



Priest, Rebel and Scholar

François-Marie Savina in Tonkin (Vietnam) 1901–1941

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Abstract – With this case study of a French Catholic missionary in Tonkin, as north Vietnam was called during colonial times, I wish to illustrate how individual agency might find ways of expression in spite of severe hierarchical clashes. Put differently, I wish to critically reflect on a case where the scientific inclination of a given missionary in the field became his calling. The surprising result being that instead of meeting the expectations of conformity or “toeing the line” of Catholic conversion duties, he intentionally took a significant step outside dogmatic morality. [*Tonkin (Vietnam), uplands, ethnography, François-Marie Savina*]

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Can a young Catholic priest with humble peasant roots grow into a seasoned ethnographer and become a *bona fide* scholar by sheer willpower – and against the wishes of his hierarchy?¹ This at the price of his Bishop labelling him unruly and deviant, nearly rogue, and actively pushing him out of play over decades? In colonial Indochina one hundred years ago, what may have motivated

a strong-headed missionary to stay such a trying course?

In his 2015 book, “The Barefoot Anthropologist,” historian Andrew Hardy paints the uncompromising, yet compelling picture of one such rebel, Jacques Dournes (1923–1993), a Catholic missionary in Vietnam from 1946 to 1970, who quit priesthood for a new mission he believed in even more, ethnology. With this article, I wish to draw equally rigorously the portrait of an earlier French Catholic missionary in Tonkin, as north Vietnam was known over colonial times, with the fully accepted intention of revitalising the memory of an unjustly silenced free thinker. I illustrate how individual agency can find ways of expression in spite of severe hierarchical clashes. Put differently, I wish to critically reflect on a case where the scientific inclination of a given missionary became his calling. And instead of conforming to the expectations of his missionary duties, he intentionally took a significant step outside dogmatic morality.

François-Marie Savina (1876–1941) was at odds with his bishop, Paul Marie Ramond (1855–1944). For nearly 40 years, Bishop Ramond resented Savina and what he represented, and tried to discipline him in a variety of imaginative ways. Stemming from a rural Breton background that had embedded in him a habitus of defiance towards authority – especially centralised French state authority – Savina responded by standing his ground and dodging blows. He did so while reinventing himself as a self-taught scholar, linguist,

¹ This article takes at its starting point biographical notes on F.-M. Savina which I published in my book “Incidental Ethnographers” (Michaud 2007) and expands them on the basis of a critical revision of the initial information supported by new material that only recently came to light.

historian, and a distinctly skilled ethnographer. Thus, he made very few converts; instead, he published thousands of pages of grammars, lexicons, and dictionaries on obscure Asian languages he came to grasp, as well as historical studies and ethnographies. He studied one minority culture in particular, the Hmong (Miao), and is widely acknowledged as the author of the pioneering work on this group, his “Histoire des Miao” (Savina 1924a).

In this article, I ask three central questions. First, within the French Catholic church active in Tonkin, why was there such a relentless attempt to subdue a subordinate’s mind and behaviour? Second, how did this trigger the priest’s distinctive response, leading him to morph into a noted scholar? And finally, why has the case of Savina been actively disremembered?

The Case of François Savina

In terms of biographical information, little is available on the life of François Savina.² This relative paucity is odd considering the impressive number of publications left by this solitary operative over the four decades he was active in Asia. It is doubly odd given that he spent significant segments of his life connected to colonial institutions – the Church, diplomatic corps, the military – that generated records as a matter of routine. This hush is intriguing. Barely any published biographical details survive to this day besides two short, official accounts – an obituary and a biographical note – in his missionary society’s internal organs plus another obituary in the popular magazine *Missionnaires d’Asie*. Besides these, we have a handful of reviews of his books and the modest biographical details Savina himself shared with his readers in his published works – he was frugal on this front. His private correspondence is extremely scarce and no diaries have been found. It did not help that the archives of the Upper-Tonkin Vicariate had to be hastily abandoned in 1953 before being bombed by the colonial air force.

For this article, I have explored all these sources and conducted research in the uplands of northern Vietnam, interviewing elderly Hmong as much as missionaries about their memories of colonial times. I have also mined the National Archives in Hanoi, while in France I have worked in the archives of the *Société des Missions étrangères*

de Paris (MEP), the *Archives nationales d’Outre-Mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, the archives of *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) in Paris, and those of the *Service historique de la Défense* (SHD) in Vincennes. I also visited Savina’s birth place in Brittany where I spoke with local officials, residents and kin. From all this, what do we actually know about this unconventional apostle?

A Lineage of Peasants

François-Marie Savina was born on March 20th, 1876, in the secluded hamlet (*lieu-dit*) of Kervendal, a cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Mahalon, a small commune in the rural hinterland of Finistère, Brittany. By French standards, Bretagne was at that time a remote province with its cultural peculiarities, starting with a vernacular Celtic language spoken by all. Within Brittany, Finistère in the extreme west was the epitome of remoteness; indeed, in France the western tip of Finistère ploughing into the Atlantic is still nicknamed *le Bout de la Terre*, Land’s End (latin *finis terrae*).

The hamlet of Kervendal comprised, as it still does today, only two inhabited farmhouses with outbuildings huddled around a common yard, surrounded by roughly 40 hectares of land, forest and streams off which dwellers have managed to live for generations. The Savina lineage had intermarried within or close to Kervendal for at least two centuries; Savina’s parents had followed the trend: on February 4th, 1866 Henri Marie Savina married Marie Marguerite Darchen, a widow with three young children. The names of Darchen’s parents and grand-parents can still be seen carved in lintels above their farmhouse’s windows, signalling that they were proud owners of their farm and land (Simon 1988).

To decipher the life of Savina-the-missionary, one must know about Savina-the-peasant. In the second half of 19th century, life in rural Finistère was harsh. The inside of a farmhouse was a cramped affair enforcing an exacting habitus on families. Breton rural stone houses were cold, damp, rustic and devoid of most amenities. In winter, everyone lived huddled around petrol lamps in a dim, low-ceiling single room heated at one end by a fireplace bellowing smoke as much as heat, with animal pens opening at the opposite end to take advantage of the cattle’s body heat. Chickens roamed freely. One colourful habit of Breton farmhouses at that time was furniture used to divide the volume of the ground-floor, in

² He signed official documents “F. M. Savina,” while only “François” in his personal correspondence.

particular *lits-clos*, short beds enclosed in wooden wardrobe-like boxes in which one slept half-sitting, and which could be repositioned around the floor to accommodate arriving and departing members as the family evolved. It is also said that through the ages, these *lits-clos* could serve as the last line of defense against prying wolves (de Kort et Tiez Breiz 1997).

With no neighbours in sight and a five-kilometer walk to the parish church, its school and marketplace, young François would grow up in a bounded world, learning the daily chores of subsistence farming. From dawn till dusk, youth would help plough, plant, weed, harvest, store, and collect dry wood and edibles from the forest. They would assist their elders in processing lumber, fish the streams, trap, hunt, all the while husbanding, feeding, and helping in butchering horses, cows, pigs, ducks and chickens, plus assisting in clothe production. Through all this, young *Breton* peasants would forcibly learn the wisdom of living by their elders' law, like it or not. They would also fear God and hope for little in this world. News from the outside amounted to the odd regional paper, church sermons and village gossip on market days, hardly enough to nurture dreams of a different life.

