

Of Vietnam
Identities in Dialogue

Edited by
Jane Bradley Winston and
Leakhina Chau-Pech Ollier

New York:
palgrave 2001

*French Natural in The Vietnamese Highlands:
Nostalgia and Erasure in Montagnard Identity**

Hjorleifur Jonsson

For the highlanders, man and society are embedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces. In the highlanders' green milieu of forested mountains, sweeping, undulating plateaus, and valleys through which brown rivers flow, each ethnic group over time worked out its adaptation to nature and shaped its society so that its members could survive, reproduce, and readapt to whatever changes man, nature, and the cosmic forces might impinge on it. This evolutionary process resulted in some social-structural differences, but at the same time, adaptation to the mountain country created among them physical and ideational bonds that have given rise to a common culture, a highlander world.

—Gerald C. Hickey, *Shattered World*

Virtual Debate

For roughly three weeks during late October and early November 1999, a number of scholars with an interest in Vietnam took a stand for or against the term "Montagnard" in reference to the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands. This debate took place in the virtual space of an Internet discussion site, the Vietnam Studies Group. The debate is interesting for a number of reasons, among them the term itself, and the fact that the issue was not of interest to Vietnamese ethnologists. Montagnard is a foreigners' term, and the debate was foreign in more ways than one. The issues of the virtual debate are pertinent for an examination of how particular realities are projected onto Vietnam as an object of discourse, realities that may not have any resonance within the country.

The issue was raised with a query about possible readings on Montagnards for an American college class on ethnic conflict. This query set in motion an academic conflict about identities and ethnic labeling. The first reply was from a scholar who sent in a thirty-five-item bibliography on the subject, but asked

that the term itself, "with all of its accumulated racist, colonialist, and pejorative associations," be dropped. In response to that, one of the early participants in this debate wrote in to say: "I can see nothing wrong with the word. It simply means people who live in the mountains. I am unaware of any racist or pejorative associations."

The debate had taken off, and during the following weeks various people sent in their comments over e-mail. Some argued that the term was appropriate and that the complaints were merely posturings of the politically correct. Others maintained that the term was tied to particular imaginings of the French colonial administration, and that the use of the term tended to naturalize the colonial mentality and its social categories. It does not seem that there was any resolution to this debate; people sent in their opinions on the matter and within three weeks the issue had died down. In the virtual space of the Internet, Vietnam served as a site for statements about categories of identity in part because of all the accumulated associations of "Vietnam." Colonial history and fantasy, the American War,¹ and the position of Vietnam as a postcolonial socialist state are all involved in the imagery associated with the country and with the hinterland ethnic minority populations that some insist are properly to be called Montagnard.

There are various commonalities among highland populations regarding agricultural adaptation, social life, and worldview, particularly when viewed in contrast to the agricultural, social, and cultural patterns associated with lowland peoples. The commonalities among the indigenous populations of the Central Highlands of Vietnam that the term "Montagnard" supposedly draws on do not set these peoples apart from the hinterland populations of the adjacent regions of Cambodia and Laos. But in contrast to the imagery attached to the highland peoples of Vietnam, there is no indication that outsiders prefer the French term "Montagnard" for highlanders in the neighboring countries that also belonged to Indochina. A recent report on Cambodia by Minority Rights Group International² uses the term *Klimer Loen* ("upper" Klimey) to refer to highland minorities, while only a few years earlier I never once heard this term. When I did research in Ratanakiri Province in 1992, the minority populations were collectively referred to as *Chonhlat* (nationalities, ethnic groups). During the early part of the twentieth century, it appears that the generic Cambodian term was *Phnong* (savages).³ In Laos, where previously the term *Khia* (savages, slaves) was the general reference to highland peoples, a three-part distinction among ethnic groups by altitude has become commonplace. The reality of this categorization is promoted for instance on a banknote with female representatives of each of these kinds of people, a Lao woman representing *Lao Lam* ("low" Lao), a Kammu woman *Lao Thieng* ("mid" Lao), and a Hmong woman *Lao Sung* ("high" Lao).⁴

One obvious characteristic of these new designations for minority populations in Laos and Cambodia is that their reference is the modern nation-state. There are various parallels elsewhere to this process of nationalizing difference, such as in the Turkish designation of Kurds as "Mountain Turks" during the 1930s.⁵ In Thailand since the 1980s, there has been an effort to move away from

Chaklao (mountain people, which has derogatory connotations of savagery and insurgency) and toward *Chao Thai Phukhao* (Mountain Thai, Thai mountain people), *Chon klum noi* (minorities), and *Chon phao* (ethnic peoples, tribes). The contemporary Vietnamese designation for highland ethnic minorities is most commonly *dai toc* (nationalities, ethnic group[s]) and *dai toc thien so* or *dai toc* (*ngui*) (small/minority ethnic groups). While the term does not explicitly define ethnic minority populations as Vietnamese of a particular kind, analogous to recent terminology in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, both the national majority and national space are implicit in this local Vietnamese term.

