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## THE FRENCH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION VS SWIDDEN CULTIVATION

From political discourse to coercive policies in French Indochina

*Mathieu Guérin\**

### Introduction

The French agronomist, botanist and anthropologist Jacques Barrau defined swidden cultivation, or *essartage*, in Southeast Asia as a mode of culture ‘on land cleared by fire with long fallow in the forest’ (Barrau, 1972, p100). This general definition has the merit of sticking to the reality of practice while remaining broad enough to incorporate local variations. Swidden cultivation has long been practised in the highlands of the southern part of the Annamite Range, which extends through Laos, Vietnam and into northeastern Cambodia, by native people, including the Muong, Jarai, Brao, Stieng, Bahnar, Rhades, and so on. These people are considered to be the indigenous occupants of this region; they have languages, customs and social organisation distinct from the Viet, Lao or Khmer peoples of the plains. Because of their strong connection to the forest, they can be viewed as ‘people of the forest’.

In the second half of the 19th century, France set foot on the peninsula and built the far-eastern component of its colonial empire: French Indochina. It included the territories of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and also the highlands that were once a buffer zone between lowland states. This paper aims to describe the process that led to the emergence of a deprecatory discourse against swidden cultivation; a discourse that eventually led to the drafting of regulations and policies. The fight against swidden carried out by the French colonial administration appeared to be one of the many facets of France’s ‘civilizing mission’ in the region. It had severe consequences for the highland peoples and for the preservation of Indochina’s forests.

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## Swidden in the southern highlands of Indochina

A farmer in the highlands of Indochina who wanted to cultivate a field in a forested area would chop down the trees on the land he had decided to farm, and then set the resulting slash on fire before growing his crops. He then used the field for one to three years before moving to a new plot, where he renewed the operation. Swidden cultivation could not be regarded as a permanent clearing technique, because the forest would regenerate on the abandoned field. The farmer would return after a variable time, usually 10 to 20 years, and the operation would be repeated. The forested territory of a village could be considered as a large space of fallow, potentially available for cultivation. Knowing that crop yields would be higher on swiddens cleared from dense forests, it was in the interests of the farmer to leave the forest to recover sufficiently before a plot was cleared again. However, when they had to clear areas too far from their village, they would move closer to their fields.

The agricultural calendar began at the end of the dry season in February and March (Condominas, 1983, pp21–28). Plots for swiddens were selected on the basis of expected yields, assessed by examining the slope, to allow rainwater to flow, and the quality of the soil and the forest cover. There were also religious considerations. For instance, the presence of a cobra on the ground to be cleared was often considered a sign that the divinities opposed the use of the land, and another location had to be chosen. When they found a suitable plot, the trees that covered it were chopped down, but the largest stumps were left in place. Some of the slashed branches were used to build a fence around the field to protect it from predators, and the rest of the slash was left to dry on site. At the time of the first rains in April, the dried slash was burned. Sowing took place shortly after. In most villages, the men would move forward in line and make planting holes in the ground with sticks. Behind them, women poured some rice seeds into each hole. As well as rice, vegetables, corn and tobacco, plants were grown for their textile uses, their dyes and their medicinal properties. The extreme variety of crops on a swidden was one of the features of the system. A small house was built on the field to allow farmers to continuously supervise their crops. These houses, on cleared land well hidden by the surrounding forest, could even serve as shelters in cases where people were driven from the main village by some form of danger. In June, when the rice panicles were beginning to form, the oversight of the fields was tightened. Vegetables began to be collected. The corn was harvested in July, and then came the early rice. In November, at the end of the rainy season, late rice was harvested, and this was the community's most important harvest.