Proofs are scarce, but judging from illness that struck him in the course of his adult life, François seems to have experienced lung problems from early age, and that might have kept him away from most of the heavy farm work. However, he would have witnessed every bit of it and would have been familiar with its habitus, strains, rhythm, and seasonality.



Fig. 1: 1906 – A stern Savina clan in Pont-Croix for the baptism of Guillaume Savina's third child. Guillaume (circled with his wife Marie Corentine) was the brother closest to François (Source: Savina family).

What we do know is that with several elder siblings in line to inherit the family farmstead, his

destiny had to lie elsewhere. Facing a similar ordeal, his sole brother from the second bed, Guillaume (1872–1908), had already taken another path. He had been schooled in the village like most local boys, primary education being mandatory and free in France since 1882. But by the age of 10, instead of returning to farm work Guillaume proceeded to the *Petit Séminaire* in rural Pont-Croix 10 kilometers away, a strict religious institution for boys. As an alternative to farming, a religious career, despite its harshness, was one of the popular options in deeply Catholic Brittany – one that half of the Savina siblings took, including young François.

Guillaume and François saw their opportunity and after Pont-Croix, they were headed for the Jesuit *Grand Séminaire* in Quimper where boys trained towards priesthood. But here their paths separate: Guillaume opts out and goes on to train as a notary public's clerk and gets married. He and his wife, Marie Corentine Le Gall, soon start their own business, which would eventually become *Cafés Savina*, still in operation today though no longer in the family fold. For his part, François stayed the course.

Quimper was a bustling city by Finistère standards and the novelty of urban life must have impressed François greatly; yet, this was nothing compared to his next step in the heart of Paris' *Rive Gauche*. To pursue a missionary career instead of the common option of becoming a parish *curé*, young men could ask to join a missionary society. In September 1897, aged twenty-one, François took that radical step. He was considered of good enough moral and intellectual standing to enter the *Séminaire des Missions étrangères de Paris*, rue du Bac, where he studied for an additional four years towards priesthood and missionary life. At that time, missionary societies such as MEP were recruiting vigorously for the booming colonies, and youth with rural background were highly prized for their hardiness and pliability. Ordained in June 1901 at age 25, François Savina pronounced his perpetual vows of poverty and chastity – but crucially, as we will see, not obedience as the MEP did not require that.

Within a few days, he learned that he was assigned to the new Upper-Tonkin Vicariate³ founded in 1895 in the distant colony of French Indochina, and boarded a ship for Hanoi the following

³ A vicariate in colonies was the equivalent of a diocese in France and playing the role of a Bishop was a Vicar Apostolic. To simplify, I use Bishop throughout this text.

month. Thirty years would pass before he saw France again.



Fig. 2: F. M. Savina at MEP, Summer 1901, and P. Ramond upon being made Bishop of Upper-Tonkin, 1895 (Source: MEP archives).

A Nomadic Life

Thus, François Savina settles in Tonkin. Uncharacteristically compared to his colleagues who remained permanently within the boundaries of the vicariate they had been assigned to, sometimes remaining in the same posting for decades, Savina was attached to specific missions for only three or four relatively short periods, each time a different one. Each of these stays ended with his departure for one form or another of work beyond the borders of the Upper-Tonkin Vicariate. Such nomadism was unusual.

The first hypothesis that comes to mind to explain Savina's mobility suggests to look at his talent for languages. This was a skill in high demand in the missions of course, but one also valued in colonial diplomatic, intelligence, and military circles. This alone could justify his transfer from one linguistic group or region to another, presumably to learn and record vernacular idioms or act as interpreter in periods of crises. However, for Savina's direct superior in the Upper-Tonkin Vicariate, Bishop Ramond, this meant doing without a gifted polyglot for years on end in a vast, multi-language vicariate badly in need of able bodies. To release Savina, one would think some important reason would have been documented, such as a written derogation or perhaps a mention in the yearly reports. Oddly, none of these seem to have survived in the MEP archives.

For at least two substantial periods, from 1918 to 1921 and 1925 to 1929, we know that Savina

was on leave to work with other branches of the colonial administration. The first period was with the military in the Protectorate of Laos, and the second with a diplomatic mission on the Chinese island of Hainan. Then, he was released again for years to work on publication projects in the MEP printing and retirement house in Hong Kong, culminating with a five-year stay from 1934 to 1939. At the end of each of these three periods, Savina returned to the vicariate he had left. But, instead of being sent back to the specific post he had been attached to earlier, he was consistently given new assignments. Again, this is uncommon, including the fact that no evidence seems to exist to justify this constant movement.



Fig. 3: Tonkin – The main locations where F. M. Savina was active (Source: J. Michaud)

Closer scrutiny is thus needed to make sense of the context in which Savina managed, despite all this motion, to research, write and publish thousands of pages of informed ethnography and comparative linguistics on a dozen groups in and around the uplands of Tonkin.

Savina's Whereabouts Year by Year

So let us go back to square one. Upon landing in Tonkin, recruits were directed to their vicariate's see to settle in and "learn the ropes." In the summer of 1901 in Savina's case, that was Hưng Hóa on the Red River (Sông Hồng) in today's Phú Thọ province. Then, from 1902 to October 1906, the first substantial hole in his biography appears. He is completely absent from the yearly *comptes-rendus* published by each Vicariate summarizing (and slightly embellishing) the reports individual missionaries had to send their Bishop on a regular

basis. These *comptes-rendus* were then made public within Catholic circles in France to show how energetically conversions were progressing.⁴

The only possible explanation for his absence from the *comptes-rendus* is that Savina had not been assigned to a particular mission yet, otherwise he would have been mentioned by name as was the custom. Such a long period without being explicitly appointed to a specific mission and not appearing in records was unusual, but whatever the motive, it had to have been vetted by Bishop Ramond.

Savina's name pops up for the first time in his vicariate's *comptes-rendus*⁵ for the year 1907, in relation with his first assignment. He was introduced to the readership as a newcomer to the Ha-giang mission (today Hà Giang) and was quoted as saying:

On 1st October last [1906], I received my new destination to the Tay country in the high region. After wandering the territory between Tuyen-quang and Ha-giang, I decided to settle down in Vinh-tuy, where the Con and Clear [Sông Lô] rivers meet. On 19 March [1907], my modest church dedicated to Sainte-Anne was finished and I could celebrate mass in front of over 100 pagans coming from all around the area.

For the next five years, Savina's name appears annually in the reports. He is based in his Vinh-tuy mission and is described as evangelising among "the Tay and the Man." It is in 1910 in Vinh-tuy that the first evidence of his scholarly commitment to languages and linguistics appeared, when the *comptes-rendus* mentioned that he was working on his *Dictionnaire tay-annamite-français* (Savina 1910). Published in Hanoi, this was a bulky opus of 500 pages for which, in 1912, he was awarded the *Prix Stanislas Julien* of the *Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres*, a prestigious Paris-based institution and a feat for a first publication by a self-taught linguist. The production of such a useful tool for relating with one of the most powerful upland groups must also have been valued by the Indochina authorities, be they religious, administrative or military.

4 The Bishop asked for such reports to include factual information on the number of new converts in the mission, the number of confessions performed, the number and nature of the schools set up or details on how existing ones were doing, a general recounting of the year's highlights with an overall commentary (Michaud 2007: 135).