Montagnard, which "simply means people who live in the mountains," appears to refer exclusively to the indigenous populations of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It does not seem to be applied to the ethnic minority peoples of the north, such as Yao (Dao), Hmong, Tai, and Nung. The French term "Montagnard" was used interchangeably with the Chinese term *Man* (barbarians [of the south]) and the French terms for "ethnic groups" and "savage tribes" in publications on highlanders of the north (then Tonkin) around the turn of the twentieth century,⁵ whereas the Vietnamese term *Moi* (savages) was common in references to peoples of the Central Highlands.⁷ The reason Montagnard is associated with the Central Highlands is then not some difference in language use, ethnography, or topography that restricted the use of the term to that region. Rather than being a matter of local history or ethnography, the routinization⁸ of this reference to the peoples of the Central Highlands is primarily the result of a particular historical moment within a global ethnoscapes. The moment in question is the American War in Vietnam, within which Montagnard or more commonly Yard(s) was one of the kinds of people that the American forces encountered and dealt with.

By the time the American forces fighting the feared global spread of communism replaced the French colonial effort to hold on to Indochina, the highland peoples of the north had fallen outside the colonial cause and its classification of peoples by joining the nationalist and anticolonial army.⁹ This is why there are no Montagnards in the north. Among the other kinds of people that the American forces registered, and that thus became real globally through the mediascape to which the war belonged, was "VC" (Viet Cong), although to my knowledge this term has not been treated like an ethnic reference after the war. As with the highlanders in the north, VC identity was political, which suggests that anti-communism may have contributed to the implied naturalness of Montagnard identity. The term Montagnard, then, carries various associations to the American War in Vietnam without making the slightest reference to the war, to the American forces, or even at all to Vietnam. The power of the term lies then less in its overt reference than in the particular disappearances that it brings about.

It seems to me that the assumed naturalism of the French term, that "it simply means people of the mountains," is what makes this term so appealing to some parties in the debate that surfaced briefly over e-mail. The attraction of this "French natural" is that it serves to erase complicated entanglements of place, identity, politics, and history. Montagnard conjures up a population natu-

rally-associated with a particular landscape, socially and culturally separate from the Vietnam that has been tainted by warfare and politics. In contrast to the troubling image of post-Indochine Vietnam, Montagnard indexes the apolitical connotations of nature and traditional culture. The resonance of this reference to a population in a natural condition is then most likely a lingering nostalgia about an Elsewhere, a refuge from the complications of identity and politics in the modern world in general and those associated with Vietnam in particular. This interpretation suggests a peculiar reality, as Montagnard exclusively implies an aspect of Vietnam between roughly 1965 and 1975, and the timelessness of the concept itself is quite significant. The term erases the contingency of the definitions of "kinds of people" that are specific to the war. I suggest that this simultaneous process of erasure and naturalization through the term "Montagnard" is not only about the peoples of the Central Highlands, but equally about the war and Vietnam.

One of the contributions to the debate conducted over e-mail, sent in as a defense of the continued use of the term "Montagnard," is suggestive of such processes of erasure of both the war and Vietnam. Through a discourse that concerns kinship imagery, bravery, and human caring and camaraderie, the statement carefully avoids mentioning the implied common enemy, the contemporary authorities of Vietnam:

I would venture to suggest, based on my own experiences, that Montagnard is used in an affectionate and praiseworthy manner by the vast majority of us who lived with and fought with these brave people we consider our brothers and sisters, the gentle and caring people many of us call "Yards" for short. (www.wlib.washington.edu/southeastasia/vsg/montl.html)

Montagnard or Yard, then, indexes one of two parties in a story of human bonding and care during a period of unspecified hardship. The other side in the debate about the term was approaching ethnic labels from a perspective that was comparative, analytical, and concerned with the political and historical dimensions to particular designations of identity. The premises of the two sides were too far apart to allow for any productive argumentation, and it seems that the participants left the debate with largely the same ideas as they had brought to it in the beginning.