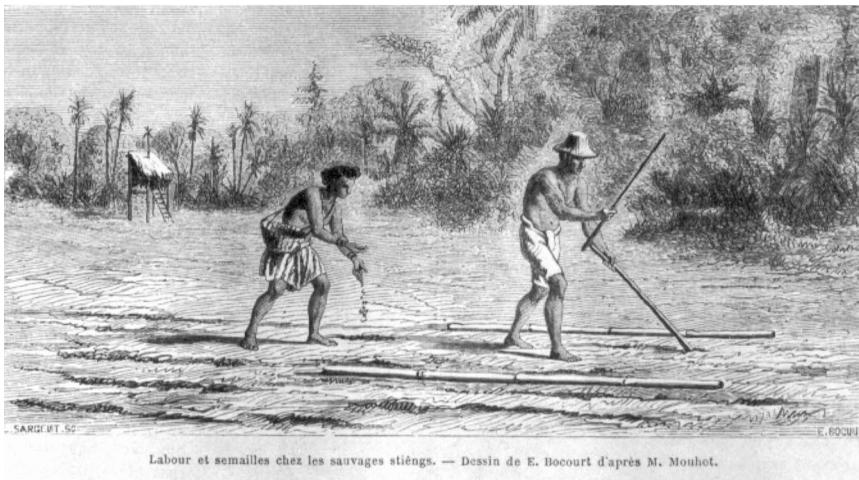
## A cropping system seen as unproductive and destructive by the French

One of the first detailed descriptions of swidden cultivation by a French traveller was provided by the explorer Henry Mouhot in 1859 after he spent three months in a Catholic mission established in the Stiemg area in eastern Cambodia. Mouhot's account carries no value judgment on swidden cultivation as an agricultural practice.

He chose to describe it because it was exotic to him. He considered that it 'is very different from [the techniques that] our farmers use in their wheat or oats fields' (Mouhot, 1868, p155). Mouhot's description has long been an exception in the tenor of comments on swidden farming (figure 1).

During the installation of the French colonial presence in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, a deprecatory discourse was constructed on swidden cultivation. As early as 1853, the Reverend Combes, who was a founder of the Catholic mission in Kontum, among the Bahnar people, wrote:

'The land seems fertile enough in Banhar territory, although it is of much lower quality than in some neighbouring tribes' territories. Several villages reap a hundredfold, and the least fortunate still collect another fifteen to twenty for one. Such results lead to the conclusion that here the savages do not know the hardships of hunger, and yet it is rare that there is enough rice to fill the gap from a harvest to another without suffering. This is due to several causes, and especially the agricultural system. When a Banhar cuts down a forested area and burns it to make a field, the land acquires a strength that indeed compensates the fatigue necessarily attached to such a difficult work, for two or three years only. However, the tools available to him do not allow him to maintain this fertility: everything he does and all he can do is to deliver its seeds to the ground with a sharp stick, and later in pulling weeds, with a small pickaxe only three inches wide. He cannot stir the earth; or rather he doesn't have the means nor the force to do it. So it exhausts very fast, and after three crops, it is abandoned and returned to the forest, which rises and falls and to fall and rise again, without ever disappearing.' (Dourisboure, 1922, pp309-310)



**FIGURE 1** A mid-19th century illustration of Swidden farmers at Stieng in Cambodia

*Source:* Mouhot (1868)

Combes' description deserves a critical analysis, especially because of its contradictions. It describes both exceptional returns and scarcity of food – if not famine – experienced by swidden cultivators. Part of his explanation involves the decline in soil fertility after two or three years, while reporting that Bahnar farmers then changed the location of their fields, and part of it refers to the simplicity of the tools and cropping processes. For the Reverend Combes, yields were insufficient because he perceived Bahnars as primitive people; and in his view 'savages' couldn't possibly have efficient production techniques.

The ethno-historian Oscar Salemink showed the impact of representations made by missionaries in the 19th century, as they were regarded as the best experts on the highlanders (Salemink, 2003, pp40-50). Combes' letter was published in Pierre Dourisboure's 1873 book, *Les Sauvages Ba Hnar*, which was reprinted at least 12 times between 1875 and 1929. It certainly helped to impose the idea that a swidden, then known as *ray*, was unable to feed those who cultivated it. This assertion was repeated in most books on the subject published during the colonial period. Thus, the monograph on Darlac Province, published on the occasion of the Colonial Exhibition at Vincennes in 1931, says 'the performance of upland rice is, however, much lower than the rice paddy, the *Moï* [savages] also grow corn' (Montfleur, 1931, p45).

