to the traditional land regimes. Critics identified three directives that officially denied them of such rights. I showed that these directives originated from attempts to prevent highlanders from losing further land because of land grabbing. In fact, when the government introduced

the official practice for regulating land sales between highlanders and other people, it was essentially a hybrid practice of traditional verification of land access and state defined land regulations. Furthermore, I showed that when implementing the programs of frontier formation, the government recognized *de facto* that highlanders were 'owners of the land in the highlands'.

I have so far tried to avoid coming to any conclusive statement on whether the Vietnamese state under the First Republic was assimilationist or not. Some readers may probably feel that at times I tried to 'paper over' this issue by stating that this state formation process on the frontier bore too much ambiguity to fit into a story of assimilation. I could only respond to this charge in three ways, probably rather inadequately. First, if I begin with the conceptual underpinning of *not* treating the state as an *a priori* formed entity, then I am not about to jump to the statement that this is an assimilationist state after identifying what are the policies of state formation. Instead, I examined the process in which these policies were modified and how the state form was reshaped. Second, if I begin with the conceptual underpinning that state formation is a dynamic recombinant process, then the state may learn something new along the way and take on different forms. Even if forced to say that the state began as an 'assimilationist state', the conceptual framework I used and the empirical evidences that I presented showed that this was simply not the story from beginning to end of the period that I discussed. Third, I suggest that before we persist in branding any policies as assimilationist, there is a need to test the logic of such arguments in other parts and on the ethnic majority of the country. I believe that such arguments must be logically and empirically consistent.

I hope that I have opened a new chapter to how we understand Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier under the First Republic between 1955 and 1961. I hope the theoretical model that I used can help us to better understand the story after 1975 as well. There is a need to understand how collectivization and decollectivization were played out in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. We need to go beyond the existing assessments of the socialist government's *Dinh Canh Dinh Cu* program and adopt a thick description of this program before coming up with the verdict. We know even less about how the socialist government really manages the land question in the Central Highlands. We are now better informed about the migration

process to the Central Highlands, but even then, our understanding of the settling down process is still thin. I showed that during the process of settling down on the frontier, newcomers had to make tremendous adaptation to the frontier environment. Without any in-depth comparative ethnographic study of cultural and everyday practices among the settlers on the frontier and their place of origins, I do not think anyone should insist that frontier formation is a 'Vietnamization' of the Central Highlands. Then, there is always the question of how do highlanders feel and manage during the process of state formation on the frontier? My earlier discussion suggested that highlanders were not always against change in their agricultural practices. Through Hickey's work, we saw that in the late 1960s a number of highlanders had put into practice some of the changes that were first introduced under the First Republic. The diffusion model will continue to reveal the tensions and conflicts in the process of state formation on the frontier. But I am very sure that there is a different facet to the story after 1975 that will be more effectively uncovered by the recombinant model. After all, I first began thinking about the limits of the diffusion model while conducting fieldwork in the Central Highlands in the late 1990s.

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# APPENDIX A

## An Example Of Ngo Dinh Diem's 'But Phe'

70

VIỆT-NAM CỘNG-HÒA

PHỦ TÔNG-THỐNG

PHIẾU TRÌNH

Tuân-hành lệnh TÔNG-THỐNG, Đại-Tả Huỳnh-công-Tĩnh, Giám-Độc Nha Công-Tác Xã-Hội miền Thượng xin đệ-trình lên TÔNG-THỐNG các đề-nghị về biện-pháp ngăn-ngừa sự đốt-phá rừng của đồng-bào Thượng.

1)- Xin đặt luật-lệ để hạn-chế bớt việc đốt rừng làm rẫy như sau :

- a) Từ 1958 trở đi, đồng-bào Thượng phải xin phép ở Quận rồi mới được làm rẫy.
- b) Quận phải người tới cắm mốc phân rõ ranh-giới khu-vực được đốt rừng.
- c) Mỗi gia-dình có thể được cấp 2 khu "ô" (tức là ruộng khô) để luân-chuyên canh-tác.
- d) Từ nay về sau, các nông-dân Thượng chỉ được làm rẫy ở khu-vực "ô". Cấm ngặt việc bỏ nơi cũ mà phát đốt sang khu rừng mới.
- e) Ngoài khu-vực đã gó mốc ranh-giới, nếu để cháy lan sang rừng khác, sẽ bị phạt vạ.
- f) Mọi vi-phạm luật-lệ trên sẽ bị phạt vạ bằng tiền.

VIỆT-NAM CỘNG-HÒA  
 SÁO Y  
 Ngày 5/1/58

2)- Xin tăng-gia hoạt-động Nông-Tín-Cuộc ở vùng Thượng để giúp cho đồng-bào Thượng vay vốn, mơ-mang các việc trồng café, cây trái hoặc hoa-mẫu.

3)- Xin cấp thêm kinh-phí cho các Nha Canh-nông để lập nhiều vườn ương cây trái phát cho đồng-bào Thượng.

4)- Xin mở một chiến-dịch tuyên-truyền việc bài-trừ nạn đốt rừng làm rẫy.-

*Về việc trình báo địa phương để kiểm tra việc đốt rừng làm rẫy của đồng bào Thượng. Các địa phương có thẩm quyền phải kiểm tra kỹ lưỡng, nếu có vi phạm phải báo ngay cho Ban Chỉ đạo để xử lý. Ban Chỉ đạo.*

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