Sites of Nostalgia and Social Engineering

The notion of global ethnoscapes that I brought up in the previous section comes from the writings of Arjun Appadurai. He proposes this term to address the modern situation of population migrations and a global flow of imagery that have fundamentally upset the assumed isomorphism of place, identity, and people.¹⁰ The label "Montagnard" is an ideal example of such dynamics of deterritorialized identities, since it was originally a projection of the French colonial enterprise, and then was routinized in the context of the American War in Viet-

nam. The term "Montagnard," as an identity, has no contemporary resonance within Vietnam, but it has a reality on the Internet. On the World Wide Web, montagnards.org have a home, and Montagnard identity is projected from there, with a reference to the Central Highlands of Vietnam, through a biblical analogy and set within a French colonial context:

The term "Montagnard" is pronounced "mountain-yard" as one word and is French for "mountain dweller" or "mountain people." The term "Dega" is how Montagnards in Vietnam refer to themselves. In their folklore, De and Ga were the first Montagnards in Indochina, Adam and Eve to us. (www.montagnards.org)

The identities of Dega and montagnards.org are sustained by people who for all practical purposes are Montagnards. They perceive themselves as Montagnards and are known as such, and/or as Yards. The context of their identity is the American War, and it is reproduced in exile from Vietnam, particularly in North Carolina, where they are affiliated with missionaries and members of the American Special Forces that were stationed in the Central Highlands. This identity-in-exile is reproduced through the new technologies of the Internet. The rooting of Montagnard identity is within a translocal space that refers to Vietnam, but equally draws on the French colonial construct of Indochina, leaving unmentioned the American space from which the projections come. This creative spatial combination is complemented by a multiple temporality. The introductory statement on the homepage from which I quoted flows among mythical time, French colonial time, the unmentioned narrow time-span of the American War, and the modern and somewhat timeless framework of Internet communications technologies. I do not want to trivialize Montagnard identity by saying that it only exists in cyberspace. It is a real identity to the extent that people use it, both Montagnards themselves and others interacting with them as such. But I do want to qualify Montagnard by stating, in light of the above, that this identity has primarily virtual links to Vietnam. This does not make Montagnard or Dega identities unreal; it simply locates them as global identities among various other transnational constructions of Vietnam. The local and the global are intertwined in multiple ways, and the histories involved in the production of localities and local identities are informed by global dynamics that they again contribute to.

Wendy Mee's analysis of the imagery of Internet discussions among Malaysians, partly in a global context, provides a useful qualification for the tendency to overestimate the reality of Internet-based understandings of the world:

While information technology can be used to extend a sense of presence across a global arena, it is doubtful whether Internet affiliations can by themselves undermine that sense of place—or nation—that develops through interactions with national institutions and systems of government, education, language and culture. A formative influence here is the sense of difference which is a legacy of the historical experiences of colonialism

and reaffirmed by a global political economy which insert a hierarchy of difference in our post-colonial world.¹¹

Montagnard identity was the last in a series of identities that French colonials projected upon the indigenous minorities of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In his work, Oscar Salemink¹² has traced the intended political manipulations of the various French projections of identity on the local populations in this region and the way in which the final one, Montagnard, was subsequently adopted by the American Special Forces. Initially, the French did not imagine the populations of the Central Highlands as an administrative collectivity, and both missionaries and adventurers made connections with individual leaders through whom they attempted to reach and/or control larger populations. Some of the early attempts at colonial control involved the projection of ethnic identities through the codification of customary laws and the establishment of ceremonies in which leaders of highland populations swore allegiance to the French. In much the same way, Dutch colonial authorities established themselves in hinterland communities within the colony that became Indonesia, as did the British in Burma.¹³

The practice of governing through particular notions of identity, even if the identities in question may not have any local precursor, contributes to the reality of such identities once people's actions reproduce these notions as social projects. As Davydd Greenwood has argued for the case of Spain, identities that assume an ethnic or a national reference are not intrinsically more or less real than others that draw on administrative entities like provinces or regions.¹⁴ For Vietnam, examples of the former include Sedang or Jarai, and of the latter such French terms as "Pensien" and "Montagnard." The two latter terms are both French constructions for the populations of the Central Highlands. While the e-mail debate shows that Montagnard is assumed to somehow naturally refer to the Central Highlanders, no such claims have been made for Pensien in recent times. Pensien is an administrative creation, from the colonial administrative entity PMSI, *Pays Montagnards du Sud-Indochinois*.¹⁵

Just as the colonial project brought out such novel collective identities, it also contributed to a general ethnicization of social life among the people who became minorities. This process is common to many colonial situations, as well as to other settings where categories of regional/ethnic identity are central to the allocation of rights and duties.¹⁶ The issue then is not whether some identities are natural and others the creations of particular political interests. Rather, the important issues concern the styles in which such identities are imagined¹⁷ and the social ramifications of these constructs, which can change in various ways over time and invite many conflicting politics.¹⁸ An identity maintained in exile, such as contemporary Montagnard identity, is one of many possible variations on the alignments of place, people, and identity, and this exile status is one of many transformations in the identities attached to the populations indigenous to the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

