CHAPTER FOUR

FOCUSBING UPON THE CATHOLIC COLONIAL MISSIONARY TOWARDS THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

The aim of this chapter is to examine the formation and education of French Catholic missionaries, the specific group of ‘incidental’ ethnographers that form the focal point of this book. To practice his trade, the ethnographer’s main tool is his/her own personality combined with intellectual equipment. Subjectivity thus runs high in the early practice of describing the exotic Other—as indeed one can argue it still does today. In any case, for the missionaries considered here, faith, the institution of the Church, and loyalty to the motherland combined to produce a signature type of agency which we now examine.

To begin, I first turn to describe the circumstances of the Catholic missionary and then consider what made him distinct from other missionaries belonging to non-Catholic Christian denominations. I then examine the particular case of missionary education within the French Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, the institutional home of our religious ethnographers. Finally, I explain how biographical information on these authors becomes necessary to accurately assess their texts.

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an early advocate of the benefits—for Europe that is—of embracing human diversity rather than trying to eradicate it. Rousseau suggested that studying human variety was a most important and necessary task. This task, however, as he wrote in 1762, was subject to methodological problems linked to what would later come to be known as ethnocentrism.

For three or four hundred years inhabitants of Europe are flooding other parts of the world and incessantly publish new travel accounts and diaries. I'm persuaded that all we know about Man is in fact only about Europeans. People may come and go but it appears that philosophy cannot travel, thus the philosophy of one people is not appropriate for another people. The cause for this is manifest, at least regarding far away countries: there is not much more than four categories of men who endeavour to travel to distant lands; these are sailors, traders, soldiers and missionaries; one cannot expect the first three classes to produce good observers, while as far as the fourth goes, busy with the sublime vocation that calls them,
and supposing they would not be subject to prejudices like the others, one has to believe that they would not readily set on their research motivated purely by curiosity, which would detract them from the more important work they are destined to.¹

Rousseau thus pointed to one of the most important problems linked to the observation of the Other: the observer’s lack of adequate preparation. As a rule, missionaries sent to the colonies were not trained to conduct ethnography. In French Indochina, in the second half of the 19th century, these missionary agents still predated by more than half a century the popular availability in France of the specific formation on how to perform ethnography—which only occurred after the 1920s.² Not only that, but these churchmen were not even exposed to the most common intellectual notions and assumptions that academics of their time shared; quite the opposite, they were often actively sheltered from them. Administratively as much as ideologically, the missionaries were embedded in, and dependent on, highly hierarchical institutions that had the first and last words on their work, their whereabouts, and some could argue, their mindsets.

If we give the term ‘ethnography’ the broad definition of the carrying out of systematic observations of human social behaviour in situ, and if we accept that an ethnographer is a person conducting such observations, then the missionaries within the colony of Indochina were definitely ethnographers, at least for a portion of their time. Self-awareness and reflexivity, two elemental virtues of modern academic ethnography, were extremely limited among colonial missionary ethnographers; in their particular context, it needed not be any greater. Actually, these men were not even apprentice ethnographers as their intention was not to learn the trade of the ethnographer. They also cannot be branded amateur ethnographers as again, their studies were not performed out of curiosity but served instrumental purposes, a sort of digging for facts geared to highly specific needs. Then, if we were to adopt the academic viewpoint that sees the formalisation of ethnography into its ultimate form—academic ethnography—as a progression on a continuum going from simplicity to complexity, we could stretch a

concept proposed by Leclerc and label these agents pre-ethnographers. However, using such a notion would mean that we implicitly accept the principle that academically-informed ethnography is of higher value than its non-academic forms, precisely the perception that I am careful not to promote in this book.

As introduced in Chapter 1, I like to use the idea of ‘incidental’ ethnography instead. By avoiding applying a label relative to an intellectual evolution through time, this notion is consistent with the suggestion that all forms of ethnography have merits in their specific contexts, without respect to the professionalisation of this activity. It also conveys the sense of these observers, otherwise busy with their chief duties, being accidentally dragged into this activity. A call of duty so to speak, to which they responded with a high degree of variation in their levels of commitment, competence, and precision. Clearly, this variation calls for an individualised consideration of ‘incidental’ ethnographers and their work in situ. Therefore, as a step in that direction, let us examine the background and the preparation of this very particular category of ‘incidental’ ethnographers that we are interested in, the Catholic missionary.

