

Tonkin's uplands at the turn of the 20th century: Colonial military enclosure and local livelihood effects

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Abstract: *In colonial Southeast Asia, the process of enclosure aimed to integrate communities living in the borderlands, along with their lands and resources, into the state project. In 1891, the newly established French colonial administration in Tonkin (northern Vietnam) decided the upland region bordering China should be physically and administratively enclosed to achieve these aims. The governor general ordered the French military to administer these borderlands and to complete two surveys of local 'tribes' in 1897–1898 and 1903–1904 to make upland populations and their livelihoods more legible and, the administration hoped, more controllable. By examining details of these surveys, we not only obtain proof of this enclosure project but we also gain rare insight into and a snapshot of upland border livelihoods at the turn of the 20th century. The surveys reveal details regarding local cross-border trade strategies, marketplace manoeuvres, the means by which the colonial government enforced a common currency and, despite such attempts, the enduring nature of barter. We probe how local populations reacted to the state's processes of legibility, and in particular, how upland residents adapted their trade livelihoods to the new realities of being included within the colonial state and, progressively, within the national economy.*

Keywords: *borders, enclosure, highland minorities, livelihoods, Tonkin, Vietnam*

The Miao is not much of a trader. He brings his occasional products to the nearest market, purchases the sporadic goods he needs, and then quickly returns to his mountain. (1903, MSS. EUR. 332, Ban-Lao)

Introduction

In mainland Southeast Asia, north-eastern India and, to a degree, southwestern China, victorious colonial powers found themselves able to achieve a project barely conceivable to their local predecessors: binding non-state spaces and acephalous, egalitarian peoples to the state. Initially, colonial rulers noted that the more peripheral such people were and the more mobile their subsistence routines – such as foraging, pastoralism and shifting cultivation – the more likely they were to maintain egalitarian social forms 'relatively opaque to the state' (Scott, 1998: 183; see also Winichakul, 1994; Hazareesingh, 2013). The project to reorder these social forms, argues political scientist James Scott, represents the 'last great enclosure' plan. More or less steadily over the last two centuries, governments

in the region, regardless of allegiances – colonial, democratic, communist and authoritarian – embraced this project. As Scott adds: 'The headlong pursuit of this end by regimes otherwise starkly different suggests that such projects of administrative, economic, and cultural standardization are hard-wired into the architecture of the modern state itself' (2009: 4). This enclosure aimed to integrate people living in the territorial periphery, along with their lands, resources and livelihoods. As such, the monetising of these residents' otherwise often subsistence-based economies was valuable in converting them into formal contributors to the national economy.

Concurrently, growing lowland populations across Southeast Asia accelerated the colonisation of the hills. Colonists brought with them familiar crops, their social organisation and their state. Ultimately, the 'friction of terrain' was overcome, and the enclosure of the commons was complete. By 'enclosure', Scott does not refer here to the original Marxian meaning of land-grabbing with its original users being expropriated, turning over exclusive use rights to

powerful landowners. He means instead 'an effort to integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery[...] to ensure that their economic activity [is] legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable.' (Scott, 2009: 4,5). We propose that the 1891 French territorial policy regarding the borderlands of Tonkin illustrates this process in a textbook fashion.

As a result of enclosure processes, since the end of World War II, 'the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies has changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing hill peoples and nation-states' (Scott, 2009: xii), and these Southeast Asian upland locales no longer provide minorities refuge from the grasp of the state. As Appadurai similarly proposes, in addition to mapping these uplands (Reclus, 1876–1894), the state has modernised them through the implementation of 'technology, modern science, mass participation in politics, massive investments in higher education, and immense propaganda for new ideas about citizenship' (Appadurai, 1996: 144; see also Driver, 2001).¹ In this paper, we investigate the historical foundations of this process, namely, the practices put in place by the French colonial government that set the stage for the gradual takeover of these uplands. One of these practices was the French military's commissioning of two detailed ethnographic and geographic surveys of the uplands, carried out in 1897–1898 and 1903–1904, that resulted in a rich corpus of field-based insights at the outset of colonial occupation (Michaud, 2013). These documents provide clear indications of the enclosing strategies of the colonial state's Military Territories policy, as well as being part of this process themselves, rendering upland populations and their activities far more legible than ever before. Moreover, by analysing the contents of these surveys further, we gain a snapshot view of the lives and livelihoods of upland ethnic minority inhabitants, including trade routes, the roles of marketplaces, local reactions to the creation of a common currency and the enduring role of barter at the turn of the 20th century. We detail how upland residents reorganised aspects of their livelihoods and also mobilised strategies to negotiate and at times out-manoeuvre colonial state control.

Our methods here are primarily archival research. We have located, photographed,

transcribed and at times translated over 3000 pages of the sector reports that combined to create the two surveys (discussed more below).² We have coded these sources using thematic, axial and constant comparative coding, with a focus for this paper on what the reports contain regarding livelihood approaches and enclosure processes. We are well aware that these documents are riddled with biases, racism and prejudices, written as they were in the colonial era for a restricted military readership (Willems-Braun, 1997; Stoler, 2009). Yet created contemporaneously with the events they report on, they provide a particular, unique window on these northern uplands (Roche, 2010).

