

## Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

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This paper provides a critique of Vietnamese communist policy in the Central Highlands since 1975. It first examines the impact of internal migration on the highlands; then it looks at how Vietnamese anthropologists have understood these developments and extracts from their studies references to the social and cultural changes induced by the policies of the new regime and the practices of some of its cadres. Finally, it briefly surveys what is known of the indigenous peoples' resistance to Vietnamese internal colonialism.

There are two main upland minority areas in Vietnam: one is on the northern border extending to the northwest of the country. Here the highlands are dominated by various “tribal” Tai groups, along with Hmong, Yao, and various Mon-Khmer speaking peoples. Most of these groups, except for the Mon-Khmer, were “invaders” from China and in that sense non-indigenous minorities. Along with considerations of space, this is one reason the northern highlanders will not be dealt with in this paper. The people of the Central Highlands, however, more properly fit the term indigenous peoples. They are commonly acknowledged to be original inhabitants of the southern mountain regions. Generally, Austronesian or Mon-Khmer speakers, these are stateless societies with the people living in the forests as either hunter-gatherers, slash-and-burn cultivators, or in some cases in more sedentary situations. They are best known to anthropologists through George Condominas's now classic study of one of these groups, the Mnong Gar, in *We Have Eaten the Forest* (1957, 1977). More recently Gerald C. Hickey produced his impressive two-volume ethno-history of the Central Highlands, *Sons of the Mountains* (1982a) and *Free in the Forest* (1982b).

This is not the place to resume an outline of the history of the Central Highlands, but Hickey makes it clear that these societies have their own dynamic history and are not “living fossils”, and that they have had continuous relations with lowland states: the Khmer, the Cham, the Lao, and the Vietnamese. These relations have varied from ritual ones with the Khmer to tributary ones with the Vietnamese: from trading to slave raiding. It was French colonial missionaries who finally established beach-heads in the mountains and paved the way for ethnic Vietnamese settlers there. The French also created “montagnard battalions”, and through them a tiny highland intelligentsia formed (Hickey 1982*b*). Once in contact with the ideas of modern nationalism they were attracted to the idea of highland independence and established an organization called *Le Front Unis pour la Liberation des Races Opprimés* (FULRO). During the American intervention in Vietnam their Special Forces continued the practice of highland battalions and kept FULRO’s hopes alive.

The Vietnam War had a devastating impact on the Central Highlands, where some of the most intense fighting, bombing, and use of defoliants occurred. The outcome is best captured by George Condominas, who returned to the field during this conflagration and found the Mnong “decimated”:

They were driven from their territory by the Army, and had been further reduced by the consequences of their forcible removal [malnutrition, epidemics, loss of their zest for life]; now they had but two alternatives: they could take to the bush and thereby preserve their liberty, but they would be obliged to endure bombardments and grave consequences should they be captured — all this without being able to lead their traditional way of life; or they could submit to the orders of foreign masters and accede to being penned in the Special Forces camps where, depending on age and sex, they were transformed into beggars or docile hirelings. (Condominas 1977, p. xv)

Jacques Dournes, who lived among the Central Highlanders for twenty-five years, called this the “era of concentration camps”. He wrote:

I have known a little girl with large, scared eyes; she lay for more than twenty four hours on the corpse of her mother who

had been killed during an operation where the national army used montagnard civilians as a buffer against an attack by the Front [National Liberation Front].... At the camp of Dam San 6000 Montagnards are without land and have no water. Uprooted, unemployed, dirty, they beg American rice and cover themselves with Western rags. (Dournes 1980, p. 10)

The disruption to the highlanders' way of life was so extensive that by 1973, according to Hickey,

The existing ethnolinguistic maps were rendered invalid. An estimated 200,000 highlanders died during the Vietnam War, and an estimated 85 percent of the villagers were forced, one way or another, to flee as refugees. (1982*b*, p. 290)

After the war ended in April 1975 it was hoped that the highlanders would be able to return to their mountain villagers and rediscover their dignity and way of life. Sadly, it was not to be.

We know relatively little about what has happened in the Central Highlands since the communists took power in the south. Only Vietnamese ethnographers have been permitted to do research in the region and consequently they are an important source of information concerning the current way of life of the indigenous people there. Unfortunately, they are constrained by their narrow theoretical perspective and by politics concerning both what they are able to see (cognitively) and say (Evans 1985). This paper attempts to gather the scattered available information on the Central Highlands. It first examines the impact of internal migration on the highlands, then it looks at how Vietnamese anthropologists have understood these developments and extracts from their studies occasional references to the social and cultural changes induced by the policies of the new regime and the practices of some of its cadres. Finally, it briefly surveys what is known of the indigenous peoples' resistance to Vietnamese internal colonialism.

### The Central Highlanders

The Central Highland provinces are Gia Lai–Con Tum (Kon Tum), Dac Lac (Darlac), and Lam Dong (see Figures 1–3). Naturally,

the highland groups in these provinces overlap into neighbouring provinces, such as Song Be or Nghia Binh, or into Cambodia or Laos. Officially, there are fifty-four ethnic groups in Vietnam, including ethnic Vietnamese or Kinh. In the Central Highlands the main groups in rough order of size of population are Jarai (180,000), Ede (129,000), Bahnar (96,000), Kohor (56,000), Sedang (50,000), Hre (n.a.), Mnong (40,000), Raglai (n.a.), Stieng (560), Ko Tu (n.a.), Jeh-trieng (11,000), Ma (23,310), Co (n.a.), Cho Ru (7,900), Brau (1,600), and Rmam (137). The Jarai, Ede, Raglai, and Cho Ru are grouped among Austronesian speakers, while the rest are Mon-Khmer. The population of the Central Highlands in 1979 was 1.5 million, which included 764,600 ethnic Vietnamese, or approximately 50 per cent of the highland population. The growth of the Vietnamese population in the highlands has been dramatic in the past thirty years. In 1936 it was around 32,750; by 1970 it was 448,349 (Hickey 1982*b*, p. 303); and by 1979 it had nearly doubled again. In 1979 the lowest proportion of Kinh were in Gia Lai–Con Tum, accounting for 40 per cent of the population (250,333 persons), in Dac Lac they were 60.3 per cent (290,936 persons), while in Lam Dong they accounted for 69.5 per cent (unless indicated otherwise the above figures are taken from Le Duy Dai [1983]).

### New Economic Zones, Migration, and Resettlement

The Central Highlands populations have borne the brunt of inter-provincial population movements in Vietnam since 1975, and this has meant occupation of minority peoples' lands by lowland Vietnamese immigrants and led to tension between the two groups. Three main reasons have been given by Hanoi for population relocation: (a) the relocation of people displaced by the war back to their home villages, (b) the redistribution of peoples from overpopulated rural areas and cities, (c) the securing of border areas with Vietnamese rather than supposedly less reliable ethnic minority groups. Such policies were not new. During partition the northern regime sent perhaps 1 million people into the northern highlands, while the southern regime

relocated 58,651 refugees from the north after 1954, often Catholics and including various Tai-Nung groups, in the Central Highlands. The post-1975 plans for population spatial “rationalization”, however, were distinguished by their ambitiousness.

