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Highlanders of Central Vietnam and Cambodia: Economic and socio-cultural changes between 1975 and 2007¹

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Abstract: The Highlanders of Vietnam and Cambodia experienced dramatic changes in their livelihood during the last 30 years. They have been facing unprecedented migratory movements from the plains. The newcomers are farmers, civil servants, foresters, traders, coffee growers. They spread over their land, fundamentally shattering their way of life. This colonization process of the Highlands by outsiders took an appalling turn in Vietnam at the beginning of the 21st century. Meanwhile, Cambodian highlands seem to follow the same path.

Forest clearing, intensive land development, land grabbing as well as pressures to change their habits affects the daily life of the native people of the Highlands. According to governments and international development agencies, these changes should allow a better integration of the Highlanders into their nation and the global world. However, many Highlanders suffer from the situation and want to stand for their land, their customs, and their identity.

The Highlanders of Vietnam and Cambodia, Jarai, Ede, Brao, Mnong, Stieng, and other indigenous people from the high plateaus at the border between the two countries have experienced dramatic changes in their livelihood over the last 30 years.

In February 2001 and in April 2004, the Highlanders of central Vietnam organized mass protests, standing for their land, their customs, their identity and religious freedom as Christians. The harsh response of the Vietnamese security forces drove thousands of people to flee to Cambodia. Some were granted a refugee status by UNHCR and were able to settle in a third country, mainly the United States of America, others were sent back to Vietnam. The 2001 and 2004 protest movement alerted the international community on the problems that the indigenous people of the Highlands were facing. These problems have their roots in the colonial era, when the French took control over the Highlands and integrated them into the neighbouring countries. However, recent socio-economic trends have, in many ways, worsened the situation of the native population.

This talk explores the policies implemented in the Highlands of Vietnam and Cambodia in the last thirty years, including how policies affected the lives of Highlanders. It is not my purpose to pass judgment on the action of the Cambodian or Vietnamese governments, but to explain their actions, the origins of those actions, and the consequences for the Highlanders.

¹ Paper presented at the conference *Socio-cultural issues of Champa 175 years after its Disappearance*, San Jose, July 7-8 2007.

In April 1975, Saigon was conquered by the North Vietnamese army and the Vietcong. The Vietnam War was over and a new era began. The socialist regime of North Vietnam had succeeded in uniting the country. In December 1978, the Bo Doi invaded Cambodia, putting an end to one of the most notorious regime of the 20th century, that of Pol Pot and the Khmers Rouge.

Between the two countries lies a space of Highlands, High plateau, dense forests, savannah, often referred to as the Central Highlands, that was neither Vietnamese nor Cambodian before the French took control over the Indochinese Peninsula. The Highlanders were not part of Cambodia or Vietnam. It's quite late in the colonial period that the French effectively controlled their territories, not before the 1930s for the core zone of the plateau.

Most of the Highlanders lived in villages that formed independent units, even if some, like the Jarai were loosely united under the spiritual leadership of the three Pötao. All the Highlanders had a strong connection with their natural environments, especially with the forests, and the streams and rivers. They practiced swidden cultivation, a form of shifting agriculture, usually within the territorial limits of the village, on land cleared by fire. Swidden provided rice, vegetables, corn, dyeing plants, textiles such as cotton or China grass. After two or three years, the swidden were left fallow between five to over twenty years, giving time for the vegetation and soils to regenerate. The Highlanders went to the forest to gather the wax of wild bees, tubers and non-timber forest product like rattan wood or wood oil. They also hunted small and large games for flesh. Some built boats, others captured and trained wild elephants. Their connection with the forest was also spiritual. The forest was deemed inhabited by spirits, the Yang, which the Highlanders respected and feared.

When the French came, they drew borders and incorporated the Western part of the Central Highlands to Cambodia and the Eastern part to Vietnam. The dwellers of the Highlands became Cambodian, Annamite and Cochinchinese, later Vietnamese. People from ethnic groups like the Jarai or the Mnong lived on the both side of the border. Families were split up. This situation was not really an issue as long as Indochina was united under French rule. It was then easy to cross borders. Things became gradually more complicated when independent Cambodia and Vietnam started to gain effective control over their margins and their borders.

After the end of the Vietnam War and the fall of the Khmer rouge regime, Vietnam and Cambodia had three priorities : to ensure their safety, to build up their nation and to develop their economy. The policies implemented to meet with these objectives had strong impact on the Highlands and the livelihood of their dwellers (Guérin & al 2003).