During the e-mail debate among the Vietnam Studies Group, I suggested that the supposedly neutral term "Montagnard" had rather persistent derogatory

connotations equivalent to "hick" in its European context, a notion that several participants found questionable. In his monumental work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, historian Fernand Braudel provides a description that with little modification could be applied to the long run of history in Southeast Asia:

There can be no doubt that the lowland, urban civilization penetrated to the highland world very imperfectly and at a very slow rate. This was as true of other things as it was of Christianity. The feudal system as a political, economic, and social system, and as an instrument of justice failed to catch in its toils most of the mountain regions and those it did reach it only partially influenced. The resistance of the Corsican and Sardinian mountains to lowland influence has often been noted and further evidence could be found in Lunigiana. . . . This observation could be confirmed anywhere where the population is so inadequate, thinly distributed, and widely dispersed as to prevent the establishment of the state, dominant languages, and important civilizations.¹⁹

Describing the way mountain people were perceived by their lowland neighbors, Braudel provides further examples of perceptions that have many parallels in Southeast Asia. He summarizes his account in the following way:

The picture . . . quickly turns to caricature. The mountain dweller is apt to be the laughing stock of the superior inhabitants of the towns and plains. He is suspected, feared, and mocked. In the Ardèche, as late as 1850, the people from the *montagne* would come down to the plain for special occasions. They would arrive riding on harnessed mules, wearing grand ceremonial costumes, the women bedecked with dangling gold chains. The costumes themselves differed from those of the plain, although both were regional, and their archaic stiffness provoked the mirth of the village coquettes. The lowland peasant had nothing but sarcasm for the rude fellow from the highlands, and marriages between their families were rare.²⁰

Studies of European ambivalence about the countryside and its peoples provide a firm reference to counter assumptions about one-dimensional understandings of place-identities.²¹ It is not my intention to suggest that the category of "mountain people" has a single reference, but it seems to me that the European connotations of the term were not fundamentally transformed when this appellation was projected upon the "uncivilized" hinterland populations living in the backwoods of French Indochina. At the time when Montagnard came into general use for Central Highlanders, between the 1930s and the 1950s,²² the highland peoples of Europe had been transformed from rustics to nationalists. After that transformation, they came to be seen as the last outpost of traditional national culture, increasingly manifest in museums.

Because of the different politics of nation-building in Europe and colonial management in Indochina, the outcomes would have differed even if Montagnard had more or less the same reference in the two settings. Various notions of racial character informed efforts at administration, labor control, and other aspects of colonial rule.²³ In the context of the Central Highlands, there were repeated debates concerning dimensions of control and extraction in the region. One side in this debate argued that "economic colonization of the Highlands would be in the best interest of the Montagnards, who would simply 'vanish' as a race if they did not give up their 'backward and harmful' agricultural practice of shifting cultivation, and start working on the rubber plantations."²⁴ This view is not specific to Indochina or French colonialism, it has many parallels in approaches to "Indian" populations in the United States, and is informed by then current notions of races and evolution.²⁵ The other side in the early-twentieth-century French debates on policy and practice in the Central Highlands favored

contacts between the French and the Montagnards to the exclusion of the ethnic Vietnamese. To strengthen the hold of the French on Indochina, the strategic Central Highlands were to be made into a "friendly" military base in hostile surroundings, in case there was a Vietnamese insurrection in the plains, or an attack from abroad. In the process, France would fulfill its civilizing mission by protecting the autochthonous populations, respecting their cultures and encouraging their gradual development.²⁶

In the Central Highlands as in Dutch Bali, the colonial interest in protecting local peoples and their cultures followed violent episodes of suppressing local autonomy and local rebellions against colonial rule.²⁷ This protectionist view formed a part of colonial discourses on how most efficiently to manage the colonized populations. In the contemporary postcolonial setting it may seem that "Montagnard" is a transparent term that "simply means people who live in the mountains." In the colonial context of its French use, it was as politicized and as tied to strategies of rule as other administrative terms, such as the tripartite division of Annam, Cochinchine, and Tonkin. As Christopher Goscha has shown, Annam once had significant political resonance, that was only later replaced by the notion of "Vietnam."²⁸ This issue of shifting spatial and political configurations in French Indochina is erased with the notion of Montagnards as somehow naturally of Vietnamese space.