5 The relevant reports are listed at the end of the article: Archives – MEP/IRFA.

After 1911, a second unclear period began during which Savina's name as well as that of Vinh-tuy disappear entirely and without explanation from the *comptes-rendus*. He does not figure again before 1919 when a brief mention is made of his departure to Laos the year before. The likelihood that Savina had simply been forgotten by the authors of the *comptes-rendus* must be ruled out as every active missionary's name was scrupulously included, along with details on their work and progress.

Intriguingly, we read in the 1919 *comptes-rendus* (160) that "[sometime in the 1910s] following difficult circumstances, Mgr Ramond had to remove the two missionaries in Ha-giang and Vinh-tuy on the Clear river;" pointing to Savina but disclosing nothing as to the causes. What we do know regarding the period 1912–1918, is that some of it he devoted to completing the research and writing needed to launch a major publication in 1916, his *Dictionnaire miao-tseu-français* published in the scholarly *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient/BFEO* (Savina 1916), again an astonishing achievement. The focus of this dictionary, the Miao, is an exonym used interchangeably then with Meo and Hmong and refers to the latter in today's literature. This is evidence of Savina having been in close and intense enough contact with Hmong living up in the mountains to learn and comprehend their eight-tone language and, even more remarkably, devise a script for it (Michaud 2020b: 243).

So, by 1911 Savina had learnt Vietnamese, studied Chinese, and knew enough Tay to produce a sizeable dictionary. Between 1911 and 1916, he managed to put together a 200-page book on the Hmong language published in a resolutely scholarly outlet as opposed to a religious in-house release. In his 1953 obituary of Savina, Father Léon Trivière, who never met his elder but spent enough years in Hong Kong to hear about him by others who did, stated that Savina learned the Miao/Hmong language in the garrison town of Lao-kay and in Hmong villages around Chapa. I found evidence to support this hypothesis (Michaud 2020a). It is clear that Savina had to have been discharged from normal missionary duties to embed himself and learn the Miao/Hmong language *in situ* where no official mission existed, and then turn that knowledge into a conclusive publication.

Focusing from a slightly different angle on Savina's early years in Tonkin, Trivière (1953: 26) assessed that between 1903 and 1925, the Breton had spent time with various ethnic minority groups studying their languages. He states that

Savina had first been in Vinh-tuy, Pai-xat, and Lai-chau to learn the Tay language, in Lao-kay and Chapa for Hmong as just mentioned, in Dong-dang and Cao-bang for the Nung language, and in Monkay and Tien-yen for the Man.⁶ Corroborating this, we know that Savina (1924a: 237) wrote that he was in Lao-kay town in September 1914 in the company of a few Miao (Hmong). He also mentions having been in contact in 1915–1917 with the Meo in the provinces of Lao-kay, Yen-bay, Son-la and the Lai-chau Military Territory, all in Upper-Tonkin. The introduction to his *Dictionnaire miao-tseu-français*, dated September 1915, was written while he was residing in Tu-lê, in today's Yên Bái province. We also know that he was in Chapa again in August and September 1918 (Michaud 2020a) and that in his “Histoire des Miao” (1924a), a majority of the photographs are depicting Hmong from the Chapa region.

Of all these locations, Lang-son, Cao-bang, and Monkay were well outside the borders of the Upper-Tonkin vicariate; they were actually within the Dominican's domain of the North-Tonkin Vicariate east of the Clear (Lô) River. A remark in Savina's obituary in the 1949 *comptes-rendus* says that he had “shared his science with the Dominican Fathers in the Langson prefecture at the time of its foundation.”⁷ In February 1918, Savina had acknowledged leaving “the Miao country” in Upper-Tonkin to reach the Kouangsi (Guangxi) border, also situated in the Dominican North-Tonkin Vicariate. That eastern borderland was not under MEP ecclesiastic responsibility but it was nevertheless under French colonial administration, with Monkay, Lang-son and Cao-bang being the main settlements. A special kind of dispensation would have to be given to allow a MEP missionary to cross ecclesiastical borders for the mere sake of studying local languages, but sources are mute on this.

Towards the end of the year 1918 as mentioned earlier, various sources state that Savina was made available to the French Protectorate of Laos and

sent to the Xieng Khouang region. His commission is to assist the French military with his linguistic and cultural skills, especially regarding the operations aimed at crushing a vigorous Mèo rebellion dubbed “The Mad Man's Revolt” – more justly called Pa Chay Vue's rebellion (Michaud 2020a). Savina stayed there until the rebel leader was killed in 1921 and the rebels tamed.



L'auteur, son domestique Nung et un chef Miao.

Xieng-Khouang, Tranninh. Laos. 1920.

Fig. 4: 1920 – Savina (right) in Laos with his Nùng assistant (centre) and a Hmong headman (left) (Source: Savina 1924a).

Following that military episode, Savina is then stationed from 1921 to 1925 in a site (or sites) that known archives do not specify, though it has to be in Asia as all sources confirm he had not returned to France. He is still not busying himself with missionary work, but wrapping up three of his most important publications. These are his unique 304-page “Histoire des Miao” (1924a) that made him a famous name in Hmong studies circles; an even bulkier 528-page “Dictionnaire étymologique français-nùng-chinois” (Savina 1924b) which the time he spent in the North-Tonkin Vicariate prior to 1918 had allowed him to research and for which he got his second award in 1926, the *Prix Giles*, awarded to a single recipient every other year by the already mentioned *Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres*; and a 245-page “Dictionnaire français-mán” (Savina 1926)

6 Savina himself stated in 1924 (b: xvi) that he had spoken Man with Man in Tonkin, Laos and Kouangsi (just over the border from Cao-bang). He then compared what he had learnt speaking with individuals with additional vocabulary from secondary sources from Yunnan, Se-tchouan, Kouï-tcheou and Kouangtong. This indicates that he himself had not been in these Chinese provinces (with the possible exception of Guangdong, neighbouring on Hong Kong) but had lived near the Chinese border.

7 French Dominicans had arrived in 1902 to help the Spanish Dominicans in northeastern Tonkin, Spain having recently been ousted from the Philippines, the long-time Dominican base in Southeast Asia.

published by EFEO, once more providing Savina's works with the seal of scholarship.

Even by today's computer-assisted standards, such sustained production would be a remarkable achievement; all the more so when one considers that the work was conducted in one of the remotest parts of Indochina, moving places, and with little clerical assistance. The fact that his 1924 book was printed in the MEP's printery in Hong Kong suggests that Savina might have spent time there to oversee its production, select the lead fonts, even help to create them from scratch perhaps.⁸ A short comment on page 25 in the 1925 *comptes-rendus* offers a clue: "M. Savina, stopping over in Hanoi ..." suggesting that he was in movement, probably to or from Hong Kong. Here again, to be allowed to leave his vicariate, his superiors had to approve of the assignment, though no trace is left.

At this point, Savina is forty-nine and has twenty-four years of Tonkin under his belt. He might perhaps have liked to settle down? It appears not. From 1925 to December 1928, the Government General of Indochina, under the patronage of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, commissioned Savina to take part in a linguistic and ethnographic survey of the Chinese island of Hainan, 300 kms off the coast of Tonkin opposite the port of Haiphong. A few years later, EFEO scholar Paul Mus (1930: 436) wrote of Savina's venture in Hainan:

Reverend F.-M. Savina went on a journey to Hainan Island that lasted more than four years, crossing it from the north-east to the south-west at its maximum length, traversing the rough central massif in the governor's company, General Gaston Wong. It was a genuine military expedition, with 150 soldiers.