Benchmarking enclosure in the uplands

Very little information exists on the inhabitants and economy of the northern Vietnam uplands before the late 1800s. Apart from rare and brief ventures (Poisson, 2009; Davis, 2013), lowland Vietnamese (Kinh) had very limited interest in these uplands (Le Failler, 2011, 2014), focused as they were on securing their authority over southern territories, asserting the country's independence from China, and emphasising the development of lowland wet rice agriculture.³ The French, in turn, were primarily interested in the borderlands because of the potential to reach Yunnan, bypassing treaty ports in coastal China. French explorers such as Francis Garnier and Ernest Doudart de Lagrée in the 1860s, Émile Rocher and Jean Dupuis in the 1870s and Auguste Pavie and Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis in the 1880s all participated in voyages through the hills and up the main rivers, hoping to find new trade opportunities and routes.

The Military Territories policy

The Military Territories (Fig. 1) came into existence on 6 August 1891,⁴ when a demarcation line was drawn to separate the Sino-Vietnamese border region from the Red River Delta. The French colonial administration hoped that this would be 'strong enough to constitute a definitive obstacle to the movements of bandit bands [...] and] resist the pressure of the inexhaustible reservoir of pirates that is China' (De Grandmaison, 1898: 89). The colonial



Figure 1. Tonkin and the Military Territories, 1903 (Michaud, 2007: 268)

government thought that the ethnic minority populations of Vietnam's northern highlands were so diverse and sparse that a standard provincial administration mirroring the lowlands would be unworkable. Instead, they assessed that the occupation of this upland frontier would be achieved most successfully through a united civilian and military administration. The region was therefore divided into four Military Territories each under the command of a French commissioned officer.⁵ These territories were subdivided into sectors and colonial influence spread outward from scattered posts and garrison towns, while groups of local mountain residents were organised into *partisans* (militia). Building trust, erasing the fresh horrors of the colonial conquest and taming roaming bandits became the objectives of the occupying forces.

With these objectives largely accomplished by the end of the 1890s, the next step was for the military command to become strategically acquainted with the leadership structure, trade patterns and local customs of the numerous ethnic groups inhabiting the Military Territories, in

order to gain influence over them (Girardet, 1972; Conklin, 1997). Cutting a long story short (Michaud, 2013), the military command was ordered to undertake two geographic/ethnographic surveys in 1897 and 1903. The Colonial Infantry were given only a few months to produce their reports. With each Military Territory subdivision (the sectors) having its own commanding officer, every report had a different author, around 70 in total, and all the reports were structured following two distinct templates. The 1897 survey was of a functional nature, while the 1903 survey focused exclusively on ethnography. Together, they amount to 4000 pages and provide the most significant and dependable textual evidence of what life and livelihoods were like for minority residents of highland Tonkin during the entire colonial period (Michaud, 2015).⁶

By completing these surveys, one could argue that the colonial state brought the enclosure process to new heights. With a previously unknown degree of precision and meticulousness, the 'population, their landholdings, their harvests, their wealth, the value of commerce and so on' were

measured and recorded (Scott, 1998: 24). Indeed, in *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998) demonstrates how 'all states developed metrics to transform complex, illegible and diverse local practices into simplified, legible and standardised ones' (as summarised in MacLean, 2013: 11). As such, we argue that these surveys can be considered key elements in a series of steps the French colonial state took to increase the legibility of populations and practices in the upland frontier, particularly regarding livelihoods and trade (Table 1). We focus now on what the surveys reveal about local livelihoods and trade practices at the time to add weight to this claim and, in addition, to gain important insights into upland borderland livelihoods at the turn of the 20th century.

Upland borderland economies circa 1900

The surveys of 1897–1898 and 1903–1904 reveal that towards the end of the 19th century, the dominant livelihood model for the vast majority of upland ethnic minority residents was a subsistence-based economy within either acephalous societies or small feudal systems.⁷ In both cases, agriculture was the mainstay for the bulk of the population, complemented by small-scale exchange to obtain essential goods that could not be found or produced locally.

The surveys also reveal that for the vast majority of borderland farmers, the choice of crops, the amount of land they farmed and the final destination of their produce were all determined by the subsistence needs of the household. The most productive and valued form of cultivation was rice in irrigated terraces, a practice mostly limited to the core areas of the established Tai-speaking domains and the valleys radiating up from them. In addition to wet rice, the other main crops were mountain dry rice and maize. In the higher and rockier zones, maize complemented by beans and a few tubers took over from rice. Nearly all the reports noted slight surpluses traded at local marketplaces, mostly through barter, while substantial accumulation of wealth through exchange was untypical. Indeed, the most common customary form of wealth besides access to land and the ownership of domesticated animals – water buffalo, oxen, horses, goats, pigs, chickens and ducks – was silver jewellery. Across the highlands, sector reports disclose that jewellery was fashioned locally from silver bars, coins or recycled ornaments obtained through barter with other highlanders or Chinese traders (more on them below).

