

CHASING TRACES

History and Ethnography in
the Uplands of Socialist Asia

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With Military Precision

A Reflexive Examination of Colonial Ethnography in Upland Tonkin

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BETWEEN 1897 AND 1904, French colonial infantry officers compiled extensive “ethnographic” reports on the highland peoples of what is now the northern frontier of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Colonial military ethnography was never a popular topic in social anthropology. It has been considered biased and unscientific, a crude tool for furthering the colonial agenda and deepening the domination of the colonized. Furthermore, as Remco Raben (2009, 556) put it, “There was a time when perusing [...] archives was an extremely suspect, if inevitable, activity that often gave rise to bitter comments on the limitations and bias of such documents.” I present in this chapter a case that disrupts that narrative.

I focus on the ethnic minority societies in the high borderlands of northern Vietnam, a linguistic and cultural composite of over 3.3 million individuals today, whose principal commonality is their distinction from the national ethnic majority, the Kinh. In a region where oral societies typically have left very little in terms of text and archeology, the tangible result of this military ethnographic push—eight thousand pages of handwritten reports, pictures, and maps—forms a significant body of ethnographies regarding early information on this high region and its inhabitants; nothing is even close to being comparable.

I do not seek to dive into the details of these ethnographic records in this chapter; I have done that elsewhere (Michaud 2013, 2015; Michaud and Turner 2016). For what remains to be analyzed regarding these records, I address this in a book manuscript that is currently under

construction. For this chapter, in step with the overarching issues Pierre Petit and I have underlined in the introduction, I focus on the progression of unearthing this military ethnography; putting this endeavor against a background of its critical, methodological, and ethical implications; and paying particular attention to logic and embedded practices. I take up the duty of remembrance for lost ethnography by these unambiguously incidental and gendered authors for whom such labels contributed to keeping their production in the shadows.

Critical reflexivity, with some storytelling, is a common thread throughout this chapter. But being critically reflexive can turn into a precarious affair. Social anthropology has insisted on its practitioners developing a sixth sense to foresee the methodological, ethnocentric, ethical, and empiricist snags that can damage or even scuttle their intellectual ship (Stocking 1991; Pels and Salemink 1999). Dealing reflexively with early ethnography thus presents robust challenges.

From reading and reflecting over the years on the forces of modernization in isolated upland societies in several Asian countries, I contend that when pushing this ethnological and historical data through the sifter of critical scholarship on egalitarian societies, layers of implications can be peeled. Discussing these colonial archives provides evidence of an early crystallization of power differentiation and, in the process, creates questions concerning context and methods that bring the moral dimension of any historical anthropology enterprise to the fore.

The Military as Incidental Ethnographers

My long-term research on upland groups of northern Vietnam during the colonial period involves the performance of an ethnography of ethnographers. In itself, this entails interesting gymnastics. While the true subjects of my research are the societies historically dwelling in the uplands, by ricochet, archives have led me to widen my gaze and include the colonial agents who came to the uplands, visited the locals and their homes, recorded their livelihoods, and, when they moved on, left behind evidence of people and places rarely discussed before.

Military colonial ethnography performed competently has not been very common around the world, but here is one interesting case. Let me address it through a short detour. When I investigated French missionary ethnographic texts from the colonial era twenty years ago (Michaud 2004,

2007), I was aware that reliability was going to be an issue. Catholic missionaries sent to Tonkin, as colonial northern Vietnam was then called, did not want nor need to care excessively for facts. Having internalized the wants of the Church, self-censorship operated effectually, and such writers ended up composing narratives that would primarily help their mission obtain more resources from their vicariate as much as from devout parishioners back in the motherland. With their exoticized stories, many missionaries assisted the Church hierarchy by making stronger cases to attract recruits. Enrollment from the French countryside came through the publication of colorful and somewhat fantasist accounts appealing to the believers' emotions and, if nothing else, made them reach for their pocket. It is only exceptionally uncommon that recruits like Paul Vial (1898), Alfred Liétard (1913), and François-Marie Savina (1924) went on to produce ethnographic writing venturing beyond the instrumentality of conversion and institutional reproduction to reach the level of genuine ethnography—by the day's standard, that is, as promoted for instance by the journal *Anthropos* from 1906 onward.

By comparison, for the military ethnographers of the years 1897–1904, it was security, precision, and political supremacy that were paramount. And unlike the Catholic Church, the colonial infantry had no need to generate its financial support or muster recruits.

As should be the case in such a tightly run and unequivocally hierarchical ship, military orders were to be followed scrupulously. This discipline resulted in diligently answering the detailed commands from the governor-general of Indochina, and as a foretold consequence, “each [military] sector without exception provided a notice accompanied by a map.” Then, “the notices of the sectors centralized in the chief town of each Territory, were submitted to the examination of an experienced officer, who made an overall report on the [Military] Territory” (Maître 1905, 200).

Unlike their missionary counterparts, the French military sought facts, not opinions, stories, wants, or hopes. Yes, individual officers still had their own agendas, which sometimes tainted their prose, but it was undeniably secondary to military reason and to the orthodoxy of organizational efficiency rather than answering to individual distinction—beyond subordinates wishing to make an impression on their commanding officers. Moreover, the top brass in Tonkin kept strict watch on data crunching, and the production of a final blend of reports for the general staff was meant to be accurate and tactical and ensure an efficient use of military resources (see fig. 2.1).