Swidden was also accused of destroying the forests of Indochina, especially for turning areas of dense forest into savannah or open forest. In a seminal work written in the 1930s, the forest engineer Maurand, from the Institute of Agricultural Research and Forestry of Indochina, who was then chief of the forestry station of South Indochina, began a chapter on deforestation by writing: 'The clearing of forests is caused by the creation of permanent crops, the *rays* [swiddens], forest fires and wildfires' (Maurand, 1938, p35)

He went on to describe swidden as 'one of the causes of the ruin of forest stands'. Eugene Teston and Maurice Percheron drew a similar conclusion in their famous *L'Indochine Moderne, Encyclopédie Administrative, Touristique, Artistique et Économique*. In a chapter on forests in this impressive and luxurious book, which was designed as an exhaustive introduction to French Indochina for a large audience, we read:

'The fires started by the natives and the foolish exploitation of forest, in which they were engaged before the organisation of the French Forest Service, are the plague of Indochinese forests. Indeed, in all parts of the colony, and especially in the vast interior forests, wandering lands of the *Moï* tribes, the only practice of this technique causes incalculable losses to the forest and we could foresee the gradual disappearance of the finest stands. Thanks to the expert, patient and tenacious efforts of French foresters, who limited as much as they could these traditional devastations, Indochina will preserve its admirable wooded area' (Teston and Percheron, 1931, p931).

The Forest Service Department of Indochina believed that the forest had been in significant decline since the colonial conquest. The regression of the forest at that time was confirmed by historical studies (Thomas, 2000). Members of the Forest Service Department, who were considered the main experts in this field by the leaders of the colonial administration, blamed swidden as the main cause of deforestation.

Moreover, swidden was seen as encouraging a nomadic lifestyle, allowing its practitioners to elude the control of the state. The location of villages could change, making it difficult to assert administrative control over their inhabitants.

### A perception of swidden, in the colonial rhetoric

This vision of swidden as archaic, unproductive and destructive fitted perfectly into the evolutionary discourse in vogue throughout the colonial period; a discourse that was one of the justifications of French colonisation, especially during the Third Republic, whose motto was *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. It was considered a duty of France, as a part of its civilising mission, to bring progress to colonised peoples. This was its ‘white man’s burden’. Within this mindset, swidden farmers in the highlands of Indochina appeared as a boon for advocates of colonial action. They were the perfect incarnation of ‘savages’: they lived in the forest, they dressed with a simple strip of cotton wrapped around the waist, men and women went topless on a hot day, some of them filed down their front teeth, they did not know how to write, they refused the authority of the state and their religious beliefs were considered to be superstitions by Christians. The French chose to call swidden farmers in the highlands *Moi*, a Vietnamese term meaning ‘savages’. Therefore, the inferiority of these ‘savages’ and the need to bring them some progress seemed obvious. An outspoken defender of French colonialism, Paul Lechesne, was moved to write:

‘We have the rare chance to face a kind of *tabula rasa*, and nothing and no one will distort our action: no ancient civilization as in Annam, no valid organisation, no formidable resistance, no contiguous influence other than ours, simply Nature, and untouched! [...] We don’t find the *Moi* in a respectable evolution but in an inveterate stagnation, morbid, and precarious state of single embryo of “Human Capital”. How dare say, “Respect this!” How not to seek the formula of Progress, which can only be administrative and economic, an element supporting and justifying the other?’ (Lechesne, 1925, pp64–65)

For the French administration, the implementation of the ‘civilising mission’ therefore meant replacing swidden cultivation with techniques perceived as being more productive; in line with the European perception of what must be modern. Thus, the Resident Superior of Annam (a former subdivision of French Indochina, now the central region of Vietnam) Pierre Pasquier, issued an order on 30 July 1923 entitled ‘Guidelines for the Administration of the *Moi* Provinces’. These provided a general

framework for action in the highlands, with a first economic goal of eradicating swidden cultivation.