All the reports discuss hunting, gathering and fishing as essential components of local livelihoods. Additionally, small prey was captured, with some birds, small rodents, snakes, lizards,

Table 1. Populations in the Military Territories in 1903 and 2009

1903 [†]			2009 [‡]		
Lunet de Lajonquière's ethnonyms [also mentioned in sector reports]	N	%	Official Vietnamese ethnonyms [current international usage]	N	%
<i>Annamites</i> (not counting troops)	8212	3.2	Kinh [lowland Vietnamese]	518 749	17.6
<i>Chinois</i>	20 098	7.9	Hoa [Haw]	10 965	0.4
<i>Thais</i> [Tho, Nung Nhang, Nyang,]	180 475	69.9	Tày, Thái, Nùng, Sán Chay, Giáy, Lự, Bô Y [Tai, Thai] [§]	1 497 576	50.8
<i>Mans</i> [Mun, Yao]	25 035	9.6	Dao [Yao]	323 622	11.0
<i>Meos</i> [Mong, Miao]	21 411	8.5	Mông [Hmong, Miao]	513 532	17.4
<i>Lolos</i>	2214	0.9	Lô Lô [Lolo, Yi]	4429	0.2
<i>Divers</i>	80	0.0	25 official ethnicities	80 459	2.7
Total	257 525	100	Total	2 949 332	100

[†] This is a conservative estimate based on field reports by Lunet de Lajonquière (1904: 27). We reproduce the ethnonyms as written by Lunet de Lajonquière, although sector field reports are much richer in this regard.

[‡] These are calculated from 2009 National Census data from today's five border provinces of Lai Châu, Lào Cai, Hà Giang, Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn, which match the four Military Territories (MT) of 1903 nearly exactly. Quảng Ninh province includes the coastal portion of the former first MT but has since been extended west well into Kinh territory; including it would significantly alter the statistical validity of this comparative table. At the opposite end, the western portion of Lai Châu province lay beyond the western limit of the fourth MT but is so lightly populated today that its inclusion seems acceptable.

[§] Excluding the Tai-speaking Lao group, an overspill from neighbouring Laos.

turtles, insects, snails, river prawns and shellfish reaching local marketplaces. As reported by Commander Bonifacy in his extensive 1903 summary report for the Third Military Territory, forests actually provided a wide range of products for consumption and commerce.

Agricultural wage work among highlanders appears to have been non-existent at this time, except in the immediate vicinity of the French military posts. Here, wage work, mostly maintenance tasks, was available for *partisans*, the willing or simply the downtrodden. An officer in the Fourth Military Territory colourfully illustrated the lack of enthusiasm from locals towards any wage work, noting: 'On these roads, all transport is by small pack horses, as coolies cannot be found because the native hates to do this job' (GGI 66105, Muong-Khuong).⁸ The reports imply that local labour could only be mobilised successfully when village leaders and their councils of notables drafted individuals from within their constituencies for unpaid *ad hoc* maintenance of roads, buildings and irrigation. As much as the colonial military aimed to enclose the region, doing so by changing labour structures did not appear, at least at the time, to be a promising route.

Observing production and trade

A typical quote from the 1903–1904 survey regarding production and trade among uplanders is informative in itself but also reveals the puzzlement of colonial observers seeing indifference to production beyond the subsistence level:

The Nung⁹ do not seek to make their land produce more than what is necessary to feed them and have enough left to sow again the following year. The same applies to livestock, it is limited to herding just the number of buffalos and horses necessary for pack and field work, and smaller domestic animals are bred as food for their owners and to generate a small income when sold at the market. There is no will to produce intensively. [...] Since the Tho only just cultivates what he needs for his own consumption, the resulting trade is almost zero, and limited instead to barter (MSS.EUR. 307, Yen-Minh).

The same interpretation applied to crafts:

The local handicraft industry yields nothing for the marketplaces, limited as it is to the needs of

the craftsman himself. [...]The Méo produce their own cloth from the hemp they plant; some smith their work tools, spades, ploughshares, sickles etc. ... and to do so, purchase the iron from Yunnan at the Pho-Bang marketplace. They also craft large water pails and fashion their sandals out of bamboo fibre. They also make pottery. Commerce is practically nil (MSS.EUR. 307, Yen-Minh).

This lack of intensive trade among upland ethnic minorities went hand in hand with the fact, either as cause or consequence, that there was no well-developed road infrastructure between upland rural settlements. Instead, an intricate web of waterways, challenging trails, and steep foot and mule tracks linked upland valleys to each other and connected them to the lowlands. This limited mobility conveniently doubled as insurance, in that the 'friction of terrain' obstructed whoever wanted to access or secure the highlands. One French officer located in the east of the Third Military Territory noted: 'The area is a vast forest clinging on to rocks. It is impracticable at the present time; rivers are not navigable, communication channels are mere mule tracks' (MSS.EUR. 304, Quang-Uyen). Likewise, officers further south in the Bac-Kan sector lamented the intrinsic difficulties in finding transportation links:

When one strays from the roads reaching the French posts, which have been significantly improved, it is necessary to have a guide to move from one point to another. [...] Apart from the watercourses, roads in the sector only allow goods to be carried by coolies, this being the safest and fastest means that can be used until properly sealed and solid roads allow the use of pack animals or carts drawn by oxen or buffaloes (GGI 66103, Bac-Kan).

Fittingly, colonial officers also remarked that the topography did not appear to pose a problem for local residents, capable as they were of negotiating the most challenging terrain in any weather while carrying heavy loads.

Despite scanty infrastructure, the basic elements of trade networks did exist in, across, and beyond these mountains, providing upland markets with goods not available locally such as salt, metals, gunpowder and utilitarian industrial goods that were essentially lowland

commodities. These networks operated mostly through the main river systems, sometimes across the Chinese border. More often than not, Chinese merchants were involved, and the waterways of the northern mountain ranges connected trade between Yunnan, Guangxi and the Red River Delta.

