PART ONE

SETTING THE SCENE
CHAPTER ONE

MISSIONARY ETHNOGRAPHERS IN AND AROUND TONKIN

We submit that, in order to follow up on Talal Asad’s admonition to study the location of anthropology in the colonial encounter, it is necessary to free the study of colonial ethnographies of disciplinary bias and to treat them sui generis, not in thrall to an academic idea.¹

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is twofold. From the very start of its planning stages it was to introduce an English speaking audience to a particular body of ethnographic literature produced by Catholic missionaries at the time of French Indochina. This body of literature is still largely unknown to non-French speakers—and to a majority of French speaking anthropologists alike. From this initial and relatively modest aim, I also wanted to pursue a complementary, more critical objective, that is to weigh up these ethnographic writings by assessing the intellectual context of their creation and the methods by which they were produced. This objective is important so that we can discuss their potential validity today in the turmoil of ongoing debates regarding ethnography as text.

Over the last few decades, the number of anthropologists examining missionary contributions to ethnography has grown, evident in mounting numbers of publications. In the broader Asian context, these published works take many forms, from James Clifford’s Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World, published in 1982 in which Clifford discussed the contribution the French Protestant missionary made to New Caledonia’s ethnography as well as to anthropology in general, to Albert Schrauwers’ analysis of the work of Dutch pastor Albert C. Kruyt among the To Pamona of Indonesia in his Colonial ‘Reformation’ in the Highlands of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, 1892–1995 published in 2000.

One should also note the many scholarly dissertations, articles and book chapters taking a similar path, an excellent example being Margaret Byrne Swain's “Père Vial and the Gni-p’a. Orientalist Scholarship and the Christian Project” published in 1995.

However, in comparison to the vast majority of these earlier publications, this book takes a distinct stance. It does not concentrate on a particular individual's life and work. Its focus, instead, is at a broader scale, concerning a group of missionaries brought together by chance, geography and time. Will this mean that disparities between such an eclectic assembly of authors and their texts may exceed potential similarities? Possibly, but this does not overly worry me. My point is that these single men—and they were all men—were actors in the same play, the plot of which was the expansion of France's grandeur to the Orient. In the minds of these actors, the playwright was God Himself. Not surprisingly however, in the minds of the French colonial administrators in Indochina, the script was instead in the hands of the conquering Third Republic, dictated by its economic interests and craves for prestige. The primary, and perhaps the most ubiquitous tension underlying the actions and the writings of missionaries in Tonkin, was thus triggered by the differing agendas of the religious and republican institutions. At times in relative harmony with each other, sometimes paying no attention to the other’s actions, and more than occasionally outright conflicting, this marked stress between religious and republican ideals and desires in Tonkin will constitute the backdrop, the trope of this book. We will see the effects rippling down the power hierarchies to influence even the hesitant prose of the humblest messenger of the Lord labouring in His fields.

Yet, merely presenting these early works would hardly be satisfactory as a scholarly undertaking. Discussing and analysing them is another objective of this book. The intellectual context of the production of colonial ethnographies at the turn of the 20th century has to be scrutinised if one hopes to assess these works for what they actually meant, and why they were completed. What is colonial ethnography? Who performed it? In what frame of mind? What methods did the early ‘researchers’ use? How did all these questions materialise in French Indochina? To answer these questions, I have decided to focus on the earliest embodiment ethnographical research took in Indochina, namely, that performed by individuals ingrained in segments of the colonial apparatus (as opposed to research that was later to be conducted by trained ethnographers under the auspices of the École française d'Extrême-
The early ethnographers who will be presented and discussed in this book were either missionaries, administrators or military officers, all belonging to the spearhead of a colonial system in the process of taking over an ancient civilisation and its frontiers.

It has been observed in various contexts of European colonial expansion that explorers, administrators, the military and missionaries constituted, in practical terms, the first Western ethnographers.