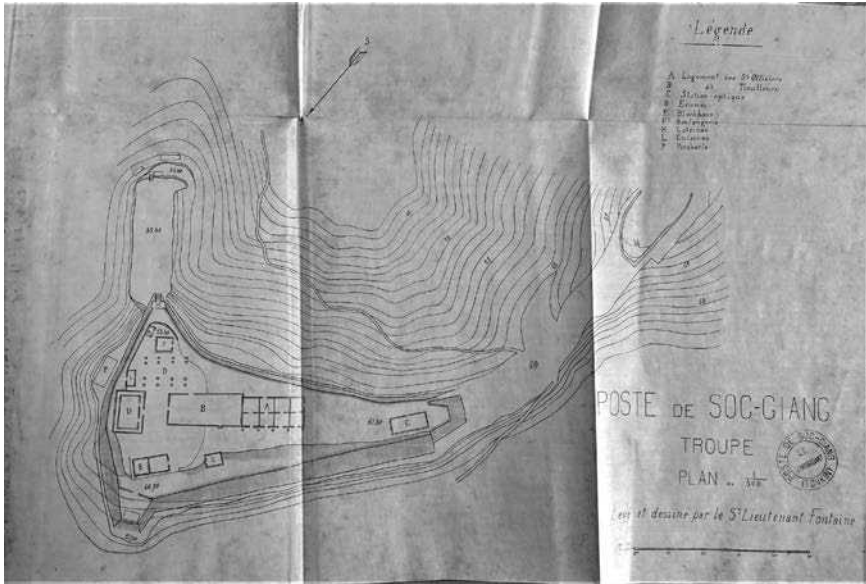


Figure 2.1. Methodical: A plan of the French military post of Soc-Giang (ANOM, 1898, GGI 66103). © J. Michaud.

A Methodological Challenge

Scores of such handwritten pages very precisely located in time and space have been sitting in vaults ever since; while a few of the original reports have been brought to light on occasion, most have been entirely forgotten, never translated or analyzed. Yet, this record contains a distinctive body of firsthand observations that says something unuttered about these remote societies; it is precious information in view of the paucity of reliable ethnographic data available in any language before European contact.

To get a sense of their content and atmosphere, I let these primary documents briefly speak for themselves. First, we find dozens of original and for the most part never before seen photographs that adorn many reports (see fig. 2.2). In truth, most do not differ much in style and intention from contemporaneous pictures of “tribes” and “savages” found in European colonies, but they come from distant locations where pictures had never been taken before. A serious analysis of such images clearly needs to take place.



Figure 2.2. Exotic: A photograph from a sector report of 1903 (ÉFEO, ME 318. Quan-Ba). © J. Michaud.

Along with photographs, a striking outcome of the 1903–1904 survey in particular was ethnolinguistic cartography. Handmade color maps locating each ethnicity were formally requested from all sector officers and duly created. Sadly, many originals have been lost or can no longer be located in archives. Figure 2.3 shows a remaining example from the Ba-xat Sector, 4th Military Territory. From this material, Commander Lunet de Lajonquière had a summary map drawn for the entire northern borderlands for his 1904 volume (Lunet de Lajonquière 1904), which became the first-ever ethnolinguistic map of northern Tonkin.

Then, in terms of the texts themselves, here are five telling samples illustrating the diverse methods and degrees of professionalism found in the field reports.

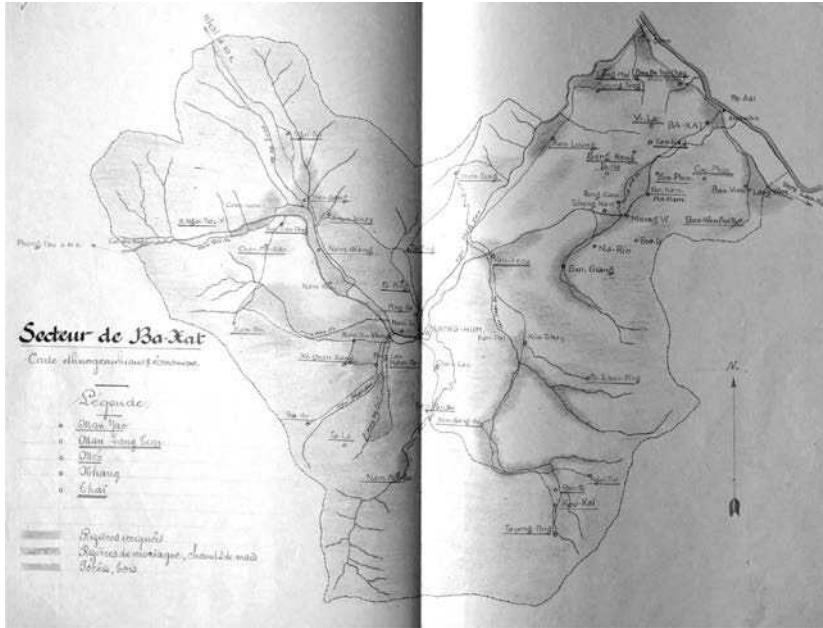


Figure 2.3. Agreeable: Hand-drawn ethnolinguistic and economic map of 1903 (ÉFEO, ME 331. Ba-Xat). © J. Michaud.

