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Livelihoods in the Vietnamese Northern Borderlands Recorded in French Colonial Military Ethnographies 1897–1904

Jean Michaud

Examination of unpublished colonial military archives on the Tonkinese borderlands offers new insights into the conditions within which indigenous inhabitants of these remote uplands made a living at the turn of the twentieth century. After sketching the background, methods and historical sequence behind the production of these archives, the paper draws from them a snapshot of indigenous living conditions, focusing on patterns of settlement, property rights, taxation and capitalisation. Three core elements of upland livelihoods are identifiable: hunting and gathering; agriculture; and trade and wage work. The paper concludes with a discussion of the significance of this archival material for the study of highland societies in the northern uplands of Vietnam today.

Keywords: Tonkin; Colonial Ethnography; Upland Minorities; Vietnam; Military

Overview

Little has been written about the specifics of livelihoods among highland indigenous societies in the northern Vietnamese borderlands before the arrival of French colonial military observers at the close of the nineteenth century.¹ As a rule, these societies did not produce endogenous archives and we are left to look elsewhere for traces of their history. I have surveyed the writings of Catholic missionaries in Upper Tonkin between 1880 and 1930, some of whom did produce forms of ethnography (Michaud 2004a, 2004b, 2007). Exploring Vietnamese sources, historian Bradley C. Davis (2011, 2013) bravely unearthed rare observations written in 1856 by civil administrator Phạm Thận Duật² on the remote northwestern province then called Hưng Hóa, containing all or part of the contemporary Vietnamese provinces of Điện Biên, Lai Châu, Lào Cai, Hà Giang, Yên Bái and Sơn La. There may perhaps be one or two

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additional observers from the Nguyễn period remaining in the Vietnamese archives, but that would likely be all we can look forward to.³ It is unlikely that records from Chinese observers will ever appear since ventures across the southern imperial border—for the purpose of putting on paper ethnographies of the non-Han—would have constituted a rather extraordinary endeavour (Yang 2009).

With this scarcity in mind, I want to shed light on the unexpected and recent appearance of one rich colonial ethnographic source from the early years of French involvement in the upper region of northern Vietnam, then called Tonkin. A growing academic interest in highland societies in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands warrants renewed scrutiny of this original material. This is due in part to the recent fame of van Schendel's (2002) and Scott's (2009) thought-provoking notion of *Zomia*, and also to the growing number of ethnographic studies on that region.

This archival source comprises a collection of over 100 unpublished reports on Vietnam's northern highland populations produced at the turn of the twentieth century. Penned by seventy different field officers, these archives clock in at more than 4000 fine-grained hand-written pages of text accompanied by pictures, diagrams, original maps, lexicons, demographic tables and elements of oral history. Together, they narrate practices related to agriculture, trade, social organisation, crafts and beliefs (see Michaud 2013).

Specialists of upland societies in Tonkin who have conducted research throughout the twentieth century until now can say with a degree of certainty that at the time of colonial contact (around the 1880s) everyday life in these northern geographic and cultural and economic margins was structured in terms of the well-known pattern of customary agrarian societies in East and Southeast Asia (Collective 1921; see also Cancian 1989; Peluso 1992). Patrilineal households constituted the building blocks of society and clusters of households related through blood and alliance—lineages and clans—operated along ethnically determined patterns of mutual assistance. In Sahlin's (1968) clan typology, 'generalised' and 'balanced' reciprocity dominated exchange between these households, and was favoured over its 'negative' form which was associated with monetised exchanges, work for wages and war. Or to use Gudeman's (2008) characterisation of highland societies, relationships of mutuality within the community took precedence over those relations of impersonal trade generated by the market.

Social differentiation, including internal specialisation of labour, was minimal compared with the class structure found in co-existent Kinh (Việt) and Han societies, the dominant ethnicities in Vietnam and China. Still, the state was unmistakably an important agent, even if an indirect one in remote hamlets. Its power was felt through administration, taxation and security (Fourniau 1989). Active economic change geared towards modernisation was driven by market rules and demand from the lowlands. Physical remoteness—the 'friction of terrain' proposed by Scott (2009)—but also cultural distinction were obstacles to the penetration of market imperatives into local economies. And contrary to Scott's thesis, endogenous feudal polities⁴ have surfaced here and there in the borderlands, their inhabitants having long been linked

to each other via these political formations as much as through steady economic exchange, even if with relatively low intensity (Friedman 2000).

But at the turn of the twentieth century this general state of affairs in the northern highlands was still to be observed and deciphered, and the ethnographic push reviewed here was instrumental in this impulsion. After drawing the background and explaining methods, I will summarise briefly the historical sequence behind the production of these colonial military archives, before diving into the texts to provide a picture of the conditions surrounding indigenous inhabitants of these borderlands. To understand their livelihoods I focus on patterns of settlement and property rights, taxation and capitalisation. I will then turn to four core elements of upland livelihoods as they appear in these archives, namely: hunting and gathering; agriculture; trade; and wage work. In the Conclusion, I will briefly question the validity of this original material.

A Rationale for Ethnography

Linked to the French colonial push in Asia, during the nineteenth century a handful of Catholic missionaries contributed fascinating but highly uneven ethnographies of those societies located on the northern borderlands of the Red River (Sông Hồng) catchment (Salemink 2003; Michaud 2007). Beyond these fragments, plus short sections in a few isolated pieces such as Dupuis (1910), Famin (1895) or Lefèvre-Pontalis (1902), the initial European ethnographic publications on the 200,000 or so people inhabiting northern Tonkin's highlands (Michaud & Turner forthcoming) were confined to a limited number of books by military authors, namely: *Ethnographie du Tonkin Septentrional* by Commander É.-E. Lunet de Lajonquière (1904) plus its expanded version of 1906; Lieutenant-Colonel E. Diguet's (1908) *Les montagnards du Tonkin*; and articles by Lieutenant-Colonel A. Bonifacy (for instance 1904).⁵ However, it turns out that these military authors were all mining the original field surveys we explore in this paper (Michaud 2013). This background material was subsequently largely forgotten and not precisely located and measured again for another century.

In my opinion, this case provides an excellent example of what a state might endeavour to do to ensure a grip on its national peripheries when spaces within slip mechanically outside the scholarly gaze on account of their marginality; what van Schendel (2002) terms a 'geography of ignorance'. James C. Scott (1998, 2009) describes an effort to increase the 'legibility' of such space through the activation of 'distance demolishing technologies' meant to reduce and eventually erase the 'friction of terrain' required to stay at a distance from the state's stifling embrace. France, keen to enforce in Indochina as elsewhere a systematic administration of '*mise en valeur*', had learned from experience the importance of getting acquainted with the peripheral populations (Sarraut 1923). After militarily securing the highlands in the late 1880s, France devolved administration to the military in 1891, and ordered dozens of infantry officers to produce reports on each administrative area of the borderlands

under their jurisdiction. The two surveys thus launched, while overlapping, were distinct. The 1897 survey was of a functional nature, geared towards the need for factual information on the borderland, its native populations, its resources and its economic and military organisation and potential. The 1903 survey focused exclusively on ethnography (Michaud 2013). Until some new data sets may perhaps be found in future archival research, these surveys together can be considered as constituting the most stable, systematic and dependable evidence of what life was like at the time for the populations in highland Tonkin's borderlands.