In 1953, Meyer Fortes wrote that it is characteristic and important that anthropological studies owe a great deal to enthusiasts from outside the academic world, to officers of the Crown, to missionaries, traders and travellers. In France, Maurice Leenhardt was an important missionary presence among anthropologists, while in Austria and Germany, Father Wilhelm Schmidt and his journal *Anthropos*, started in 1906, made an important impact on behalf of his congregation, the Missionary Society of the Divine Word. Yet, histories of anthropology do not usually consider missionary anthropologists and when they do, their missionary background is thought to be of no importance. The importance of the administrative background is illustrated by the fact that in Britain, Cambridge anthropology owed a lot to the Orientalist and administrator Sir Richard Temple, and that as late as 1953 Meyer Fortes succeeded to a Cambridge professorship which was handed down by two former members of the Indian Colonial Service, T.C. Hodson and J.H. Hutton. Malinowskian functionalism could not have established itself without the support of missionaries like J.H. Oldham or administrators like Lord Lugard. [...] These cases indicate the importance of non-academic influences on the establishment of academic anthropology.2

Two categories in particular, the missionaries and the military officers, probably due to their relatively long residence in contact with local populations, as opposed to the generally shorter visits paid by explorers and colonial administrators, have undoubtedly produced a durable legacy of empirical and methodological approaches to the Other which is still of value today. In many cases, and despite definite biases dictated by the epochs and the ideologies with which these early observers were associated, their legacies are highly valuable as first hand observations of populations, some of which have since disappeared. Not only because of the importance and the relevance of these legacies, but also because they are highly relevant to the French Upper-Tonkin case, it is the publications and correspondence of missionaries that form the bulk of the

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ethnographic works presented and analysed in this book. Hundreds of
documents, indeed thousands of pages, exist and wait to be analysed
while perhaps an even larger number has not yet been made available
to the research community. Nevertheless, enough is obtainable to fully
justify attempting to understand, analyse and interpret it.

While it has often been argued that missionary writing is of disput-
able scientific interest, this literature nonetheless forms a body of direct
observations that should not be shunned, especially in view of the pauc-
ity of ethnographic information available on isolated ethnic groups at
the time of European colonization. I argue that studies of Peninsular
Southeast Asian highland ethnicity today cannot afford to ignore this
rich, though disparate assortment of views from the past.

It is not possible here to review all of the archival material on hand
regarding upland northern Indochina and Yunnan and as a conse-
quence, a selection of texts will be addressed. I have selected these texts
based on four key criteria: their qualitative and quantitative importance,
the competence of their authors, the conditions under which they were
produced, and their value in supplying material for a discussion on
ethnography in the French colonial context. I give particularly promi-
nent authors more space with additional biographical data, providing
details regarding their intellectual formation, a major factor in the
performance of their ethnographic work. For each of these figures, a
major piece of work will receive extra attention.

THE NEW DIALOGUE BETWEEN MISSIONARIES AND ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Are academic anthropologists today ready to approach colonial mission-
ary ethnography with an open mind? Certainly more than they ever
were in the past. Along with a growing number of authors making a
case in favour of acknowledging the contributions of non-academic
ethnographers to anthropology, I am of the opinion that studying the
texts of ‘incidental’ ethnographers such as missionaries is of great
value for the discipline. As Guiart succinctly put it: “There is still, in
missionary archives, a wealth of material waiting to be analysed, if the
anthropologist had been trained to make use of it instead of brushing
it aside as tainted with bigotry.” Pels and Salemink also clearly voice

their support for this option, arguing that “an essential methodological move in the study of the history of anthropology needs to be made: the dialectical one of accounting for the extra-academic and extra-disciplinary influences on the constitution of the discipline”.

4 Studying missionary writings in the context of colonial northern Vietnam constitutes a step in that direction.

Over colonial times, professional anthropologists and missionaries were able to largely ignore one another or keep out of each other’s way for as long as the colonial enterprise provided a logical division between their respective roles. It is a telling symptom that open and frank debates between Western anthropologists and Christian missionaries only took place on a significant scale from the late 1970s onwards, after the colonial era was over. Facing superb indifference, even hostility as shown by a number of British academic anthropologists,5 the missionaries long considered the academic ethnographers as intruders and unconcerned intellectuals whom, they believed, spent just enough time with their subjects to produce a report or a thesis, giving locals little in return. Academics on the other hand, saw in the missionaries incompetent and moralistic hordes focused on normalizing the natives, causing their cultural and, often, material demise.6