My examination of the reality of the term Montagnard offers neither an affirmation nor a dismissal of the concept as an identity. It is as valid as any other notion of who people are once it gets rooted in social life through practices of livelihood, culture, administration, and/or the allocation of rights and duties within larger political frameworks of intergroup relations. Ethnic identities are relational; the issue is not of Montagnard identity in and of itself but of how this identity is or is not real within a larger system of identities, roles, and relationships.

Precolonial Structures and Identities, Postcolonial Debates

The possibility remains that Montagnard identity, like Permian, is simply a colonial-era construction that obfuscates the more fundamental reality of the "highlander world" that Hickey portrays,²⁹ and which I quoted at the beginning of this article. He describes this highlander world as a product of centuries of adaptations to a particular environment, and in many ways independent of the comings and goings of lowland kingdoms.

There are various continuities within the Southeast Asian region regarding the identities of hinterland populations. They are in general lowlanders' appellations for people who stand outside the state, and the terms have various associations with "savagery." The Lao and Thai term *Kha* (slave) is one such example, and the Vietnamese term *Moi* (savage) is another. The term *Brak* from Sunatra is of this sort, as is *Dəyək* from Borneo, *Təjia* from Sulawesi, and *Igorot* from the Philippines. Some of these terms are now standard ethnic labels, and as such they attest to processes of routinization whereby the perspective of the lowland state becomes the implied reference concerning the identities of peoples outside the realms of state rule. In general, these lowlander terms for hinterland (backwoods, upstream, mountain, and/or forest) populations carry connotations of servitude and/or savagery, and they implicitly define lowland peoples as the unmarked reference point for both normalcy and civilization.

Some of the lowland terminology for hinterland peoples suggests that "global ethnoscapes" are not a specifically modern phenomenon, and that the notion is equally applicable to the precolonial period. A Cham inscription dated to 1170 CE records the victories of a twelfth-century king, noting that he had defeated "the Khmer, Vietnamese, Randaŷ, Mada, and other Mlecchas."³⁰ In the context of the e-mail debate about Montagnard, this is an interesting passage, since it shows the Cham appropriation of a Sanskrit term for "savages," *Mleccha*, being applied to the hinterland populations of what are now the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The historian O. W. Wolters describes how the use of this term fit a "Hindu world" within which rulers in the Southeast Asian region viewed themselves and their environs. It was from the imagery of this Hindu world that they drew terms to describe the peoples unfit for their domains, the "wild savages who lived in the forests."³¹ Cham inscriptions also use the Sanskrit term *Kiratas* (mountain people) in reference to hinterland populations.³² The reference of the two Sanskrit terms, "mountain people" and "savages," is similar to the more local terms for highland peoples elsewhere in the region, and these similarities draw on rather uniform projects of state-making and the categorization of peoples and identities that these projects entailed.

The making of states in Southeast Asia was both a political economic project of structuring production, trade, and expropriation, and a cultural project involving conceptual workings concerning the logics of power and inequality and a categorization of kinds of people. Both aspects of this process can be thought of as matters of projecting and grounding particular structures in social life. To the extent that these projects were successful, everyday life then reproduced the structures that emanated from the state. These state-projects relate to

the reproduction of highlander worlds in a fundamental way, in that shifting cultivation in the forested hinterlands was beyond state control. The focus of the state was to exploit areas fit for intensive cultivation, which in this region was primarily irrigated rice farming. While the various states in this region maintained policies of expanding the areas suited to wet-rice farming, they did not extend the reach of their taxation or labor recruitment to settlements of shifting cultivators (swidden, or "slash and burn" farmers). This ecological limit to the reach of the state is manifest equally in mainland and island Southeast Asia, and in southern China.³³

Given this ecological limit to the state's project, it is possible to view upland populations as simply beyond the state's reach,³⁴ and thus outposts of traditional ways of life that predate the state.³⁵ Contrary to these views, I want to suggest that uplander identities and ecological adaptations are entangled with processes of state-making, and that they are most profitably viewed in the context of the kinds of structurings of peoples and places that involve this large region over long runs of history. That is, in approaching questions of Montagnard identity, it may be useful to look beyond the historically specific and politically particular boundaries and histories of Vietnam, and toward more regional understandings.