Chinese intermediaries and cross-border trade

The surveys clearly indicate that by the end of the 1800s, upland residents were in regular, though not necessarily frequent, trading contact with the lowlands and that outsiders took part in these trade networks. According to sector reports, apart from occasional European merchants in the most important colonial hubs, Chinese (simply called *Chinois*, ethnicity remaining indeterminate) appear to have been the most active in creating long-distance trade networks, with Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) a distant second. Ethnic minorities like the Tai-speaking Tho (today's Tày) tended to focus on intra-regional trade, with most other groups rarely operating beyond the marketplace nearest to their dwellings. In 1903, French officers in the Third Military Territory observed that

Trade in the region is in the hands of a few Europeans (supplies for the troops, the timber trade, horses), Chinese (supplies for the troops, salt exported to China, *củ nâu* exported to the Delta, hardware, canvas, rope, small items), and some Annamite [Kinh] and Thổ (small items, products from the Delta, food) (MSS. EUR. 313, 3rd MT).

The Chinese were associated with trade all across the uplands. In Bát Xát, on the western bank of the Red River in the Fourth Territory, one officer observed:

It should be noted that most of the trade is in the hands of a few Chinese merchants from Ho kheou [Hekou] (Long-Phong), Pa-Sa and Tien Phong [all in Yunnan]. The people of the region purchase from them the few things they need, usually paying in money/silver¹⁰ and very rarely through barter. Thus the Chinese sell them some English fabrics, haberdashery of English or German origin, Japanese matches, opium, tobacco, tea, etc. (GGI 66105, Ba-Xat).

Also, to the west of the Red River, a large part of Chinese-organised cross-border trade involved livestock:

The Chinese trade with the Mans and the Méos and mainly buy their cotton, bringing in exchange iron, malleable cast iron pots, opium, tobacco, tea, some silk, matches and trinkets. They also come once a year, in February and March, from Mont Zé [Mengzi in Yunnan] to buy buffaloes from Minh Luong and Duong Qué [in Tonkin]: their purchases are sizeable enough to trigger a raise of 25 percent in the price of buffalo in the region (GGI 66105, Phong-Tho).

Likewise, in the Second Territory to the east, the Chinese still held sway:

These Chinese share among themselves the small trades of the area such as jewellery, blacksmithing, carpentry, brick making, gambling, pig slaughtering, opium collection for the state, etc.[...] But they only settle in the main towns where markets are held and they form real commercial colonies, each town with its leader.[...] They still have the larger part of their family in China and cross the border often to visit home (MSS.EUR. 306, Trung-Khanh-Phu).

In general, international exchange with China was encouraged by the French colonial state, as it generated profits and underpinned lucrative taxation on both sides: 'Our natives regularly attend Chinese markets on the border, and vice-versa the Chinese flock to ours' (MSS.EUR. 306, Trung-Khanh-Phu). Taxes were extracted for a variety of merchandise, including forest-products, provided by uplanders:

The vast forests which cover the territory of the commune of Ngoc-Phuoc are partially exploited by the Méos for the manufacturing of coffin boards.¹¹ The boards, cut from big logs with an axe, are traded [to Chinese merchants]. They are exported in fairly large quantities to Yunnan. Tax paid for this is ten cents for a large board, and five cents for a small board travelling across the border (GGI 66105, Ba-Xat).

Conveniently, colonial officers could encourage border guards to turn a blind eye to illegal

cross-border trade that might potentially benefit the colonial venture: 'Over the past year, the commander of the sector has relentlessly pressed and encouraged inhabitants to engage in the smuggling trade [of salt] as it is beneficial to the region, even offering to lend money to those who did not have the necessary resources' (GGI 66105, So-Nhieu). Bending the rules may have been a time-honoured practice among local highland dwellers; getting encouraged and paid by the state to do so was probably a novelty.

Yet while the French supported trade with China, the reports reveal that they were not so keen to leave Chinese merchants, shopkeepers and moneylenders at liberty to freely pursue their lucrative activities in Tonkin. Taxation and certain smuggling operations were carefully monitored, and French officials often judged the dominant trade role of the Chinese as detrimental to local ethnic minority inhabitants' own prospects. One officer had a particularly terse take on these relations: 'The Chinese have a talent for draining all the money from natives in the high region. They are far superior to them on all accounts and are especially aware of their superiority, which is in turn acknowledged by the natives. Thus we should see to eliminate them completely' (MSS.EUR. 308, Cao-Bang). This statement had an appearance of wanting to empower the 'natives' against what was perceived to be exploitation by the Chinese. Equally plausible, however, are French concerns about maximising the retention of financial capital inside Tonkin. Enclosing the Military Territories involved reining in local populations, but it also entailed excluding or at least curbing undesired elements to ensure the profitability of upland operations and confirm the authority of the colonial system.

Marketplaces: More than just economic rationalisation

In a geographic context where most of the population lived (and continues to live to this day) in hamlets of only a few houses distributed over a large and under-populated territory, marketplaces constituted noteworthy and detectable sites of trade, doubling as meeting points for many social purposes having little to do with commerce (Michaud, 2006: 153–154). As such,

marketplaces were among the best sites for the colonial state to regulate the flow of goods, obviously, but also to gain information.