Precursors to a dialogue could be found on both sides of the fence, ranging from Rivers in 1920, Smith in 1924, Westermann in 1931, and Junod in 1935, to Nida in 1959 and 1966, Luzbetak in 1961, and Miller in 1970.7 All have indeed questioned the perceptions of anthropologists

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6 On occasions in this book, the word ‘natives’ with inverted commas, sometimes without, will be used in consistency with the colonial terminology. The same applies to ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal’, ‘savages,’ and a few additional terms associated with the colonial era. This should by no means be interpreted as a promotion of those terms.
regarding missionary work and thus have made attempts to breach
the unity of an overall and all-powerful condemnation of missionary
‘ignorance’ and ‘ethnocentrism’ by senior scholars in academia. Such
a dominant anti-clerical front had prevailed to the point of profoundly
negatively influencing the curriculum in universities, as Trouwborst
recalled in the Leiden of the late 1940s.

In the meantime, over the 20th century, without needing in any way
to wait for an elusive seal of approval from academia for their work in
the field, missionaries took the initiative to publish their ethnographic
observations in an array of forms including novels, diaries, children’s
books, religious journals, annual reports, travelogues and articles in
various kinds of magazines, many of them aimed at members of the
public at large. A more formal branch of the missionary world also
officially entered the select field of academic anthropology through the
creation of the academic journal *Anthropos* in 1906. For a century, this
successful journal has promoted the ethnographic work of Christian
missionaries by offering them a serious venue for publication, as well
as a medium that has contributed to sharpening their intellect and
acquainting them with the current debates they could measure their
own reflections against. *Anthropos* has earned a right to sit on university
library shelves next to academic anthropology journals. Elsewhere,
some missionaries have entered the academic field to the point of playing
influential roles within higher education institutions. Frenchman
Maurice Leenhardt, who started his career as a Protestant missionary
in New Caledonia where he spent two decades, was offered upon his
return to France the Marcel Mauss chair at the *École des Hautes Études
en Sciences Sociales*. When Leenhardt died in 1954, that chair was then
passed on to the young Claude Levi-Strauss.

As was just mentioned, the post-colonial rapprochement between
the two dedicated groups of lay and religious modern ethnographic

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Such a statement is necessarily sweeping, only aiming at indicating what was the general state of mind among professional anthropologists of the colonial period. Exceptions, or at least moments of exception, also existed, for instance when Lowie spoke in defence of Father Wilhelm Schmidt, whom he assessed was unfairly criticised. Fittingly, Lowie declared “…let him that is without bias cast the first stone.” Lowie, Robert H. *The History of Ethnological Theory*. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1937, 193.

fieldworkers took place 30 years ago. Following several seminal individual contributions, the landmark was an article published in 1980 by anthropologist Claude Stipe in the academic journal *Current Anthropology*, starting a three-year debate that had just been waiting to happen, an exchange of views that helped, as one commentator put it, “to bring an important issue out of the anthropological closet.” That debate was then quickly followed by substantial works by Clifford in 1982, White-
man and Salamone in 1983, and Abbink in 1985, and the road to a mature discussion was resolutely opened. This involved multiple voices, as was illustrated by the remarkable book *The Ambiguity of Rapprochement. Reflections of Anthropologists on their Relationship with Missionaries*, edited in 1990 by Bonsen, Marks and Miedema, in which authors assessed the legacy of decades of reciprocal suspicion and investigated with intellectual honesty the common grounds where the two sides, vividly aware of their primary differences, could nevertheless safely discuss issues of mutual interest.