From this expedition, Savina produced several unpublished reports now stored in the archives of the EFEO headquarters in Paris.⁹ During these four years, collaborating with the local chapter of the French *Congrégation des Sacrés-Cœurs de Jésus et de Marie* (or *Picpuciens*, IRFA biography online) he also had time to produce the "Dictionnaire Français-Mán," already mentioned, published in

8 Another indication is the dedication of "Histoire des Miao" to his colleague André Kicher, who was residing in Hong Kong from 1911 where he died in 1922. Kircher had spent the years 1900–1911 among the Miao of Yunnan, thus providing Savina with a stimulating companion for scholarly conversation.

9 EFEO documentation centre in Paris, under ME 88 (five volumes).

1926. Then, amazingly, in the year 1929 he completed the manuscripts of not one but three new dictionaries, a "Dictionnaire français-bê", a "Dictionnaire hoklo-français," and a "Dictionnaire hiai-ao-français," each a substantial piece amounting to a rough total of 1500 handwritten pages (c.f. Archives/EFEO). These were not published, only elements of the "Français-Bê" manuscript were to be later released in an edited form by French linguist A. G. Haudricourt (1965). Why the EFEO did not publish the two other dictionaries remains unexplained. And as if this was not enough, that same year Savina added a 59-page "Monographie de Haïnan" published by the *Cahiers de la Société de Géographie de Hanoi* (Savina 1929).

With this assignment in Hainan over and aged fifty-two, Savina had to find his next home in Indochina. We know that in 1929 he returned to Tonkin. Bishop Ramond was still in charge of Upper-Tonkin; it was eighteen years since Savina had exited this vicariate. Ramond attaches him to Chapa, a Hmong, Man, and Tày area. Since his first visits the 1910s, Chapa had turned into a thriving summer hill station for European colonists, and one could have assumed that Savina would be attached to the MEP's brand-new mission and rest house there. Instead, fluent in Hmong language and handling Man and Tày well too, he elected to live away from the crowds and his colleagues. He settled some thirty kilometers down the Muong-bo valley in a minority village where he lived a secluded life. Europeans in the hillstation nicknamed him the "hermit of Muong-bo." On occasions during this posting, Savina's name appears in administrative records, for instance when advocating in favour of the Meo to settle local disputes with the colonial authorities (Cf. Archives/ANOM: RST-NF 22, 1931–1932). When he resurfaces in the *comptes-rendus* in 1930 (163), we can read:

In Chapa region, M. Savina works courageously to convert the Meo and Man in the mountains ... Our colleague lives among them to know them, he is the only one to understand and speak their language [*sic*].

Even there, in spite of isolation and sparse resources, Savina manages to produce yet another dictionary, his *Lexique day-français*, published once again by EFEO (Savina 1931). A scholarly accolade followed the same year when he was very formally made "par arrêté du 2 juillet 1931" a *correspondant*, or an associate member of EFEO, underscoring the level his scholarship had reached in the eyes of this learned institution.

Then late in 1931, due to ill health, Savina was sent back to France, which he had not seen in thirty years. The following year he was back in Asia. However, this time he bypassed Tonkin altogether and travelled directly to the MEP publishing house on the heights of Pok Fu Lam Road in Hong Kong where he settled for five years of writing. His task was to complete his most ambitious publication yet, which was to be his last, a massive 2500-page multilingual “Guide linguistique de l’Indochine” (Savina 1939), put together from his field material gathered over three decades. By 1939, this enterprise completed, Savina returns for the last time to Upper-Tonkin. A new Bishop, Mgr Vandaële, has just replaced the ageing Bishop Ramond. Savina is sent to Ha-giang, farther up the Clear River from Vinh-tuy where he had started his missionary life. He lives there for the last two years of his life. In March 1941, ill with pneumonia,¹⁰ he is taken to Hanoi where, after four months in the St-Paul clinic, he dies on 23 July 1941 at age 65, 40 years exactly after setting foot in Asia. The location of his grave, said in MEP archives to be in Hanoi, is still unknown today.

This was the most complete synopsis of the biographical information available on François Savina that I could collect in 2003 after a good period of careful research. From what was known, Savina had lived a life unlike any of his MEP peers in Indochina. Nothing more seemed to exist to explain his uncommon itinerary and I was left scratching my head in search of the logic behind such relentless nomadism in an otherwise rather routine-prone institution. Fortunately, in Spring 2004, when investigating the MEP archives in Paris again, intriguing evidence unexpectedly turned up.

The Key

In a standard procedure, I had inquired with MEP staff about which missionary’s papers had lately been declassified. That is to say, which priests who had died 60 years before, now had their papers moved into the public domain. From Savina himself, nothing new had surfaced in 2001. But the 60th anniversary of Bishop Ramond’s death in 2004 yielded a surprise. I came across unexpected

material of a very private nature listing events that were vital to explain the unusual course of Savina’s career. In a nutshell, it appears that the reason for most of Savina’s frequent displacements was of a disciplinary nature.

The evidence is found in copies of five short letters penned by Bishop Ramond. The oldest letter is dated March 1905, four years after Savina’s arrival, and the others are all dated 1931–1934. The earliest one was sent by Ramond to an unnamed colleague and opens with: “Father Savina worries me much, he is extraordinary, I can hardly believe he was sent by the Society [the MEP seminary in Paris].” The Bishop grumbles about Savina’s unruly temperament: “... he listens to no one but himself ... and one wonders if he realizes the consequences of his actions.” Ramond mentions his recruit’s poor health, and yet adds that “he walked from Tuyen Quang to Yen Bai [47 km] in 10 hours,” finding in this feat proof of poor judgement rather than vitality. From these comments, it is plain to see that the Bishop is seriously unimpressed by Savina.

However, it is with the next statement that his real concern surfaces. Ramond retells an episode in which Savina had been to Hanoi without authorization and bought five large pictures of scantily clad female Vietnamese prostitutes. When his colleagues found them, says the Bishop, the guilty party was forced to get rid of the photographs, but only with great reluctance: “It was quite a scene to make him understand that he could not keep them.”

Then comes a hiatus of twenty-five years, the second letter being dated July 13, 1931, when Ramond sends Savina a four-page reprimand. The Bishop states that he recently “received here in Chapa five or six very serious accusations, including from Europeans [about] your behaviour with the natives.” Ramond refers to the fact that during his current posting in Muong-bo in the Chapa region, Savina had refused to build his own private house and elected to live among the Miao/Hmong people instead. “You should have had a separate house where no woman could ever be allowed to enter, but you ignored my instructions.” The Bishop adds “it is the fifth time and in locations far from one another that I receive such grave accusations.” Determined to put an end to this outrage, Ramond brings up Savina’s poor health to order him to hospital in Hanoi and to move permanently out of his current dwelling: “Be docile to the voice of God who wants the salvation of your soul and accept gratefully the opportunity for rest and solitude he is sending you, either to Hong Kong,

10 The official telegram sent to the MEP see in Paris from the State secretary to the Colonies, Political Affairs, 4th Bureau, mentions “lung sclerosis” (*sclérose pulmonaire*, from file 2566, MEP archives). Not a cancer, this was likely a long term degenerative condition Savina had carried from early age that got worse with age compounded with his smoking (photographs show him holding pipe and cigars).

or to France.” Ramond is perfectly conscious that his subordinate will be distressed to have to, as he puts it, “make the sacrifice of the Miao.” But he explains that it is him, his Bishop, who is the most saddened by the course of events. Out of alternatives, a few months later Savina boards a ship for France, officially, to restore his health.