This record is far too large to be exhausted in a single article. I have chosen to document livelihoods as the angle with which to breach the bulk of the archive.⁶ Much has been said of late regarding the livelihoods of people living on the geographic and symbolic margins of strong nation-states. Current research on how the world's frontier groups make their livings has flourished and has generated a vibrant body of theoretical propositions (Horstmann & Wadley 2006; Kanji, MacGregor, & Tacoli 2005; Turner 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Li 2014). From a region left for too long beyond the gaze of research, this archival data contributes first-hand observations from a century ago.

Upland Livelihoods at the Time of Contact

As historian Le Failler (2011, 42) remarked, until the early nineteenth century the imperial Vietnamese administration had kept its distance from most of the northern highlands. He said:

In a view shared by the Chinese and the Vietnamese, [...] the longstanding concept of an imperial frontier zone [...] prevailed: an ill-defined frontier territory and not a border area with agreed limits. Consequently, there were no boundary lines [...] and, save for rare occasions, no fortifications, no citadels or garrisons. (see also Winichakul 1994)

During the nineteenth century, the imperial power in Hué slowly began to attempt direct administration on the northern frontier, which 'garnered mixed results and was limited at best' (Le Failler 2011, 43). With this historical lack of active involvement from the imperial state in the high borderlands, it is thus fair to accept that what French observers saw and reported early in their tenure, starting in 1883, did reflect in large part what was occurring on the fringes of imperial administration. It is this portrait we are now reviewing starting with patterns of settlement and property, then taxation, debt and capitalisation.

Patterns of Settlement and Property

The French takeover was instrumental in importing a logic of territorial occupation coherent with the Western notion of the nation-state. A commission by the Governor General was issued in August 1891 to occupy and administer the previously neglected borderlands, thereafter divided into Military Territories (*Territoires militaires*) each subdivided into Circles (*Cercles*) and Sectors (*Secteurs*). Commission in hand, the

French military proceeded to establish colonial authority from the Delta to the highlands with an eye towards instituting border security and methodical taxation. Border controls were reinforced to take advantage of commerce with the Chinese provinces of Yun-Nan (Yunnan), Kouang-si (Guangxi) and Kouang-tong (Guangdong).⁷ Population censuses were run while taxation was consolidated—not limited to land ownership, but also levied on production, trade and consumption. To hasten Tonkin's economic profitability and viability, state monopolies on the lucrative markets for opium, alcohol and salt were instigated (Brocheux & Hémerly 2009).

Poor infrastructure and the lack of a trained workforce meant that the expanding colonial order had barely begun to leave its mark on fringe-dwelling populations when our two surveys were launched. As a consequence, what was reported by the officers in the field largely depicted remnants from the pre-colonial state of affairs. In mountain communities, custom prevailed with a pattern of land occupation unfamiliar to the conquerers, with a small population distributed over a vast, rugged territory (see Figure 1). A few moderately concentrated clusters of houses and shops, lying along dirt roads in riverside settlements or at route junctions, became headquarters of colonial administration in the Military Territories (MT). Beyond these, houses clustered in small kinship-based hamlets scattered over vast swathes of land were the norm. In the remote sector of Muong-Khuong⁸ for instance:

a few families, usually three or four, form a hamlet.[...] A *xa* [a commune] includes a more or less considerable number of separate hamlets, which we quite improperly name villages, and which are sometimes located two or three days' journey from each other.⁹ (335, Muong-Khuong¹⁰)

In neighbouring Hoang-Su-Phi, 'villages usually comprise two or more hamlets composed themselves of three or four huts sometimes quite distant from each other. We also find many isolated huts' (317, Hoang-Su-Phi). And further east, on the heights of Quan-Ba: 'Nowhere do we find large concentrations of dwellings. There are only hamlets of two, three or four houses scattered in the plain' (318, Quan-Ba).

Land ownership and land-use rights were managed at the commune level: 'As a rule, the regime of ownership is communal within hamlets' (335, Muong-Khuong). Land ownership fell broadly into two types:

[Among the Tho¹¹] land ownership can be divided into two categories: first private property, second communal property. Private property is the only one transferable by gift, inheritance, sale or exchange. These mutations are certified by documents drawn up by public writers, and a copy is given to each party. There are no originals kept. Communal property consists of cultivated or uncultivated land, which is the reserve of the available land. Every Tho reaching majority receives a share of communal rice field. This part, which is not transferable, remains the property of the owner until his death. At that point, it is handed back to the communal lot. (307, Yen-Minh)

Land ownership [among the Nhang¹²] is communal, but the allocation of rice paddy fields is ancient and the users consider these fields as their property, though knowing well that they cannot sell them. Newly farmed land becomes the property of those who cleared it. (332, Ban-Lao)