Peter Pels wrote in 1990 that a systematic study of the historical relations between missionaries and anthropologists had yet to be produced, and I personally do not know of any having been published since this statement was made over 15 years ago. Such lack is symptomatic. Pels also explained in a concise way why, in his view, anthropologists and missionaries were both professionals ‘on a mission’, although the exact meaning of these words proved to be more complex than expected. Limits between these two universes are more blurred than one would like, with considerable overlap:

During the professionalization of anthropology, anthropologists’ missions have often been directed, not at the mission areas of the Christian

12 Bonsen et al., *The Ambiguity of Rapprochement.*
missionaries, but at the Christian missionaries themselves. In doing so it meant that these anthropologists had to endorse—be it passively—the civilizing mission in which the Christian missionaries participated. 14

One of the unquestionable consequences of the progress made during this recent debate, is that it is now not only possible, but also desirable for anthropologists to go back in time and re-assess the legacy of missionary ethnographers with a fresh eye. This, they must do devoid of emotional rejection and also without the resistance created by a long period of uncomfortable proximity. Academic anthropologists, as a group, have matured and as Petersen wisely put it, it has recently become possible to acknowledge that:

we all rely upon [the missionaries’] documents; we are all familiar with and lament the changes they have had a hand in; and we are all acquainted with one or another of wise and humane men and women who serve in the missions there today. Fools and charlatans are there as well, but most of my colleagues manage to discriminate among them. 15

The recognition of non-professional contributions to institutionalised anthropology has therefore occurred against the will of many, and this resistance has not always been with the best intentions. To a large extent, the professionalization of fieldwork in British anthropology depended on the tactical disparagement of both missionary and administrative ethnographies. 16 Yet, at the same time, we now know that early modern anthropologists like Malinowski succeeded in their seminal fieldwork because of major ground work having already been conducted on location by earlier explorers, traders, administrators, and Christian missionaries. As stated by Stocking,

Anthropology needed the missionaries. The shift from the amateur ethnographer to the professional fieldworker, embodied by people like Franz Boas, A.C. Haddon, W.H.R. Rivers and W.B. Spencer, was not possible without the help of the missionary ethnographers in the field. 17

16 Pels and Salemink. “Introduction.”
Indeed, in his preface to *The Nuer*, E.E. Evans-Pritchard made this connection explicit by thanking:

the staff of the American Mission at Nasser, of the Congregation of Verona at Yoahnyang, and the Church Missionary Society at Ler, [with] particular acknowledgement to the staff of the American Mission, […] who unreservedly placed their home, their time, and their knowledge at my disposal.18

Acknowledging this debt may seem sensible and relatively harmless to younger generations of anthropologists today. But it was far from obvious early in the 20th century. Even when administrators or missionaries happened to also be trained ethnographers, the professional anthropologists of the time were reluctant to acknowledge their work, let alone give them credit.

Colonial missionary ethnography was, for the most part, conducted by non-specialists for whom this activity was accidental in the course of their apostolic mission. In this sense, I call them ‘incidental ethnographers.’ The preference I give here to the word ‘incidental’ instead of the more neutral equivalent ‘accidental,’ may appear to suggest that such ethnography could be of a lesser value. This is not the case. In this context of course, ‘incidental’ between inverted commas is meant as an irony pointing at the contempt institutionalized anthropology has held for a long time for non-professional ethnographers and their texts.

To make sense of their writing, we need to consider these ‘incidental’ ethnographers and their work individually, as well as their historical, cultural, and political circumstances. Throughout colonial times, a few dozen French Catholic missionaries were first-hand witnesses and gatherers of information regarding the highland populations living beyond the Red River19 delta in what constitutes today northern Vietnam, northeastern Laos, and the south of Yunnan province in China. Yet, while a handful of published missionary texts from these individuals were later found to be of use to academic anthropologists, linguists,
and historians, little is known of the actual circumstances of their production in the field. Clerical prose produced within the missionary apparatus humbly collects dust in religious archives; most pieces that were published in missionary journals have gone largely unnoticed, while rather modest attention has been paid to a few essays that appeared in more established media. In this book, I want to offer a glimpse into some of this neglected ethnographic literature.

But, one might ask, with a variety of French colonial authors having left ethnographical texts on the populations dwelling in the highlands of Tonkin, why should the missionaries be of singular interest? The answer is: Because they were observers at the forefront meeting with and producing texts on the ‘savage’ Other. And these representatives of Europe and Christianity were active in the colonies on a continuous basis for far longer than any other category of Western observers.