The unruly priest came back the next year and landed in Hong Kong. Ramond decided to explore the practicalities linked to his flawed subaltern possibly returning to work under his authority in Tonkin. This is detailed in three letters he sent between June 1933 and February 1934 to an unnamed MEP ecclesiastic whose responses have not been kept. More precisely, Ramond was seeking advice on how to interpret canonical law regarding the liberty a Bishop has, or has not, to allow a priest to exercise his ministry when convicted of what he called “private adultery” (*adultère privé*).

As opposed to the earlier two letters in which he named Savina, Ramond refers in these three letters to not one but two of his priests showing this problem, and uses pseudonyms to conceal their identities: Narcissus I and Narcissus II – a telling appreciation of his juniors’ personal flaws. He gives enough details coherent with the case of Savina to safely conclude that our man is Narcissus II. In the letter of November 13, 1933, Ramond offers a crucial timeline of Narcissus II/Savina’s case:

A young priest giving clear reasons to worry during the first two years of his priesthood, received a letter asking him to move to our Hong Kong retiring home, at least for some time. He came to me and promised to correct his behaviour. I sent him to work with a colleague with whom he stayed for over one year, then I assigned him a new posting. He fell for three or four persons. I called him in, he confessed. I then sent him to another posting, quite distant from the first one, where he was asked to settle in the mission’s presbytery. Without a word, he went to live with the natives under the pretence of learning their language better. One year later, yet another serious accusation. It was impossible to conduct an inquiry, none of the priests or the [Kinh/Việt] Christians knew the language. At that point, Bishop Cottonet asked for him to instruct and hear the confessions of Christians of the same tribe with which Narcissus II had settled. I sent him right away.

After a year, Bishop Cottonet requested me to take him back, again on the grounds of the same serious misconduct. I sent him to Hong Kong. In Haiphong, he was asked to attend to Christians from that same tribe he knew the language of. Then, he followed a military ex-

pedition, after which he went on a several-month long exploration. He wrote to me that Father Robert in Hong Kong had authorized him to do all this.

In the meantime, he visited Haiphong regularly. The Bishop of Haiphong wrote to me that poor Narcissus II was misbehaving, always in the same way.

Finally, he was stationed for 6 to 8 months with priests. Their superior wrote that during that stay, Narcissus II’s conduct was commendable. At that time, I received a letter from Narcissus II telling me that he wanted to start a new life, do some good before he died, asking me to take him back. It was a really touching letter, filled with goodwill.

I took him back and sent him to another posting, where he did not pay any attention to my recommendations. A year later, new accusations, this time from European sources. He fell seriously ill, I sent him to Europe to cure himself ... If he were to come back, should I restore his missionary responsibilities? I do not believe so.

Then, in the next letter of February 19, 1934, Ramond recaps that his correspondent confirms he is entitled to render the decision he sees fit about Narcissus II without referring the case to Rome. Ramond thus has full power of decision.

* * *

With this new information, we can now reconstruct Savina’s whereabouts, give or take a few minor inconsistencies possibly due to Ramond’s failing memory or the spontaneous nature of his letters.

Savina arrives in Hung Hoá in 1901 and during the first two years there, falls for local women often enough to alert his superiors. Narrowly avoiding being sent to Hong Kong to “cool his heels” at that time, he is instead sent to assist a colleague somewhere else in the Upper-Tonkin Vicariate, probably in a Kinh area not far from Hung Hoá. He is eventually judged fit to establish his own mission, this being his 1906 posting to Vinh-tuy. However, after a few years left to himself, he is found to be at fault again. His Bishop pulls him out of that mission in 1911 and reassigns him to a distant, yet already established mission where he is told to set up quarters in the church’s presbytery – this could be the town of Lao-kay, or perhaps Chapa.

But within a year, he has gone to live among the non-Kinh indigenous population, either the Nùng or the Miao/Hmong, and again, is removed “following difficult circumstances” as alluded to in the 1919 *compte-rendus* mentioned above. Ramond then opts to rid himself of this difficult

case and shifts Savina to another upland vicariate, under the responsibility of Bishop “Cottonet” – in fact Bertrand Cothonay, a seasoned French Dominican in charge of Lang-son and Cao-bang from 1913 to his death in 1926.¹¹ Savina arrives there in 1913 or 1914, but a year later, he is sent packing to Upper-Tonkin for the same faults again. Out of options and not inclined to forgiveness anymore, Ramond decides to deny Savina access to the Upper-Tonkin Vicariate and sends him to the Hong Kong sinbin to be under the responsibility of procurator Léon Robert. This exile is considered permanent and Ramond very likely hopes it will be the end of the matter.

And it is – for a while. Over the following years, the less stern Robert accepts to let Savina go on assignments in Haiphong, Laos (1918–1921), Lang-son, Moncay, and from 1925 to 1929, to Hainan Island as already explained. Still unattached to any particular mission, Savina uses this relative freedom to study a number of languages and writes profusely, while still being disobedient according to Ramond’s letter of November 1933.

In 1929, at the conclusion of his Hainan adventures and while staying for several months with *Picpuciens* colleagues there, it is a seemingly repentant Savina who writes to Bishop Ramond and begs to be allowed back to Upper-Tonkin. Ramond is moved, accepts and assigns his prodigal son to Chapa. Soon, according to a letter he wrote on February 22nd, 1937, the returning priest spends 1800 *piastres d’Indochine* of his personal money, a considerable sum, buying land, rice-fields, tools, having a house built (not saying for whom), and supporting a few catechists from Yunnan – most likely Hmong – as well as a schoolmaster. This level of financial obligation was not unusual among MEP priests, though it certainly showed commitment on his part.

But soon, by 1931, new allegations surface, this time including from European witnesses, shattering the elderly Bishop’s fresh hopes. Out of options to tame his subordinate, he orders Savina out of Tonkin again, giving him the option of settling back in France (likely in the hope that he might quit the MEP), or to withdraw to the Hong Kong printing and retirement home. Needing treatments for ill health, Savina opts for France. On what

happens next in this saga, Ramond’s file at the MEP is of no more help.

Little information has survived about the year or so that Savina spent back in France. He landed in Marseille and his anonymous 1949 MEP biographer wrote that he was interviewed by journalists on his knowledge of Asian languages, but traces of this still have to be found in local media. Then he is in Brittany, residing among kins in his native Finistère, either with his sister-in law and widow of his elder brother Guillaume in Pont-Croix, probably also at the farmstead in Kervendal (Archives–MEP/IRFA: Anonymous 1949, and personal communication), or perhaps even at the Quimper seminary. By then, both his parents had passed away and the farmstead was being run by one of his older siblings.

When I visited Kervendal in June 2022, the sole male resident left in the hamlet, aged 78, belonged to an unrelated family, the Savina having moved out. He told me a story he grew up hearing: that a Savina missionary, while staying with his folks in Kervendal around 1932, had baptised a female newborn named Marie. Then, two of Savina’s descendants living in Brittany stated to me in January 2023 that he had also baptised their older sister in Pont-Croix at the end of May 1932. These events underline that at the time Savina was still a *bona fide* priest.