Vignette 1: Samples of Ethnography

The Man, who are great hunters and who can fish too, have the equipment necessary to engage in these kinds of exercises. We see these hanging in a corner of their homes: first a primitive crossbow, then a fork to spear the fish, and finally this strange gun that the Man Méo Tam make themselves from scratch, a matchlock with elongated barrel and without a stock, which cannot be shouldered and which one simply places against the cheek to aim. [...] They use these guns to hunt predators and other animals that come prowling around their homes or cause damage to their crops. (Sector of Dong Khe, ÉFEO, ME 301, 1903)

The Méo is a great hunter. With his matchlock he is not afraid to take on large predators and he can stalk a deer for days. For small birds he uses a blowgun with a stock. (Sector of Dong-Van, ÉFEO, ME 315, 1903)

The fauna of the region includes: tiger, tiger cat, bear, wild boar, deer, otter, porcupine, armadillo, monkey, and weasel. The main birds are: the eagle, the raven, the dove, woodcock, snipe, partridge, wild rooster and hen, the ordinary pheasant, and the silver pheasant. The natives hunt with rifles or using snares. During the year 1897 they brought to the Coc Rau post four tigers, a half-dozen tiger cats, weasels, deer, a porcupine, and an armadillo. (Sector of Coc-Rau, ANOM, GGI 66104, 1898)

To the inhabitant of the upper regions of Tonkin, to the montagnard, the forest is actually the *alma parens*, the great benefactor. He knows her every nook and cranny. In the troubled moments of his history, when war was plaguing villages in the plains with its horrors and devastation, it is to the forest that, poor, defeated, powerless to defend himself, he came to seek asylum and protection. She has sheltered him in her safe hidings, him with his family, his cattle, his provisions. When the rice ran out, she fed him, she gave him unreservedly her bamboo shoots, her succulent roots, all of the resources known only to the mountain folks. Thus, he loves her, he respects her, and only just does he preserve his fields against her attacks. (Sector of Bang Hanh, ANOM, GGI 66104, 1898)

**Vignette 2: *Mercuriales* (market price lists)
for the Sector of Ba-Xat (ANOM, GGI 66105, 1897).**

Merchandise	Unit	Price list per marketplace in piastres [\$] and sapèques [sap.]			Average price in sector
		Ban-Qua	Muong-Hum	Trinh-Thuong	
Rice	picul (60 kg)	\$2.65	\$3.00	\$2.50 to \$3.00	\$2.80
Paddy	picul (60 kg)	\$1.50	\$1.50	\$1.50	\$1.50
Maize	picul (60 kg)	\$1.25	\$1.25	\$1.25	\$1.25

(continued)

Merchandise	Unit	Price list per marketplace in piastres [\$] and sapèques [sap.]			Average price in sector
		Ban-Qua	Muong- Hum	Trinh- Thuong	
Quartered pork	annamite kilo (0.6 kg)	120 sap.	100 sap.	100 sap.	107 sap.
Quartered buffalo	annamite kilo (0.6 kg)	64 sap.	60 sap.	60 sap.	61 sap.
Pork fat	annamite kilo (0.6 kg)	130 sap.	120 sap.	120 sap.	123 sap.
Chicken	annamite kilo (0.6 kg)	120 sap.	100 sap.	100 sap.	107 sap.
Fish	annamite kilo (0.6 kg)	50 sap.	50 sap.	45 sap.	48 sap.
Duck	per item	400 sap.	350 sap.	350 to 450 sap.	400 sap.
Rice alcohol	bottle	70 sap.	60 sap.	80 sap.	70 sap.
Salt	picul (60 kg)	\$4.00	\$4.00	\$6.00	\$4.66
Opium, raw	annamite 100 g	\$2.65	\$3.00	\$2.50 to \$3.00	\$2.80
Chinese tobacco	annamite 100 g	\$0.08	\$0.10	\$0.10	\$0.09
Matches	pack	\$0.07	\$0.10	\$0.10	\$0.09

Vignette 3: Sample of Ethnocentric Thinking

For two years, great efforts have been made both in Cao Bang and in the sectors, to bring Natives to cultivate special products, which later, under the leadership of European settlers, may also enjoy a great development and can definitely ensure the region's wealth: coffee, tobacco, opium. But, despite our own example and advice, we only encountered negative results with the Natives, whose laziness and carelessness are ill-suited for the care and time that these cultures require. (Circle of Cao-Bang, ANOM, GGI 66103, 1898)

Vignette 4: Methods Made Explicit

The information given in the second part [the catalogue of "races"] has been collected: 1) For the Chinese, directly by the Sector's Commander from a Chinaman in Ba-xat who can speak French; 2) For the Thais, directly by the Sector's Commander from the Tia-Tian of Van-xéou, the Ly-truong of Muong Hum serving as the interpreter; 3) For the Nhangs, directly by the Sector's Commander from the Ly-truong of Ba-xat, who can speak some French. (Sector of Ba-Xat, ÉFEO, ME 331, 1903)

And for the fifth vignette, Commander Auguste Bonifacy, the officer closest to qualifying as a proper ethnologist at the time, expresses his intelligence of the situation in resolutely reflexive terms. Here, he brings to light the positionality of actors in the field and highlights the distinction between descriptions of material culture, farming, and other aspects of everyday life, which we can assume to be accurate, and those about ethnological institutions and concepts, which in truth standard officers would have no reason to know about.