**The Catholic Missionary**

In comparison with the Catholic missionary universe, understanding the mind set of other colonial actors-cum-ethnographers requires less explanation since those observers and their world are somewhat more evident. They have been studied for longer, particularly the categories of colonial explorers and state representatives, including the military.
In addition to being a complex universe in itself, the specificities of the Catholic Church regarding the formation of the missionary and his actions in the field demands some explanation.

Contrary to Protestant ministers or pastors of various denominations for whom the separation from the larger body of the Catholic Church at the Reformation entailed drastic changes in the ways and lives of the working members of the Church, Catholic friars, deacons, priests, and bishops from continental Europe operating in the colonies were invariably celibate and male. Along with other particularities that will be addressed in the next pages, this fact has far reaching implications when studying the contributions of these men to ethnography. We will start here by considering the distinctiveness of Catholic missionary preparation, context, and work as a preliminary step to assessing the influence these idiosyncrasies may have had on their texts. To keep this expose within reasonable limits, it is specifically the late 19th century French Catholic traditions that will be addressed, which bore many similarities with other Western European Catholic colonial traditions such as in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and to an extent, the Netherlands and England.

First, we turn our attention to the formation years. The education of a Catholic missionary constituted a fundamental stage in his development, one that would determine his social character and provide him with an intellectual foundation. In the French Catholic tradition, young boys seen by their parents or relatives as prospective religious recruits were sent to provincial petits séminaires, minor seminaries, also called preparatory seminaries, around the age of 12. The preferred candidate was usually born into a rural family and showed dispositions for introspection and studies, and perhaps not much inclination for agricultural work. More often than not, however, he was merely the first-born son in the house. In addition to the not insignificant benefit of having one less child to feed, peasant parents would also agree to this course of action because they believed that the whole family would gain merit from such sacrifice. The parents would also ensure one of...
their children would have a more secure future than what rural life, with all its uncertainties, could offer.

During the first few years of general education in the minor seminary, some of the adolescents would be sent back home for lack of the required temperament and qualities; some would simply quit due to an incapacity to adapt to religious life. Others would elect to stay with the congregation for the long term, completing their studies and devoting their life to simpler matters like providing primary education to pupils or the material maintenance of the seminary and the congregation; these were the frères (friars), who were not ordained priests, and did not normally go on missions. And, there were others, young seminarists contemplating the higher state of priesthood or even missionary life, who would be sent to a grand séminaire, a major seminary, also known as a theological seminary, for further studies, with one major seminary usually operating in every diocese. There, for four more years, the novice would complete his education and prepare for a life fully dedicated to apostolic work, either at home or elsewhere, since at this stage, whether the candidate would eventually be a parish priest or become a missionary abroad was not yet decided. General formation was still the main item on the educational agenda. For example, in the late-19th century, the curriculum at the major seminary of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, on the corner of Rue du Bac and Rue de Babylone, blended various elements reflecting the union between Catholic religious tradition and French Republican values. Studies included arithmetic, antique philosophy, antique languages such as Latin and Greek, theology, Christian philosophy and moral doctrine. These studies were accompanied daily by four or five collective prayers and a mass, as well as collective meals and moments of solitary contemplation. Learning the rites and the history of the congregation and participating in its spiritual and material life were also required. In lesser as well as in major seminaries, topics that were not approved of by the almighty Vatican censors were carefully kept out of the curriculum. All written sources the students had permission to lay their eyes on were carefully screened, and the prospects for a particularly curious candidate to expand his knowledge on such topics as non-religious travel writing, Darwinism, or the ethnography of the Savages, were tantamount to nil—at least within the walls of the seminary.

In such seminaries, direct or indirect contact with the secular world was restricted and during all his years of training, the seminarist would rarely see even his family. Brief and most often yearly visits would be
allowed for close family members in the seminary’s parlour, while leaving the compound altogether would only be permitted for specific duties or for attending important family events such as weddings and funerals. On the whole, the young priest in the making was confined within the physical and intellectual ramparts of his seminary.

Diocesan major seminaries varied in importance, shape, atmosphere and tradition not only between religious denominations—such as Ordre Dominicain (Ordre des Prêcheurs, OP), Oblat de Marie-Immaculée (OMI) and Congrégation du Très-Saint Rédempteur (CSsR), present in other parts of French Indochina—but as well within one given denomination. For instance, larger establishments located in prominent cities would offer more opportunities for socialising than smaller ones in the countryside, not only because of the former’s proximity to population centres but also because these would be the preferred choices for wealthy families to send a child of their own. This selection process brought additional depth to in-house discussions and debates among young novices who also had more numerous opportunities to glimpse into the lay world while, for instance, accompanying a senior colleague ‘into the world’ to perform some logistical or religious duty.