### **An inaudible rehabilitation of swidden**

A few voices rose against the dominant and official discourse on swidden cultivation. The Resident administrator of Kratie, in northeastern Cambodia, Adhémard Leclère, who had studied the local Mnong people for some years, described their swidden-farming system as a fairly productive one (Leclère, 1898, p204). Leclère's analysis was confirmed early in the 20th century by the work of agronomists and geographers who tried to rehabilitate the swidden system, with long forested fallows. In 1910, the director of Cambodia's Agricultural and Commercial Service wrote after a visit to the highlands of Kratie:

‘This mode of cultivation may seem primitive and even barbaric. However, it is quite rational, if one considers the very special conditions under which these people are [...]. Upland rice has the same requirements as cereals in Europe, that is to say that it needs decomposed minerals to grow, while ashes from the incineration of the forest gives precisely the necessary minerals and when they are exhausted, harvests cannot be reaped anymore and the land must be abandoned.’ (Magen, Director of the Service of Agriculture and Trade in Cambodia, [Tournée dans la Province de Kratié, Agrolologie], report to the Résident Supérieur du Cambodge, 1910, RSC 4147, National Archives of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)

Pierre Gourou, a geographer who specialised in Indochinese rural areas, drove the point further in his seminal work *L'Utilisation du Sol en Indochine Française* (Land use in French Indochina):

‘The system of *ray* is not awkward, it is indeed practising a very long fallow revolution [...]. The system of *ray* does not allow a high density of population, but it protects the soil from erosion, since there is no ploughing of the land on which [in] the second year grow some shrubs, and since the reconstitution of the forest, hampers laterisation.’ (Gourou, 1940, p347)

Gourou's analysis was based mainly on the work of the agronomist Yves Henry, who had been studying Indochinese soils and ways to preserve them (Henry, 1931).

Blaming deforestation on swidden was also quite unconvincing. While all research indicated that high-quality timber quickly disappeared from easily accessible forest areas in the decades following the arrival of the French, most French colonists accused swidden cultivation of being the main cause, a view that was supported by the Forest Service of French Indochina, even if swidden cultivators had been using their system for several centuries, if not millennia. In fact, the timber trade was an important

element of the economy in early colonial times. As well, the author Frédéric Thomas was able to highlight the fact that the majority of forest officers – those who became experts in the field for the colonial administration and the general public – had very low technical competencies (Thomas, 1999, pp14–16).

After World War II, the work of anthropologists embracing participant observation, such as Georges Condominas and Jean Boulbet, contradicted the most established assertions about swidden cultivation (Condominas, 1957; Boulbet, 1966, 1975). They calculated that swidden yields could be very high. The comparison between wet paddy and swidden yields in Stung Treng in northeastern Cambodia in the early 20th century, drawn from colonial sources, confirms their writings. Swidden had the highest yields in this area at that time (Guérin, 2001).

Anthropologists also showed that only in exceptional circumstances would swidden cultivators clear dense or primary forest, because this was believed to host very powerful divinities. Jean Boulbet went further. For him, the ability to maintain forest cover was an essential part of swidden cultivation. ‘Only those who can manage their sylvan capital in a way as to retain its agricultural and regeneration potential can be called *paysans de la forêt* (forest farmers)’ (Boulbet, 1975, p8).

Georges Condominas also explained that shifting cultivators were not nomads, since, except in times of crisis such as wars or epidemics, they moved their villages only within the boundaries of their territory. However, the work of Condominas and Boulbet was published too late to influence colonial policies.

### **A rehabilitation sanctioned by recent studies**

Studies conducted at the end of the colonial period or shortly afterwards, in line with the work of Harold Conklin on swidden cultivation in the Philippines, confirmed that another approach to swidden was needed (Conklin, 1954, 1957, 1961). In former French Indochina, the routine of blaming swidden for deforestation was significantly cooled by the work of Jean Vidal (Vidal, 1957–1961). More recently, Jefferson Fox, comparing sets of aerial photographs of the highlands of Cambodia between 1952/1953 and today (figure 2), was able to show that where swidden cultivation was practised, forest cover was maintained, even if there was an observable decline in the quality of the forest. But where perennial crops were grown, the forest had disappeared (Fox, 2002).