Vignette 5: Limitations of the Ethnography

Data relating to psychological life is often wrong. [Ethnic Vietnamese] interpreters habitually cannot admit that the natives may think differently, and consider certain of their customs as immoral and simply do not translate the information relating to these. [. . .] In addition, the officers conversant in ethnography and ethnology and owning books on these matters are very rare.

As a consequence, the details given are sometimes worthless, while the facts pertaining to customs that have great importance for an ethnographic perspective are ignored. [. . .] In addition, some remains of primitive customs—group marriage, levirate, endogamy, exogamy, etc.—have not been researched, the officers not knowledgeable in ethnology generally ignoring these customs. Same with what belongs to the social life; the types of property, the formation of clans, rules relating to justice: ordeals, judicial evidence, have generally not been treated, sociology still being a little-known science. (Ha-Giang Military Territory, EFEO, ME 313, 1903)

My Positionality in the Shape of Storytelling

Back to the story of this body of archives, I have come upon it by accident. During my first visit to the national CAOM (Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer) in Aix-en-Provence in 1996, since renamed ANOM (Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer), I stumbled on a report showcasing military ethnography. I did not make much of it, as my eyes were set on other targets. For readers not familiar with the ANOM, it is worth sharing a few particulars on research methods.

Once the researcher has been assigned a seat in the modern and spacious reading room, the standard procedure is then to be handed one protective archive box, a bulky object containing the document one has asked to see from the catalogue, selected by its title and the series it belongs to. That box hosts the document requested but also dozens of others belonging to the same numerical sequence, despite them usually having nothing to do with each other; these documents just happened to be filed on the same day in the same office in colonial Hanoi. Looking for a particular document, I often found that it did not live up to the enticing outline jotted down in the catalogue. But by regulation, only one box can be in hand at any given time, with a maximum of only a few consecutive boxes per day, with wide gaps between official times of release from the storage desk. Thus, when the initial target proves disappointing, and unlike older times when one was not allowed to photograph anything and thus made good use of these gaps to record by hand, researchers today take pictures for later examination. There is thus time to cruise through other papers that simply happen to live in

the box they have in hand, biding time until they could swap this box for a new one with its fresh promises. As everyone eventually comes to realize, it can pay to be nosy.

Over following visits, I bumped in this way into two more ethnographic reports from the Military Territories, this time dutifully writing down the references for future consideration, but still clueless as to the bigger picture (see fig. 2.4). Concurrently over the same ten years or so, I was also visiting other archives, including those of École française d'Extrême-Orient (ÉFEO) in Paris. There, I likewise ran into an intriguing stream of military reports from the northern frontier showing resemblances with the ones in Aix-en-Provence, though all were dated a few years later. At the ÉFEO, these military documents were easier to spot as all had been catalogued together. Still busy chasing other rabbits, I initially assumed that these were simply copies of the ANOM reports that I had already spotted in Aix. That is, until that fine day in 2010, when the penny finally dropped: the reports I had encountered so far in the ANOM were dated 1897–1899, and the ones at ÉFEO were all from 1903–1904. They were not copies

of each other, and they had ended up in different repositories because they had been handled by different colonial bodies. Indeed, they turned out to be two entirely separate lots from two distinct initiatives, even if at times involving some of the same officers in the field. At last I had connected the dots and realized the full scale of the matter: two major investigations had closely followed each other in exactly the same locations, involving between them a total of seventy military officers posted all over the northern highlands, who penned over eighty-five separate reports of entirely original material. I eventually published the story of their making in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (Michaud 2013).

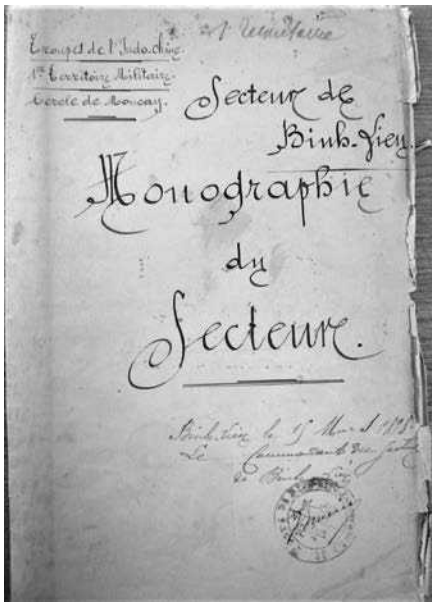


Figure 2.4. Informative: A typical sector report cover from 1898 (ANOM, GGI 66102). © J. Michaud.