Upon graduating from the grand séminaire, which most of the times meant that the candidate had just been ordained to priesthood, which happened towards the end of his training, the question of his final destination was raised. The young man was asked to choose his path. Although recruits may have voiced their preference much earlier and made it known to all, it was at this point that they could officially opt for missionary life. If not educated in a seminary specifically dedicated to missionary work (in which case they were now ready to leave on their assignment), the young priests could ask to be sent to such a place. These seminaries, where the young men would reside generally not exceeding one year, were suppliers of Catholic missionaries to the colonies. Among these providers stood the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP). Being entirely devoted to missionary work abroad, not only did it accept fully formed priests wanting to become active in its missionary network, it also was a training ground for younger candidates on their way to priesthood. In the cases when adolescents graduating from minor seminaries showed an early determination to enter missionary life, the MEP would operate as a major seminary, hosting such pupils for the full four-year formation leading to priesthood. These students were then included in the larger crowd of priests-cum-missionary candidates coming to the MEP from all over the country. Together,
these students were given a one-year preparation devoted to learning about the precepts and history of the MEP and the development of its overseas missionary activities since the 17th century. Then they were sent away on their mission. It is important to note that even at this late stage in their formation, only weeks away from actually boarding the ship that would take them away, the missionaries-in-the-making were still unaware of their exact destination and thus, they could not undertake any specific historical, cultural, or language studies while still in France.

Why, one is tempted to ask in today’s fast moving world, would a young priest from late 19th century France, coming most often from the countryside and unexposed to the larger world, accept a one-way ticket to an uncertain future far from home, and ignore safer and more comfortable options like priesthood in a homeland parish, teaching in a seminary, or perhaps staying at the MEP headquarters to take up some administrative task? This resolve and dedication of a young missionary may seem hard to grasp, it may even appear dramatically naive. At the time however, it went without saying.

First, there was the very nature of the missionary societies. Some of them, like the MEP, had no other raison d’être than to produce missionaries. The more priests that the society sent abroad, the more prestige it gained, and the more donations it received from devotees to support its activities. The atmosphere within the missionary seminaries was thus conducive to seminarists wishing to reach this sublime objective of being sent abroad and spread the Word of God to the Pagans. Social origin was another decisive factor. Most of the candidates came from humble social backgrounds where the traditional notions of sacrifice to God, family, and the Nation were widely accepted values. In contrast, the wealthy families of candidates from higher social origins were more likely to ensure that their heir steered safely away from physical danger and remained closer to home. But beyond such objective factors, for the hardcore candidates of missionary life, total dedication to the simple destiny of ‘labourer of God’ in a foreign and hostile country was above all the surest way to make His Kingdom come and to press forward towards sanctity.

The braver ones among the young candidates were also fuelled by an irrepressible desire to follow the brothers of yesteryears whose names and memory were solemnly revered in the missionary community. Indeed, there was a regiment of sanctified predecessors, each of whom were ostentatiously displayed in grand pictures hung high on
every available wall of the seminary, in sculptures set up on pedestals in every chapel, garden and cloister, in engravings adorning missals, or represented in pious images kept close to one’s heart or on a bedside table. Some were depicted in the blissful presence of God, others in the gruesome agony of martyrdom, on their way to sitting on the right of Christ, the first among martyrs. Letters sent by French missionaries from various colonial locations regularly referred to the glorious and much enviable opportunity for martyrdom that could be looming on the horizon. Although a degree of apprehension was certainly a common occurrence among missionaries, the possibility of dying in the most atrocious circumstances while devoting body and soul to advancing God’s project was generally not dreaded, instead it offered a path for the ‘true’ missionary to accelerate his pace towards an enviable fate in Paradise. Those who had been granted the ‘joy’ of becoming martyrs were elevated back home to the pinnacle by their community; their lives were cited and studied as models, the circumstances of their violent death told again and again.