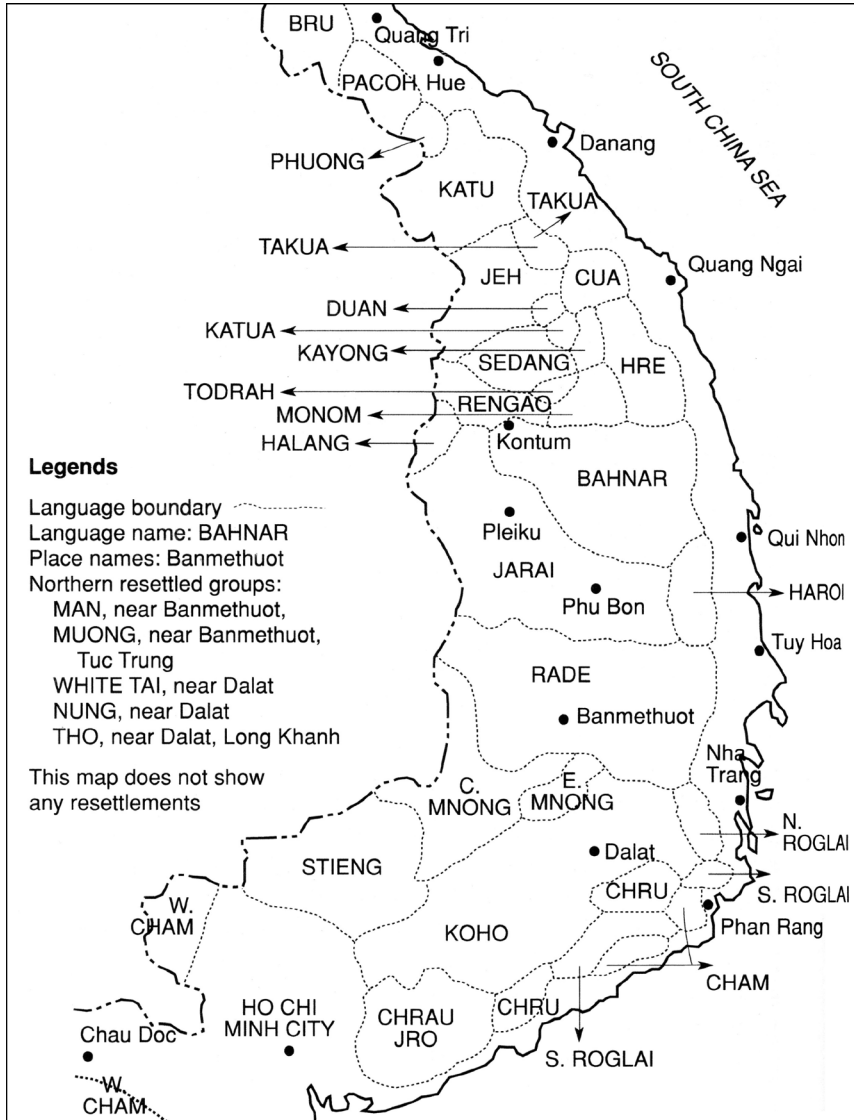
Jacqueline Desbarats has analysed the Vietnamese Government’s attempts at population relocation for the whole country from 1975 until the early 1980s. The aim of the policy, as she points out, was to redeploy labour. Or as Vietnamese official statements put it, to “rationally” distribute labour. It was planned to relocate 10 million people by the end of the century. This involved movement of people out of southern cities swollen by the war, a relocation of people from the overcrowded northern cities and Red River Delta into the south, and the resettlement of “nomadic hilltribes”.

The Second Five-Year Plan (1976–80) called for the transfer of 4 million people overall: 1.5 million residents of large Southern urban centres to be settled in rural areas, and 2.5 million Northerners from the most overcrowded provinces to be transferred South.... In addition, the government intended to settle approximately 700,000 members of the Central Highland nomadic hill tribes. (Desbarats 1987, p. 8)

Desbarats comments that these movements were poorly organized, especially to virgin New Economic Zones (NEZs), leading to resistance by settlers and therefore increased use of coercion by the authorities; many urban dwellers had never been farmers and were unprepared for NEZ life in every way; and, the government held a naive view of “empty”, “virgin” territory. As Desbarats drily observes, it was often this way because the terrain was unsuitable for farming.

Resistance, however, did not lead to a reappraisal of the policy, only a revision of its ambitions during the Third Five-Year Plan (1981–86). During 1976–80 the government had hoped to move 4 million people, but achieved only 1.3 million; during 1981–85 the plan was revised down to 1 million persons, and this was barely achieved.

FIGURE 1 Ethnolinguistic Map of the Vietnamese Central Highlands



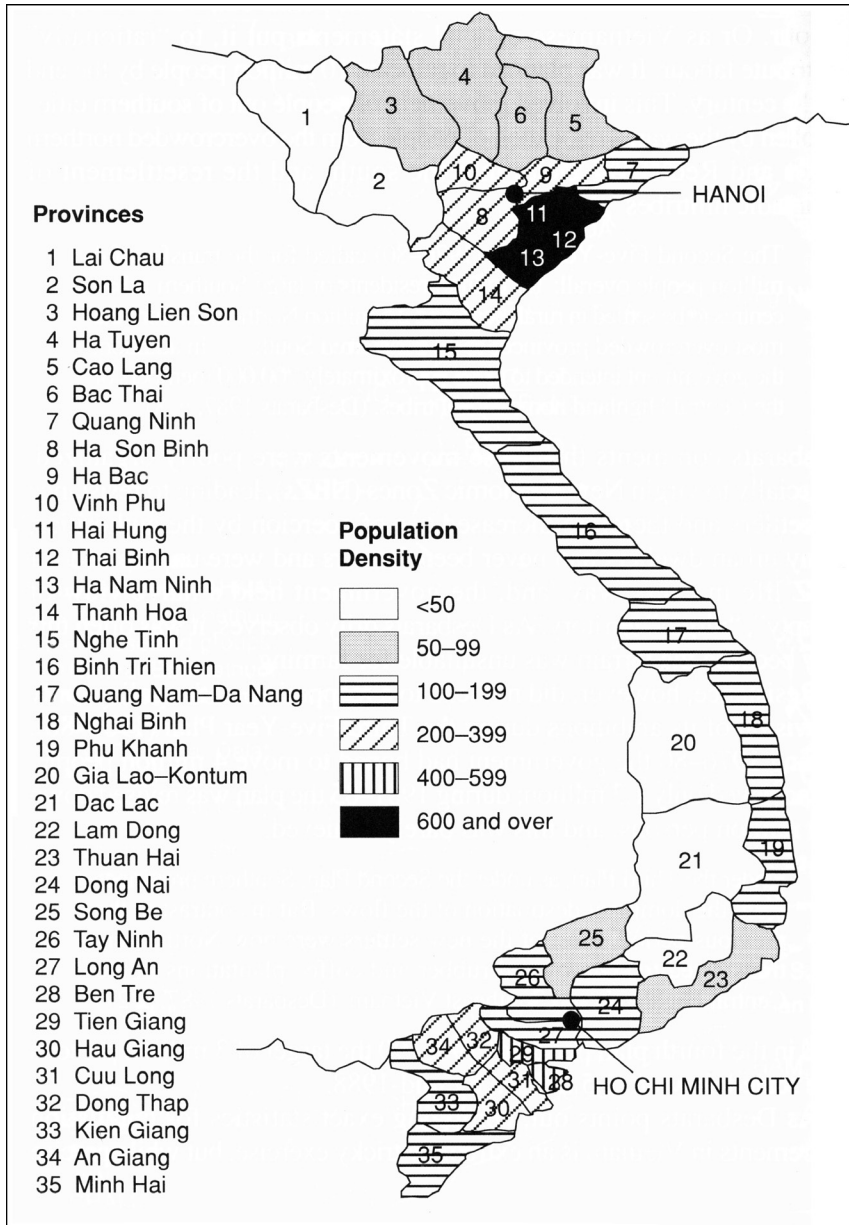
Source: Gregerson and Thomas, eds. (1980, p. xi)