Case studies by authors such as Pels and Foster have emphasized that missionary texts actually constitute a specific form of ethnography, undertaken in unique conditions rarely matched by current anthropologists, most strikingly with regards to the embeddedness of the outside observer in the host society. This new relativism has contributed to toning down, even to leaving behind, the all-pervasive and one-sided representation of the near-wicked clergymen among the ‘natives.’ To its credit, such hostility focused on the very real contradictions inherent to missionary work in the colonial setting, and on the cultural damages caused to host societies by over-zealous missionary practice and ideology. Yet at the same time, such dismissals also sadly deleted any valuable contributions these early observers could have made, and this is precisely what is being corrected to a degree in this book.20

Curiously, during colonial times, French academic anthropologists remained somewhat on the margins of this historical dismissal of missionaries, being noticeably less vocal than their British colleagues about the vices of missionary work in the field. This low-key attitude was linked to a series of factors. In addition to the fact that the practice of ethnography remained separated from the discipline of ethnology for longer than elsewhere, a point to which we will return, one dominant

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factor was that French missionaries in the colonies were usually unmarried Catholic priests. In French colonial history, this allowed many Catholic missionaries to play a long-term spearhead role in the colonial venture. They took roots in remote settings for decades on end, setting themselves up in a prime position for gathering intelligence on little accessible locations, infiltrating coveted countries and societies, learning the natives’ customs and languages and diffusing them afterwards, and acting as cultural as well as political interpreters, often brokers of the colonial take-over. As a consequence, French academics have acknowledged earlier and more freely than their British and American colleagues the contributions that missionary work and texts have made to anthropology. Important administrative successes and also great ethnographic works owe a debt to the use of archives collected by generations of missionaries. In the next chapter, I will expand on the reasons for this difference in the appreciation of their work, which lie in the specifics of the French Catholic missionary institution. In Indochina, in their role as actors in a multi-layered historical drama, French Catholic missionaries were bound together by a very unique mindset instigated by the combined ideological forces of their era—the Third Republic in France, and missionary politics—and religious traditions and institutions—here chiefly those of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris. While searching for traces of this ideological imprint and in order to read between the lines of written archives, I will at different stages detail the particularities of each author, including their intellectual genealogy, and combine such individual histories with an understanding of what was occurring in the local surrounds. I do this to be able to answer the important questions: who? when? how? and, crucially, why?

21 To disentangle the sometimes byzantine debates associated with the exact definitions of the terms ‘Catholic’ and ‘Roman Catholic’, I take in this book a conciliatory approach by which both terms will be used as alternative names for the entire Christian Church governed by the Pope. The word ‘Catholic’ alone—in contrast with ‘Roman Catholic’ used in the British/US tradition, which is needed there to distinguish the English Catholic and Anglican traditions—is used in harmony with the French autonym: l’Église catholique de France, the Catholic Church in France.


CHAPTER ONE

WHY FRENCH UPPER-TONKIN AND YUNNAN?

One could argue without encountering much resistance that northern Vietnam, or colonial Tonkin, shared many similarities with other regions of the world colonized by Catholic conquerors such as Africa, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines before the 1890s, and French North America prior to the British conquest. Indeed, a similar book could be written on any of these locations. The choice of Tonkin is due to five key reasons. First, it is triggered by my personal interest and experience in that region and its populations—another illustration, if ever it was necessary, of the inherent subjectivity of anthropological inquiry. But clearly, this familiarity argument alone does not suffice to make this place a suitable scene for a study such as the one conducted in this book. There are also tangible features that make colonial Tonkin, and particularly Tonkin’s uplands, and nearby southeast Yunnan especially suitable for this inquiry into Catholic missionaries and their ethnographic legacy. Allow me to review them briefly.