In 1842 at the MEP headquarters in Paris, this serene form of fascination with death led to the establishment of a permanent exhibition in a salle des martyrs, still open today, a room where were put on display various artefacts that pertained to those MEP members who died brutally. This was orchestrated so that future generations of recruits could be enlightened by the contemplation of graphic representations of their elders’ torment and touch objects that belonged to them. In the 19th century, with the anti-Christian religious movements in Vietnam reaching their peak, dozens of French missionaries and scores of Vietnamese converts and proselytes were put to death by Vietnamese rulers. To deter the population from following the bad example of their ‘deviant’ brothers and sisters, the execution of a foreign priest in particular had to be public, exemplary, and violent. However, as gruesome as these demonstrations were, they often backfired. Paintings of the capital punishments were made by eye-witnesses and accounts were written. These were then copied and secretly circulated among

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5 Thus for instance, Jean de Brébeuf whom we’ve met in Chapter 3, was beatified in 1930 by Pious XI and appears today as one of only two historical characters worthy of representing his town of origin on the communal website of Condé-sur-Vire, Normandy (http://www.condesur-vire.com). His short biography explicitly states that he died a martyr.

converts. The martyrs became the objects of special reverence among their flock as their example was spun into a source of emulation. Meanwhile in Paris, the individual displays in the salle des martyrs grew accordingly in number and importance. By the end of the 19th century, they had reached dramatic proportions that impacted profoundly on the psyche of the seminarists preparing for their departure. Faced with such forceful glorification of the martyrs, and still remote from the sensorial displeasure of such a miserable end, the earnest would-be missionaries were understandably tempted to follow in these bloody, yet inspirational footsteps.

The choice of apostolic destination for each new missionary generally depended on the Society’s commitments at that moment, on the financial and political support from benefactors, and obviously, on the current colonial politics. As far as the religious establishment was concerned, exactly how many neophytes would be sent to one particular colonial vicariate in any given year was determined by the number of new recruits available combined with the requests for help received from bishops in their overseas missions. A few weeks before their departure, which usually occurred in summertime, all the new priests would solemnly gather in the seminary’s common room and hear from the assembly of directors what was in store for each of them, their individual name and assignment being publicly called from a role. According to accounts left by recruits, this is when their emotions of expectancy and excitement were at an all time high.7

About to leave their homeland permanently, the young men bade farewell to their families and asked for their blessing in the face of the hardships awaiting them. Unlike Protestant missionaries who would occasionally go back home on furlough and were entitled to contemplate retirement in the homeland, Roman Catholic missionaries were all conditioned and geared to spending the rest of their life abroad without the prospect of ever returning home.8 In hometowns where the young priests were allowed to visit their family one last time, farewells were, accordingly, a mixed bag of bouts of elation and heartbreaking moments.

8 In the case of the MEP, such comfort as occasional visits to France would only be introduced in 1922 (Guennou, Jean. Missions étrangères de Paris. Paris: Fayard, 1986).
Continuing to consider the objective and ideological conditions of the French Catholic missionary's work on assignment in colonial Tonkin, and particularly in highland Tonkin, we reach the important step of his insertion into, and adaptation to, a new setting where his personality and his training will be turned into praxis in the mould of a physical and cultural confrontation with the host society and the 'pagan' Other.

Initially stationed at the vicariate's headquarters, one of the first tasks for the missionary was to learn spoken and written Vietnamese, the dominant vernacular language. For West and then Upper Tonkin, these headquarters were located south of the capital in Keso prior to 1885, or, between 1885 and 1895 in the MEP Hanoi enclave and then, after 1895, at the Upper Tonkin vicariate headquarters proper in Hung Hoa. Concurrently, the newcomer's participation in simple missionary work nearby in the company of older colleagues contributed to his becoming acquainted with the local customs while facilitating his acclimatization to the tropical environment. After a time period that varied according to local conditions, lasting roughly one year, the apprentice was then ready to be dispatched to his first formal apostolic assignment. Depending on his personality, keenness, linguistic proficiency, and talent, his Bishop had a choice between several locations requesting help and requiring varying degrees of survival skills and political finesse. Commonly, a newcomer would first be assigned to a well established lowland mission outpost among the Kinh where he would 'learn the ropes' in the company of more seasoned colleagues. Later, the capable ones among this young crowd could be reassigned to more demanding tasks, such as opening a new mission in the uncharted uplands. In this case, a clear connection existed between the need for this particular apostolic assignment and the colonial military agenda of winning territories and controlling populations, as Bishop Puginier's agency will aptly illustrate in Chapter 6. For the colonial authorities in Hanoi as much as for the religious ones, a crucial task of the despatched missionary was to be the eyes and ears of the colonial structure among the natives.