In 1903, Captain Fesch, stationed in the border town of Tà Lùng on the Bằng River in current-day Cao Bằng province, summarised the logic of periodic marketplace trade:

Trade consists of the exchange, in marketplaces, of products of the soil or native craft for utensils, tools and objects or products that do not exist in the *chau* [district] or whose production is insufficient for the needs of the population. There is no commercial enterprise, even at an embryonic stage, with a store and the money to get a serious result. The Chinese alone have an entrepreneurial spirit and the initiative along with the necessary commercial skills (MSS.EUR. 305, Ta-Lung).

Commander Auguste Bonifacy efficiently summarised the most significant characteristic shaping trade: 'Natives merely sell or exchange their surplus harvest and some forest products' (MSS.EUR. 313, 3rd MT).

Market days were commonly held in impermanent structures set up in the immediate vicinity of a few established shops owned by Chinese or Kinh merchants. Quantities were small, as everything had to be carried long distances on one's back or, at best, by pony, horse or mule. For uplanders, a seller typically operated on behalf of his or her household. Photographs of highland markets at the time show many sellers sitting side by side with surprisingly small quantities of similar produce on display.

Practically all items brought to the market by upland farmers were linked to the food economy.¹² Local inhabitants' needs were modest and the produce they could sell sparse. In return, they acquired utilitarian goods. '[The Nung] bring maize or potatoes down to the market and take home rice and petrol' (MSS.EUR. 303, Nuoc-Hai). 'As for trade it is negligible, for the Meo lives with too little to be an active trader. He brings to the different markets pigs, chickens, European bean, canvas, some agricultural implements, and fish in season' (MSS.EUR. 334, Trinh-Thuong). '[The Man] are content with bringing to the regional markets a little cotton, some produce from their fields and gardens, vegetables and fruits, and in turn they buy

instruments, tools, items, etc. which they do not manufacture themselves' (MSS.EUR. 335, Muong Khuong).

From extensive oral histories collected for the 1897–1898 survey, the French acknowledged that marketplaces had long existed in towns and villages or at track crossings prior to colonisation. In the rare larger settlements with (Kinh) town dwellers, marketplaces were permanent structures, while elsewhere, periodic temporary structures were more common. In the latter case, markets were held every few days following the lunar calendar. In any given valley, watershed or cluster of settlements, market days were arranged to rotate in such a way that one occurred somewhere just about every day. Highland dwellers could thus choose those best suiting their needs, and travelling traders could maintain a regular business. In the Third Territory, we are told, 'markets are held every six days in Hoang Su Phi, Xin Man, Man Mei Coc Pai, Ngan Chen, Ban Qua, and Nam Ryck' (MSS.EUR. 317, Hoang-Su-Phi). In the Fourth Territory, 'these markets are held every six days, the market of Muong-Khuong taking place the day after the Phâ-Long one. The day after Muong-Khuong the market takes place at Ké-Chau, so that merchants leave Phâ-Long, attend the markets at Muong-Khuong and Ké-Chau and arrive at Lao Kay where they can restock' (GGI 66105, Muong-Khuong). Nearby, 'there are three markets in the Quan Ba region: those of Quan Ba, Chang Kien, and Na Cho Cai. They are each held every six days and the roster is set up so that none of these markets takes place the same day' (GGI 66104, Quan-Ba). And further to the east in the Second Territory: 'This sale is ingeniously ensured by means of markets each held every 5 days with combined dates warranting that each day there is a market held somewhere in the sector' (MSS.EUR. 306, Trung-Khanh-Phu).

Marketplaces were also important sites for meeting relatives, discussing alliances, planning weddings, staying informed, socialising and enjoying a few hours away from domestic chores and farm work: 'It is customary in Tho country that twice a year, in the 3rd and 7th month, young men and girls gather in groups in the major markets in the region to form choirs and sing duets passed down generations' (MSS.EUR. 305, Ta-Lung). Similarly: 'The [Tho]

ideal seems to be the blood-red *cai ao* that the youth adorn on certain festive market days where marital relationships are initiated and from where couples return singing hymns of love and joy' (MSS.EUR. 304, Quang-Uyen). Marketplace gatherings were also used in the preparation of collective celebrations such as the all-important New Year's festivities, *Têt* in Vietnamese: 'In Ta-Lung market come 1200 to 1500 persons, 2000 for *Têt*' (MSS.EUR. 305, Ta-Lung). 'The largest of the three [markets] is that of Quang Uyen. Approaching *Têt* it comes to be very busy. Unusually, and so that all traders are able to fit in, it is held outside of the village in a rice field where it occupies [an area] at least 150 meters wide. Even then, squeezing in is a tight fit' (GGI 66103, Quang-Uyen). In these uplands, demographic density was low, hamlets were fragmented and interactions beyond one's immediate neighbourhood – usually populated primarily by close kin – were infrequent. The reports highlight that for many, pleasure and distraction were the primary reasons for a visit to the market: 'These markets are very popular with the natives, but many come for leisure rather than to buy or sell' (MSS.EUR. 317, Hoang-Su-Phi). 'The Meo man prefers independent living alone with his wife and children, without the neighbour putting his nose in his business. He sees his friends at the market' (MSS.EUR. 315, Dong-Van). Thus, at the start of French colonial rule in highland Tonkin, customary marketplaces were serving purposes beyond mere commerce and had not reached their full potential as vectors of economic modernisation.