The significant Catholic presence in Tonkin, like the French colonial presence as a whole, was neatly circumscribed in time. Prior to the 1880s, the sheer difficulty in accessing the northern high region meant that the first French testimony on the northern mountain regions and their inhabitants had yet to be produced, with the exception of a handful of explorers such as Jean Dupuis, who limited their observations to river valleys. Leaving aside the events in 1873 when Francis Garnier briefly held Hanoi and its environs, the French presence in Tonkin spanned from the start of the formal military conquest in 1883 to the Geneva agreements of 1954. In the mountainous section of the new Tonkin protectorate, the time period of missionary activity was even shorter. This began in 1891 with the establishment of a military administration along the Chinese border and lasted until the start of the First Indochina War in 1946, which marked the retreat to Hanoi of most of the missionaries attached to the uplands. Within this timeframe, by the early 1930s, the most serious ethnographical publications on the northern highlanders had appeared, that is, after François-Marie Savina’s *Histoire des Miao* and Maurice Abadie’s *Les races du Haut-Tonkin de Phong Tho à Lang-Son* were published in the mid-1920s. From that moment to the official launch of the First Indochina War, security issues had largely subsided in the upper reaches of Tonkin, the *pax gallica* had been firmly installed on the China frontier, and everyday administration of populations had become a routine actively geared towards the fullest
possible exploitation of economic resources—*mise en valeur*, as the French euphemistically called this operation. Therefore, all that was published on the uplands and its inhabitants after the 1930s essentially repeated earlier publications, with the notable exception of infantry officer Henri Roux’s *Quelques populations du Nord Indochinois*\(^24\) much cited in English mainly because it was published in 1954 at the start of the American involvement in Indochina. The book was in fact based on its author’s memories and field notes from investigations conducted in the 1920s while he commanded the 4th and the 5th Military Territories.

Nevertheless, between the 1880s and the 1930s, an impressive amount of ethnographic observations, linguistic surveys, and analyses were produced by independent, administrative, military, and missionary observers—the third key reason as to why this book focuses upon them. This sheer volume of work in itself arguably places this particular region among the most intensely researched in terms of the general ethnography of ‘tribal peoples’ of the whole French colonial empire. In particular, the military officers posted in the Tonkinese high region were prolific authors, leaving in their wake major ethnographic inquiries rivalling the missionaries’ contribution. A fair number got published, such as, and in addition to Abadie and Roux just mentioned, Émile Lunet de Lajonquièrè’s two famous versions of the same research, *Ethnographie des territoires militaires* in 1904 and *Ethnographie du Tonkin septentrional* in 1906, Émile Diguét’s *Les Montagnards du Tonkin* published in 1908, and Auguste Bonifacy’s dozens of articles released between 1902 and 1930.\(^{25}\) A great many such reports also remain in archives and thus, have never made it into the public eye. It is not possible here to study these military texts, as that would require another book entirely. Yet, their contribution will be felt in several ways here, sometimes simply because missionary authors had a chance to read these accounts prior to writing their own observations, at other times because their paths crossed, some missionaries having congregated with officers during their postings in the highlands and having had the opportunity to discuss their thoughts.


The fourth important reason why upper Tonkin and its immediate periphery constitute a fertile field of inquiry for our purpose relates to the Vatican’s Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the Roman arm responsible for actively spreading the Catholic faith throughout the world. This reason dovetails more precisely with the Vatican’s strategy in East Asia of assigning only one missionary society to work within the limits of a given vicariate—the see of a Vicar Apostolic, equivalent to a diocese. This constituted, so to speak, an exclusive licence to convert within that particular territory.26 This exclusivity, in turn, lead to a homogeny among the priests sent to harvest souls with regards to language, culture, ideology, and intellectual preparation. Thus, in the largest part of Tonkin’s highlands, one single Catholic missionary congregation was granted the right to proselytise, the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP), the Paris Society of Foreign Missions. The only exceptions were the provinces and Military Territories east of the Clear River and the lower Red River that were part of different vicariates assigned to Spanish missions by Rome in the late 17th century. Conveniently for us, Yunnan and northern Laos were also organised in formal vicariates attended by MEP missionaries. A welcome consequence of this homogeny today is that while devoting most of our attention to the Upper Tonkin vicariate case, political borders will not stop us from considering the texts of neighbouring missionaries in other MEP vicariates when appropriate. For instance, I argue that it is justifiable to include here the work of, among others, Paul Vial in southern Yunnan and Antoine Bourlet in eastern Laos, because their institutional background, their relationships to the local populations, their administrative circumstances, their conception of their ministries, and their ethnographic writings are very much comparable.