In terms of daily affairs and accountability, the priests in each local mission were under the direct responsibility of a senior colleague in charge of that particular mission, who would in turn report to the Bishop in charge of the vicariate. Bishops chosen by the MEP Board of Directors in Paris and commissioned directly by the Pope were given substantial authority, with political imperatives as well as moral,
financial, and managerial ones.\footnote{Formerly, in the 17th and 18th centuries, bishops were commonly appointed from the outside, often by the King. Many had aristocratic origins, strong political backing, and solid patronage from one or several wealthy benefactors. Far from the homeland and the eyes of their directors, their political power and freedom to manoeuvre was important, and the material benefits substantial. In pre-colonial Vietnam, Jesuit Vicar apostolic Pigneau de Behaine became a trusted counsellor at the court of Nguyễn and brought decisive support to the future emperor Gia Long by taking his case to Louis XVI in 1787 [Hall, D.G.E. A History of South-East Asia. New York: St-Martin's Press, 4th edition, pp. 449–54, 1981]. Jesuit François de Montmorency de Laval, an early MEP member and the first bishop of Canada in the late 17th century, converted enormous surfaces of forest granted to him by the colony’s Governor, into farmland for the benefit of his congregation. With money given to him by his aristocratic supporters in France, he also built a hospital and a seminary. He was a de facto member of the Sovereign Council and as such, part of all political decisions regarding the conduct of the colony’s affairs. In the 19th century however, a democratisation of promotion from within missionary congregations lead to bishops being recruited from the ranks and files more often, which was the case in Tonkin in the late 19th century.} Lower in the religious hierarchy, the simple missionary sent to outposts in the highlands had to nurture more humble aspirations. Often the only non-military European present in a vast territory apart from the occasional trader or custom officer, he would tend to be attached to French troops in a regional town. At other times, beyond the Red River delta’s lowlands, he might be sent to a more remote location to live among the natives. There, his life as an outsider in a drastically different culture was a solitary one in spite of the few Vietnamese aids he could take with him on his assignment. Mastering Vietnamese and, in many cases, learning a regional vernacular language was a crucial requirement if he was to be able to communicate and hope to survive. In upper Tonkin, vernacular languages differed drastically from the Vietnamese they had learned in the lowlands. In these uplands, as in Huronia two centuries earlier, missionaries had no other choice but to give first priority to the linguistic chore. Since some among them were only sporadically in contact with France’s colonial representatives, they had to ‘make it’ in the company of their hosts. For that purpose alone, it was imperative that isolated missionaries mould themselves to the local ways of life.

For the missionary in the field, writing his observations on his hosts, at times actively seeking information in connection with a matter of specific interest that he was asked to keep an eye on for the colonial apparatus, and successfully securing letters back to the vicariate’s see, was a mission in itself. These reports were to be performed with various
degrees of regularity depending on the magnitude of the events reported and the strategic importance of the population he was attached to. On the other hand, besides the usual task of converting the natives, the missionary was also expected to convey messages to his hosts from the colonial authorities and encourage compliance with the laws and decrees—taxation, military draft, implementation of specific crops, and so on. In addition, once a year, the MEP missionary was also expected to produce a chronicle of life in his mission and submit it to his superiors. The Episcopal authorities would then draw out from this raw material whatever was of a political nature or could be useful in the management of the colony, and submit the results to the civil and military colonial authorities. Then, in a process on which we will expand in the remainder of this book and that was comparable to the Jesuit Relations described in Chapter 3, the rest of the chronicle’s content was edited and blended with those from other missionaries in the same vicariate, and published in the form of yearly comptes-rendus (accounts or reports). As we will see in this book, more prolific authors could also publish individual articles in missionary journals, while a select few went on to publish scholarly pieces, which were most often also screened and approved by their superiors.

With ongoing war, conquest, resistance, rebellions, and spying on each other inevitably tainting the relationship between natives and outsiders in colonial Indochina, it is easy to realize that most native groups did not like always having a European observer so close to home all year long, let alone one who could understand their language and report on their private conversations. As such, the hosts were exposed more than they wanted to the outsider’s gaze without being able to prevent sensitive information from leaking out. Most native hosts knew perfectly well what their guests were doing, but assessed the risk was still worth taking. Many saw the political benefits stemming from having a resident representative of the colonial state at hand. Lineage-based groups in particular, without a central authority and with active internal fractures between competing lineages and clans, did not present a unified front regarding the local missionary. Indeed, vying parties would constantly attempt to win the missionary to their cause and use him as an ally against their foes or competitors.