Mercuriales, namely market price lists or registers of official commodity prices, comprised one of the ways the French bureaucracy tried to make market routines increasingly legible. These lists provided the colonial administration with a valuable inventory of what was on offer locally and at what prices. Comparing *mercuriales* across sectors gave a good indication of regional specialties and, most importantly, opened the door to more finely tuned taxation and circulation of goods (see a typical case in Table 2). The *mercuriales* also revealed the craft and industrial products specialised traders brought from outside the region, as

Table 2. *Mercuriales* for the sector of Ba-Xat (Bát Xát) for 1897 (GGI 66105)

Merchandise		Price list per marketplace in <i>piastres</i> [\$] and <i>sapèques</i> [sap.]*			Average price in sector
		<i>Ban-Qua</i>	<i>Muong-Hum</i>	<i>Trinh-Thuong</i>	
Rice	Picul (60 k)	2.65\$	3.00\$	2.50\$ to 3.00\$	2.80\$
Paddy	Picul (60 k)	1.50\$	1.50\$	1.50\$	1.50\$
Maize	Picul (60 k)	1.25\$	1.25\$	1.25\$	1.25\$
Quartered pork	Annamite kilo (0.6 k)	120 sap.	100 sap.	100 sap.	107 sap.
Quartered buffalo	Annamite kilo (0.6 k)	64 sap.	60 sap.	60 sap.	61 sap.
Pork fat	Annamite kilo (0.6 k)	130 sap.	120 sap.	120 sap.	123 sap.
Chicken	Annamite kilo (0.6 k)	120 sap.	100 sap.	100 sap.	107 sap.
Fish	Annamite kilo (0.6 k)	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 k)	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\$

**Piastres* and *sapèques* are defined below.

well as the variety of local products linked to agriculture, livestock, hunting and gathering.

The project of enforcing a common currency

The French elected to install a common currency across the whole of Indochina, inaugurated in the lowlands in 1885 and progressively brought to the uplands. French authorities acted on the belief that a local economy that did not use a common currency would be incapable of amassing wealth, leaving locals in a state of misery (see, for instance, GGI 66103, Na-Ri). There were also less altruistic motives, based on the understanding that barter does not help taxation, while accurate records of transactions using currency can maximise legibility (Scott, 1998, 2009). The silver piastre (*piastre indochinoise*, or as stamped on it, *piastre de commerce*) was minted by the newly established *Banque de l'Indochine* for the Indochina market. The strategy seemed to work, as noted by an officer in the Third Territory: 'The natives show a marked preference for the recently minted French piastre [at 27.215 grams of silver] over the Mexican piastre [at 24.430 grams], which they have issues with because of the weight difference' (GGI 66104, Quan-Ba). Then, for transactions smaller than one piastre, the French introduced an assortment of cent coins, but several reports describe a convoluted situation: 'The *piastre de commerce* is the currency used to trade, with

its subdivisions of 10 and 20 cent coins. The natives do not use the cent coins much, they prefer Chinese *sapèques* made of copper' (GGI 66105, Pa-Kha).

At the time of their survey in 1897–1898, the French noted that an assortment of local and regional currencies had already been used for quite some time in transactions taking place outside the realm of kinship and village-based reciprocity. 'Trade through bartering is common practice in the region for small transactions; more important affairs (opium) almost always involve cash money' (GGI 66104, Hoang-Thu-Bi). That was particularly the case for transactions with established Chinese traders and shops: 'The inhabitants of the region purchase from [Chinese merchants] the few things they need, usually paying in money, very rarely in kind' (GGI 66105, Ba-Xat). The same applied to official transactions such as those taking place in state shops or French military posts, although on occasion, even these formal dealings could involve partial payment in-kind for particularly valuable items: 'Salt is generally paid in *piastres* and is also traded against opium' (GGI 66105, Muong-Khuong). Opium circulating across the upland region was thus purchased with cash but constituted a form of currency in its own right: 'The prominent item of higher Red River trade, opium, is now monopolized by the agent of the State. He claws back this trade while other

Annamite and Chinese traders suffer. Opium earlier played the role of a sought after common currency for traders on the high river' (GGI 66105, Pho-Lu).¹³

Among the most common currencies identified by the French upon arrival were the Chinese copper sapèque, the Annamite tin sapèque and the Mexican silver dollar, also known as the Spanish dollar or 'eight-real coin'. Also common were bars of solid silver in various shapes and weights, the most reliable retainer of value among locals, particularly prized for crafting jewellery.¹⁴

Profitably manipulating the currencies in any given sub-region required a deep-rooted understanding of their relative values depending on where, when and with whom transactions were being conducted.¹⁵ These relative values constantly fluctuated, sometimes with major discrepancies:

The most common currency in the country is the sapèque. The rate of the piastre in sapèques is variable: but generally the piastre here is worth one thousand or eleven hundred sapèques. Since we have occupied the region, [piastres] coins in silver and copper (cents) have become common. The garrisons of Quan Ba and Na Chu Cai put a significant amount of them in circulation on each market day (GGI 66104, Quan-Ba).

In December 1893, the piastre de commerce was worth 900 sapèques in Muong Khuong and since then it has steadily decreased in value when converted into sapèques. [... Today] the piastre de commerce is the only currency used for trade; its subdivision is the large Chinese sapèque whose value varies: usually two sapèques are worth about one cent of a piastre. Currently, the piastre is traded against 220 sapèques in Muong Khuong and 230 sapèques at Phâ Long (GGI 66105, Muong Khuong).