Fifthly and finally, Tonkin’s highlands are again on the international agenda of anthropological research thanks to the recent political liberalization in Vietnam, Laos and China. There may never again be another opportunity like this one, when a large concentration of minority peoples—millions of them—speaking dozens of distinct

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26 Following a strategy made necessary after many historical setbacks throughout the world, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome (often called the Propaganda Office) nominated bishops abroad as vicars apostolic, heading new missionary territories where no formal ecclesiastical organisation had been erected before and where local authorities were reluctant to let such an installation occur. These ‘floating’ bishops held symbolic titles in partibus, which bore the names of ancient vicariates (such as Mauricastr) that had been abandoned or were in places no longer Christian.
languages, is suddenly available to be observed, studied, and understood better by outsiders. This clearly justifies the current high level of ethnological interest in the Mainland Southeast Asian massif and its populations.27

 Structure of the Book

The seemingly eclectic structure I chose to give this book calls for an explanation. The volume is divided into four parts with nine chapters in total and the development of the argument does not follow a linear path. The current chapter sets the scene by asking questions about the logic of the study and the rationale of the topics addressed in the next chapters. Chapter 2 completes this introduction by concisely presenting the populations in northern Vietnam who were subject to missionary ethnography, with a portrait of their situation today. The circumstances on the Chinese side of the border have not been included as they would have required a significant supplement. For our purpose here, we can argue that southeast Yunnan and southwest Guizhou, where some of the ethnographers analysed in Chapters 7 and 8 were posted, offer a general situation comparable to that in northern Vietnam in terms of ethnicity and the history of Catholic missions.

The two chapters forming Part II—Colonial Ethnography and the French Heritage, paint a historical background to the development of ethnography as conceptualised and practised in France. Thus, in Chapter 3, I build a foundation for a comparative evaluation of the missionary ethnographic production from northern upland Indochina. The early experience of French Catholic missionary ethnography performed during France’s expansion in Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries is used to establish that point of comparison. Chapter 4, then, summarises the particulars of the formation and life of the French Catholic missionary in the late 19th century and contributes to explain why, in the reflection on individual missionaries’ text to ensue in Part IV, biographical information on each author is needed.

Part III—Upper Tonkin, takes us to the field in the highlands of colonial northern Vietnam. In Chapter 5 are first surveyed the ethnographic texts of religious and secular authors who were active in

that region before the establishment of the Upper Tonkin vicariate in 1895. The religious texts are in direct relation with our object; secular authors, however, are also important because they generated a wealth of information available to those who walked in their footsteps. Entirely devoted to the creation, life, and decline of the Upper Tonkin Vicariate over its fifty years of existence, Chapter 6 sets the political stage on which missionary ethnographers posted among the highland minorities performed.

Part IV—MISSIONARY AUTHORS AND THEIR TEXTS is a critical presentation of ethnographic texts produced by variously talented missionary authors working in the southern portion of the Southeast Asian Massif. Following a short biographical introduction for each author, their main works are presented and discussed. One of these, a monograph, is contemplated in more details from the point of view of its ethnographic context. Thus, Part IV is divided in two. Chapter 7 deals with ‘minor’ authors who came on the scene early and illustrates the most widespread type of missionary writing on the ‘natives.’ In Chapter 8, three more gifted and prolific authors are paid special attention: Alfred Liétard and Paul Vial, both writing from Yunnan, and François-Marie Savina, in the Upper Tonkin vicariate, arguably the most prolific author the Missions Étrangères de Paris ever dispatched to northern Vietnam. Accordingly, he is apportioned the lion’s share of Chapter 8. A romantic, perplexing author, Savina was a phenomenal ethnographer.

In Chapter 9, the conclusion, I discuss the ambivalent intellectual relations missionary ethnographers in southern portion of the Mainland Southeast Asian massif developed with each other and with secular scholars as well as colonists. I attempt a characterization of their prose based on their intention as author, and the chapter brings the book to a close with a discussion of the favourable and adverse conditions which determined their actions.