Under the Third Plan, as under the Second Plan, Southern provinces were the dominant destination of the flows. But in contrast to the previous period, most of the new settlers were now Northerners transferred to state-owned rubber and coffee plantations in the Central Highlands and Southeast Vietnam. (Desbarats 1987, p. 27)

And in the fourth plan period of 1986–90 the target of 3 million persons was scaled down to 1.5 million by mid-1988.

As Desbarats points out, compiling exact statistics for population movements in Vietnam is an extremely tricky exercise, but while precise figures are elusive, general calculations of volume are possible and thus a basically accurate picture can be constructed. While her main interest is not the Central Highlands, her calculations show that between 1976 and 1979 the Highland province of Dac Lac, and its neighbour, Song Be, received the largest number of NEZ settlers (in excess of 55,000), with the other Highland provinces of Gia Lai–Con Tum and Lam Dong receiving the next largest (between 28,000 and 55,000). In the next plan period these provinces swapped places with Gia Lai–Con Tum and Lam Dong, receiving the largest inflows (in excess of 39,000) followed by Dac Lac and Song Be (between 20,000 and 39,000). Like Desbarats, I have used the scattered information contained in radio broadcasts to update her findings, so that in Dac Lac, for example, from 1975 to 1986 176,000 people resettled in the province, and from 1985 to 1989 a further 31,500 settled, making a total of 207,500 persons who migrated into the province over a period of fifteen years. From 1986 to the end of 1988 a further 40,000 people resettled in Lam Dong, bringing the total to between 110,000 and 130,000 immigrants between 1976 and 1988. It is hard to get updated figures for Gia Lai–Con Tum, because many of the figures are buried under general statements and statistics about settlers in the Central Highlands. Total movements for the decade 1981–90 were approximately 2 million, including intra-provincial and inter-provincial movements, an achievement well short of the government's initial aims. And while perhaps only a quarter of those ended up in the Central Highlands, they had a major impact on the highland region — mostly unfavourable. From very early on it

**FIGURE 2** Population Distribution in Vietnam, by Province



Source: Jones and Fraser (1984, p. 204)



became clear to the leadership in Hanoi that there were problems with their population relocation policy, and while criticisms of the policy have become more vocal over the years it has not been abandoned. Thus an appraisal of the programme in early 1990 provided both damning criticisms of it while at the same time spelling out future targets. Thus information gathered from eleven provinces provide the following far-from-glowing picture of the NEZs:

27 per cent of the families which have resettled are much better off than before, 48 per cent have a standard of living equal to or a little bit better than before, and 25 per cent are worse off than before. (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Far East*, 3 April 1990)

It goes on to say that the programme has failed in most of its aims and that “the results obtained do not rationalize the amount of capital invested (equivalent to 67,000 taels of gold) in building NEZs during the period 1981–88”. The programme has had little impact on heavily populated areas and the lives of those in NEZs has been hard. Furthermore, the “need for self-sufficiency in food grain has resulted in the heavy destruction of forests in various new economic zones”. Nevertheless, between 1990 and the year 2000 the government still plans to try to relocate a further 2–3 million people.

Vietnamese ethnographer Le Duy Dai has given some details of the sociological problems encountered by Vietnamese settlers in the mountains. In particular he makes special reference to the differences between long-term Vietnamese residents in the highlands, beginning with those who settled prior to the post-1954 influx, and then those who moved to the Central Highlands after 1954, and later on Vietnamese relocated into the region after 1975. There has been suspicion and hostility between these groups, and consequently “marriages between different groups, especially those who came before and after 1975 are extremely rare” (Le Duy Dai 1983, p. 32). The difference in religious affiliations among the groups contributes to this. Thus he writes:

According to the Census of 1976 around 30 per cent of the Vietnamese population have no religion (less 15 per cent in Gia Lai–Con Tum, over 50 per cent in Dac Lac, and less than 30 per

cent in Lam Dong). Of the remaining population, more than 40 per cent are Christians, less than 40 per cent are Buddhists, and more than 5 per cent are Protestants. Most of the Catholic Christians are migrants from North Vietnam after 1945. Those who hold other religions such as Cao Dai and Hoa Hao [two syncretic, formerly millennial sects] often come from Central Vietnam. People with different religious beliefs certainly hold different social viewpoints. This difference creates social barriers between different groups of people. (Ibid., p. 32)

These differences were also expressed in “regionalism”. Thus people from different areas of Vietnam who were relocated into an NEZ to set up an agro-industrial complex or co-operative would effectively divide into two independent bodies because of economic and political rivalry.