In cases when factions were fiercely opposed to a missionary’s presence, this dramatically increased the hardships of the ministry and in moments of crisis, could result in the death of the intruder. Thus, aware of living on a tight rope and needing to make his presence acceptable
to the largest possible number of natives, the missionary would perform a constant and delicate balancing act, and as a precaution, devote a lot of his time to performing good deeds in the village. This could involve helping to cure as many ill people as feasible, contributing to economic activities such as agriculture and hunting, or playing the role of advocate with the colonial authorities whenever necessary. Indeed, at times missionaries only stopped short of participating actively in warfare and taking a local spouse...

When sufficiently well established, the missionary assigned to remote locations and populations was invariably used by the colonial system in several additional ways. He and his mission would serve as hosts for visiting colonial parties (diplomats, scholars, traders, or wealthy travelers), and as linguistic and cultural interpreters for scientific, trade, and military expeditions. In fact, virtually every expedition to remote areas of French Indochina and Yunnan would stop over in isolated missions, where a bearded priest in a robe would be happy to entertain European company for a short time. Expedition leaders would sometimes enrol the skills of their host for one or several legs of their journey. Well known cases from the MEP include Paul Vial, based just across the border in southern Yunnan, who led British explorer Archibald Colquhoun into upper Burma in 1882, and Jean-Baptiste de Guébriant who guided the D’Ollone Mission across Sichuan in 1907.10

MEP missionaries in Indochina were thus living a slow paced life, yet not one exempt from dangers. On average, in the course of their careers, they would move around a few different locations according to their competence and the needs of the missionary society (and the colonial state). If they lived to see old age, some would elect to finish their life among their converts, while others would return to their vicariate’s headquarters and complete their mission in relative tranquillity. A good example, though not an entirely typical one, is that of Paul-Marie Ramond, who had arrived in Tonkin in 1881 at age 26. He was assigned to various postings for about 10 years before being appointed as the first Bishop of the Upper Tonkin vicariate in 1895. He retired from his Episcopal duties in 1939, and stayed in Tonkin to die of old age in 1944. Following his will, he was buried in Chapa, a

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colonial hill station and a missionary post he particularly cherished. His
grave, recently restored, can be found behind the church.

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The training period for a MEP missionary, as in most other French
Catholic missionary companies, formed the key intellectual features
of this potential ethnographer. First, on the psychological front, the
young man had severed the emotional ties with his family and, to a
certain extent, with the outside world as he had known it, to become
a permanent and obedient member of a discrete social system, a hier-
archical institution with God, and his champion the Pope, at its top.
In all the years spent at the seminary, the would-be missionary was
relentlessly immersed in an ideological universe where truth was well-
known, and uncertainty non-existent—at least when it applied to the
world order and to moral principles. He was educated in rigorous terms
compared to most of his contemporaries, with an emphasis on the rigid
application of the rules rather than critical thinking. He was literate
and thanks in particular to the study of religious philosophy, he could
produce logical and well structured arguments, but rarely unprejudiced
ones. It is difficult to assess what was left of his individual educational
heritage from prior to his insertion into the formal religious education
system. However, it is doubtful that this residue was very important in
intellectual terms, unless the candidate came from an elite social back-
ground, which was rare among 19th century MEP recruits. For most,
the intellectual legacy of their family would be of minor relevance to a
future life in the colonies compared with the inbuilt provincial or rural
habitus internalized in early childhood. Early and deeply ingrained, this
pragmatic, empirical knowledge underpinned a down to earth, com-
monsense approach to the daily matters of life, which would become
a priceless adaptive asset when the priest would need to survive and
relate to his hosts in alien and isolated peasant hamlets.

With this knowledge of the missionary’s education and, later, his life
in the mission, what can be said of him as a potential ethnographer?
On the bright side, the missionary’s foremost strengths were undoubt-
edly the familiarity he could gain with the local population and their
circumstances, thanks to the sheer length and intensity of his stay.
In addition he had linguistic proficiency, and a status as a relatively
harmless alien compared to most other categories of colonists in the
highlands. As a producer of text, his duty to send regular reports to his
superiors must have encouraged him to find something meaningful to

say about the locals, thus forcing him to observe them. In addition, the rather extreme mindset developed during his training years made him virtually undeterred by harsh circumstances and immediate physical danger. Crucially, the severing of the emotional links with his homeland and family turned him into an enduring member of the institution, ever ready to serve. Indeed, contrary to administrative or military personnel, the missionary did not even nurture the desire to be sent home when a posting was completed or after a particularly demanding assignment. In one word, as an ethnographer, the MEP Catholic missionary of colonial times was in a vantage point to produce distinctive and exceptional observation pieces.