Savina had not come empty-handed: he brought gifts for his family in addition to numerous copies of his publications which he distributed liberally. But to anyone’s knowledge, no other documents can be located that he might have taken with him from Asia; of course, these can also have been lost or simply scattered through chains of inheritance. For instance, a letter Savina wrote from Hong Kong to one of his sisters on December 23rd, 1938, explicitly mentions he corresponded with his sister Catherine, with the widow of his brother Guillaume, Marie Corentine Le Gall, with one grand-nephew just entering the Oblate order, Noël Savina, plus a few other nieces and some among his more distant relatives.

A lively story survives locally about Savina’s charisma at 55. During his year in France, he had shocked many in conservative Finistère by persisting in dressing in the Asian fashion. Worse, he had a festive personality and he did not hesitate to attend public places and speak his mind, which many considered out of form for a priest. A local baker vividly remembered his warm and sparkling side, describing a joyful man who drove the young boys and girls of the country to religious services in a chariot, the young people singing at the top of

11 The Lang-son and Cao-bang Prefecture Apostolic, detached in 1913 from the Northern Tonkin vicariate, itself split in 1883 from the original 1757 East-Tonkin Vicariate, was equivalent to a diocese but was only made Vicariate Apostolic in 1939.

their voices, astounding villagers and clerics alike. Savina had grown up in conservative Brittany, but it was plain that he had outgrown it. A portrait of a spirited (and defiant?) Savina standing with his arms crossed was professionally snapped in Pont-Croix, the only known picture from his visit to France.



Fig. 5: 1932 – F.-M. Savina in Pont-Croix, Finistère. Poupon-Arhan Photographie (Source: Family)

Yet, in spite of apparently enjoying his visit, François Savina does not appreciate being back in France enough to forgo the robe and waive the possibility of spending the rest of his life where it seems he felt most at home: among the uplanders of French Tonkin. So, he determined to sail back. But as pledged by an unwavering Ramond, he cannot reinter Upper-Tonkin and has to sail on to the Hong Kong sanatorium and printing house. There, he is likely biding his time hoping that the ageing Ramond might retire. It turns out that despite Ramond’s disinclinations of 1933, Savina had still not been barred from resuming his priestly duties, as the last words of his letter home of December 1938 prove: “I leave you my dear sister to hear the confessions of the Chinese who

are preparing for the Christmas celebrations.” Undeterred by the potentially long wait, he devotes himself entirely to his last publication, a colossal 2500-page multilingual dictionary.

In March 1938, Ramond, now 83, renounces his charge of Bishop and on May 28th, the younger Gustave Vandaële, from the same generation as Savina, fills the episcopal seat. It seems that Vandaële did not hold as much of a grudge as his predecessor against his exiled brother, and Savina, now aged 63 and in poor health (he had just spent time in hospital, he said in the December 1938 letter), succeeds in having his banishment ended. He returns in 1939 and is assigned to the highlands in Ha-giang, his last posting. He dies of illness within two years.

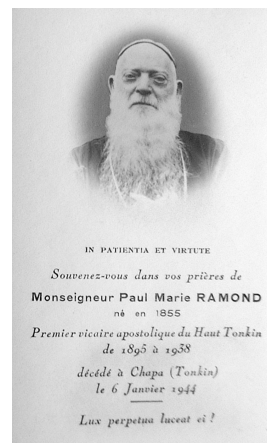
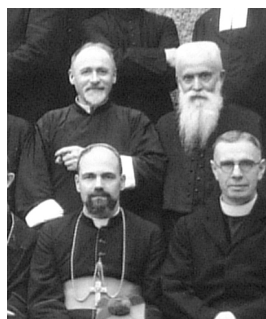


Fig. 6: Savina in Hong Kong (top left) c.1938, and Ramond’s funeral card, 1944.

Why Did Savina Behave the Way He Did?

Why did Savina who, like all MEP priests, made a perpetual vow of chastity, systematically commit the “sin of flesh” and despite being caught, kept at it for decades, as if it did not matter much? Answering this question is not merely a question of morality, it is relevant to explain his uncommon career path. Allow me to speculate a little.

It is unlikely that as a young boy Savina chose religious life solely out of a call from God along with total commitment to the canons of the Catholic Church. A part of pragmatism could also have played a part. We know about his modest background and the lack of opportunities he faced in rural Finistère, possibly compounded by a stern upbringing that might have offered less love than he was hoping for. This could contribute to explain his will to leave far away without ever ex-

pecting to return, as opposed to living the simpler life of a parish priest in France. To that end, he decided young, like several of his siblings, to adopt the mighty Catholic Church as his new family.

In 19th century rural Brittany, young François was not the first nor the last among the peasantry to do so. His commitment to canonical rule may not have been as robust as his more fervent superiors might have wished. Refusing consistently to be obedient and toe the line of enforced celibacy could reflect a half-hearted dedication to the hierarchy and the proselyte project – though by all means not necessarily a lack of faith.

The fact is that Savina could have left the MEP and priesthood any time he wanted. This option had obviously been suggested to him, but he chose not to. He went on being a rebellious element and against his senior's will, spent a large part of his time among upland societies rather than in the shadow of his mission church. Arguably, through his own peasant roots, he felt connected, having grown up on farm floors in dark and smoky quarters shared with humans and animals; anyone having spent time in Hmong houses of northern Vietnam will readily see the similarity. Such life was more immediately familiar to him than the hushed and sanitized corridors of Catholic institutions. In the *compte-rendus* (1949: 182) his obituary pointedly reported that “he lived the natives’ life, working the fields with the peasants, his notebook always at hand,” making him more of an ethnographer and participant-observer of highland cultures than an average French priest.

For his Bishop, Savina had become a thorn, but one well aware that by its own rules, the MEP did not have the power to expel him. He could be side-tracked, though. Being regularly sin-binned became a form of public castigation that uprooted him from the local communities he had made his home in and who, seemingly, had allowed him in.

Conversely, it was this constant movement that grew to be a factor freeing him from the chores of day-to-day missionizing, permitting the emergence of his lifelong ability to dedicate his mind creatively to scholarly pursuits and ethnography. This outcome was not at all foretold. Savina could have accepted to “be retired” very early to Hong Kong, or he could have become a MEP clerk or teacher in the vicariate's See in Hung Hóia and hoped to climb the hierarchical ladder. But for that he would have needed his Bishop's backing, and that was out of the question.

Savina responded instead by standing his ground, disobeying “instructions,” accepting a tag of black sheep and finding solace in other options:

linguistics, history, ethnology. And in doing so, he proved talented enough to harvest scholarly accolades which, most likely, astonished his colleagues within the MEP, possibly even quieting his critics.

Now, concerning his morality, it is not my role to justify or vilify him. Yet, it matters to keep in mind that in Hmong, Man, Nùng or Tày cultures at the time, adult male celibacy was considered extremely odd, particularly when it doubled with living alone in a separate house. Savina clearly appreciated and sought his hosts' company, aspired to blend in as much as feasible, and several testimonies from that period indicate that a good number of his hosts appreciated his company. Moreover, sexual promiscuity was customarily prevalent among the unmarried within upland groups, and likely generated opportunities for Savina to keep “sinning” without offending his hosts. However, adultery with a married woman was unthinkable as it would have constituted a serious offence by customary law, causing banishment or potentially violent vindication (Lunet de Lajonquière 1906, Diguët 1908, Bonifacy 1919, Abadie 1924); he probably avoided that snag carefully.