Due to poor facilities and economic and social deprivation, many settlers abandoned the NEZs. During a visit to one settlement in Song Be province in early 1980 I could not help being struck by the sense of desolation I found there. People were living in newly constructed single-room huts which looked as though they would blow away with the first strong wind, while the newly cleared land would still take years and much labour before becoming fully functioning paddy fields. The hospitals and schools were rudimentary even by Vietnamese standards, and this was considered one of the better settlements. The people I spoke with were bewildered and forlorn. Not surprisingly, many abandoned these settlements and illegally slunk back into the cities or to their old villages. Time and again in the reports on population relocation in Vietnam one comes across reports of chaos and mismanagement. The following long account is representative:

The most difficult problem at present is grain. During this year's first quarter, the irrational supply of grain caused a lot of hardship to people who had just arrived in the new economic zones. According to state regulations, the provinces are required to provide three months' supply of grain to families leaving for the new economic zones. For the sake of convenience, some localities have agreed to deliver that grain to the grain corporation at the point of departure with the families receiving grain at their destination. However, things have not happened

like that in reality. The grain supply for households leaving Thai Binh Province for the new economic zones was delivered to the provincial grain corporation; however, on arrival in Dac Lac, those households were told that the provincial grain corporation could not sell them any grain at all because Dac Lac was facing a grain shortage itself. (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 27 April 1988)

As a solution some suggested that it would be best to supply the would-be settlers with grain to take with them, but this would only add further costs and burden to an already strained transportation system. Another difficulty was that the receiving provinces and areas rarely received the money promised by the central government to cover the expenses of setting up new settlements, and they could not supply the capital themselves. So, rather than arriving in places with proper roads, housing, and water supplies, settlers sometimes found themselves virtually dumped in the wild. Furthermore, these new areas not only failed to relieve economic pressures elsewhere but became a burden on the wider economy because of their failure to achieve economic self-sufficiency. In late 1990 Dac Lac was continuing to suffer from serious food shortages and relief had to be provided by the central government (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 29 September 1990).

One serious consequence of the lack of preparation was that settlers resorted to slash-and-burn farming (probably of a dangerous variety that causes uncontrolled fires), illegal timber gathering and logging, and the hunting of endangered species in order to make ends meet. In other words, the environmental destruction mentioned earlier was also a consequence of the relocation policy and accelerated a trend which has seen Vietnam's forest cover reduced from 44 per cent of the country in 1945 to 22 per cent in 1985. This degradation, however, is almost invariably blamed on the ethnic minorities. A June 1987 editorial in the party paper *Nhan Dan* on environmental protection singles out the highlanders for special attention: "The movement to resettle the ethnic minorities for sedentary farming has helped reduce the incidence of bushfires and deforestation" (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 9 June 1987). By comparison the

destruction wrought by anarchic Vietnamese immigrant settlers in the highlands, or by rapacious forestry companies and illegal logging receives relatively little attention. The following report in mid-1990 on “indiscriminate exploitation of forests” is exceptional:

Many organizations and individuals have felled trees with precious timber for export or for illegal sale in the country. A number of state-run units, such as the Song Hieu Union of Agro-Forestry Enterprises, have failed to impose the ban on forest access and have illegally exploited thousands of cubic meters of timber from forest reserves. (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Far East*, 26 July 1990)

Another feature of uncontrolled logging by large companies, about which there is no hard information, is that they create roads into forests thereby opening them up for more slash-and-burn activity by lowland Vietnamese, and to hunters for wild species of animals and rare plants. This no doubt partly accounts for the reports of “unauthorized” people departing for (rather than running away from) the highlands (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 18 April 1988). Something like the rough-and-tumble of a “Wild West” situation seems to have developed in the mountains. Barry Wain reports that 10,000 “freecomers” poured into Dac Lac to a mixed reaction from local officialdom. They upset “the plan” and clashed

with residents over land, and [made] a habit of chopping precious forest trees for firewood. But says Nguyen An Vinh, Deputy Chairman of Dac Lac, “Most of these people are much more determined to build a new life than those who move according to the plan.” (Wain 1988)

Ho Xuan Ma, Vice-Chairman of the province’s NEZ committee is less happy with their arrival: “They’re destroying our forests and getting into conflicts with the minorities,” he told Murray Hiebert, who reports:

Spontaneous migrants often move into existing villages, settling on land between houses and forcing minority villagers to move because they have no land left for gardens, Ma said.

An ex-Special Forces highlander told Hiebert:

There are many conflicts with ethnic Vietnamese trying to take our land, but the authorities help settle these problems. Usually if an ethnic Vietnamese wants our piece of land, they have to pay us compensation. (Hiebert 1989)

One has a right to be slightly sceptical about the claims of compensation made by this ex-inmate of a re-education camp, and more weight can be placed on his report of “many conflicts with ethnic Vietnamese”.

A further example of anarchic population movement is that of highland minorities from the environmentally stressed northern highlands. This time we have inter-minority conflict:

Since the late 1980s, tens of thousands of Hmong and Dao [Yao] farmers have moved from areas bordering China to provinces south of Hanoi and to the central highlands, where they have often become embroiled in land disputes with the local population. (Hiebert 1992)

A report in *Nan Dan* spoke of 85,000 northern minority people migrating to Song Be province alone. Such developments considerably complicate the ethnic map as these people whom I referred to in the opening paragraph as “invaders” into northern Vietnam now press on into southern Vietnam.

A Closer Look at One Highland Province

Once again it is Le Duy Dai who has provided some detail on developments in the province of Gia Lai–Con Tum in the Vietnamese ethnographic journal *Dan Toc Hoc*. This province is the largest in Vietnam (25,542 square kilometres), and central population planners are quick to point out that it is the least inhabited and needs more people. The fact that large parts of the province are inhospitable because of high mountain ranges (averaging 1,500–2,500 metres) does not seem to figure in their calculations. The plain silliness which enters into much command planning can be seen in the fact that planning officials uncritically adopted remarks by the former Communist Party General Secretary, Le Duan, that each district

should have at least 200,000 persons, regardless it seems of the nature of the districts! This is not the place to go into the anomalies produced by central planning, but it does give a small indication of the “mind-set” of these planners.