This unintended turn in my journey through the archives later struck me as an illustration of one of the most mysterious features of research, combining curiosity and a pinch of opportunism with sheer luck (see fig. 2.5). Initially, I did not have the project to dive into this ethnographic material or write about it. But gradually, when faced with this wealth of ethnography that contrasts so sharply with the paucity of other sources dealing with these remote populations at that time, I had to accept that I just could not ignore the significance of this material. But why me, a social anthropologist? Could these documents not have waited for proper historians to come to the repositories and perform their magic? The fact, however, is that historians' interest in stateless and often illiterate peoples is modest at best.¹ Outside the subfields of *École des Annales* and micro-history (Ginzburg, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993; Brooks, DeCorse, and Walton 2008), a majority of historians still put their focus on documents: their nature, their authority, their details, the context of their

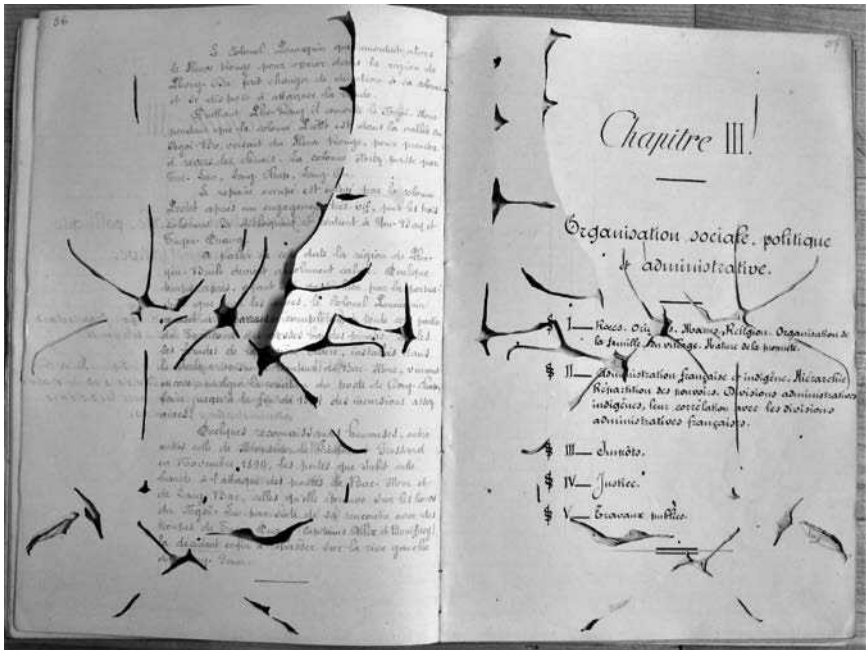


Figure 2.5. Adding a twist: Bookworms . . . (ANOM, GGI 66104. Phuyen-Binh). © J. Michaud.

production, their authorship, even their textual quality. Through such text, the aim is to investigate a particular event thoroughly without exceeding the boundaries assigned to the said event by the limits of the material available. By contrast, the broader picture of cultures and identity of those whom the documents depict, their belief systems, their social organization, their vision of the world, their emotions and aspirations—all that could be read between the lines, as it were—would not be of primary importance and often labeled as unscientific vagaries.

For social anthropologists, however, that is where the good stuff lies. Their attention is aimed at the subjects and practices depicted in archives, and a scarcity of documents is not a motive to stop pondering, thus providing space for elaboration and challenging hypotheses. Like many, and as the partially overlapping subfields of ethnohistory and micro-history exemplify, I am convinced that historians and anthropologists have compatible and largely complementary methodologies. In a situation like this one, as I have argued before (Michaud 2010, 188–193), the common subjects of historians' and anthropologists' research can benefit from their joint efforts. Making archives "speak" is the bread and butter of trained historians, and when what little there is takes an ethnographic turn, anthropological methods and tools can help refine, and also broaden, the picture significantly (Willford and Tagliacozzo 2009).

Beyond the substantial amount of time I spend exploring colonial archives, a large portion of my enterprise has been resting on my experiences with and my writings about highland societies in several countries of highland Asia. In terms of language abilities, French is my mother tongue. Unlike most social anthropologists working in highland Asia, I have not specialized on one particular society (even if I am more familiar with one, the Hmong). I have focused on what connects groups rather than on each one's distinctive culture, rituals, and ontologies. My methods reflect a macroscopic, cross-cultural, and supranational stance, the possible shortcomings of which I accept fully.

This research effort thus is an enterprise in physical, political, and intellectual border crossing. Methods are geared toward applied cross-disciplinarity, cross-border field sites, a fluid personal itinerary, and the will to bring it all together. Patently, this plasticity raises multiple questions about expertise, accountability, and ethics.

The Perils of Early Ethnography

Early ethnography of upland Vietnam at the time of European contact falls prey to tropes rooted in a period about which not as much can be known as one might like. Nothing, or just about, was known about societies dwelling in the high region (Michaud 2022). Not only is ethnography inescapably bound to time, space, and cultural logics, it also unavoidably involves, then as today, a degree of bias depending on methods, preparations, circumstances, morals, mind frames, and strategies played by all parties in the ensuing interpersonal transactions. In this way, bias is not solely borne by ethnographers, the whole context also matters.