The distinction between "tribal" and "peasant" populations is a standard reference in the ethnography of Southeast Asia. Rather than taking this distinction as indicating separate and independent adaptations to the environment, I propose viewing them as aspects of the structuration of the region as a whole. My notion of structure is derived from Braudel.³⁶ In his discussion of long and short runs of history, Braudel defines structure as

an organization, a coherent and fairly fixed series of relationships between realities and social masses. . . . Some structures, because of their long life, become stable elements for an infinite number of generations: they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering it shape it. . . . Spatial models are the charts upon which social reality is projected. . . . they are truly models for all the different movements of time. . . . and for all the categories of social life.³⁷

I suggest that the upland-lowland divide is one of the structures of the long run of regional history in Southeast Asia. As states were formed and their rulers proceeded to promote the expansion of wet-rice cultivation, they made wet-rice cultivators subjects of the state and by default dry-rice cultivators became non-subjects and stood outside the state. As the practices of states were routinized, their rulers promoted spatial understandings that defined the court as the center of the civilized world, and they assigned identities to individuals and groups in terms of their relationship to the court and its religious establishments. Drawing on Confucian and Hindu worlds, rulers placed themselves, their subjects, and their non-subjects within a global ethnoscapes of that time. The reproduction of these state structures of places, peoples, and identities resulted in a bifurcation of the natural environment into the civilized, cleared lowlands, and the savage,

forested hinterlands. Categorizations of kinds of people were then projected onto this regional space in terms of how people related to the courts.³⁸ As people engaged with the state, or averted all dealings with its agents, their identities became informed by their particular place within an ecologically and socially bifurcated region. The adaptation of highland populations was then not to the natural environment as such, but to an environment that had been prefigured by the politics of identities and social relations in terms of cultural and political economic dimensions of the state.

As with the projection of identities over the Internet, identities produced within this precolonial framework became real as people acted on them and as they became grounded in the practices and politics of everyday life. There are various cases of highlanders maintaining a position of non-subject clients of the state, such as through payments of tribute. The position of the "King of Fire" in the Central Highlands is of this sort,³⁹ and there are many analogous cases of contracts involving titles to particular highland leaders in return for services from elsewhere in the region. Such deals were sometimes made in the context of threats of raids on upland settlements for provisions and/or people. But such deals were sometimes struck for mutual benefit of trade, and a part of the motivation to enter such contracts may have been the enhanced status of upland leaders who anchored their otherwise tenuous power in dealings with the state. Yao populations in southern China are Yao because of a particular framework of interactions with the state. This framework defines them as beyond the state, and free to farm and migrate in the forested hinterlands as long as they do not interfere with matters in the lowlands. As in contracts made between the northern Thai court of Chiangmai and populations of Lua' (Lawa) such engagements offer benefits to highland leaders and ground particular social identities in the everyday life of these hinterland populations. Both Yao and Lua' identities, which were reproduced through dealings with courts that offered partial autonomy to these non-subject clients, are now ethnic identities within nation-states.⁴⁰ The precolonial notion of hinterland peoples, both through ethnic labels and a generic category of "savages," was part of the state's civilizational discourse. Uplanders could become lowlanders by relocating and changing their agricultural and religious practices.⁴¹ At the same time, rulers sometimes feared that their subjects might abandon them and "disappear" into the forest, changing their identity from subjects to forest people. In this way, nature provided a proxy for complex and shifting kinds of social relations and identities. The shape of state control and spatial practices changed during the colonial period, and the incorporation of *Moi-cum-Montagnards* is one aspect of this larger process. In precolonial times, state control in Southeast Asia was largely confined to the cleared lowlands. The political incorporation of forests and the people living there is a legacy of the colonial period. "Forest people" have been transformed from savage outsiders to variously incorporated minority populations,⁴² and the roots of Montagnard identity lie in this transformation rather than in the mountains that the term ostensibly refers to.

I have argued that the term "Montagnard" affected the disappearance of both Vietnam and the American War. My discussion of this identity is not intended

to place the nation-state or the war center stage. Rather, I have sought to draw attention to translocal frameworks of identity and the long run of regional history in order to highlight the circumstantial character of individual identities. In light of the above discussion, the suggestion that Montagnard "simply means people who live in the mountains" can be placed among other "phantasmatic" constructions of Indochina.⁴³ It suggests a virtual reality of transparent concepts uncorrupted by the shifting terrain of history that has local, national, and transnational dimensions, through narratives of camaraderie that obliterate the immediacy of Vietnam, minority status, warfare, and exile. That may be the whole point.

Ethnologists and other Vietnamese, who lived through the American War and its consequences, have participated in the restructuring of the country as a unified nation-state for a quarter of a century. To them, this supposedly neutral reference to a category of Vietnam's peoples that assumes the disappearance of the country was a non-issue, as was the debate on the term. The e-mail debate did not change anyone's mind on the issue of Montagnards, it simply spelled out the extent to which scholars, refugees, and others in the "West" are caught up in identity politics of a particular kind.