Did he go as far as to actually take one or several upland wives – polygyny among wealthier animistic men being accepted in several upland cultures – and to father offspring? No information has ever been found to help confirm or refute this hypothesis.

The possibility that Savina embedded himself within upland communities in a reasonably harmonious way is supported by the fact that according to the few clues available in Bishop Ramond's letters, it was solely converts and Europeans who reported Savina's behaviour to the Church authorities. Nothing is said in Ramond's letters of these converts' ethnicity other than, on one occasion, “none of the priests or the Christians knew the language.” This clue brings credibility to the scenario that these were Kinh and European Christians, plus fervent Kinh catechumens and neophytes; not Hmong, Man, or Tay. To what extent Savina's non-Kinh upland hosts may have felt disempowered enough to refrain from denouncing or expelling him, it is difficult to say. Hmong expert Nicholas Tapp (2010: 67) inferred from “Histoire des Miao” (Savina 1924a) that Savina carried enough colonial clout to cut an imposing figure upon his upland hosts. But we also know that most of the time, he did not visit them in the usual way of colonial agents, with an entourage, interpreters, and for short stays only. On the contrary, he seems to have worked alone – in 1931 Ramond had turned down Savina's request for two Miao

assistants – and preferred stays long enough to seriously worry his Bishop. It is very likely that had Savina's upland hosts felt strongly against his presence and behaviour, sexual or otherwise, he would have eventually been cold-shouldered and even pushed out of their houses and hamlets as was customary in upland cultures. At the least, his life would have been made miserable by lack of food, amenities and meaningful social life, rendering his existence incompatible with the type of proximity and balanced reciprocity needed to gather enough sound data to produce grammars and dictionaries on a grand scale. To our knowledge, none of his lengthier stays in upland communities ever came to an end in such a fashion; their terminations were prompted instead by Bishop Ramond.

Reading the Savina Case as Censorship

Again, my discussion here is not of a moral nature. I am primarily concerned with the conditions that turned a Catholic missionary from modest extraction into a keen and skilled ethnographer worthy of scholarly attention. Savina was not at all destined to become an intellectual or an ethnologist. Potent factors had to come into play to push him in that improbable direction. Censorship, I argue, may be one of them.

We know that early on, by March 1905, Bishop Ramond was already irritated by his recruit's unruly temperament, lack of judgement and carnal lust. We also know that even in a highland vicariate such as Upper-Tonkin, proselytizing to the Kinh was the priority for the Catholic church as a key tactic to secure a firm grip over French Tonkin (Michaud 2004). But early on, it became manifest to anyone watching that Savina had a gift for languages and could prove useful to reach the upland groups (Archives–MEP/IRFA: Anonymous 1949). In addition to the four languages he had already mastered in France – Breton, French, Latin, and ancient Greek – he had formally studied Vietnamese and Chinese over his early years in Tonkin and he had also absorbed several upland idioms that could only be learnt in situ, as no teaching material and often, no script for these languages existed. Consequently, as alluded to by Ramond in one of his 1933 letters, this was the primary cause (“excuse”) for him to want to live in close proximity to the uplanders.

Nevertheless, for the 37 years they related hierarchically in Tonkin, his Bishop kept Savina in check and disciplined him for his transgressions

– the “difficult circumstances.” He moved him around within the vicariate, each time making him start a new life. Seconding him to the colonial army for three years (1918–1921) or allowing him to be attached to a military expedition for four years (1925–1929), may also have been done in the secret hope that military life would either “straighten up” his character or push him to resign from the MEP. Notwithstanding the precise context, even banning Savina from the Upper-Tonkin Vicariate – to the Dominican northeast, to Hong Kong, to France, to Hong Kong again – were in themselves harsh moves considering that he might have established a domestic unit in the Tonkinese uplands. For the zealous Ramond, the matter was not debatable: his role was to ensure he had as many obedient priests on duty as feasible to maximize proselitizing, and that ought to have been Savina's only, unselfish calling in Tonkin well before any personal desire or ambition. Failing that, the implacable logic boiled down to only one course of action: the guilty party had to be chastised.

The oddity that Savina's obituary was published eight years after his death and penned anonymously (Archives–MEP/IRFA: Anonymous 1949) is also a signal, along with the absence of MEP voices publicly celebrating his work (with the exception of Léon Trivière in 1953, who had never met him). This suggests that Savina may have been shunned by his colleagues and certainly criticised behind closed doors for his personal flaws as much as for what must have passed to many as academic pretentiousness.

Moreover, an outcome of the punitive treatment from his Bishop was that the rebel was relieved from most of the chore of day-to-day proselytizing and administrative tasks such as teaching or desk work. This may have seemed to some as an undeserved perk. Accordingly, Savina would have faced a lack of understanding among his more conformist colleagues regarding the legitimacy of his intellectual pursuit. In this light, it is significant that the author of Savina's official obituary (Archives – MEP/IRFA: Anonymous 1949: 182, emphasis added), in an otherwise considerate text, also felt compelled to stress that:

...it was *strongly regrettable* that the deceased *preferred* devoting five years of his life [1934–1939] to writing a *scholarly* multi-language dictionary rather than providing his brothers in mission with *practical* lexicons in various minority languages and as many translations of the catechism; but *he did not see the need* to respond to this desire *of all*.

In short, the MEP never saw fit to fête François-Marie Savina for his accomplishments. Quite the contrary, just about anything about him beyond the bare facts seems to have failed to be recorded in the Society's narrative. Precious little is left to investigate in the MEP archives. Without overly personalising the issue, it is difficult not to surmise that his relationship with his Bishop has been pivotal to this outcome. Paul Ramond was himself from a small rural hamlet in Aveyron, in Occitanie, also an historical bastion of resistance to the French centralist state and culture. Might he not have felt sympathy for his young *Breton* comrade? Visibly not. More plausibly, their mutual antipathy was of a moral and perhaps of a class nature. Ramond was the ardent missionary and a social climber made Bishop at 40, with no scholarly inclination whatsoever. And like his famous elder Paul Puginier, he was probably suspicious of the caste of *lettrés* (Michaud 2004).

By contrast, Savina proved to be an anti-conformist with an innate distrust for authority and hierarchy that he could not (nor would?) disguise. He showed an obvious lack of will to abandon his personal inclinations just to defer to ecclesiastical morale. For years, he posed a rather public challenge to his Bishop's authority, something Ramond was not in a position to take lightly.¹² Hence, these two hard-headed men locked horns, maybe too similar to one another for their own good. By contrast, after Ramond retired, Gustave Vandaële, an intellectually inclined Parisian, proved far more welcoming of Savina's temperament and accomplishments and decided to restore peace by allowing him back in Tonkin – plausibly against Ramond's better advice.

The Unwavering Course of an Institutional Logic

There is an unexpected, though consistent follow-up to this story. It involves the five letters found in Bishop Ramond's file, in three of which, as we know, the real names of the blameworthy par-

ties had been withheld. As a consequence, these innocuous letters had gone unnoticed by the MEP staff when Ramond's file became public. Upon my linking the letters to Savina, his breaches of conduct and the trying relationship with his Bishop, out of courtesy I had sent a preliminary version of my prose to the MEP archivist, himself a priest, as well as to the editor of the series where my "Incidental Ethnographers" book was to appear, also a cleric. I felt it was fair to warn them about what was coming.