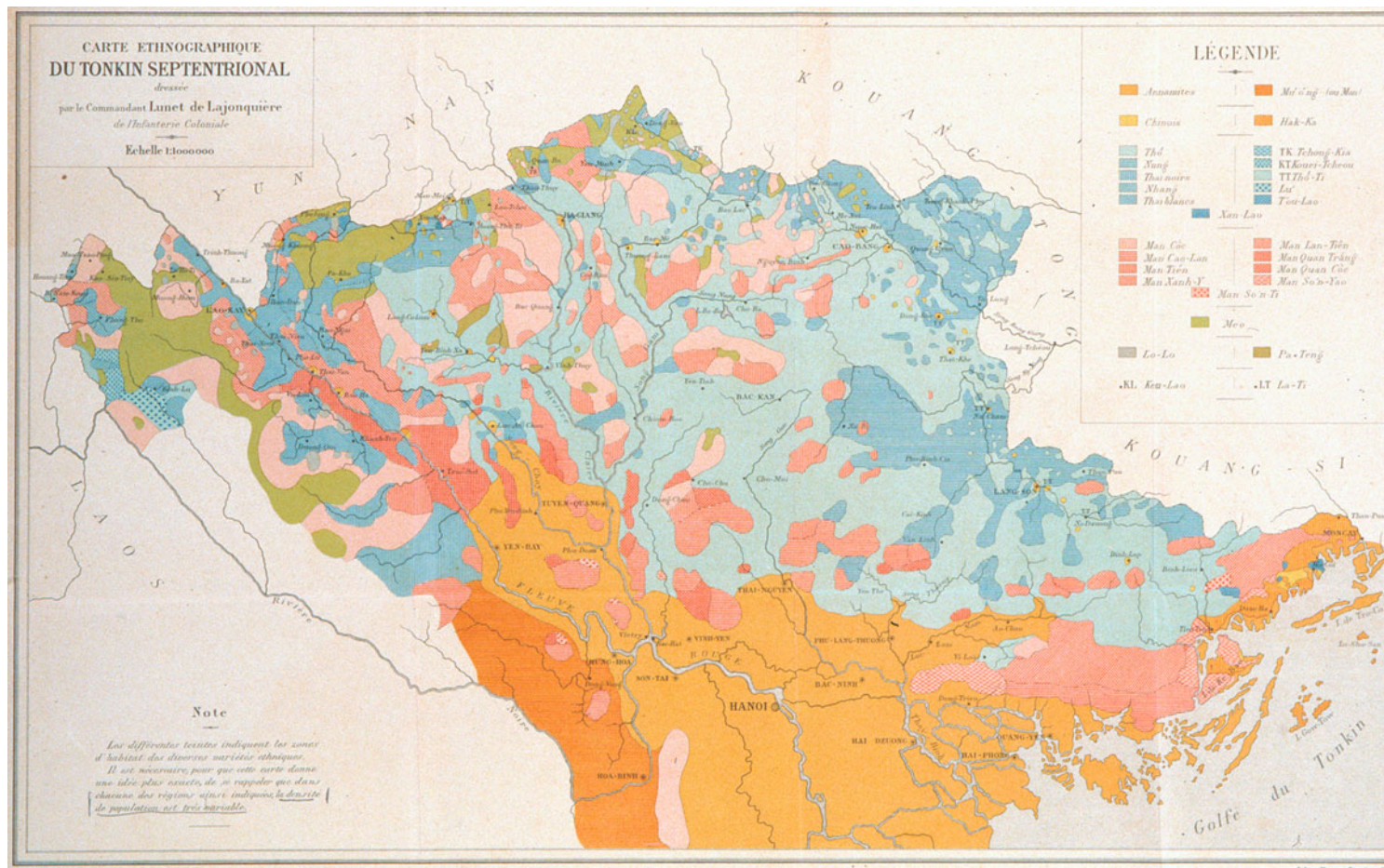


Figure 1 Ethnographic map of northern Tonkin, Lunet de Lajonquière, 1906.

The Thos when growing corn encroach on the forest, but once the land has been farmed, they keep it to use for the following years. These fields thus gained over the forest become their property by right of first occupant. (66103, Thong-Hoa-Phu¹³)

The private right to use land and treat it as a commodity thus belonged to whoever had cleared and planted it, a constant practice all over the highlands. In the (largely Tai-speaking) feudal entities, these rights were passed on through inheritance. Farther afield from the core of feudal domains, in the outer fringes, the absence of communal property alongside all land-use being household based in conjunction with fixed and rotational agriculture, resulted in more flexibly defined land rights: '[Among the Méo¹⁴] the land belongs to those who cultivate it: there are no ownership titles or land records. Only tradition and collective memory decide which family has the right to cultivate which land' (318, Quan-Ba).

Male predominance in ownership rights was reported as common practice among all groups: '[Among the Tho and Nung¹⁵] family property forms a whole managed by the male head of the family' (305, Ta-Lung). This included inheritance, not only of land, but also of dwellings, debts, children and all personal belongings. Writing about the Tho in the Third Military Territory, Captain Mellier reported a characteristic configuration:

Once the male head of the family cannot or no longer wants to administer his property himself, or when he dies, his possessions are divided equally between his male descendants. His daughters take part in sharing only if they are not married, or if being married they live with their brothers and contribute to the common expenses: caring for parents, family home maintenance, ancestors' altar, ceremonies etc. (317, Hoang-Su-Phi)

Among kinship-based groups away from the more fertile plateaus and valleys, inheritance was made less complicated by fewer possessions to pass on from one generation to the next. Upon the death of a Man father,¹⁶ for instance, 'The eldest son remains in his father's house, but his inheritance is not much greater than that of his younger brothers. [Daughters] have no right to inherit from their parents' (307, Yen-Minh). Daughters leaving the household to get married inherited a variety of goods at the time of their marriage, generally through the female line, and were allowed to pass them on to their own daughters.

Taxes and Debt

For most of the highland population, taxation by ruling elites had long been an inescapable fact of life, and most of the time, they went along with it. Tariffs were more efficiently collected in feudal entities that had taxed their peasantry for centuries. In these regions, the hereditary communal leader and head of native local administration, the *ly-thuong*,¹⁷ was recognised by the French as, among other responsibilities, the collector of land taxes: 'The ly-thuong is responsible for internal policing, justice, taxation and distribution of communal property, he legalises sales