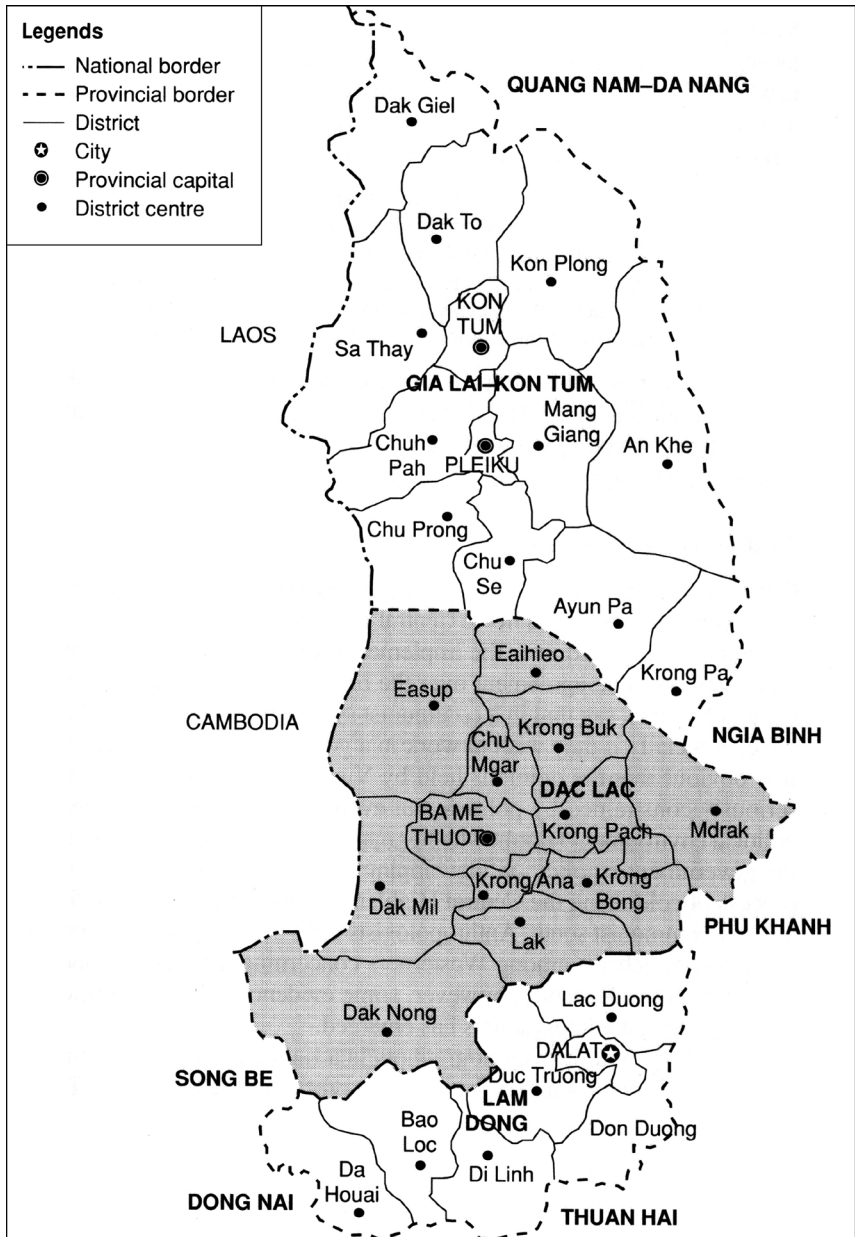
In the 1980s Gia Lai–Con Tum remained the one province where the Vietnamese population had not reached an absolute majority; I am unsure of the situation there in the early 1990s. As can be seen in Table 1, reproduced from Le Duy Dai, the Vietnamese population is overwhelming in the capital, Pleiku, and is substantial in three other districts — Con Tum, Chu Prong, and An Khe. Most of the Vietnamese in the province live in the cities or towns or in state-run agro-industrial-forestry complexes, usually in districts situated along the main roads. Few live among local groups and there is little intermarriage. Le Duy Dai gives details on the geographical distribution of the different ethnic groups throughout the province — the Vietnamese are on plateaus or in valleys, while the various ethnic groups live in “different types of settlement (nomadic, semi-sedentary, or sedentary) and different sizes and densities of population” (Le Duy Dai 1980, p. 57) as one moves up the mountain.

Le Duy Dai also gives a glimpse of the social consequences of the war by showing how a number of distinct highland groups have been thrown together in single villages. He cites figures from a survey of 147 *xa* or hamlets in which 10 per cent have three or four ethnic or local groups living in them, 32 per cent two groups, while 58 per cent still have only one group. He writes of the Dac Bia area, which was seriously affected by the war:

The distribution of population in this area is more complex. Within a *xa* there are many local or ethnic groups. For example, *xa* Kroong has the groups Ro-ngao, Jarai, Ha Lang and Vietnamese people; *xa* Ngoc Bay has the groups Bahnar, Ro-ngao, Gio Long, To-dra, etc. Other *xa* such as Vinh Quay, Dao La Doam Ket and Gia Chiem have at least two or three ethnic or local groups. (Ibid., p. 55)

Yet, he suggests that the mixing of groups here is less than in some other provinces, such as Thanh Hao to the north, and that

**FIGURE 3** Vietnam's Central Highland Provinces: Gia Lai–Kon Tum, Dac Lac, and Lam Dong





the pattern of settlement still tends to be a patchwork of different groups, although in the high mountains with very low population densities it is less so.

### Attitudes of Vietnamese Anthropologists

Generally, anthropologists in Vietnam have supported and approved of the government's policies in the Central Highlands. There may be some differences expressed over the implementation of certain policies, but there appears to be agreement over the broad direction of policy. One could, of course, say that in a communist system they have little alternative, especially if they wish to work in a government-funded institute. It is obvious that the opinions held by Vietnamese ethnographers are seriously constrained by politics, but even if they were in a different political environment I doubt whether many of them would object to the government's policy of "developing" the highlands. After all, the process of colonizing the Central Highlands began well before 1975 in the non-communist south. Anthropologists have been, of course, largely cut off from debates among Westerners concerning the rights of indigenous peoples. Recently, however, some evidence of a more critical attitude amongst ethnographers has emerged.

Reading Vietnamese ethnographers is a rather strange experience because it often gives the impression of a profound schizophrenia. The ethnographers are much more sympathetic to the minorities than the society at large, and they attempt to document the way of life of the indigenous peoples in detail. Yet this documentation is then filtered through an inadequate theoretical apparatus, which is further burdened by having to find rationalizations for the Party's current policies towards minorities. One can see this, for example, in the work of Dang Nghiem Van, the Vice-Director of the Institute of Ethnography in Hanoi and who is in charge of a research programme in the Central Highlands (which the Vietnamese call Tay Nguyen). In 1984 he presented an article "Glimpses of Tay Nguyen on the Road to Socialism", in which he seeks to demonstrate how the traditional social structure in the Central Highlands inhibits development.



**TABLE 1**  
**Distribution of Population in Districts/Towns**

<i>District</i>	<i>Viets</i>	<i>Bahnar</i>	<i>Sedang</i>	<i>Gie-Trieng</i>	<i>Jar'ai</i>	<i>Brau</i>	<i>Romam</i>
Pleiku	81,616	194	387	57	2,929		
Con Tum	38,230	17,088	5,064	290	3,826		
Dac To	7,820	1,686	19,427	119	66		
Sa Thay	3,633	1,658	4,357	6	6,184	306	158
Dac Glay	623		4,000	14,250	11		
Con Plong	1,032	3,186	12,471	8	7		
Chu Prong	29,252	615			39,007		
Mang Giang	17,923	38,960			25,928		
An Khe	45,700	30,213	22	13	910		
Chu Pat	8,796	390	1	2	38,867		
Ayun Pa	13,937	2,379	22	2	37,280		
Krong Pa	1,768	1			19,060		
Total	250,333	96,370	45,751	14,667	174,065	306	158

*Note:* Apart from the ethnic groups mentioned in this table there are other smaller groups of Tay, Thai, Muong, Ta Oi, and so forth.  
*Source:* Census Board of Gia Lai-Con Tum (October 1979).