Despite the *piastre de commerce* making progress as the universal currency, locals, wary of fraud and trickery and preferring tried and true ways, favoured weighing rather than accepting money at face value. This principle was so imperative that many French officers were puzzled by how locals dealt with matters worth less than one silver piastre. Instead of using customary coins introduced by the French administration for smaller values, highlanders

would physically split silver *piastres* on the spot with their hefty steel knives to get the exact weight needed for a given transaction: 'In Binh Lu, [piastres] are divided by chopping them into pieces. Cents are only accepted in Phong-Tho' (GGI 66105, Phong-Tho). Officers remarked: 'Which one of us does not remember the stubborn and invincible refusal among the Tho to accept the divisional coins of our piastre?' (GGI 66103, Na-Ri). This is one telling example in a broader picture whereby tradition, mistrust, confusion or sometimes simple inertia hampered colonists' efforts to standardise practices, introduce accountability and bring transactions in to the open.

Under the radar: The role of barter

Notwithstanding the French aim of enforcing a common currency, we can safely presume that the majority of the exchange of goods and services within non-Chinese and non-Kinh societies still occurred without the aid of money. In the French reports, however, mentions of bartering are limited to marketplace situations or activities in or around French posts. When the barter of goods took place between kin or neighbours, away from the colonial gaze, it left virtually no trace in these colonial records. Indeed, in certain sectors, ethnic minority commerce outside of marketplaces was considered so unlikely or negligible that officers claimed that none existed: 'Currently, commerce [in the western part of the Second Territory] is of little importance and outside of trade on the market place [...], one can say that it doesn't exist' (GGI 66104, Bac-Kan). Likewise, in the north of the First Territory: 'Commerce is virtually nil. There are no marketplaces in the sector' (GGI 66102, Bi-Nhi).

Yet glimpses of a more complex picture can turn up here and there. In the most western sector of the Fourth Territory, for instance, it was stated that '[Man] women do not know how to weave cotton; it is woven and dyed by Thai women and exchanged with Mans against pigs and poultry' (MSS.EUR. 337, Phong-Tho). 'Commerce in the Phong-Thô district is conducted mainly through barter' (MSS.EUR. 337, Phong-Tho). We also know from later documents and oral histories we have collected since 1995, that historically, numerous items were indeed

bartered away from the eyes of outsiders, as many still are today: surplus agricultural produce; articles obtained through gathering such as medicinal plants; wild as much as domestic animals; forest food such as bamboo shoots, insects and freshwater prawns; timber; opium; labour and spouses (see contemporary confirmation in Abadie, 1924 and Savina, 1924). Such sustained and significant bartering among upland residents suggests that in the 1897–1904 period, uplanders were performing a significant proportion – and perhaps most – of their livelihood negotiations in non-legible ways away from the state’s gaze.

Concluding thoughts: The enclosure project and local reactions

The French succeeded in enclosing Vietnam’s northern highlands. First, they completed the delineation of a borderline with China in 1896, before mapping the region¹⁶ to provide a standardised codification of national territory. The border was secured militarily, and the northern borderlands were divided into administrative units with embedded state representatives. Second, through the two surveys investigated here came the documentation of trade routes, the quantification of upland livelihoods and trade and the methodical categorisation of commodities. In the words of one officer at the time, the goal of the colonial command was to ‘[gather] serious and in-depth knowledge of the populations, of their aspirations and mutual antipathies, [initiate] the rational study of the region, its resources and its needs, and finally [take charge of] its administration as such’ (GGI 66104, Hoang-thu-bi; see also Powell, 2007, and Lansing, 2014, for similar situations elsewhere). Colonial observers used the results of this project to rationalise and consolidate the uplands for greater control and exploitation – *mise en valeur* (Sarraut, 1923).

More specifically, the listing of goods traded at local markets shows how upland merchandise was categorised, quantified and made taxable for the state. Small-scale localised trade, often carried out between uplanders via barter, was less controllable and deemed of little consequence. But long-haul trade, mostly in the hands of established Chinese merchants who were

managing the trade of more vital products such as metals, salt, opium and timber between the highlands and the state industries in the Deltas, provided far more promising opportunities for state regulation and were firmly connected to a system of profitable in-country and cross-border taxation. In addition, as theorised by Scott (1998, 2009), monetisation through the gradual enforcement of a universal, state-controlled currency aimed to standardise transactions, making them assessable and, when necessary, open to manipulation. The gradual move from customary silver bars and copper coins, to colonial *piastres*, was based on the binding power of a modern, common and rational currency.

The overt justification for the Military Territories policy of 1891 was to secure Tonkin and eradicate rampant banditry in the northern highlands. But crucially, it also promoted the normalisation of local and cross-border trade through the creation of marketplace surveillance and border crossing posts, both important for taxation and commodity control, the rationalisation of the economy and ultimately, the development of road and service infrastructure in the mountains. Evidence of this strategy lies in the fact that as the government became increasingly successful in meeting these specific goals, the policy of the Military Territories and their peoples gradually became obsolete, and they were made redundant.¹⁷

The 1897–1898 and 1903–1904 surveys also reveal, almost inadvertently, that French colonial plans for the enclosure of the northern uplands triggered discreet resistance by upland dwellers. Episodes of armed resistance did indeed flare up on occasion, all successfully repressed by colonial troops (Culas, 2005; Lee, 2015), but most often, it was furtive resistance instead (Hazareesingh, 2013). In these archived reports, several French observers emphasised with some surprise that local farmers showed no inclination to increase the volume of their production beyond the household’s subsistence needs. This ‘apathy’ was interpreted by most observers as a problem that ought to be fixed: ‘lazy’ farmers remained under-productive despite all the ‘logical’ advantages of converting to cash-cropping and a market economy.¹⁸ Also bemusing the colonial observers was why uplanders were leaving most of the trade sector to outsiders, ‘the Chinese’ in particular, despite

the possible profits it entailed. Barter kept being the most common form of transaction among uplanders, keeping dealings beyond the gaze of fiscal agents. Cross-border trade routinely circumvented regulations, with or without the authorities' approval, and tax dodging was performed in imaginative ways. And as Scott soberly put it 'Proclaiming the universal meter was far simpler than ensuring that it became daily practice' (1998: 32).