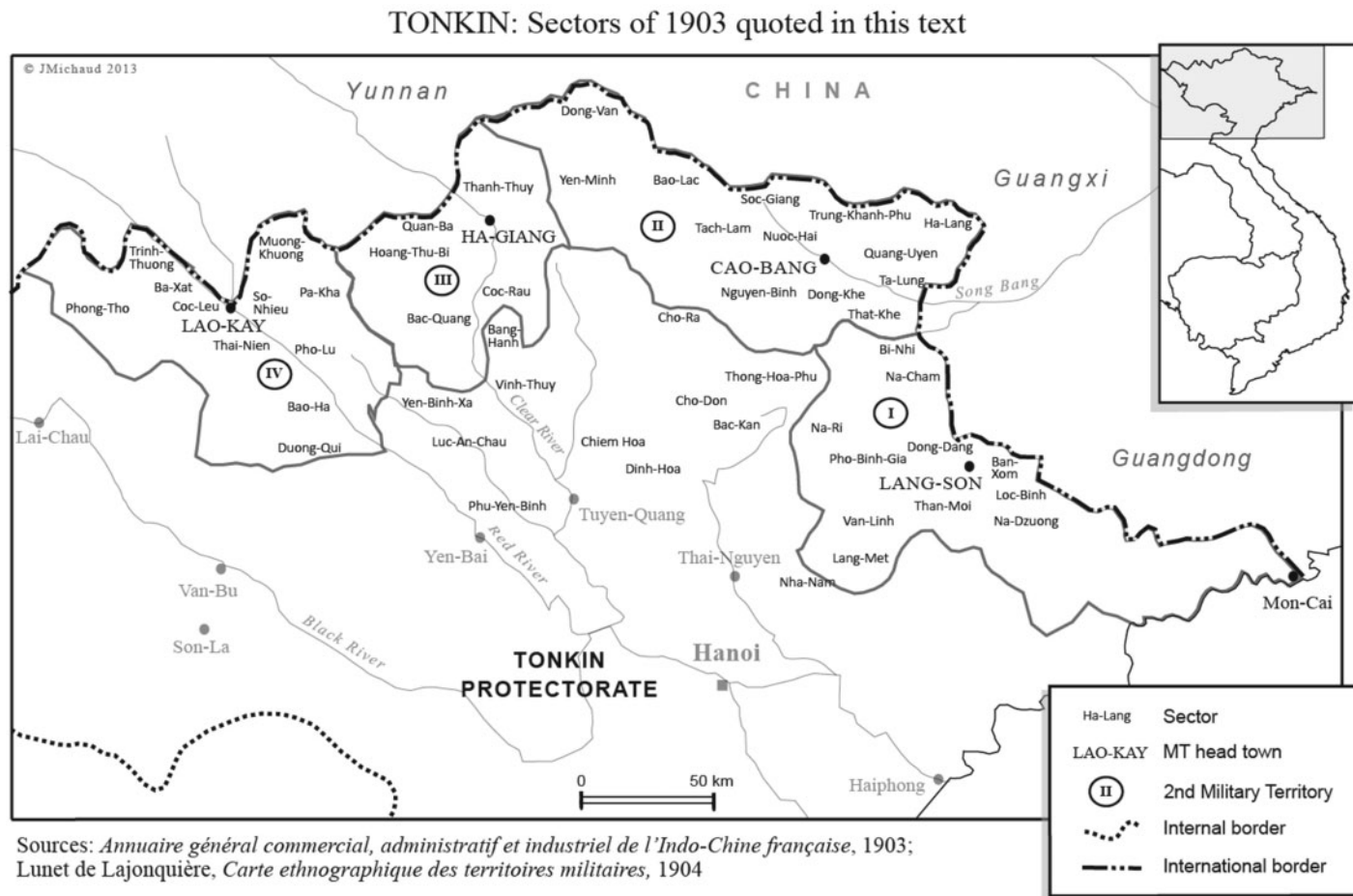


Figure 2 Military Territories (MT) of 1903 with Sectors mentioned in this text, from Lunet de Lajonquière 1906.

and ensures proper road maintenance' (335, Muong-Khuong). He was assisted in his duty by a council of notables (Figure 3):

The Council of Notables manages the affairs of the commune, it oversees the sharing of communal property, recruits coolies for community works, receives the income of the Commune and decides on its use, oversees road and other public works, determines the individual share for each tax paying household, and is responsible for the education of children. (338, Thai-Nien)

The pre-colonial mechanisms of taxation had been aimed at the household level and the French maintained that rule: 'A family in native terms is constituted by all those living in the same hut, so to date the tax has actually been paid by hut.[...] Personal taxation does not exist, it is merged with the property tax. This tax, discussed among notables, is paid per family with \$3.20¹⁸ per unit of irrigated rice field and \$1.60 per unit of mountain rice field' (331, Ba-Xat).

Taxes on consumption were collected chiefly through the three state monopolies of salt, alcohol and opium. Prices being generally lower on the black market, many highlanders were driven away from state shops. Dodging taxation resembled a familiar cat and mouse game:



Fig. 25. GROUPE DE THỔ. → NOTABLES (Bassin du Song-Câu).

Figure 3 Group of 'notables': Tho. Lunet de Lajonquière 1906 Notes: Pictures in this book were published without explicit credits. Commander Lunet de Lajonquière himself not having conducted field work in the northern highlands, those included in his 1906 précis have very likely been selected from the sector reports, or came from the personal collections of fellow officers.

We should be under no illusion about it, the liquor and opium dens [managed by Thais and Annamites¹⁹] in this part of Tonkin are a real sham; this is where the true customs lie. In reality the retailers have only themselves for customers, they only report previously agreed quantities of alcohol and opium, and they harvest the real benefits by keeping the taxes they were given by the people to let the opium through and to produce alcohol. (343, Luc-An-Chau)

Drastic avoidance action included voting with one's feet: 'Thus, sometimes, the Commander of a sector wishing for example to get taxes paid, learns that a Man settlement which a few months earlier was part of his region, has moved to some corner of a nearby area' (335, Muong-Khuong). 'The Meos have nothing or very little, so they do not hesitate to move across to our neighbours' as soon as we ask them for some work, tax or corvée' (337, Phong-Tho).

The pre-colonial communal administration was maintained and simply became accountable to French military commanders. Tax rates and labour requirements were decided higher up the chain of command and calculated proportionally to the demographic make-up of each commune. In multi-ethnic communes, tax collection was split along ethnic lines:

The [Tho] *ly-truong*, in agreement with the leaders of other races, allocates taxes to be paid. He himself collects the taxes from the Tho population while leaders of the Man do the same on their side, and all come at the same time to hand over their taxes to the sector Commander. In the event of a dispute, it is he who settles the issue. (308, Nguyen-Binh)

Along the border, exchange with China was encouraged by the colonial state as it generated profits and underpinned lucrative taxation on both sides: 'Our natives regularly attend Chinese markets on the border, and vice-versa the Chinese flock to ours' (306, Trung-Khanh-Phu).

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

Ingeniously, colonial border custodians were also encouraged by their superiors to turn a blind eye to smuggling if there was a potential benefit for the protectorate:

Over the past year, the Commander of the sector has relentlessly pressed and encouraged inhabitants to engage in the smuggling trade [of salt] as it is beneficial to the region, even offering to lend money to those who did not have the necessary resources. (66105, So-Nhieu)

Less productive farmers often needed help and debt could be contracted at the household level, against collateral such as labour or rice from the next harvest, or at a commune level, against collective assets: '[Among the Nhang] in principle, it is established that the land is inalienable, but sometimes highly leveraged communes can provide it as collateral' (338, Thai-Nien). When cash loans were required—a rare

occurrence outside of transactions linked to marriages and funerals—Chinese merchants were reportedly the chief source:

For a project such as the construction or repair of a pagoda, a lender often offers to loan or complete the necessary sum. This, predictably, involves a Chinese person most of the time. In this case, the council of elders allocates the debt in proportion to the wealth of each of its constituents. (301, Dong-Khe)

However, for the vast majority of farmers, monetary loans were not contracted: 'A Thô commune does not contract debt for the excellent reason that possessing nothing, it cannot make it happen' (301, Dong Khe). Instead, customary forms of reciprocity in help, favours or labour were preferred, as this quotation among many others shows: '[Among the Tho] harvesting and preparation of rice fields is done with the help of neighbours, whose help is then returned under the same conditions' (307, Yen-Minh).

Capitalisation

Alongside the expenses required for a household's day-to-day upkeep, provisions needed to be made for longer-term stability. The most common customary form of capital, besides feudal and communal land-use rights and domesticated animals—water buffalo, oxen, horses, goats and pigs are all mentioned as household investments—was jewellery. Across the highlands, jewellery was fashioned from silver obtained in bars, coins and recycled ornaments.²⁰ Practically all authors report this activity: 'Very stylish [Nung women] are fond of jewellery, their wrists and necks are overloaded with silver ornaments' (306, Trung-Khang-Phu). 'All [White Thai men] love jewellery and from their earliest childhood, they adorn a bracelet or a necklace. [...The Meo] all have jewellery, necklaces, bracelets and rings' (337, Phong-Tho). Demand is constant, and some invest in the silver trade:

The villages of Tam Duong, So Pa, Ma Cung and Ma Cune each have a jeweller making necklaces, bracelets, rings, earrings, clips, chains and cases, that is, all the jewellery worn by women. The Mans and Meo also know how to make these, but their work is coarser. (66105, Phong-Tho)

Silversmiths are not so much engaging in a permanent form of commerce with silver as they place themselves as the providers of jewels to a small circle of their kin and neighbours: 'Thus we find in the sector some pretty objects such as necklaces, bracelets, earrings and rings. These jewels are very original. But in this industry as in others, people only produce for their own consumption' (66105, Ba-Xat).