Between the late 1970s and the 1990s, the security forces of Vietnam and Cambodia succeeded in effectively controlling the Highlands. By 1977, the FULRO insurgency was totally defeated in Vietnam, while remnant of this forgotten army sought refuge in the province of Mondolkiri. The last FULRO guerillas fought the Vietnamese army in Cambodia with the Khmers Rouge. It was only in 1998 that the last strongholds of the Khmer Rouge in Mondolkiri and Ratanikiri agreed to stop opposing the Phnom Penh government.

Because it was a buffer zone, a border area, because of the fighting that took place over a long period of time in the Highlands, the High Plateau and mountainous parts of the Central Highlands have always been considered as a strategic zone by Vietnam and Cambodia. This explains why the military always had a strong presence in the Highlands. In Cambodia, security matters superseded all other issues in the Highlands until 1993-1994.

The situation was quite different in Vietnam. The FULRO guerrillas had not been a real threat to the Vietnamese government and army for a long time. Priority was given to the building of the nation and to the economic development of the Highlands, understanding that it would also serve national security.

In 1954 and then in 1975, the Vietnamese government found itself with the difficult task of trying to create a united nation in the framework of the socialist revolution, with a people from different ethnic groups. The official discourse presents Vietnam as a multicultural nation where every ethnic group is a flower that beautifies the country. Ho Chi Minh considered the Vietnamese nation as a family in which the compatriots of different ethnic groups would be the children and great-children of Vietnam, all brothers and sisters of the same flesh. It can be explained by the influence of the thought of Lenine and Staline who built up a multicultural Soviet Union.

If the official discourse insists on the strong links between lowlanders and highlanders, the Viet people tend to present themselves as superior to the Highlanders, but willing to help and

support them. The Vietnamese ethnographers Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son and Luu Hung, in the 1993 edition of their book *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*, - tried to justify the ascendancy of the Viet over the Highlanders by explaining that the Viet and the other groups form a national community, the center of which was “naturally” in the plains mostly inhabited by the Viet, because the plains were more densely populated, wealthier, their technology more advanced, and the economy at an higher stage of development (Dang Nghiem Van & al 1993).

Ethnic minorities are called compatriots, *Dong Bao*, which means they and the Viet people actually belong to the same country. The Vietnamese government launched huge ethnographic programs in order to record and study the oral literature and the culture of the ethnic groups of the Central Highlands. Following the 2001 riots, TV and radio stations broadcasted in local languages. The Vietnamese government did show a will to preserve the identity and culture of the people of the Highlands. Written scripts of local languages can be taught in schools. Meanwhile the school and health systems improved significantly in the Vietnamese Central Highlands. However illiteracy rates remain high among Highlanders and the recognition of their culture has always been limited to the “good” customs, as defined by the State and the Party. The recognition of the culture therefore remains only on a superficial level, such as music, dance or handicrafts.

The Vietnamese advisors who worked in Cambodia in the 1980s brought with them their vision of a multicultural nation. The 1981 and 1989 Cambodian constitutions, which had been written with the assistance of Vietnamese lawyers, included clauses to protect the cultural identity of ethnic minorities. The phrase *chun cheat pheaktich*, meaning ethnic minorities, appeared then in the political discourse to term the indigenous people. Afterwards, these provisions disappeared in the 1993 Cambodian constitution. There is indeed a huge contradiction within the Cambodian political view on the nation and the concept of ethnic minorities. The nation is traditionally seen as the nation of the Khmer. There is no distinction in everyday Khmer language between Khmer and Cambodian. Referring to the Cambodian as a whole the Cambodian, including ethnic minority members, will say “*Khmer yung*”, “us the Khmer”. This ethnic vision of the nation eventually led to a policy of assimilation since the independence of Cambodia.