Upland livelihoods were impacted upon directly by the colonial enclosure project, not only by the creation of a borderline that required uplanders to cross at border posts or make the conscious decision to avoid them but also by the numerous other processes that the colonial command introduced. But this enclosure project was not undisputed. Staying under the radar of state control was a powerful endogenous livelihood tactic, and a means by which the state's project, although ultimately successful, proved more complicated than initially thought.

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Notes

1 We have already investigated how enclosure in Southeast Asia's uplands as a *contemporary* process has impacted the current-day livelihoods of borderland residents (Michaud, 2000; Michaud and Forsyth, 2011; Turner, 2012a). We have focused on the diverse strategies ethnic minority inhabitants employ to avoid

scrutiny from the state – or, for that matter, any unwanted outsiders (Turner and Michaud, 2008; Michaud, 2012; Turner, 2012b) – as well as the ways in which upland residents are cognisant of the opportunities and dilemmas brought about by increasing state interest in their homelands (Tugault-Laffeur and Turner, 2009; Bonnin and Turner, 2012; Turner et al., 2015).

- 2 Archived reports from the 1897–1898 survey are all catalogued under *Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine* (GGI) and have been copied at *Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence. Archived reports from the 1903–1904 survey are all catalogued as *Manuscrits en langues européennes* (MSS.EUR.) and have been copied at the headquarters of *Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* in Paris.
- 3 Poisson (2009) notes that both the Vietnamese court and subsequent French colonial authorities had significant difficulties finding Kinh officials willing to be stationed in such frontier regions so local hereditary chiefs were relied upon for border defence and administration. See also Woodside (1971) and Li (1998).
- 4 File GGI 26163, 1891. See also Files GGI 57177 and GGI 57179.
- 5 The powers and responsibilities of officers administering the Military Territories are detailed in ANOM, GGI 66106 and *Instructions aux commandants de territoires militaires*, 1903.
- 6 Following early French explorers, in the late 1880s, a handful of French Catholic missionaries had started to record observations of upland populations in northern Tonkin (Salemink, 2003; Michaud, 2004, 2007). At the turn of the 20th century, a few books were published by military authors stationed in these borderlands (Lunet de Lajonquière, 1904, 1906; Diguët, 1908; Bonifacy, 1904a, 1904b). These publications drew on only a fraction of the contemporaneous unpublished field surveys conducted by subaltern officers. It is this original, first-hand data that we bring to light in this paper.
- 7 Following Condominas (1976), we use the term 'feudal' to make a distinction between societies with internal social differentiation based on ownership and control of power on the one hand – Kinh, Han and some Tai-speaking societies – and on the other, kinship-based groups.
- 8 All archive quotes translated from French by the authors.
- 9 In all quotes, ethnonyms are transcribed as in the originals. Refer to Table 1 for disambiguation.
- 10 *Argent* in French may mean either 'silver' or 'currency'. The context does not provide a definitive answer as to which one was being referred to here.
- 11 Sector reports presented this particular trade as well established, but they also observed that for the 'Méo' (Hmong), it remained an ancillary part of an otherwise agriculture-based economy.
- 12 Including home-distilled alcohol, the production of which was tolerated at domestic levels in spite of a colonial state monopoly.
- 13 French colonial commercial media such as the *Bulletin Économique de l'Indo-Chine* and recent oral histories with minority and non-minority highland dwellers alike

tell us that poppy growing and opium production did eventually become widespread in the borderlands. But according to these military archives, it appears that at the turn of the 20th century, opium mainly travelled between China and the Red River Delta across the Military Territories and was not a common crop in the latter. See, for instance, GGI 66105, So-Nhieu.

- 14 'Very stylish [Nùng women] are fond of jewellery, their wrists and necks are overloaded with silver ornaments' (MSS.EUR. 306, Trung-Khang-Phu); 'All [White Thai men] love [silver] jewellery' (MSS.EUR. 337, Phong-Tho).
- 15 And these mental gymnastics continue to this day in upland markets, where exchanges in silver bars and coins, Vietnamese Dong, Chinese Yuan and US dollars are still taking place.
- 16 For military use, each sector report in 1903 was required to include a map at 1:100 000 scale showing the lay of the land and ethnic settlement patterns (Governor General Paul Beau, 1903, 21111, GGI, ANOM).
- 17 Already by 1909, large parts of the First and Fourth Territories had been returned to civilian administration (Gallois, 1909), and the rest came gradually.
- 18 To their credit, a handful of military observers seemed to realise that the so-called apathy might instead have been a sign of pragmatism learned from centuries of being plundered and relentlessly taxed, which rendered moot any investment in producing more than what was strictly necessary to survive.

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