Notes

- * My work draws on research among hinterland ethnic minority peoples in Thailand (1990, 1992-94), Cambodia (1992), and Vietnam (1996). In Vietnam, I worked for ANZDEC, Ltd., and in Cambodia for Health Unlimited. My work in Thailand was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, the Walter F. Vella Scholarship Fund, and the Graduate School of Cornell University. I thank Nora Taylor for her encouragement, and O. W. Wolters, David Marr, Richard A. O'Connor, Nicola Tannenbaum, Sander van der Leeuw, Anne Brydon, Jean Michaud, and the editors for various helpful comments on the case. Responsibility for the final version rests with me alone. I draw on remarks sent in to the Vietnam Studies Group e-mail discussion site. In quoting from these discussions, I leave individual commentators anonymous as my concern is with perspectives on the issue of Montagnard identity and not with who sent them in. I hope the participants in this debate accept my way of dealing with the matter of authorship.
1. The "American War" is the Vietnamese reference to what Americans know as the "Vietnam War." The reason for using the Vietnamese term is that the war in Vietnam started earlier, against the French. The American War was the most important context for the widespread currency (and thus the assumed naturalness) of the term "Montagnard."
2. Minority Rights Group International, *Minorities in Cambodia*.
3. See for instance, Smith, *The Blood Hunters* (chapter 2). According to a 1992 survey by the Department of Ethnic Minorities in Cambodia, Phnomg is now a recognized ethnic group, as is Steng, a term that formerly was a similar gloss for hinterland peoples. For the ethnic statistics of this survey see Kampe, "Introduction: Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia."
4. For a discussion of this categorization and a photograph of the banknote, see Trankell, "The Minor Part of the Nation: Politics of Ethnicity in Laos."
5. See Kristic, "Minority/Majority Discourse."
6. See, for example, Bonifay, "Contes Populaires des Mans du Tonkin;" Bonifay, "Les groupes ethniques du bassin de la Rivière Claire;" Digue, *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*; and Girard, "Les tribus sauvages du Haut Tonkin. Mans et Meos. Notes anthropométrique et ethnographiques." It is perhaps an overstatement on my part that the terms were interchangeable, but this range in terminology contrasts sharply with the uniform use of *Moi* in reference to the peoples of the Central Highlands (see note 8). In recent works, Michaud has used "Montagnard" in reference to the upland populations of north Vietnam. Citing Digue's *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*, he

- maintains that those who restrict the term to the Central Highlands are "oblivious of the more ancient and general use the French have made of the word since at least the 1890s" (McKinnon and Michaud, "Montagnard Domain in the South-East Asian Massif," 6).
7. Henri Martre's *Les Jungles Moi* is the best-known reference. The following statement from a French colonial official is instructive: "The half-civilized races who inhabit the mountains and uplands of Indo-China are known by different names by their neighbors. The Birmans call them 'Karens', the Laotians 'Kha', the Cambodians 'Steng' or 'Pnong', the Annamites, 'Man' or 'Moi', 'Moi', which can be translated by 'savage', is perhaps the most convenient label for the whole complex of these primitive folk" (Baudesson, *Indo-China and Its Primitive Peoples*, 3).
8. I use the terms "routinize" (v) and "routinization" (n) in relation to identities such as Montagnard as socially constructed and historically particular. Vietnamese, French, and American ideas about the identity of the peoples of the Central Highlands have influenced how the latter fit within a larger social landscape (as Moi, Montagnard, Yai, etc.). Attributions of identity within situations of inequality provide in each case a particular set of options and constraints regarding who people are. These attributions are specific to the expectations and political frameworks of the particular hegemonic positions. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to changes in the externally attributed identity of the peoples of the Central Highlands. Certain terms gain currency at particular points in time, become routine references, as particular politics of defining identities and social relations become prominent. The routinization of a particular identity is simultaneously the establishment of a particular perspective on social reality as dominant. The more people (outsiders and insiders) act in terms of an identity, the less it is viewed as contingent. In this way identities become "real" through routinization.
9. For a discussion, see MacAlister, "Mountain Minorities and the Viet Minh." While some uplanders of the north were affiliated with the French in the early 1950s, the term "Montagnard" did not become prominent for peoples of that area. The term became attached to the peoples of the Central Highlands, and this terminology is what the American forces later reproduced.
10. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. See also Gupta and Ferguson, eds., *Cultures, Politics, Place for a Discussion of these Issues*.
11. Mee, "National Difference and Global Citizenship," 252.
12. See Salemnink, "Moi and Maguik," Salemnink, "Primitive Partisans," and Salemnink, "Ethnography as Martial Art."
13. See Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*; Hickey, *Kingdom in the Morning Mist*; Salemnink, "Moi and Maguik," and Salemnink, "Primitive Partisans." For the case of Indonesia, see Kalin, *Consulting the Minangkabau*; and Schrauwers, "Returning to the 'Origin.'" For Burma, see Smith, *Burma* (chapter 3).
14. See Greenwood, "Castilians, Basques, and Andalusians."
15. The term "Pensien" was the idea of an anthropologist, Jacques Douret, who maintained that it "had no political connotations," (Salemnink, "Ethnography as Martial Art," 307). Another French anthropologist, Georges Condominas, used the term "proto-Indochinese" ("proto-Indochinoise") in reference to the "very ancient stock" ("le stock humain culturellement plus archaïque") of contemporary cultures in the hinterlands from Burma to Vietnam (Condominas, "The Monong Gar of Central Vietnam," 17). The "Indochina" of the term is from the reference to mainland Southeast Asia as "la péninsule indochinoise" that configures the colony with the larger territory. Condominas has recently reiterated that proto-Indochinese is a neutral term ("un terme neutre") in contrast to the more common but very pejorative *Moi*, *Kha*, and *Pluong* ("Moi, Kha [ou] Xai et Pluong, termes extrêmement péjoratifs") (Condominas, "Les peuples d'Indochine," 16). It is worth noting that once upland leaders started attempting pan-uplander organization in the French colonial context, they too used acronyms and the language of racial categories to refer to themselves, though with important differences. One example is *Bajanka*, from the ethnic terms *Bahnar*, *Jani*, *Rhade*, and *Kho*, and the other is *FURO*, that translates as the "United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races. See Hickey, *Face in the Forest*.
16. The term "ethnicization" refers, in this context, to a shift from general labels for upland peoples (such as *Moi*, *Moi*, *Montagnard*) to narrower ethnic labels (such as *Jani* and *Bahnar*). To some extent this shift was informed by the "census-mentality" prevalent during the colonial period (see Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia"). For a discussion concerning West Africa that offers many parallels to the multi-stranded identity politics of twentieth-century Vietnam, see Lenz, "Colonial Constructions and African Initiatives." See also