But as a matter of fact, Cambodia remains a multicultural society that the Cambodian rulers have to deal with. In 1996, on the occasion of a national conference organised by the Centre

for Advanced Study, a Cambodian research institute in social sciences linked to Berkeley University, the Cambodian “government was urged to give minorities a voice.”(Chaumeau, Imran 1996) Ethnic minorities, including those from indigenous groups, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Cham, and other ethnic groups living in Cambodia aired their wish firstly to have the same rights than the Khmer and secondly to be able to follow their own customs. Distinction between ethnic minorities living on the Cambodian territory for ages and new comers have been emphasised at the time by officials. However, the Royal Government of Cambodia was never in a position to express a clear policy toward ethnic minorities. In fact, Cambodia is under tremendous pressure from the international community, that is to say foreign NGOs, UN agencies, bilateral and international cooperation agencies, embassies. The total external assistance to Cambodia represented 167% of the State revenue in 1998. Intense lobbying from the numerous foreign actors resulted in the State having to juggle with their wishes and its own aspirations. In order to please everybody, the political discourse is fluctuating between assimilation and ethnic minorities rights recognition. For example the term “indigenous” appears in the 2001 Land Law on the request on foreign lawyers while the concept is absent of the Cambodian legislation. Meanwhile, recent works by anthropologists, geographers or environmentalists who actually speak the languages of the Highlanders and spent time in the villages, like Ian Baird, Jeremy Ironside or Jonathan Padwe, show a strong will among the Highlanders of Cambodia to protect aspects of their life styles and their land rights, and also sometimes a high level of suspicion and skepticism toward development agencies and authorities.

In both countries a gap appeared between the official policy statements and State achievements. In Vietnam, although the political message is clear, it is often at variance with the facts. For instance, assimilation and acculturation policies might underlie projects designed for the development of ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, the specific identity of ethnic groups is seldom denied in the official discourse.

Paradoxically, the most damaging measures for the Highlanders have been those taken to develop the Highlands. The Vietnamese Central Highlands have been torn apart by the war. Destructions have been extensive. Highlanders who had to leave their village because of the strategic hamlets policy during the war or to flee the fights were allowed to move back after 1975.

But, as soon as the war was over, the Vietnamese government also organized mass migrations of people from the northern part of the country to the Central Highlands. This migration scheme was part of the New Economic Zone programme that was responsible for the migration of 4 million persons, including 600,000 who settled in the Central Highlands.

For the Vietnamese rulers, the transfer of Viet farmers from areas of dense population into region of low population would result in a more rational distribution of population with respect to land at a national scale. Another consequence would be the development of the agriculture of the Highlands that would create new opportunities and improve the living standards of the dwellers, migrants and natives. Hamlets of migrants would also form a network of strategic residential areas that would increase the country's capacity for national defence. The migration of people from the plains was both an economic and a military project.

Three elements underlined the installation of the migrants in the Highlands:

- National enterprises were built from the plantations and factories left behind by the French. They introduced industrial agriculture in the Highlands.

- Cooperatives have been organized with migrants family.

- Besides, in order to make room for the new comers, an anti-swidden agriculture policy was implemented. Using exactly the same rhetoric than the French during the colonial era, swidden cultivation was presented as “primitive”, “unproductive” and responsible for deforestation. A sedentarisation policy was implemented in the Highlands and the administration stimulated cash crops production.

As the historian Andrew Hardy explains it, “the idea was to create a modern, socialist socio-economic system made up of enlightened migrants from the plains and reformed inhabitants of the uplands”.

With the success of the cooperatives and national enterprises, the Central Highlands started to develop a reputation of a place of prosperity. Meanwhile the Doi Moi adopted in 1986 gave more freedom to the Vietnamese citizen to change their place of residence and to choose their activity. Free migrants, Viet but also members of the ethnic minorities from the northern part of the country, started to move to the Central Highlands. The coffee boom of the early 1990s created an incredible opportunity for those who were ready for this new adventure. Vietnam became the second largest coffee exporter in the World. Meanwhile the state farms and

cooperatives were dismantled and shared between their workers. A frontier was open. Since then, hundreds of thousands of migrants left the lowlands and the northern region and settled in the Central Highlands (Hardy 2003).

Soon, the state found itself unable to control these free migrations, which had dramatic effects for the native Highlanders. They led to a complete demographic transformation of the Highlands. The population of the Central Highlands that was around 400,000 in 1926 jumped to 2.8 millions in 1991, and since the 1990s the population growth accelerated. The native highlanders became a minority not only in the Vietnamese nation but also on their own former territories.

The land that the migrants took to grow coffee and more recently cashew nuts was taken from the forest, from the fallow land of the swidden cultivators. Even fields of the natives have been bought or grabbed. Land grabbing is the major issue for native Highlanders. A few Highlanders took the opportunity offered by the coffee boom to improve their wealth but the vast majority lost a lot if not everything in the process. Besides, because of overproduction the price of coffee nuts fell in the late 1990s - before increasing again. Some farmers, migrants and natives, who had invested everything on coffee in the early 1990s bankrupted. The Highland farmers discovered that they were now not only dependent on climate and soils but also on the global market (De Koninck & al 2005, Déry 2004).