Moreover, studies conducted by Jacqueline Matras, Frédéric Bourdier and more recently Ian Baird, have shown that production of crops other than rice was significantly underestimated in the French colonial era (Matras–Troubetzkoy, 1983; Bourdier, 1995; Baird, 2008). During his stay among the Mnong Gar in 1949, Georges Condominas collected a herbarium of 27 species of food plants, in addition to different varieties of rice, tobacco, cotton, indigo, ‘magical’ plants for rituals and medicinal plants. Ian Baird observed that the Brao of Northeastern Cambodia could grow more than 180 different plants (Condominas, 1983, pp38, 53; Baird, 2008, p93).



**FIGURE 2** An aerial photograph from 1953 reveals swiddens at Bu Gler, Mondulkiri province, Cambodia

*Source:* Service Géographique de l'Indochine, Institut Géographique National

Studies in the post-colonial period confirmed the conclusions of those who, in the early 20th century – and against the dominant ideology based on the superiority of *homo occidentalis* – began seeking to rehabilitate the practice of swidden cultivation. The major conceptual breakthrough in reassessing swidden was to take into account the environment, soil quality and forest cover, population densities, actual production, contributions in input and labour and cultural practices. As Georges Condominas noted, this rehabilitation was primarily the result of the work of researchers who took the time – often years – to study the system of swidden in depth (Condominas, 1983, p53).

It also appeared that swidden was complementary to other forms of agriculture, including wet-rice production, thanks to harvest calendars and an opposite sensitivity

to natural hazards: wet rice was particularly vulnerable to floods as young plants could rot if submerged, while upland rice was very sensitive to drought. Trade networks between swidden and wet-rice farmers reduced the risk of famine in the region (Condominas, 1957, pp203–204; Guérin, 2001).

However, despite the writings of agronomists, the work of Pierre Gourou, who, in 1948, introduced the concept of *Civilisation du Végétal* (Gourou, 1948), and the writings of the anthropologists, French administrators never changed their perception of swidden. Efforts to rehabilitate swidden were a clamour barely heard. Indeed, to challenge official thinking on swidden was to question the dogma of progress – a part of the justification of the colonial action. To look more closely at this retrospective vindication, I return to the highlands of French Indochina at the beginning of the 20th century, when the colonial administration launched a campaign against shifting cultivation.

## Policies implemented to fight swidden cultivation

### *Prohibition*

The first step taken by the colonial administration against shifting cultivation was to ban it. This was aimed primarily at protecting forests, since these had been considered a resource in the colonial-development scheme since the late 1860s. By decree of the President of the French Republic dated 9 January 1895, practising shifting cultivation in Indochina became punishable by six months in prison and a fine of 25 to 100 piastres, to be paid by the village. This was the heaviest penalty imposed for a forest crime. Similar bans were soon introduced into local laws.

It soon became clear that such laws were impossible to implement because they were disconnected from the capacity of villages. Moreover, local French administrators and residents were among the first to take side with the people under their jurisdiction, even opposing the Forest Service staff. In 1902, the Resident administrator of Kratie received complaints from the residents of three Mnong villages following the application of regulations of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Trade. Eventually, the Résident Supérieur of Cambodia ruled that swidden cultivation would be tolerated in the open forest of northeastern Cambodia (Letters between the head of the forest service in Cambodia, the Résident Supérieur of Cambodia and the Résident of Kratié, July–August 1902, RSC 758, National Archives of Cambodia, Phnom Penh). In 1907, a new decree lowered the penalties. Shifting cultivators were nevertheless still subject to one to three months' imprisonment and their villages liable to fines of 20 to 250 francs.