Thus, it appears that silver was prized as the most reliable holder of value among local populations. Displaying jewellery was generally reserved for public spaces and collective events, and auspicious times such as New Year, or visits to marketplaces where prospective grooms and brides ascertain the family wealth of potential partners. Nevertheless, investing in something as compact and mobile as silverware was also a risky form of capitalisation in times of high theft and wars before the French came, as recounted in the 'Narrative of the conquest' chapters in each of the

1897–98 reports (see also McAleavy 1968). When not needed for public display, hiding household silver by burying it in the forest was often the wiser strategy.

Core Elements of Highland Livelihoods Around 1900

Hunting, Gathering, Forests—and their Destruction

Almost every report lists hunting and fishing as essential components of local livelihoods. Here are telling examples:

The Man, who are great hunters and who fish too, have the equipment necessary to engage in these kinds of exercises. We see these hanging in a corner of their homes: first a primitive crossbow, then a fork to spear the fish, and finally this strange gun that the Man Méo Tam make from scratch, a matchlock with elongated barrel and without a stock, which can't be shouldered and that one simply places against the cheek to aim [...] They use these guns to hunt the predators and other animals that come prowling around their homes or cause damage to their crops. (301, Dong Khe)

The fauna of the region includes: tiger, tiger cat, bear, wild boar, deer, otter, porcupine, armadillo, monkey, and weasel. The main birds are: eagle, raven, dove, woodcock, snipe, partridge, wild rooster and hen, the ordinary pheasant and silver pheasant. The natives hunt with rifles or snares. During the year 1897 they brought to the Coc Rau post four tigers, a half-dozen tiger cats, weasels, deer, a porcupine, and an armadillo. (66104, Coc-Rau)

In all rivers in the region fish abound. Residents gather fish either using nets or building dams. All river dams are equipped with traps. In some places, locals poison the water with a plant that stuns the fish. Sometimes as well, all the inhabitants of a village get together and after blocking the creek with a net, direct the fish into it. Locals conserve the fish by lightly roasting and smoking using special ovens set on stream banks. (66104, Coc-Rau)

Several reports list additional small prey that, judging by some disparaging remarks, the French may not have thought very highly: birds, small rodents, snakes, lizards, turtles, insects, snails, river prawns and shellfish. And as alluded above, locals also hunted to safeguard their dwellings against large predators—and rightly so: 'During 1897 five people were devoured by tigers on the territory of Linh-ho commune' (66104, Coc-Rau). Hunting was also good for trade in the form of cured, smoked or salted fish, hides for leather, and items destined for the Chinese and Vietnamese pharmacopoeia: '[The Mans-Lang-Téen] hunt bear and sell the liver and gall, which are considered excellent against rheumatism' (343, Luc-an-Chau).

The forests covering a large portion of the borderlands were reported to be lush and often impenetrable, evidencing the modest state of deforestation in the highlands at the time: 'Forests are numerous and cover all the mountains, they constitute the natural limits in the sector, they also crown all secondary ranges and, in general, all hills of clay and limestone' (66103, Na-Ri). 'Two-thirds of the territory in the sector of Bac-Kan are covered with forests' (66103, Bac-Kan). As one author eloquently put it: 'The forest is the great mistress of the whole of upper Tonkin' (66104, Bang-

Hanh). Perhaps the forest's greatest worth to inhabitants was the near-infinite expanse of land available for clearing and cultivation using customary swiddening, the practice being widespread among all groups. French authors decried swiddening, which they equated with pure destruction and a grave offence to the forests' commercial potential. 'Forests generally cover the peaks; elsewhere indeed the natives through the entire upper area follow a tradition of destroying by fire all kinds of vegetation' (66104, Quan-Ba). 'The Meo clears the mountain slope that seems most favourable to the cultivation of upland rice, as wooded as it may be: thus he is a great destroyer of forests' (335, Muong-Khuong). Equipped with their Western European understanding of fixed agriculture performed on permanently cleared plots, officers did not fully grasp what they saw, and consequently disapproved of it: 'The Thos people, especially the Mans, have this vicious habit of clearing the forest by fire' (66103, Na-Ri).

Considering that the Mans and especially the Méos are nomads [...] and that, encamped rather than settled, they usually abandon the land after it yielded one or two crops to go farther and clear another corner of forest, setting it on fire, we realise the precarious fate that awaits in this area any attempt at systematic logging. (66105, Ba-Xat)

'The forests are quite extensive although devastated every day by the improvidence of the natives and their habit of burning it'; this officer also adds quasi-prophetically, although arguably for the wrong reasons, that 'the time is not far when timber will be a rarity in this region' (66103, Soc-Giang).

Still, forested areas remained bountiful for the age-old practice of gathering. As reported by Commander Bonifacy in his 1903 summary report for the Third Military Territory, forests provided an extensive range of products for consumption and commerce:

Among forest products, coffin wood *pôu mô* (white wood) and *sa mô* (table wood) are the most esteemed; they are found buried in the ravines where they were thrown by typhoons. Ordinary wood, bamboo, betel roots are only for export in the Coc Rau and Bac Quang sectors. The *cũ nâu* [wild dyer's yam] makes an important trade everywhere. People also find in the forest edible tubers, the most common one being *cũ mài* [yam], bamboo shoots and fruit. The trunk of the wild banana tree is used to feed the pigs. Several trees whose products are not used, among others caryota, also grow in the forest. The leaf of the fan palm (*mây cơ* or *củ thỏ*, *cây lá cô* in the Annamite language) is put to use and its fruit, eaten. The forest sugarcane harvested in the region of Hà Giang is treated on site and converted into molasses or brown sugar. (313, Third TM)

The forest offered a lifeline for local people. In times of food shortage, 'If rice and maize are lacking, they find in the forest the bamboo shoots, wild bananas, flower fruit, wild tubers, tender tree or plant leaves they usually cook before eating' (66105, Phong-Tho). Through spells of hardship and war, forests played a vital part as refuge, as expressed here by an inspired officer:

To the inhabitant of the upper regions of Tonkin, to the montagnard, the forest is actually the *alma parens*, the great benefactor. He knows her every nook and cranny. In the troubled moments of his history, when war was plaguing villages in the plains with its horrors and devastation, it is to the forest that poor, defeated,

powerless to defend himself, he came to seek asylum and protection. She has sheltered him in her safe hidings, him with his family, his cattle, his provisions. When the rice ran out, she fed him, she gave him unreservedly her bamboo shoots, her succulent roots, all of the resources known only to the mountain folk. Thus, he loves her, he respects her, and only just does he preserve his fields against the forest's assaults. (66104, Bang Hanh)

Agriculture, Cash Crops, Livestock—and Laziness

Agricultural practices varied among upland groups depending on topography, altitude and influences from the lowlands. The most productive and valued form of cultivation was rice in irrigated terraces, a practice mostly limited to the core areas of the established Tai domains and the mid-altitude valleys radiating from them: 'All his [the Tho's] attention is focused on rice fields that are well irrigated and maintained. He only cultivates valleys that are easily irrigable' (66103, Tach-Lam).