In Cambodia, no mass migration to the uplands was organised by the government in the 1980s. It was only after 1994 and the restoration of peace that migrations to Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri really started, but not at the same scale than in Vietnam. We can estimate that approximately 26,000 lowlanders settled in the Highlands of Cambodia between 1979 and 2000, which falls far behind the millions of migrants who settled in the Central Highlands of Vietnam over the same period. However the same causes led to the same effects: deforestation, land grabbing, impoverishment of the natives. The Highlanders of Cambodia received the support of NGOs and had an access to the judicial system to protect their rights, even if the judicial system has often favoured the rich and the powerful people. They could utter their discontent. The Highlanders of Vietnam had no other choice but to protest in the streets in 2001 and 2004. The surveys conducted by Human Rights Watch and by independent researchers commissioned by the UNHCR show that they have been harshly punished by the

security forces and the Vietnamese judicial system (Human Rights Watch 2002, HRW June 2006, Writenet June 2006).

It is however important to point out that the pressure on the Highlanders to change their lifestyle, to abandon shifting cultivation and their strong links to the forest, doesn't only come from the central governments of Vietnam and Cambodia. American Evangelical missions have dragged along hundred of thousands of people. Most of the programs implemented by the international community, UNDP, the NGOs, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, France or USAID, aim at increasing the pace of economic development with little understanding of inhabitants of the Highlands or consideration for them. When Japan and ADB fund a bridge over the Mekong and a highway to Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri, they mostly help lowlanders and local or foreign companies who wish to settle upland. Lowlanders will buy or take land that formerly belonged to Highlanders. Companies, like the Chinese Pine tree company Wuzishan, are creating large plantations on land that was once used by villagers and that the central government gave away as long-term concessions.

The swallowing up of the Highlanders into the nation had been a painful and complex process in both countries. The Highlanders are facing unprecedented migratory movements from the plains. This colonization process of the Highlands by outsiders took an appalling turn in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Cambodian highlands seem to be following a similar path, but with their own special circumstances.

Major social and ecological strains, which eventually led part of the indigenous peoples to struggle, dominate the region at the turn of the 21st Century. Vietnamese and Cambodia States are torn between different ends. National security, economic and social development of the Highlands, Nation erection and consolidation are partly antinomic to preservation of indigenous cultural identity and natural heritage protection. After the end of the wars security matters and economic development appeared as the main priorities.

In the process that brought together an economic and social development of the region and the cultural and material impoverishment of its indigenous dwellers, Vietnam is far ahead Cambodia. The Vietnamese Central Highlands are no longer the territory of the indigenous people who became a minority among the Highlanders. In fact, the problems of lowland demographic pressure and national security are much more acute in Vietnam than in

Cambodia. This explains why migrations, which are the real propulsive power for the changes, reached such a high scale in Vietnam. Cambodia appears to be at a cross road between a quick economic development of the Highlands and a slower evolution. The former will result in despoliations for the Tampuan, the Brao, the Mnong, the Jarai and other indigenous groups. The later would give time to allow the indigenous people to prepare themselves to face the outside world. The first step would be to secure their right on the land they farm.

All over the globe, and especially in Southeast Asia, indigenous cultures are facing heavy pressure from the external world to change, and in many cases they themselves wanting change. The level of control of change is the key, and right now the Highlanders are rapidly losing control and influence to outsiders -lowland dominants groups, authorities and foreign institutions. Development schemes often have paternalist elements that tend to present indigenous peoples, not any more as savages, but as immature people who need to be educated for their own good. The concept of development has replaced the former “mission civilisatrice” of the colonial France in order to justify a new levelling evolution, which is part of globalisation. The end is to reach the standards, lifestyle, and socio-economic organisation of dominant western cultures. Much of foreign assistance to these countries, even if is not intended as such, is a tool to fulfil this transition. The acculturation policies that the indigenous people of the Indochinese Central Highlands are facing today fit in a much wider discourse in which Cambodia and Vietnam have been dragged into.

**A few books and papers for a better understanding of the current situation
in the Highlands of Cambodia and Vietnam**

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