The evident weaknesses of the Catholic missionary as an ethnographer, as was recorded later by quite a few academic and religious authors, were his near-total deficiency in cultural relativism, his lack of cross-cultural education, and the fact that his morality would constantly infringe upon his judgement. In other words, like most of his contemporaries outside of religious life, he did not conceive of the ‘savage’ Other as a fully developed human, nor of tribes as apt forms of social organization. Cultural relativism was absent. His essentially patronizing agenda was set on doing what was ‘right’ to elevate the moral condition of the uncivilized to suitable levels of civilization. His missionary biases extended to him siding politically, consciously or not, with the colonial project, even if a number of recorded cases have convincingly shown that in specific circumstances, missionaries could also encourage natives to stand up against abuse by the colonial administration. He was made to wear intellectual blinders during his religious education, carefully sheltered as he had been from the necessity of having to develop a critical opinion on politics and social issues. His mindset was not geared towards learning, but towards teaching; so as a rule, on location, most missionaries only accepted to take in what they perceived as likely to make their teaching more effective. Often left to himself amongst the natives of his ministry, the lone apostle often did not have the opportunity to debate his observations and share his thoughts with a likeminded counterpart, and was inclined to reflect only within the limited boundaries of his own persona. Even among the most learned of these men, limited critical intellectual preparation combined with the absence of extra stimulation led to conclusions and generalizations that still baffle the scientific mind. Finally, on the darker side, he could easily be depicted as the ultimate political emissary to remote lands and little known peoples. His total commitment to the colonial institution
secured—that task was in large part the duty of the religious institution, even if this was done less convincingly in times when profound disagreement between civilian and religious leadership threatened this alliance—he was the perfect scout, the eyes and the ears of the colonial system on the margins of the empire where the colonial machine could only reach with appreciable difficulty. He was one of the state’s cheapest, most effective and efficient political and cultural spearheads and as such, his actions undeniably left a wound in the flank of every upland society he lived among and missionised.

As tempting as it has been for many authors to envision the French colonial Church as a radical, authoritative and inflexible body, it is difficult to ignore that it also harboured a capacity to be genuinely discerning. As a proof of this potential one finds the oft-quoted instructions—based on the 1659 principles promoted by the Roman Propaganda (the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith), the moral authority for Catholic missionary initiatives outside Europe—that were read to every MEP young missionary leaving France in the late 19th century. These were a set of thoughtful recommendations indicative of a much less aggressive strategy than the stern critics of the Catholic missions have often suggested. It read:

Do not put any zeal into, do not promote any argument aiming at convincing these peoples to change their rites and their customs, unless of course these are contrary to moral and religion. What would be more absurd than to carry to the Chinese the ways of France, Spain, Italy or any other country of Europe? Do not introduce our countries to them, but introduce faith, the faith that does not repulse nor harm other peoples’ rites and customs unless these are undesirable, but on the contrary faith that keeps and protects them. It is, as it were, part of any man’s nature to esteem, love, and place above all others the traditions of his country, and the country itself. Conversely, there is no more powerful cause of separation and hatred than bringing changes to a nation’s specific customs, especially customs whose practice goes back in time as far as the elders can recall. What would be the consequence if, after discarding them, you were to replace them with customs from your own country, brought from the outside? Thus, never compare traditions of these peoples with those from Europe: on the contrary, be swift in getting used to theirs. Admire and praise what deserves to be praised. As for what does not, and if it is appropriate not to praise it with flattery, be cautious not to judge or condemn mindlessly or excessively. Regarding the decisively wrong habits, one should fight them with head shakes and silence rather than with words.11

11 Cited in Guennou, Missions étrangères de Paris, 74, my translation. A different trans-
What actually remained of such open mindedness once a missionary reached the field is of course another matter—not to mention defining what qualified as ‘wrong habits’. Yet overall, such cautionary remarks made to the new missionaries about to enter the field were laudably balanced and give an indication of the evolution that the Catholic Church had undergone after a period of difficult and often fruitless proselytizing abroad.