Produced by untrained colonial agents such as explorers, administrators, and missionaries, the scholarly appreciation of early productions has understandably been either negative or tentative (Stocking 1991; Pels and Saleminck 1999; Chafer and Sackur 2001; Goodman and Silverstein 2009; Johnson 2017). These hesitations have much to do with the fact that the observers were active in the years before professional ethnographic methods were devised and tested. There are also doubts about the gender, intellectual, religious, and class preconceptions on the part of the colonial observers that are reputed to taint or warp their prose, sometimes to the point of rendering it scientifically worthless—examples abound (Salamone 1977; Said 1989; Pels 1997; Michaud 2004). European explorers and fortune seekers in Tonkin, like Francis Garnier (1873) and Jean Dupuis (1879), for example, were mostly trying to make a name for themselves. Their motivation was sensationalist and self-serving, and the ethnographic parts of their texts ought to be treated with utmost caution. Administrators, except for truly unique ones such as Auguste Pavie (1908) and Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis (1892), were rarely in the physical presence of the northern highland populations, and if they were, the contact periods were far too brief and the language and culture gaps too extensive to support dependable testimonies. As for missionaries in the Tonkinese highlands, most were from the *Société des Missions étrangères de Paris*, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, was recruiting chiefly from the peasantry in rural France. Their seminary education was certainly solid, but it was exclusively directed at steering candidates towards the service of God, with little room for doubt or notions of scientific thinking (Michaud 2007).

Thus, to concretely grapple with the problem of colonial ethnography among upland societies of Tonkin, one must be aware of the ethnographers' profiles: their origin, social class, ethnicity, cultural fabric, religious thinking, education, intentions, desires, biases, and position in the colonial hierarchy. One must also bear in mind the context of the surveys and carefully factor in the historical and political forces that affected their course.

Compared with their predecessors, the military officers sent to the northern outposts of Tonkin, who were eventually ordered to reinvent themselves briefly as ethnographers, were a rather different kettle of fish, particularly among the Military Territories' commanders and sub-commanders (see fig. 2.6). Bearing the ranks of infantry lieutenant and captain, all had comfortable or even affluent family backgrounds that allowed them to use their social capital and wealth to secure a solid education and an officer's commission. This combination of class and formal education promoted a capability for organized reasoning and critical thinking, although whether it was likely to venture beyond mere conformity to the colonial military cause remained unsure. In that era of anticlericalism typical of the French Third Republic (1870–1940), such a middle- to upper-class upbringing combined well with a scientifically designed survey and a rigid work ethos, helping to produce unusually consistent and steady outputs. Yet, many other shades of subjectivity and biases remained, arguably in a lower concentration than in the "ethnography" performed by explorers and missionaries.



Figure 2.6. Pensive: A lone French officer near his upland post of Pho-Bang (Abadie 1924, plate 2). © J. Michaud.

With its peculiar nature, military ethnography is seen by many scholars to be particularly suspect due to the rigidity inherent in military thought and action, its ideological as much as power-driven agenda, and its culture of secrecy.² So, in an attempt to balance the blessings and the trials, and while I unequivocally share the calls for caution, the decisive factor to bring to the fore in colonial military ethnographies here relates to the scarcity of voices speaking about the former identities of these mostly illiterate societies—some of which being also devoid of a formal mode of remembering their own collective past (see Vargyas, this volume). It leads me to believe that mining these archives, trying hard to decipher them, and meticulously cross-checking their content with the rare other sources available constitutes an authentic endeavor while being also a substantial challenge. In many cases, and despite obvious partialities dictated by the epochs and the mind frames tinting military ethnography, it can only be accepted that these imperfect texts represent firsthand observations that ought to be studied.

What Scholars Were Saying at the Time

Beyond my own judgments regarding the soundness of such a legacy, it might be helpful to consider what contemporary scholars have said of this work and its authors. In the preface to infantry officer Maurice Abadie's 1924 ethnography of the northern highlands, entitled *Les races du Haut-Tonkin de Phong-Tho à Lang-Son*, French scholar Paul Pelliot (1924, 5) wrote: "You belong to the lineage of Diguët, Lunet de Lajonquière, Bonifacy, and so many officers in the Military Territories whose names were never cited, but whose conscientious investigations, humbly transmitted through the hierarchy, have helped to build our ethnographic knowledge of Upper Tonkin on a solid foundation." Pelliot was referring by name to the higher-ranking officers who contributed to the rare publications stemming from the two military surveys discussed here. First and foremost are Étienne-Edmond Lunet de Lajonquière's twin volumes issued in 1904 and 1906, which fed directly on the 1903–1904 field reports handed to him by the colonial hierarchy with a request to produce two summary volumes. The 1904 one was intended for internal use and bore the title *Ethnographie des Territoires militaires (Rédigée sur l'ordre du Général Coronnat [. . .] d'après les travaux de M. M. le Lieutenant-Colonel Diguët, le Commandant Bonifacy, le Commandant Révérony, le Capitaine Fesh etc.)*. The 1906 volume, called *Ethnographie*