The floor of the valleys, of clayey nature, is extremely fertile. In the mountains, the presence of limestone makes it more difficult to cultivate, but the soil is also very fertile and produces an abundance of upland rice, maize, cotton, indigo and hemp. (66105, Pa-Kha)

Uphill from the core areas, swiddening remained the dominant method for working the soil but there were many pockets and transitional narrow valleys where both systems co-existed: 'With irrigated lowland rice, red rice or white rice, the Thai, following the example of the Mans, grow quite a number of tracts of upland rice' (66104, Bang-Hanh).

In the higher reaches, mountain (dry) rice often co-existed with maize:

After felling all the trees, he [the Méo] sets fire to the dried shrubs and feeds it until all the plants have been turned into ashes. He then tills the soil lightly and plants mountain rice. He also uses this method for maize, which for the Méo is subject to much more intensive cultivation than upland rice. For maize, ground into a flour, certainly constitutes the basis of his diet; it is also used to manufacture a type of alcohol consumed liberally by the natives. (335, Muong-Khuong)

Beyond rice and maize, highland agriculture appeared to concentrate on a relatively narrow selection of produce: 'Food crops here are plains and mountain rice, maize, buckwheat, yams and potatoes, some vegetables, sugar cane and fruit trees in small quantities' (313, Third MT). Nearly all authors note that for the vast majority of borderland farmers, the choice of crops, the amount of farmed land and the final destination of the produce were above all determined by the subsistence needs of the household: 'Trade is virtually non-existent. [Nhang] locals are content with little and work only enough not to die of hunger' (334, Trinh-Thuong).²¹ In fact, several reports emphasised—in words suggesting bewilderment on the part of the author—that local farmers showed no inclination whatsoever to increase the volume of their production:

The locals are content with little and they do not attempt to produce. Completely indifferent to well-being as we know it, they are satisfied with their lot when the

rice crop is sufficient to provide food for the year. In such a mind frame, they do not understand why they should spend time working with no other purpose than to dress better and lodge themselves adequately, or make less primitive their agriculture, weaving techniques, and the means of transportation used by their ancestors since time immemorial. (66105, Ba-Xat)

This approach was insularly interpreted by the French as shameless apathy. 'In general, the Tho man, being lazy, is content with a small gain, just enough to make a living, and sees no further' (305, Ta-Lung). 'The Nyangs cultivate paddy fields, but like all the races of this region, they are lazy and apathetic and cultivate only the amount necessary for their needs' (337, Phong-Tho). 'The White Thaïs and all the Mans and Nhangs are farmers, but all are lazy and careless; they are satisfied with a modest return, far from exhausting their land' (66105, Pho-Lu). Needless to say, 'lazy', 'apathetic' and 'careless' here are Eurocentric judgements, as discussed by Alatas (1977), that ignore local rural realities and historical consequences, reflecting instead colonial presuppositions (see Stipe 1980; Stocking 1991). For several more discerning officers, such as Auguste Bonifacy, this so-called apathy is more accurately viewed as a sign of resignation, learned from generations of plundering and relentless taxation that discourages production beyond what is strictly necessary to survive:

The Tay [Tho] farmer who forms the majority of the population [...] will decide to work new plots only if he knows that his renewed efforts will not be hit with new taxes. [...] In this country, where the extent of fallow land is considerable, where the natives have limited needs and are few, where the forest offers inexhaustible resources, it is necessary to use all means to increase cultures. The mere prospect of new taxes has hampered this budding movement. (313, Third MT)

Nearly all occurrences of cash cropping in reports point to disposal of minor surpluses in local marketplaces, mostly through bartering. Substantial accumulation of wealth through cash cropping is an exceptional occurrence. An officer in Luc-an-Chau encapsulated this state of affairs: 'The Thos only sell their rice when they need money, either to celebrate Têt [New Year] or pay taxes. Thus the market of Luc-an-Chau is never more attended than before New Year and when taxes must be paid' (343, Luc-an-Chau).

About livestock, all reports mention small domesticated animals roaming around each highland house. There are also numerous observations on larger and more valuable livestock such as horses, oxen and water buffalo for use as pack animals and for working the land. For security, all animals are kept as close as feasible to the house.

Opium, or not

Scholars have long thought that since the mid-nineteenth century or so, the opium poppy had become a common crop along the whole of the southern border of China and beyond, some even proposing that this industry could have constituted the first firm foothold for a market economy to spread among highland populations (Lebar, Hickey, & Musgrave 1964; Geddes 1976; Cooper 1984; McCoy, Read, & Adams III

1989; Chouvy 2009). French commercial media such as the *Bulletin Économique de l'Indo-Chine* and contemporary oral histories of minority and non-minority highland dwellers tell us that poppy growing and opium production eventually became widespread in the borderlands. But at the turn of the twentieth century it appears that it was not. Not yet, not anymore, or both.

French officers contributing to the 1897 survey unanimously testified that opium was not grown locally in significant volumes. Instead, opium was mainly imported from China, and intended for refining in colonial state-owned plants in the lowlands with a view to selling to the coastal market and beyond: 'Opium comes mainly from Yunnan and is sold in the Delta' (66105, Pa-Kha). In the Fourth Military Territory this absence of local production was noted in Binh-Lu (66105, Phong-Tho) as well as along the Red River (66104, So-Nhieu and Pho-Lu). This was also the case in the Third Military Territory (66104, Hoang-Thu-Bi). In Quan-Ba north of Ha-Giang, 'poppy and bean cultivation only exist two days walk from here in the Song Quan' (66104, Quan-Ba). And again in Cao-Bang in the Second Military Territory: 'The star anise and opium poppy are not grown in the region. [...] For the poppy, [locals] say that the soil is too hot' (66103, Tach-Lam). Some opium did nevertheless find its way to highland marketplaces as a commodity for highlanders, but on a small scale and only for domestic consumption:

[Opium] is an imported product, it comes from Yun-Nan. [...] So-Nhieu, where the population is very poor and sparse, consumes small amounts of opium. A number of hawkers roam the villages to sell their opium, of which just the amount required for consumption on the premises is purchased, always paid for with money. (66105, So-Nhieu)

In an era when opium was widely accepted by both France and Britain as a legitimate commodity supporting a very profitable business (Descours-Gatin 1992; Le Failler 2001), its reported rarity in the Tonkinese highlands is noteworthy. The colonial state and black market traders were certainly willing to purchase all the lucrative raw opium they could from any farmer producing it. There would have been no reason for military observers to strategically play down its presence in their reports. On the contrary, encouraged by superiors, field officers were constantly assessing the commercial potential of opium production in the region: 'It is likely that the region of Quan Ba would not be absolutely averse to this kind of culture [opium]' (66104, Quan-Ba). Some were even investigating the idea themselves: 'All tests done in the gardens of our posts to grow the vegetables found in France have thrived marvellously. [However] the cultivation of the opium poppy does not seem to succeed' (66105, So-Nhieu). 'Coffee and opium are planted as a test. Young coffee plants grow well. As for opium, the amount harvested was too small to draw conclusions' (66103, Quan-Uyen). The military even enticed the locals to try their hand at it:

For two years, great efforts have been made both in Cao Bang and in the sectors, to bring Natives to cultivate special products, which later, under the leadership of European settlers, may also enjoy a great development and can definitely ensure the

region's wealth: coffee, tobacco, opium. But, despite our own example and advice, we only encountered negative results with the Natives, whose laziness and carelessness are ill-suited for the care and time that these cultures require. (66103, Circle of Cao-Bang)

And five years later, in the course of the 1903 survey, the situation had not changed significantly: '[The Méo] do not grow opium, which comes from China' (336, Pa-Kha). However, the officers, now more familiar with the terrain and perhaps with a mind to pressuring highlanders into seizing a business opportunity, made a few more references to the local cultivation of poppies: 'A small number of Nhung villages have a few opium poppy fields, but either for lack of care or because the climate is not favourable to this type of culture, the results are most mediocre' (335, Muong-Khuong). 'We notice in the vicinity of Na Cho Cai a few opium poppy fields' (318, Quan-Ba). And further east: '[The Méo] grow corn, buckwheat, oilseed, vegetables and opium' (315, Dong-Van). Opium was included in marketplace commodity price lists (*mercuriales*). But overall, mention of poppy growing occurred rarely, and mostly with reference to local consumption. In the entire 1903 survey, the only actual description of poppy planting and sap harvesting are four lines devoted to the agriculture of a few Méo and Lolo hamlets in the vicinity of Yen-Minh in Ha-Giang region (307, Yen-Minh).

Trade and Wage Work – or not

In Commander Bonifacy's words: 'Natives merely sell or exchange their surplus harvest and some forest products' (313, Third MT). As captured by another officer: 'The Tho only cares for agriculture' (66103, Tach-Lam). In short, trade plays a minor role in a household's livelihood strategy, ancillary to agriculture, hunting and gathering, and is designed to bring in those necessities not easily found in the uplands. Captain Fesch summarised the relatively uncomplicated mechanisms of trade in the Sectors:

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

At the time of their field inquiries, the occasional exchange of goods and services between locals reported by French officers appeared to be mostly conducted without currency or accounting trail. 'Since the Tho only just cultivates what he needs for his own consumption, the resulting trade is almost zero, and limited instead to bartering' (307, Yen-Minh). Moreover, if the transactions took place outside the immediate vicinity of the posts, they were largely undetected. For these reasons, the only evidence of exchange found in the reports refer to marketplace situations and activities in or around French posts.

Market days were customarily held every five or six days: ‘In these first three locations, markets are held regularly every five days’ (66103, Na-Ri). ‘[Markets] are held every six days’ (66105, Ba-Xat). The French noted that currency had been in use since before the time of the colonial occupation: ‘Trade through bartering is common practice in the region for small transactions; more important affairs (opium) almost always involve cash money’ (66104, Hoang-Thu-Bi). This was particularly the case for transactions with established Chinese traders and, as noted earlier, for important payments such as bride wealth. Generally, farmers practised non-monetised exchange for most daily matters, while reserving currency for exceptional occasions. Silver, as well as Chinese and Vietnamese coins were the customary forms of money, to which the French added in 1885 the Indochinese *Piastre de commerce*.²²

Agricultural wage work—not to be confused with *corvée* work—appears to have occurred rarely, judging from the reports:

Besides these difficulties linked to land clearing which could be very important and serious, [the potential European settler] would be facing a very painful situation: he would lack what is essential to any European who wants to establish a farming operation in these regions. I mean labour. He should forget engaging in sharecropping with the help of the native man. Working only for himself, there is no danger that even with the lure of high wages the native will bother to work for a stranger. It will, therefore, be necessary to bring people from the outside. (66104, Bang-Hanh)

But beyond farming, the establishment of French posts in each Sector—a total of several hundred of them counting the sub-posts—did provide new prospects for the growth of local wage work: roadwork, construction and maintenance of the posts, provisioning, laundry, cooking, personal services and so on. Could that tempt the locals? It turned out that it was not highlanders who came to occupy this labour niche but Kinh from the lowlands who relocated for that purpose:

The Annamites who live in the Sector come from the Delta. Living in the vicinity of our posts they play the role of small itinerant trader from post to post and they willingly take the drudgery of chores in the post near where they are located. (334, Trinh-Thuong)

Similarly: ‘The Annamites live in the headquarter town of the Sector. The men are almost all employed as boys or coolies while their wives are active in petty commerce’ (338, Thai-Nien). Large infrastructure projects like the creation of the Haiphong-Kunming railroad crossing the Fourth Military Territory and other road and bridge construction could have potentially lured local ethnic minority labourers. But yet again, outsiders tended to occupy this niche, mostly unskilled migrants from China (called *coolies* even in French): ‘From the beginning of the railroad work, a large number of Chinese coolies are employed on sites located on the segment of the line passing through the Sector’ (338, Thai-Nien). There was a similar situation regarding labour in plants and workshops:

The local workforce being insufficient, the mining managers are forced to turn to the Chinese.[...] [Chinese] coolies working in factories are the dregs of the border

population, a bunch of thieves and pirates. The majority work as coolies employed in supplying the troops. (308, Nguyen-Binh)

Military wage work options for the willing or the downtrodden were also significant. They included portage and portaging, scouting, guiding and various services for troops stationed throughout the highlands. Some uplanders at least did get employed in these roles:

On the right bank [of the Red River], where there are very few horses, coolies are employed; the Thais and Mans are good porters who load to 30 kilos. Horses are hired for 45¢ per day including the *mafu* [grooms], the porters 15¢ or 20¢ depending on whether or not they are also given rice. (66105, Pho-Lu)

As a rule, such tasks were performed by native militiamen recruited locally who also performed other jobs relating to border security.

A number of inhabitants who we call partisans have been armed by us to contribute to policing the border and the region in general. They have a duty to report any band that seeks to sneak in, to lend the necessary support to the troops to suppress these, and to prevent piracy. (301, Dong Khe)

But overall, among the highland population, little existed in the form of work exchanged for wages. An officer summed up the lack of enthusiasm from locals towards such economic opportunities: 'On these roads, all transport is by small pack horses, as coolies cannot be found because the native hates to do this job' (66105, Muong-Khuong). Reports suggest that local labour could only be mobilised successfully for ad hoc maintenance when village leaders, the *lý trưởng* and their councils of notables, drafted them from within their constituencies for *corvées*.

Closing Thoughts

In spite of all these predicaments, this original material—rarely used after its *précis* (Lunet de Lajonquière's two volumes of 1904 and 1906) was published as a limited edition a century ago—yields a vivid image: of a composite, ancient and multi-layered social constellation in transition towards modernity hesitantly initiated by lowland imperial powers and powerfully catalysed by European colonial occupants. The material suggests genuine, half-hearted or sometimes forged compliance, opportunism and defiance among and between endogenous and exogenous societies, dominant and subjugated groups, regions, valleys, hamlets and households.