In fact, prohibition could only be enforced in areas where the administration was strong enough to be aware of breaches of the law and to impose court decisions. This wasn't the case in most of the highlands (Carton, 1951, p455; Guérin, 2003, pp226–241). Moreover, administrators whose main task it was to keep order in their jurisdiction were very reluctant to impose unpopular orders that could lead to general uprisings, like those that occurred between 1901 and 1936 on the Boloven plateau

of southern Laos or between 1912 and 1935 in the Mnong territories of Cambodia. They sought to avoid any risk to supplies of quality timber from the forests (Moppert, 1978; Guérin, 2008).

### ***Modernization of land law, concessions and expropriation***

The modernisation of land laws was also used as a tool to fight swidden cultivation. Individual private ownership of land, as conceived in the West, was gradually introduced into all countries of Indochina. In Cambodia, a royal decree of 24 January 1908 stated that land belonged to those who worked it for at least three consecutive years. Article 15 stipulated that land abandoned for more than five years returned to the public domain. These provisions made land ownership inaccessible to shifting cultivators who cultivated their fields for one to three years before shifting to another plot, and let the land rest and the forest fallow for several years, even decades (Letters between the Résident of Stung Treng and the French Administrator of Veunsai, 1908, RSC 26315, National Archives of Cambodia, Phnom Penh). On 17 October 1921, a royal ordinance introduced property taxes on land, cultivated or not. This was partly justified by the fight against swidden cultivation. However, because the administration didn't have the means to carry out a comprehensive cadastral registration of land, this ordinance could never be enforced (Forest, 1980, pp244–253).

Another measure that had a tremendous impact on swidden in these areas was the provision of large areas of land to colonial capitalist companies. When such concessions were granted, swidden cultivators were denied access to the land. These domain concessions were instruments by which land belonging to the state was alienated to an individual or a company under the condition that the land was then developed. The concession was at first temporary, but became final after the authorities duly recognised the implementation of a development project. Only land that belonged to the state – meaning unfarmed land – could be granted as a concession. However, the fallow forest areas of shifting cultivators were considered public land and therefore available for alienation (Deroche, 2004, pp36–40). In the early 20th century, with the development of coffee, tea, and above all, rubber cultivation, French investors started to become very interested in the fertile red earth of Southern Indochina, which was found mainly in the territories of swidden cultivators, who could harvest very high yields from these soils.

With the arrival of large rubber companies, many villages were expropriated. This is what happened to the Stiang villages in the Loc Ninh region of Cochin-China (the southern part of Vietnam) and those in the Memot region of Cambodia. The concessions could cover thousands of hectares. Memot provides a good example of the setting up of a concession and its consequences for forest farmers. In 1929, the Memot concession extended over 9,500ha on a red-earth plateau covering 24,000ha, on which lived 8,763 inhabitants, mostly swidden cultivators. Due to a relatively high population density – 36 people per km<sup>2</sup> – the swidden farmers had shortened the length of their fallows to about four years, and cleared swiddens from bamboo

thickets. In the farmers' view, there was no land available. A confrontation arose between the villagers and the owners of the concession, and the administration acted as an intermediary. Finally, the people received an 'eviction allowance (*indemnité de déguerpissement*)' for their plots, crops and huts, not even equivalent to half the value of a yearly rice harvest. In addition, 9500ha of the plateau was declared a reserve for the people. This area appeared to be insufficient for swidden cultivation as the rotation period would be too short to allow time for the forest, or even a thicket of bamboo, to regenerate. The villagers had no option but to leave or to change their cultivation techniques with the support of the administration (Guérin, 2008, pp291-294).

### **Education**

To help swidden cultivators displaced by the establishment of large plantations, and also because of the failure of police enforcement, the French administration tried to set up educational programmes to teach intensive-farming techniques to shifting cultivators.