du Tonkin septentrional, was an expanded version also including northern lowland provinces and was aimed at a civilian audience.³ Auguste Bonifacy, whom we met briefly above, was a ranking officer, commander of the 3rd Military Territory, who spent many years accumulating a deep knowledge of the mountain groups and languages along the Clear River watershed. This experience allowed him to produce several summaries of many of the 1903–1904 survey reports then used by Lunet de Lajonquière to write his two volumes. Over the next two decades, Bonifacy also went on to publish his independent ethnography and analyses of the northern highlands in dozens of scholarly articles. In 1908, Lieutenant-Colonel Edouard Diguët, after his active involvement in the 1903–1904 survey, independently published his own *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*, based on his experiences and the personal notes he took as commander of the 2nd Military Territory. Eminent diplomat Auguste Pavie signed the preface to Diguët’s 1908 volume, Pavie and Diguët having met fourteen years earlier in the Tai domain of *Sip Song Chau Tai*, where the latter was a commanding officer and the former was conducting a political study of the local population for the benefit of the colonial administration (Pavie 1908, v; Le Failler 2014). In his preface, Pavie (1908, xv) predicted that Diguët’s *Les Montagnards du Tonkin* “will always remain a precious help to all those wanting to know the upper regions of Tonkin.”

As for Paul Pelliot, this scholar was among the first prominent intellectuals to see the importance of this body of early field data. A sinologist, anthropologist, archeologist, INALCO linguist, member of ÉFEO, and professor at Collège de France since 1911, Pelliot had the highest academic credentials available in France, and as such, his 1924 endorsement of the works by the original officers involved in the surveys carried weight. Among other qualities, Pelliot underscored that these ethnographies followed methodological and intellectual standards fitting the contemporary expectations for ethnological research. And sixty years after their publication, Frank M. Lebar, Gerald C. Hickey, and John K. Musgrave in their *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (1964) refer abundantly to Lunet de Lajonquière’s work, along with Abadie and Diguët’s, declaring these to be the most reliable sources available on the early ethnography of upland Tonkin.

Still, others were less convinced. Antoine Cabaton (1907, 339), in his generally positive review of *Ethnographie du Tonkin septentrional* (Lunet de Lajonquière 1906), also lamented that it contained “official reports

of very unequal and sometimes insufficient value.” Young sociologist Marcel Mauss, who had helped design the questionnaire used for the 1903–1904 survey long before he would reach academic fame (Salemink 2003, 74–75; Michaud 2007, 205–206), rightly remarked in his review of Lunet de Lajonquière’s 1906 opus that “this book has all the virtues, all the faults also of such work imposed by a hierarchy concerned with something other than science” (Mauss 1906, 241).

It is significant to note that these assessments were all based solely on Lunet de Lajonquière’s two summary volumes, plus the few follow-up pieces made public by other officers, some of whom had been active in the surveys. Crucially, none of the commentators from that time appeared to have seen or have a chance to appraise the bulk of original field reports informing these published compendiums. By the time they had printed their opinions, the reports themselves had already been tucked away and would not resurface for decades.

Buried Data

It is telling that the colonial government of French Indochina did not see value in publishing more from this sizeable initiative than just the two overlapping 1904 and 1906 summaries by Lunet de Lajonquière. As Mauss had rightly perceived in 1906, the ethnographic initiative had served its purpose of state control through knowledge production, and the state’s gaze moved on. The budding French military anthropology of colonial subjects was redirected at other targets for “pacification,” such as in Africa and Polynesia. Accordingly, demand quickly died out for what Tonkin’s military reports had brought up. Within a few years, even the Military Territories themselves had run their course and were handed over to civilian administration, while the frontline actors and witnesses of the 1897–1904 efforts had been redeployed to other battlefields and occupation zones within Indochina and beyond.⁴

Since then, a very busy century has unfolded and the science of anthropology has expanded accordingly. Against today’s expectations of methods and ethics, the colonial administrators and ideologues must still be treated as having produced this knowledge as weapon of control (notwithstanding its truly scientific potential), to bury it as soon as it was judged obsolete. Having now retrieved it, we are able to see that this material, once sensibly sifted, adds a new layer of knowledge about a poorly known, underdocumented, ancient, and multifaceted

social constellation in the early stages of a transition to the globalized world order. With regard to some of the other themes of this book, such knowledge might even also feed retroactively into to local people's own narratives of their own pasts.

Lowland imperial powers surrounding the northern highlands initiated the transition of kinship-based upland societies toward modernity, which was then catalyzed by French colonial occupation. Remarkably, the early advent of globalization was promoted by both capitalism and communism alike, and in the post-collective era, rapid market integration became the driver. Even with reality imperfectly perceived and expressed through Eurocentric biases, this archival data opens a window into this longitudinal landscape of practices, beliefs, representations, compliance, opportunism, and defiance among and between endogenous and exogenous societies, dominant and dominated groups, regions, valleys, and hamlets, and even among kin.