In the old society, food and other products were squandered without any plan, without calculations. This did not serve production and reproduction. Food and wealth were common property and were divided equally among those who lived under same roof. Here the principle “from each according to his ability” was respected, but not the principle “to each according to his work”. The wealthy placed their property at the disposal of the village in order to get undeserved reputations. Slaves did not suffer from any discrimination but were regarded as relatives. (Dang Nghiem Van 1984, p. 44)

And further on:

The people’s wealth, the largest part of the food produced, nearly all the fowls and domestic animals, were spent on rituals for the village, family or oneself. Poverty and hunger were partly due to religious rites. Religion, in brief, fascinated the Tay Nguyen people and prevented them from building a life of their own. (Ibid., p. 46)

What is intriguing about Dang Nghiem Van’s reflections, and those of others, is how they wrestle with the problem of how “primitive communism” is incompatible with developmental socialism. Thus one other ethnographer, Luu Hung, writes:

Besides such positive aspects as the sense of equality, mutual assistance and altruism, the communal character with a sense of collectivity inherited from age-old society in the Central Highlands has several negative aspects hindering the process of social evolution. In socialist society, the communal relations must be expanded beyond the ties among kinsfolk and villagers, and manifestations of sectionalism stemming from the old communal relations must be overcome. Egalitarianism has become obsolete as it is an obstacle to the development of wisdom.... The habit of following the pattern already set by their ancestors and observing old customs fail to give filip to invention, technical innovations and scientific advances in production. On the contrary, it gives rise to self-satisfaction and simplicity. (1986, pp. 167–68)

And yet a folklorist from Gia Lai–Con Tum, Trinh Kim Sung, ponders whether traditional culture among the Central Highlanders could help foster people of a new type and build socialist culture. There is a continuation, to a certain extent, between the primitive communal

culture and people of such a community, and the culture and people of a socialist community. (1986, p. 164)

Dang Nghiem Van produces an almost quaint comparison between the “ancient Tay Nguyen man and the socialist man, which the revolution is going to build him into”. The comparison is reproduced in full in Table 2.

While these views reflect an ambivalence at the heart of the Vietnamese anthropologists’ views of “primitive society”, there is little ambiguity in their broad support for “socialist development” (Evans 1990, chaps. 1 and 9 discusses this ambivalence in Marxist-inspired anthropology). Dang Nghiem Van, for example, sees development as filling in “the time gap” for highland people who, it is believed, failed to evolve. He writes:

Sending people to Tay Nguyen to build this region is not only aimed at re-distributing the workforce on a national scale, but also at contributing to filling in the time gap for Tay Nguyen to advance to socialism. (1984, p. 53)

Or as the White Tai Vice-Chairman of the Committee for Nationalities, Cam Ngoan, and his Vietnamese deputy, Hoang Lam, told me in Hanoi in January 1986: “People of a lower civilization follow those of a higher civilization.” That is, the people of Tay Nguyen can be helped to make up for the “time gap” by having Vietnamese settlers in their midst.

What is especially interesting is the degree to which, in this patriarchal society, old-style evolutionist-cum-developmental socialist theory reserved a special hostility for “primitive survivals” like “matriarchy”. This emerged clearly during an interview with Professor Phan Huu Dat at Hanoi University in January 1986. During a discussion which was partly concerned with the curriculum for ethnographers at the university he informed me that the aim of ethnographic study of the economy is to see how “nomadic” slash-and-burn agriculture can be eradicated among the minorities. By studying the social system the students’ “aim is to overcome the vestiges of primitive society, because we know that in our mountains

**TABLE 2**  
**Comparison between Traditional Man and Socialist Man**

<i>Traditional Man</i>	<i>Socialist Man</i>
<p>1. Sincere and honest, selfless. Has a sense of self-respect. Abides by the principle “Each for everybody, everybody for each” on the scale of the village, the area, the ethnic. Has a simple management organization, aimed at defending his own interests and those of the community.</p> <p>2. Engages in collective production; adopts the slash-and-burn and crop rotation method; uses rudimentary implements. Production is unstable, non-specialized. Division of work is done according to the sexes: pays no attention to improvement of technique. Wastes money on spending. Can only meet the requirements of a simple, low living standard.</p> <p>3. Self-sufficient, consumes his products on the spot. Advocates egalitarianism in distribution. Takes no account of the individual’s labour productivity. Takes no account of the cost price and time. Pays no attention to enlarged production.</p> <p>4. Indulges himself in superstition, which seriously affects the people’s material and spiritual life. Is resigned to a life of want and backwardness.</p>	<p>1. Sincere and honest, selfless. Has a sense of self-respect. Abides by the principle “Each for everybody, everybody for each” on a national scale, on the scale of Tay Nguyen, of which the village is an organic part. Has a sophisticated management organization and wide co-operation with many people.</p> <p>2. Engages in large-scale collective production, on the basis of sedentary life and farming. Has a high technical level and high productivity. Sets great store by talent and technical advances. Plans his spending to meet the needs of a high living standard, both material and spiritual of an industrial society.</p> <p>3. Produces commodities to serve national and local plans. Takes account of cost price, time, and labour productivity. Opposes egalitarianism in distribution. Advocates remuneration according to talent and the work done. Accumulates funds with a view to enlarged production.</p> <p>4. Has high knowledge. Advocates coordination in productive labour between manpower and machinery at a high tempo and with a strict sense of labour discipline.</p> <p>5. Has self-confidence and confidence in the collectivity. Yearns for a life of plenty and high culture. Has a socialist style of life and thinking.</p>

*Source:* Dang Nghiem Van (1984, p. 47)

there are still many vestiges of primitive society”. Students study the family cycle to investigate “bad customs” in order to transform them. For example,

the custom among some minorities where the bridegroom goes to stay and work with the bride’s family, in which case the man is not allowed to leave to join the army, for example. This is a bad consequence of this custom.

Phan Huu Dat and others have singled out the longhouses of the Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and Ta Oi (in Binh Tri Tien province), and advocated that they be broken up. Phan Huu Dat argued that “the longhouse is a typical symbol of matriarchy”. He went on:

In each hamlet of these groups there are only three or four houses, each of which contains 50 to 100 persons. For example, the Ede in Ban Me Thuot. And each of these houses is under the rule of an influential woman, and means of production are held in common. Under the new social and economic conditions in Vietnam this is decadent. This decadence is being rejected by the young in Tay Nguyen who do not want to be tied to the large family group and wish to accumulate and therefore live in small houses. No more longhouses are built, although some people continue to live in the existing ones.

Cam Ngoan, during an interview in February 1987, also spoke of attempts to break up the longhouses in Tay Nguyen:

People used to live in houses of 100 families and women brought their husbands to live with them and the young men married out. Now we give people 1,000 to 2,000 square metres of land to build houses and gardens. By doing that we develop in them a sense of property. In the past these people worked together and distributed the product evenly and no-one was responsible for production. There were no private facilities in the longhouses.