ON THE RELEVANCE OF BIOGRAPHIES

Before embarking on a review of missionary texts from Tonkin in the next chapters, a word is needed to explain why I will establish biographies of individual missionary authors in as much details as feasible prior to examining the production of their written work. These details may at times seem to bear little historical significance—actually, this will be the case for most of them. However, there is a rationale for not losing sight, in our analysis of their texts, of their backgrounds and frames of mind.

One of the most explicit conclusions triggered by the meeting of anthropology and post-modernist thinking in the 1980s was that the traditional objectivity of the ethnographer had to be questioned, that is, that all ethnographic texts are constructs. Therefore, the personality of the ethnographer, his/her past, education, career, intentions, and emotions cannot be brushed aside when assessing the value of the ethnographic text she or he has produced. In the cases being studied here, the need to explore the ‘incidental’ ethnographers’ biographies is further compounded by the fact that these authors did not belong to the academic field, and therefore, as has been shown in this chapter, lacked its intellectual training and standardised methodology—albeit they had been taught philosophy, ethics, etc. Instead, they thought without patent uniformity, they were not as homogeneous in their appreciation of reality as, say, the military, their early individual lives were all distinctive, and their careers in Asia took them in a number of different directions. These variations left their mark on the texts,
the roots of that influence digging into each priest’s separate past, and could be felt at every step from the data collection to the final editing of their written prose.

Some simple examples of biographical information from colonial Indochina that influenced the production of ethnographies may help to illustrate the relevance of taking note of the backgrounds and details of these individuals. Father François-Marie Savina, whom we will meet more at ease in Chapter 8, came from rural Brittany, a region whose inhabitants had long been defiant of the capital, Paris. Savina grew up speaking the Breton minority language, French coming second. This helps clarify why he developed an immense interest in linguistics, and sensitivity for highland minority cultures. As a non-missionary example, military commander Émile Lunet de Lajonquière, who in 1904 authored a major ethnographic report on upper Tonkin, had become a close friend of scholar Louis Finot after they had met on a ship taking them both from France to Indochina in 1899. At Finot’s invitation, both men toured Indochina together for over a year. This friendship played a key role in the selection of the Commander by the École française d’Extrême-Orient, founded and directed by Finot, to produce the seminal Ethnographie des Territoires Militaires in spite of the fact that other officers in Tonkin might arguably have been better qualified than him to put this book together.13 In another case, military officer Auguste Bonifacy had a degree in Chinese language before coming to Tonkin. This is the main reason why he was to become an expert of the Man tribe—today better known as the Dao, Yao or Mien—which happened to be a montagnard group of Tonkin using Chinese script for their ritual texts, parts of which Bonifacy went on to translate and study in a scholarly fashion. And finally, Colonel Henri Roux published in 1954 a much cited book on the ethnic minorities of Upper Laos, Quelques populations du Nord Indochinois.14 In fact, it was over 30 years earlier that Roux had been in that region, and he wrote his book in good part from memory once he had retired in France. Nearly blind since 1945, he could still write, but could not read his old notes or his own manuscript, which was edited largely by an assistant who incorporated unplanned flaws. Used as illustrations to make a point, none of these biographical details is of

truly crucial importance. However, the accumulation of such elements, when taken into consideration and put in context, reveals a distinctive intellectual signature for any given author. Combined with additional elements regarding educational background and career contingencies, this signature helps deconstruct the texts and interpret the pieces.

However, obtaining a sufficient amount of biographical information on people who did not leave a vital mark on history can prove somewhat difficult. None of the missionary ethnographers who will be presented in the following chapters have been the subject of a formal biography, unlike for instance French Protestant missionary Maurice Leenhardt whose life and work in New Caledonia were analyzed by James Clifford.15 Researchers are thus forced to dig deep in order to find nuggets of biographical information scattered amongst in-house obituaries, occasional comments published by contemporary observers and colleagues, or the infrequent detail given by the ethnographers themselves in the course of their text. A ‘who’s who’ of French Indochina up to the early years of the 20th century, Brebion's Dictionnaire de bio-bibliographie générale, ancienne et moderne de l’Indochine française has been priceless in helping to grasp the little that was recorded about many a character who remained backstage during the Indochina colonial performance.16

Therefore, for me, the challenge has been to attempt to build a biography from scratch for each important ethnographer considered in the following chapters, filling in the blank spaces by superimposing biographical sketches over the background portrait of the institution that they belonged to in the particular historical time period that they lived. This is why I have presented in this chapter the structure of missionary education and the characteristics of life in the colonies in some detail. And whilst a degree of conjecture is inevitable, it has been kept to a strict minimum.