Again, one-off surveys conducted relatively speedily by inexperienced external agents embedded in a rigid ideological framework will inevitably display a contingent mindset conditioned by subjectivities and positionalities of a rather extreme sort: the military psyche. Officers can only report what they see, hear, or are told in connection with the pre-set questions they asked; they can only write what they grasp and what is acceptable to their hierarchy. Moreover, they might leave out the rest uncritically, as Bonifacy had wisely noted above. The ultimate historical, anthropological, and linguistic portrait painted in these two flawed, yet unique surveys lies in the raw frontline transcripts of the sector reports, penned in the field in a consistent manner by dozens of eyewitnesses. It provides verifiable factual data contained in abundant demographic tables, glossaries, maps, and photographs. It is this material's integration, horizontally across the whole region and vertically following common mindsets, structure, and method, that confirms its significance.

The Challenges Ahead

One can argue whether the seventy or so officers who contributed to the surveys can be branded ethnographers. I have no decisive answer to that. Yet in my mind, the texts they produced are without a doubt ethnographic in nature. It is the rigorous enforcement of military discipline and norms that places these texts in a different category

from contemporary missionary accounts and the embellished diaries of travelers and explorers (Salemink 2003, 58–72; Glover et al. 2012). The uniformity of the officers' descriptions, cemented by their common educational as well as cultural backgrounds, constitute a rare and verifiable DNA.

For scholars and for the heirs of the uplanders themselves, the sum of these fine-grained accounts represents an unanticipated achievement in viewing the kaleidoscope of agency, desires, intentions, and down-to-earth logic among dominated groups faced with multiple forms of adversity. With the complexity they reflect, these testimonies provide both a foundation and a milestone for a more reliable reading of social and cultural behavior through time. These accounts could also help reiterate the social intricacy and cultural uniqueness of a past that continues to play a role in today's construction of identity with its connected negotiations and struggles. With such germane discovery comes a moral duty for the social scientist aware of its scale and potential. This duty is to make this material bear fruit by heralding its existence, cataloguing its content, cross-checking its substance, verifying its soundness against known data, and making the results of this endeavor available to the broader and local communities alike (Johnston 2010; Low and Merry 2010).

Or, put in a reflexive way—literally—I do not think I would be able to look at myself in a mirror having learned about the existence and potential of these documents and then choosing to sit on my hands. This, thus, becomes a case where a quiet archival search can unexpectedly morph into a long-term commitment, turning without warning a detached and predictable scientific search into a subjective, engaged, and morally binding practice. As I pointed out at the start of this chapter, I may not be, for an array of reasons, the best person on this planet to conduct this endeavor; but it seems that I am among the few willing to step forward—for the time being.

Looking ahead, the methodological challenge now lies in cross-checking this relatively ancient and well-situated material with contemporaneous texts yet to be brought up from Asian archives and possibly from other European ones too—most likely from Spain and Britain as far as Tonkin is concerned. Endogenous archives in Vietnamese, Chinese, and vernacular scripts from these highlands, such as Thái, Tày, and Nùng, if such texts exist, could also yield unique data and should not be overlooked. Here again, the active contribution of (indigenous?) historians would be needed.

Beyond textual evidence and corroboration, as several authors in this collective book underline, oral history should be explored, although my efforts regarding this method have mostly drawn blanks so far (Michaud 2012, 2021). Despite its usual pitfalls already known to historical anthropologists, listening to the memories of living elders is not just a way of learning more, but also of participating actively in the expression, appropriation, or reappropriation of local history by the very people who were themselves at its heart, but who have been silenced or disconnected by grand narratives attuned to concerns not entirely their own (as the chapter by Turner and Delisle illustrates handsomely).

Another challenge will be to bring this material to engage with today's world. Doing so involves rereading the upland situation one century ago from this previously little-known perspective. I have made a start through the particular lens of livelihoods studies, but much more remains to be done from several additional angles. What kind of endogenous knowledge model could these texts reveal? In what ways are these endogenous knowledge models similar to, or different from, colonial models produced and promoted by others, such as explorers, administrators, or Vietnamese intellectuals of the imperial and colonial eras (Michaud 2022)?

A century may have passed, but many threads are still being woven as we speak, at times in similar directions and sometimes in radically different ones, depending on what is at stake for the agents involved. The heartening news is that there is now evidence available for a fresh and possibly more adequate, more respectful consideration and discussion of the history of Vietnam's northern highlands' societies.

Notes

1. A few recent and distinguished exceptions exist in northwest Vietnam, with the pioneering works of Philippe Le Failler (2014), Bradley Camp Davis (2017), and Christian Lentz (2019), whose work I salute.

2. To be convinced of this, one needs only to try accessing the military archives at the Fort de Vincennes' Service Historique de la Défense, starting with being summoned in front of an officer in uniform and *képi*, who will decide on the suitability of your credentials and quest.

3. Claude-Eugène Maître (1905, 200), an Orientalist and the future director of ÉFEO, wrote the following after reviewing the 1904 volume by Lunet de Lajonquière: "We must especially praise the positive results

obtained by the good organization of work, regulated by the General Staff, and the zeal displayed by the commanders of the territories, some of whom had already been noted before for their remarkable studies.” The 1906 opus was reviewed favourably by INALCO professor Antoine Cabaton (1907), and by S. W. B. (1907) in the British *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

4. With a few notable exceptions, such as Auguste Bonifacy, who retired in Hanoi and carried on with his intellectual pursuit until his death in 1931.

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