A more measured opinion was given by Tran Van Loc, Head of the Department of the Central Highlands in Hanoi in February 1987. He spoke of attempts to break up the “community houses”, but said this was very difficult. Many of the elders resisted, and he said the Ede continue to live in longhouses. “We have to try to cater to the characteristics of each of the minorities”, he said.

We could perhaps begin by building little houses around the big house, and even building them of brick. But if we maintain the longhouse we cannot raise the level of culture and production of these people.

He acknowledged that there were differences among some of the ethnographers on this question, and shortly after this interview I asked Be Viet Dang, Director of the Institute of Ethnography, for his opinion. He felt that attempts to forcibly break up the longhouses were undesirable, and that if they were to dissolve, it should occur through a natural process of social evolution. Some ethnographers, according to Tran Van Loc, also oppose mass lowland migration into the highlands.

Recently, one can see a new mood being expressed, for example, by Dang Nghiem Van in a lengthy article on socio-economic development in the Central Highlands published in 1989. While couched in a politically acceptable manner, his criticisms of the population relocation programme in the Central Highlands are wide-ranging. He attacks forest destruction, and suggests that the felling of primary, as against secondary, forest has been severe. Both the state and the new settlers have treated the natural environment “as a sort of ‘instant noodle’, and an inexhaustible source” he wrote (1989, p. 74). The state and its officials are only interested in narrow economic development and have ignored the social dimension of development. Consequently

the solidarity between Kinh [Vietnamese] and the highland people which was handled successfully through two resistance wars has been violated ... in some places conditions are worse than during the anti-American wartime. The revolution has appeared to neglect them and religion [by which he means Christianity] is now filling the gap instead. (Ibid., p. 81)

Using the rhetoric of the government concerning “the people’s self-mastery” he also criticizes the giving of vast areas of land to state enterprises by central bureaucrats who simply drew lines on maps (ibid., pp. 94–95) and ignored the indigenous users of the land. What emerges from Dang Nghiem Van’s comments on the state takeover of

forest land is a problem which has emerged elsewhere: the absence of any specific owners of forest has meant that the groups who use the forest (the indigenous peoples and the settlers) are unable to invest in its long-term conservation. Thus a main thrust of his article is his recommendation that “mastery” over specific pieces of land be returned to indigenous peoples. With regard to forestry he argues:

The forests must be returned to the communes [of the indigenous peoples] ... Privately owned trees, such as beehive trees, medical trees must be returned to the people, according to their local traditions. The forest products, birds, forest vegetables, wood, etc. must be used by the people according to the law. Forestry enterprises should not be allowed to be a law unto themselves. (Ibid., p. 137)

He draws attention to the peculiarities of land ownership and use among the various minorities in the Central Highlands. For example, among the Ede collective lineage property was inherited matrilineally and that this, he suggests, must be respected. In passing he criticizes “ethnocentric” attempts to break up longhouses and force people to build houses on the ground Vietnamese style (ibid., pp. 111, 120). He also points out that the various minorities have a range of agricultural practices; not all of them engage in only slash-and-burn farming, but some have paddy fields. He also argues for a more nuanced understanding of slash-and-burn agriculture. Ethnographers and policy makers must ask why it is so economically and socially attractive to the minorities (ibid., p. 108). In other words, he argues that planners must reconsider their generalizations about the way of life of the minorities and the need for “sedentarization”. He documents various clashes that have occurred due to misunderstanding of the situation of land use among the minorities. He notes ironically of the whole programme:

People from the plains who used to farm paddy fields now farm dry rice fields, cultivate industrial crops and do forestry, while people who used to do slash and burn have come down to farm wet rice fields, to garden and engage in a sedentary life. (Ibid., p. 110)

It would have been more rational, he suggests, to incorporate highlanders into forestry and have the lowlanders doing wet rice, but the enterprises were a channel for resources for the Vietnamese and for corruption, so it did not happen.

Dang Nghiem Van also criticizes the bullying of the minorities by Vietnamese settlers and their exploitation of them by buying their forest products “dirt cheap”. The picture he paints of the difference between the two groups in the highlands is undoubtedly, for him, an embarrassing one:

Over half the areas of the ethnic groups are short of food for three months a year. In some places hunger is occasionally very serious. These people must sell their forest goods and handicrafts cheaply while having to buy other necessities at a high price. It will take a long time to abolish the contrast that shows the ethnic farmers bending down with baskets on their backs and in tattered clothes in the market crowded with Viets in fine clothes; the shabby “buons” [huts] beside the spacious houses of the Viet state-owned establishments. (Ibid., p. 119)

The picture of marginalization and impoverishment of the minorities in the Vietnamese Central Highlands is all too familiar for observers of indigenous peoples world-wide.

Within the confines of state policy Dang Nghiem Van’s article is a strong plea for careful consideration of the rights of minority people in the Central Highlands. There are many hints of earlier views expressed throughout his article, but it does signal an important shift in the thinking of Vietnamese ethnologists. Unfortunately, one suspects that the views of anthropologists count for little in the central planning organs of Hanoi’s developmental state.

### Central Highlands Minority Policy

At its First National Congress in 1935 the Vietnamese Communist Party adopted the standard Comintern line on “national minorities”, promising them autonomy:

that is the right to solve local affairs, to use its mother tongue in its political, economic and cultural life, and to choose its own



leaders in political and economic affairs. (Viet Chung 1968, p. 12)

This is reiterated in the amended constitution of North Vietnam in 1960, which also states:

Autonomous zones may be established in areas where people of national minorities live in compact communities. Such autonomous zones are integral and inalienable parts of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. (Ibid., p. 16)

Autonomous zones were established in the northern mountains after the communists came to power in the north. In April 1955, a Thai-Meo Autonomous Region was set up in the northwest and a year later the Viet-Bac autonomous region was created in the northeast of the country. In 1957 there was an attempt to create a third autonomous zone in between the two others, but according to Bernard Fall (1962, p. 148) the composition of the region was so diverse that it became unmanageable and was dissolved two years later. In establishing these zones the Vietnamese were guided by the policies of the Chinese communists (Dassé 1976).

The existence of these autonomous zones in the north of the country was an important propaganda weapon in the hands of communist cadres during the war in the south, especially following the emergence of FULRO and political leaders among the Central Highlanders, many of whom were attracted by communist promises of autonomy. After the communist victory in April 1975, however, any hopes they had for autonomous zones in the Central Highlands were quickly dashed. Not only were none established in the Central Highlands, but those existing in the north were abolished. The ethnic Nung Chairman of the National Assembly Nationality Committee, Chu Van Tan, attempted to assure minorities that “although the autonomous regions are dissolved, the nationality policy of our State and Party is still considered important” (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 19 January 1976). But this renegeing on promises of autonomy, combined with the beginnings of mass relocation of Vietnamese into the Central Highlands, which of course would dilute the concentration of minorities in the region and reduce

their claims for autonomous areas, fuelled FULRO opposition and no doubt caused considerable disillusionment among highlander cadres.