- Greenwood, "Castilians, Basques, and Andalusians," for an insightful discussion of historical shifts in identity politics.
17. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, is a much-cited source for the argument that the shape of social life draws in important ways on specific imaginings of community, which were fundamentally altered with nationalism.
18. See Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics*. Among other things, Warren's study serves as a valuable check on the top-down model in Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.
19. Brandel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of King Philip II*, 38. For accounts of Southeast Asia, see Durling, *Hill Farms and Plain Fields*; Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*; and O'W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*.
20. Brandel, *The Mediterranean*, 46.
21. See Caro-Baroja, "The city and the country."
22. For these dates, see Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, 3, and Salemnink, "Ethnography as Martial Art." The French designation for what is now the Central Highlands changed from "Pays Moi" to "Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois" in 1948 (Salemnink, *Moi and Maguik*, 264).
23. See Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (chapter 4).
24. Salemnink, "Moi and Maguik," 255.
25. See Lewis, *Nether Wolf Nor Dog* (chapter 1).
26. Salemnink, "Moi and Maguik," 256.
27. For Bali, see Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise* (chapter 2).
28. See Goeschla, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism*.
29. See Hickey, "Some Aspects of Hill Tribe Life in Vietnam," Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*; and Hickey, *Shattered World*.
30. Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, 2.
31. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*, 110.
32. Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, 83.
33. See Dove, "The Agroecological Mythology of the Javanese and the Political Economy of Indonesia"; Jonsson, "Forest Producers and Peoples"; and Jonsson, "Yao Minority Identity and the Location of Difference in the South China Borderland."
34. For this view, see Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe* (220).
35. See Peter and Sally Kunszader, "Population Movements and Environmental Changes in the Hills of Northern Thailand."
36. See Brandel, *On History*.
37. Brandel, *On History*, 31 and 52.
38. See Jonsson, "Cultural Priorities and Projects," and Jonsson, "Yao Minority Identity."
39. The "King of Fire" is a title granted to a highland leader, and implies tributary relations with the courts of Vietnam and Cambodia. There were also "King of Water" and "King of Wind." To within the Vietnamese and Cambodian domains that they had taken over. The historical reality of the titles and the implied relations were more tenuous than what the French understood. See Douret, *Pays*; Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, 136-143; and Salemnink, "The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands."
40. See Jonsson, "Yao Minority Identity."
41. See Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.
42. See Jonsson, "Cultural Priorities."
43. See Norind, *Phanantamak Indochina*.