The desire to inculcate the techniques of wet-rice farming or commercial cropping into forest farmers appeared early in the 20th century, in conjunction with the implementation of the decrees of 1895 and 1907 prohibiting swidden. Schools that opened in the highlands integrated the teaching of wet-rice cultivation into their curricula. The results were very disappointing for French administrators. In 1921, for example, the school of Veunsaï, Cambodia, had only 18 students, including seven highlanders. Young Brao and Jarai, although good students, didn't show any interest in the study of wet-rice farming. After being forcibly closed by lack of resources, the school reopened in 1938, and alternative modes of production were then at the core of the curriculum: 'We have to inculcate the habit of growing rice without resorting to the disastrous technique of *ray*, and to pull off the earth a much larger variety of production than that known by Kha people.' (Order of the Résident Supérieur du Cambodge, 19 May 1938, *Bulletin Administratif du Cambodge*, 1938, pp997-1003)

The results remained almost nil. The French never understood that they were trying to teach agricultural techniques that were less diversified and less efficient than swidden. The highlanders didn't change their cultivation methods because, contrary to the beliefs of the French and Khmer leaders, it was not in their interests to do so.

Promotion of alternative crops also required education campaigns aimed directly at farmers. Leopold Sabatier, administrator of the Darlac province in the highlands of Annam (central Vietnam) between 1914 and 1926, was a pioneer in this field. He was also one of the main characters in the history of the highlands of Indochina. He married the daughter of the prestigious Rhade chief, Khun Jonob Thou of Ban Don. He drafted the 1923 order on 'the Administration of *Moi* Provinces'. He imagined a specific policy toward shifting cultivators, which he implemented before being ruled out of Indochina in 1926 by colonial circles that looked longingly at the land that fell under his jurisdiction. Sabatier had sought to encourage the people of his

constituency not to totally abandon swidden, but to practice it in conjunction with other agricultural techniques, especially wet rice and fruit-tree plantations. He made buffalo and seeds available to those who wanted to plough wet-rice fields.

Sabatier's approach served as an example in Cochin-China and Cambodia, particularly in the red-earth areas where the land of swidden farmers was being expropriated for the establishment of rubber plantations. A school was opened at Snoul, in northeastern Cambodia, in 1931, half of whose students were Stieng. They were taught wet-rice cultivation. As well, the Agricultural Services of the Protectorate supported former shifting cultivators in introducing a three-fold crop-rotation system with corn, cotton and cassava. It also tried to introduce coffee. Seeds and fertilizer were distributed in the villages. The results were encouraging at Snoul, where after a few years, local governors witnessed the development of wet-rice cultivation:

'I had the satisfaction to see during my last tour conducted in the district of Snoul on the 2nd to 6th of December that many people in this district have abandoned the practice of ancestral *ray* for permanent rice fields. In the commune of Sre Char everybody started to grow wet rice. Of course for this year, there is no sufficient space for each family' (Governor of Kratié province, monthly report to the Resident of Kratié, November 1938, RSC 380, National Archives of Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence)

This success, in the view of the administration, could be explained in part by a local environment favourable to this type of culture, but also by the fact that large population densities existed on lands that remained after the installation of plantations, which left Stieng farmers in the region with no other choice. In Memot, where the quality of the land was different, the situation appeared to be much more difficult for the Stieng and many left for Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s. However, swidden didn't disappear in the area, as shown clearly in aerial photographs taken in 1952-1953 by the Geographic Service of Indochina.

### **The failure of French colonial policy vis-à-vis swidden**

Neither the prohibitions and penalties, nor expropriation of land, nor teaching other forms of cropping were successful in eradicating swidden in Indochina during the French colonial domination. This failure of the French administration can be explained by its weakness in the highlands, but also by the very low understanding of what swidden cultivation really was. The French decision-makers never understood, even after the publication of the first ethnological works, those of the Reverend Kemlin in 1909, or later those of Georges Condominas, that swidden was not only a method of agricultural production, but it was also part of the civilization of the peoples of the highlands, with implications for their religious and social patterns (Condominas, 1957; Kemlin, 1998). They refused to acknowledge that swidden agriculturalists relied on the forest not only for production of food and to supply life's needs, but

also as the ever changing framework of their existence; past, present and future. The land and the forest, left fallow for years or decades, were more than a reminiscence of their history; they were the canvas on which it was written (Condominas, 1957; Padwe, 2011, 58–101).