The political context was one of already growing regional tensions between Vietnam and China in the north and Vietnam and Pol Pot's Cambodia in the south. In this situation the state wished to gain stronger control over its border areas which the minorities overlapped, and for that reason were considered less reliable than ethnic Vietnamese. Naturally, explanations for the change in policy have always been in terms of national "unification", and as Chu Van Tan suggested, it allows the government to "pay greater attention to the mountainous regions by practically helping the highlands and remote areas along the border" (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 19 January 1976). In early 1980, officials in Hanoi claimed to me, with what one suspected was a convenient humility, that their ally Laos had the correct policy of not promising autonomous zones. They, however, had been too influenced by policies in China (the enemy at that time), and the Soviet Union when what they needed was policies which suited "Vietnamese conditions". They also argued that in the established autonomous regions there were many minorities, and by giving the Tai or the Hmong the upper hand in them had proven disadvantageous to these smaller minorities. However, they did not recognize that substitution of Vietnamese control reproduced this imbalance on a grander scale.

For obvious reasons, the extent of armed FULRO resistance to Vietnamese control in the Central Highlands is unknown. It has never been on a large scale, although as Paul Quinn-Judge observed, FULRO

always had the capability of creating a sense of apprehension disproportionate to either its size or its activities and, at the moment, any insecurity in the Central Highlands upsets Hanoi's plans for extensive development of the area. (1982, p. 14)

What is clear is that a major Vietnamese attempt to crush the resistance occurred in the wake of the invasion of Cambodia, and between 1979 and 1981 the back of the resistance was broken through military campaigns and successful manoeuvres which allowed

Vietnamese internal security to trap key FULRO leaders (“Asia’s Forgotten War”, *Asiaweek*, 7 December 1986, pp. 35–36). According to some FULRO refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border, they had been reduced to stealing food from other highlanders (Ben Kiernan, personal communication) and could no longer rely on popular support. Under pressure, it also seems that the FULRO leadership turned its guns on itself and carried out several disastrous purges (Quinn-Judge 1982). It was reported that FULRO had been receiving some military aid from the Khmer Rouge after 1979 (Chanda 1981) as the Central Highlands border on north Cambodia and are linked through there to the Thai border. However, the extent of this assistance has never been clear. As far as I can ascertain there was little love lost between the Pol Pot regime and the minorities on Cambodia’s northern border, mostly Jarai and Rhade, among others. During a mid-1991 field trip to areas of Attopeu province in southern Laos, which border on the Vietnamese Central Highlands and on Cambodia, minority people there told me of having to absorb an influx of thousands of minority people from the Cambodian side of the border fleeing repression and fighting there. Furthermore, reports by FULRO remnants (“Asia’s Forgotten War”, *Asiaweek*, 7 December 1986, pp. 35–36) indicate that fleeing FULRO personnel had been detained, and in some cases executed, by the Khmer Rouge. If indeed there was ever an alliance it was purely one of convenience on the Khmer Rouge side.

Despite continued claims of success against FULRO (see, for example, an interview with the Lam Dong provincial military commander, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 22 February 1988, or the Chairman of the Council of State, Vo Chi Cong’s statement that Lam Dong “province was able to solve definitely the problem of FULRO forces in November 1987”, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 2 February 1988), reports in 1979 from Gia Lai-Con Tum spoke of small-scale engagements with “FULRO bandits” (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 4 August 1979). Remnants have continued to surrender to various authorities, the latest being a 400-strong group offering to surrender to the government in Phnom Penh on the condition that they would not be sent home (“Intelligence” 1992). It would be foolish to argue

that these forces are any more than nuisance to the Vietnamese, perhaps only being able to upset the expansion of tourism in the Central Highlands. But as we have seen, the highlands have been so flooded with Vietnamese settlers that the ability of FULRO to move among the population as it could before 1975 has been destroyed, and the effectiveness of highland armed resistance with it.

## Conclusion

The traditional Vietnamese state laid claim to the Central Highlands as tributary domains and as such they were incorporated into the modern Vietnamese state under the French. The original impetus for this assertion was part of the traditional court's desire to inflate its stature as a mini Middle Kingdom, and the emperor therefore claimed to have established relations with a "king of fire" and the "king of water" in the highlands — in reality, Jarai shamen. The existence of these tributary "states" has formed part of the highlanders' argument for regional autonomy (Hickey 1988, Afterword). Vietnamese anthropologists, however, have allowed themselves to be used to deflate such arguments in the interests of the "unified Vietnamese state". Thus Nguyen Tan Dac claims that there was no organization or clearly articulated identification among ethnic groups above the village level. The "villages in the central highlands are pre-nation social assemblages" (1986). He rightly criticizes the inflation of the status of the Jarai shamen by the traditional court, but asserts that their existence does not imply any supra-local identification. His argument is debatable — but unlikely to be seriously debated inside Vietnam itself where it will be used to justify state policies which deny minority rights. Yet despite his claims, it is clear that many traditional institutions among the highlanders, including that of the "king of fire" operate parallel to the Vietnamese-imposed administration, and even Dang Nghiem Van is ambivalent about this:

Reforms imposed from outside are sometimes mistaken and impatient and create a holding place for conservative forces. In fact, throughout the countryside there are parallel family systems, the revolutionary one and the traditional one. So, although the village chief system has been abolished, in fact the

“metao” or “potao” are still overseeing traditional activities. The customary courts are still established and perform according to custom. Of 80 cases of divorce and “ma lai” that were brought before the court more than 90 per cent had already been tried in a customary way. In Dray Hling collective farm, beside the manager there was a “polan” woman. In 1984, the polan woman died and another woman was immediately elected by the people. In 1987, the King of Fire in Ayun died and people there applied to the authorities to promote a new king. Meanwhile the proposed successor managed operations in the region. The problem is how, with study, to change the customs and conventions of these people slowly in order for them to be more suitable to current conditions and thereby avoid unnecessary confusion. (1989, p. 45)

Despite his appeals for tolerance, Dang Nghiem Van shows himself to be set in a mould fashioned by the Vietnamese state and its ideology. But his report does give some hope concerning the survival capacity of the indigenous cultures which have been swamped by Vietnamese.

The plight of indigenous peoples in Vietnam is no better than elsewhere, and perhaps it is worse given the absence of freedom on the part of these peoples to organize or to establish contacts with other indigenous peoples for solidarity. The promises made by the communists to the Central Highlanders have been broken, and the process of Vietnamization and colonization of the mountains for which they so heavily and opportunistically criticized the southern Vietnamese regime, has been carried forward by them with a vengeance. Hopefully, foreign anthropologists will be able to start field-work in the Central Highlands in the coming years. Only then will we begin to get a more accurate (which probably means “more depressing”) picture of what has been occurring there. And only with an infusion of outside ideas will Vietnamese ethnographers be able to see beyond their present confines and perhaps hazard bolder criticisms of the state’s policies.

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## NOTE

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