Yet, this portrait of economic activity in the highlands at the turn of the twentieth century is far from complete.²³ I did not mean it to be exhaustive. It is offered here as a taster for the promise these archives contain for further research. Given the rarity of other contemporary testimony, such ethnographies hold potential to shed significant new light on a pivotal moment when endogenous forms of government and economies attached themselves to a new world order represented and diffused through colonial occupation. A new order enforced by the strengthened presence of

the state in the highlands, paving the way for future engagement by postcolonial Vietnam.

There is no doubt that ethnography in and by agents of a colonial state, when aiming at peripheral, isolated, border populations, becomes a distinct form of ‘distance demolishing technology’ (Scott 2009). Its aim in the broad colonial plan is to reduce the cultural, but also the political and economic distance between the margins and the core of the nation (Stocking 1991; van Bremen & Shimizu 1999; Middleton 2011). And reduce, even eliminate the ‘friction of terrain’ in a geographical sense, but also what I am tempted to call the friction of culture—vernacular languages, distinct cosmologies, kinship-based power relations and unregulated economic systems that threaten the dominance of the state narrative. As illustrated by this case study, and in rare pre-colonial attempts at performing the ethnography of the margins of Tonkin (Davis 2013), when used as a weapon of normalisation, the ethnography of fringe societies contributes significantly to increasing the legibility of the territory and its population. By the same process, other forms of friction are in turn shaped, linked this time to fresh proximities: increased economic competition; political regulation; cultural homogenisation along the lines of the Nation; and essentialisation of ethnic distinctions.²⁴ All this new friction constitutes the price to pay when becoming fully integrated within the modern state (Scott 1998; Tsing 2005).

As Ann Stoler (2009) warned, pronouncements such as ‘lazy natives’, ‘a native buys a woman’, ‘superstitious beliefs’, ‘sorcerers’, ‘sham’ and ‘lacking’ contained in this archival data display vividly the expected flaws inherent to ethnography produced under a colonial hand (see also Kleinen 1996; Alatas 1977; Des Chene 1999; Pels & Salemink 1999). Undoubtedly, one-off surveys conducted rapidly by inexperienced and virtually non-reflexive external agents, prejudiced by an ideologically tainted mindset and performing within a rigid military machine, illustrate how colonial authors are conditioned by their positions and subjectivities. These officers could only report what they saw, heard or were told, they could only write what was tolerable to their hierarchy, and as a consequence, they simply neglected the rest of highland complexities. Beyond this veil of partiality and incomplete truths, a whole world of concealed or less visible proceedings, activities, dealings and decision-making processes tended to escape their gaze. As a result, these outsiders did not fully comprehend the cultural systems or livelihoods of border populations, with cultural systems too mysterious for them to grasp fully. Should we therefore simply discard such testimony? Certainly not. What we need to do is get to work and decipher it.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- [1] This paper forms part of a series beginning with Michaud (2013), in which I present and analyse an original set of ethnographic archives produced by the French colonial military. In

this particular article, I deliberately favour a descriptive stance and as such, I will only engage briefly in the Conclusion with the fields of (post) colonial studies, issues linked to the production of knowledge from archives or the role of the military in producing colonial ethnographies. I am mindful of the fact that in choosing to refrain from such in-depth analysis, I may contribute to reproducing errors inherent to the practice of colonial ethnography (Pels & Salemink 1999; Stoler 2009). Such further evaluation and more discussion will be undertaken elsewhere in the series of works of which this article forms a part.

- [2] See Davis (2013) on Pham's 1856 'descriptive geography', the *Hưng Hoá Địa Chí* (興化地誌).
- [3] Personal communication with Bradley Davis, November 2013.
- [4] Historians are debating whether the notion of feudalism can apply to social formations outside the European Middle Ages. I use the term here, as Condominas (1976, 39) explained, only to make a useful distinction between societies with internal social differentiation based on ownership and control of power on the one hand (Kinh, Han, some Tai-speaking societies), and the landless peasantry on the other (all the other highland, kinship-based groups).
- [5] These publications and the field surveys on which they were based, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, did not include most of the Black/Đa River (Rivière Noire) catchment in northwestern Tonkin. This omission was due to the fact that since 1889, that area (the Sip Song Chau Tai) had enjoyed a semi-independent political status as the domain of local White Thái rulers. Neither is that area covered in this paper. For a recent and rich historical survey of that region, see the pioneering work of French historian Philippe Le Failler (2014).
- [6] A range of livelihood frameworks have been in use for over fifty years (Scoones 2009). For the purpose of this paper, I borrow from Turner's (2012a) notion of livelihoods. Several common concepts related to assets (capital) and vulnerabilities broadly underlie recent studies. More precisely, in the Southeast Asian uplands, individual and household livelihoods are shaped by 'local and distinct institutions (e.g. local customs regarding access to common property resources, local and national land tenure rules), and by social relations (gender, caste, kinship and so on), as well as by economic opportunities' (Ellis 2000, 6).
- [7] At the time, the Chinese province of Guangdong extended southwest along the coast and reached the Vietnamese border.
- [8] For historical integrity, I write people- and place-names as they are found in archives, with inconsistencies between authors, the occasional dash and capital letters and most of the time without diacritics.
- [9] Throughout this text, I translate quotes from French and reproduce them unedited, which, again, may lead to some variation in the writing of ethnonyms, place names and vernacular terms.
- [10] Archives numbered in the 300s are part of the 1903–1904 MSS.EUR series held at Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient in Paris.
- [11] The ethnonym Tho was attributed by the French to the group known today as the Tày.
- [12] Known today as Giáy.
- [13] Archives numbered in the 66100s are part of the 1897–1898 GGI series held at Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence.
- [14] Today's Mông (Hmong).
- [15] Nùng.
- [16] Dao (Yao).
- [17] In Vietnamese, this term is written *lý trưởng* and generally translates as 'village elder'.
- [18] The dollar sign in archives referring to the French colonial currency, the '*piastre de commerce*'.
- [19] Thái, and Kinh (Việt).
- [20] Incidentally, in the whole of the reports, not once is gold mentioned.
- [21] Clearly, some trade did nevertheless exist, as will be detailed in the section below. What the officer means to say here, though not consciously, is that from his vantage point as a

European observer located in a colonial military outpost, not much trade (that is, monetised exchange) met his eyes, neglecting all the dealings beyond his gaze involving bartering and various other forms of reciprocity.

- [22] See Michaud and Turner (forthcoming) for more detail.
- [23] Not to mention, again, the absence of the Sip Song Chau Tai encompassing the border area within the Đa River catchment (Le Failler 2014).
- [24] That is to say, in Vietnam today, the near-sacred figure of fifty-three ‘minority nationalities’ (các dân tộc thiểu số) each with its primordial characteristics (VME 1997; Salemink 2001; Michaud 2009).

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