The policy against swidden maintained by the French colonial authorities, and then taken up by Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam after the collapse of French Indochina, has been a source of pain and hardship for shifting cultivators. Swidden farmers suddenly found themselves regarded as outlaws; they were under strong pressure from the authorities to change their cultures and therefore their ways of life; and sometimes their land was expropriated. On top of this, false representations about the farmers of the forest led authorities to introduce absurd methods of taxation, with regard to the agricultural calendar and the financial capacity of villagers to pay (Guérin, 2001, pp48–52). This policy was not based on serious studies, but simply on the way that decision-makers perceived highlanders; this is where we find the atavistic distrust of modern states for the people of the forest (figure 3).

The prohibition of swidden has to be understood in the broader context of the colonial administration's willingness to strongly regulate use of the forest by villagers in all of French Indochina (Thomas, 2000). When France established its domination over Indochina, it aimed at imposing the paramountcy of a modern European state.



**FIGURE 3** A Mnong house on a swidden in Mondul Kiri province, Cambodia

*Photo:* Mathieu Guérin

Forests not only had to be protected, but also controlled, and shifting cultivators were very hard to control. They were seen as part of a wild and strange world, thus were considered as ‘savages’ in need of civilization. This will to control what was perceived as the ‘wilderness’ had tremendous consequences for the forest, for the flora and fauna of Indochina, and for the people who were most closely connected to it. Coercion was used to bring highlanders under the authority of the state and its regulations. Animals considered as pests or vermin were slaughtered against bounties: these included not only rice-field rats and crabs, but also tigers, panthers and crocodiles (Guérin, 2010). Hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest were felled for plantations, timber, roads and perennial agriculture. While official discourse claimed that the fight against swidden was necessary to protect Indochinese forests, the main threat to forests at that time was the colonial system of domination itself. Then, it gave the new states of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos the rhetoric and the intellectual tools to take over the job.

### **Post-colonial situation**

Over the past 70 years, the publication of many research reports has supported the rehabilitation of swidden in Southeast Asia, yet the same policies are still enforced, with a persistent background in which swidden is negatively represented. Working in Indonesia, Michael Dove has shown that the denigration of swidden provides a basis for state control; for agricultural settlers or logging companies to grab land from the farmers of the forest (Dove, 1983; Dove and Kammen, 1997). This analysis, together with the concept of ‘a civilizing mission’, helps to better understand the politics of the French colonial administration vis-à-vis shifting cultivators in Indochina, even though authoritative views were, at that time, challenging the dogma of swidden cultivation being unproductive and destructive. It seems that the French decision-makers never understood that forest in the vicinity of swidden cultivators’ villages was not free land, but land left fallow for years to allow the forest to regenerate. They never understood that swidden combined with low densities of population made it possible to maintain a forest cover along with agricultural practices.

The parallel that can be drawn between the colonial era and the situation that exists today is actually striking. Supporters of European colonial expansion in the 19th and early 20th centuries justified the grabbing of others’ land and resources by claiming the ability to more efficiently exploit those resources. Some even claimed a global right of expropriation, in the name of the need to access natural resources: ‘The human community has, as each State, the right to expropriate. No property is inviolable when public necessity requires its sacrifice’ (Pelletier and Roubaud, 1936, p33). Today, forgetting that highlanders have been incorporated very reluctantly into the modern states of the peninsula (Scott, 2009), Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos still give to local and foreign companies and individuals the right to take the land of swidden cultivators in the name of development. The concession granted in 2007 to the former French colonial rubber company SOCFIN and its Cambodian partner

KCD at Bu Sra, in northeastern Cambodia, (see Leemann and Nikles, this volume) appears as a strong reminder of what happened in Memot in the 1920s and 1930s. Abuses took place when the concession was established and attempts to take into account the specificity of local cultures have been dismissed by top management (Slocomb, 2007; FIDH, 2011; Vogel, 2011). The founding of an efficient modern agro-industry is leading to the impoverishment of local farmers and the destruction of the forest cover, all in the name of development, or *mise en valeur*, as it was called by the French-expansion supporter Jules Ferry at the end of the 19th century.

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## Notes

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