The archivist responded with a thoughtful but concerned email, writing that "all is not good to say" and that making the story of Savina's transgressions public was likely to soil his legacy. He added that members of the Savina family were in touch with him and planning to celebrate their kin; my story would disrupt that project. As for the book series editor, the feedback was stern. He found that retelling this story was conjectural, tantamount to gossiping, and would undermine not only Savina's reputation but the book's, too. He had consulted with lawyers and urged me to reconsider or risk consequences. He, too, was adamant that the family would be shocked.

With this united front against me, I became seriously worried that my publishing deal might be in jeopardy. The argument of sparing the Savina family's feelings also weighed on my thoughts. So, I gave in and massaged the text into the sanitized version published in 2007 (167–210).

All was not said. I reconnected with the MEP archives in 2022 through the *Institut de Recherche France-Asie* (IRFA), the lay body now in charge of curating the MEP archives, which is by and large an arm of the French state. I learned that the archivist I had dealt with had passed away, and that Bishop Ramond's five letters still existed – but just. After my visit of 2004, the letters had somehow been relocated to the "Archival Hell" a colourful nickname used by archivists for a hidden repository where sensitive materials could quietly collect dust away from undesirable attention. Aptly, the director of IRFA had since retrieved these letters and reinstated them in Ramond's public file. In addition, it was verified that there were no traces of relatives of Savina in the MEP logbook of contacts nor in any of their files, be it paper or digital. This absence does not prove anything decisively of course, but it provides a good indication.

Then, following my research in Brittany in 2022, I was contacted by two of Savina's close family, senior women belonging to the lineage of his elder brother Guillaume. These ladies accepted

12 It certainly did not help that in 1937, Savina bypassed his chain of command to write directly to the MEP Superior General about his resentment against Ramond regarding significant sums of money he considered were clawed back from him, also in the form of investments he had paid from his own pocket such as the land and ricefields purchased in the Chapa region in 1927–1931 and for which he was never compensated after his eviction of 1931 (Archives–MEP/IRFA: Savina file, letter to L. Robert, February 22nd, 1937).

wholeheartedly to discuss Savina's life and fate with me, provided me with copies of relevant documents in their possession, and also accepted to read a draft of this article. To put it in as few words as feasible, they were surprised but not offended to learn of their ancestor's moral shortcomings. On the contrary, both showed a healthy curiosity, welcoming his humanity and his typically *Breton* independent spirit (*têtu*). They said they preferred knowing he was holding his flock in high esteem and had done his best to understanding them well and share his knowledge broadly, rather than purely aim at increasing the statistics of conversion. I also learned from these informants that they had no knowledge of anyone in the extended family having been in touch with the MEP (or with my publisher), nor had anyone done anything to publicly celebrate François Savina.¹³

Again, this is not conclusive evidence of anything, but it offers compelling clues. It led me to deduce that the requests to tone down my prose were probably more of a pious nature and an attempt at protecting the reputation of the Catholic Church than anything else. But in the process, I could not help noting that a century later, François Savina had yet again been silenced.

Coda

I sincerely believe that what should really matter here is that by hiking the mountain paths along downtrodden peasants, tilling the soil with them, living the same life they lived, François Savina contributed greatly, with his knowledge and his publications, to carrying their voices further and for much longer, as this article illustrates. He has recognized a world order in the uplands of Indochina coherent with a *Breton* peasant habitus he had never forgotten, going full circle to where he had started from. His personal background was the part of him that was instrumental to this extraordinary engagement.

Unlike the vast majority of MEP field priests committed to reaping souls for the glory of God and Church, Savina did not make it his calling to convert nor civilize. As a contrasting example, just over the border in Yunnan, his eminent MEP

brother Paul Vial (1855–1917, in Asia for 38 years), another self-taught scholar with a remarkable legacy of ethnographic texts, put significant energy in enrolling local uplanders into a model Catholic hamlet functioning along a European logic of sociability and productivity. Vial designed the hamlet to showcase generously, he thought, the virtues and superiority of the French culture and way of life (Swain 1995, Névet 2010). Savina never took that road; he actively avoided it.

Savina was more akin to his junior MEP colleague Jacques Dournes (1923–1993), whom we met briefly in the Introduction, posted in the Central Highlands of Vietnam from 1946 onwards, who also encountered institutional difficulties in squaring his apostolic life with his passion for ethnology. In terms that could have fitted François Savina just as splendidly, anthropologist Oscar Salemink (2015: 93f.) wrote of Jacques Dournes that:

He was a marvelous maverick, an irreverent reverend, a missionary celebrating pagan culture ... a celibate man who admired and enjoyed the eroticism of Jarai culture. He was not an easy man, and he got easily and often into trouble because of his idiosyncratic thoughts and behavior ... He was not very serious about missionizing in the sense of converting the local population to Christianity, because converting them would mean destroying the very culture that he loved so much.

The resemblance strikes to the point that one cannot help thinking: did Dournes know about Savina's life? Probably, as Dournes had landed in Vietnam merely five years after Savina's death. Even more than his elder, Dournes went on to yield an impressive record of scholarly works. The war had pushed him to choose between his religious calling and his scholarly inclination: he was abruptly shipped back to France, renounced priesthood and became an academic anthropologist (Hardy 2015). Thirty years earlier, Savina did not, or could not afford to go his own way. For motives only known to him, but almost certainly linked to a time when finding oneself alone and homeless at an advanced age was a chancy gamble, he chose to endure rather than quit.

Over a lifetime in Indochina but also past his death it seems, François Savina has been seen in certain circles as somewhat toxic. He seems to have been dealt with by the *Missions étrangères de Paris* as someone better not talked about, perhaps even an embarrassment. Yet, Nick Tapp (2010: 67), arguably one of the leading anthropologists of the Hmong, said of Savina that he

13 Following an email I had sent in 2007, a survey of the inhabitants of Mahalon and the region had been conducted by the mayoral office in 2009, including online, and it did not yield a single response of individuals who were aware of François-Marie Savina (interview with mayor Le Gall, June 2022).

was “one of our earliest informants who is at all frank about the nature of his day-to-day encounters with the Hmong.” Historian Charles Keith (2012: 123), in his book “Catholic Vietnam. A Church from Empire to Nation,” wrote that Savina was one of the most notable missionary ethnographers colonial Vietnam had known. Léon Trivière proposed that Savina’s contribution to the ethnography of French Indochina were important ones, earning him the right to sit at the same table as better-known missionary ethnographers of French Indochina such as François Callet (1822–1895) and Léopold Cadière (1869–1955) (Trivière 1953: 29; Condominas 1991).

These praises in mind, and largely agreeing with them, I felt it necessary to add flesh to the bones of who François Savina was, even if all is not glowing, in order to explain how he fashioned himself into a distinctive and distinguished intellectual by his sole willpower. To do that, it has been central to understand the causes of his being continually shifted and sidelined by his superiors. In turn, grasping accurately why he was pushed aside required to bare the behaviour that put him at odds with his hierarchy, exposing the motives and circumstances why a rebel priest, repeatedly disciplined by his superiors, could lay some of the earliest foundations on which to build a scholarly understanding of the rich cultural fabric in the uplands of northern Vietnam and beyond.

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