PART THREE

UPPER TONKIN
CHAPTER FIVE

EARLY CONTRIBUTORS TO THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF UPPER TONKIN

In Part 3, we are firmly setting foot in and around colonial Tonkin. In the upcoming two chapters, we will meet some of the men whose agency contributed to the expansion of Catholic proselytism into the highlands of Tonkin, from the seminal influence of the 17th century Jesuits, via Bishop Puginier in the 1860s, to the end of the missionary presence in the highlands in the late 1940s. We will first follow a historical narrative to briefly review missionary as well as lay ethnographic texts produced until the 19th century on the upland ethnic groups. I should stress again the fact that I am presenting these lay authors here in order to establish what kind of ethnography of the northern Indochinese highlands was available at the time of the missionary installation in upper Tonkin. This should allow us, downstream, to gain an idea of the degree to which MEP members were acquainted—or not—with sources that could be found locally with relative ease. We will proceed next with the story of the foundation, growth, and decline of that MEP vicariate at the heart of this study, Upper Tonkin, with the aim of setting the political and ideological backdrop for the more detailed consideration of texts that unfolds in Part 4.

Since the early 1600s, Catholic missionaries from various denominations were present in Vietnam, although on a small scale and only in the lowlands.1 Near the end of that century, a papal intervention gave the evangelising task of the northeast portion of Tonkin—covering roughly one-third of it—to Spanish Dominicans based in Manila, whilst the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris was given the remaining two-thirds.2 Until the curtain fell on French Indochina in 1954, the MEP was to remain the most important source of Catholic missionaries to Tonkin. Yet, despite this early start to Catholic proselytising, the mountainous areas at the periphery of the Red River delta remained untouched by

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European missionaries until late into the 19th century. Conversion was initially confined to the Kinh population in the delta—with the possible exception of some among the Muong minority, then still a fuzzy category used to designate an unspecified number of non-Kinh groups in the western foothills.3

Prior to the French military conquest of Indochina, reports were sent to France and Rome more or less regularly by a small number of missionaries who had succeeded in maintaining their presence in Tonkin, either openly or covertly. With no missionary outposts set up beyond the immediate periphery of the coastal areas and deltas, these reports and personal correspondences and diaries did not contain ethnographic material concerning the groups dwelling in the mountainous hinterland.

With his monumental Les missionnaires français au Tonkin et au Siam, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles [French Missionaries in Tonkin and Siam, 17th and 18th centuries]—his doctorat d’Etat—especially Volume Two devoted to Tonkin, historian Alain Forest has monitored the progress of French Catholic missionary work in Vietnam. He notes that in a clandestine fashion, often disguised as merchants, a few dedicated men from the MEP endeavoured for two centuries, starting in the 1660s, to spread the Word of God in ‘Annam’, hoping to be able to create the embryo of a local clergy. While their relationship with the local rulers saw ups and downs, Jesuits from Portugal and Dominicans from Portugal and Spain were also competitors to their project at times.

Dominican and Franciscan priests from southwestern Europe accompanied their countries’ ships on voyages to Asia since the Renaissance. In the 16th century, some among them set foot in Tonkin on occasion, although none are known to have stayed for very long. In 1564, the Jesuits set up a base in Macau on the Chinese coast. Nearly a century later, from 1626, a few Jesuit missionaries—their total number estimated at 24 over 40 years—started to work in Tonkin. This was when their Japanese mission was closed and it was decided to redeploy those still embedded in Asia elsewhere. Among them, some French Jesuits visited the Vietnamese coast. The most famous French Jesuit representative to work in Vietnam before the 1660s was Father Alexandre

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de Rhodes. He started his missionary work on the coast in Cua-bang in 1627. Jesuit preaching became so successful there that by 1639 it is estimated that 82,500 Tonkinese had converted to Christianity. Local politics, however, obstructed further Jesuit activity and by 1663 nearly all their missionaries had been expelled from the northern kingdom by the Tring authorities.

To serve as a counterweight to the dynamic Portugal and Spain-based Catholic missionary expansion, of which the Jesuits were a spearhead, but also in line with the centralization of the administration of missionary work following the Trenta Council, in 1622 Pope Gregory XV created the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, the Office for the Propagation of the Faith. This was operated by a permanent secretary and directed by 13 cardinals and two priests, with its headquarters in Rome. Thirty years later, it was to that Office and to Pope Alexander VII that Alexandre de Rhodes, back in Europe, directed his request to recruit more missionaries to send to Tonkin and Cochinchina, supported by his colleagues and future Bishops François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de La Motte. In Paris, the initiative was also supported by a number of influential people around the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement who, at the time, were also promoting François de Montmorency de Laval as the first Bishop of Canada. King Louis XIV was eventually instrumental in the designation of all these Bishops and their promotion in Rome.

‘Bishop’, however, is not the correct word here. The system by which the Office nominated missionaries abroad where no formal organisation of the Roman Catholic Church had been erected before and where local authorities were reluctant to let such an installation occur, was to put a vicar apostolic, in fact a titular Bishop in partibus, at the head of former vicariates or new missionary territories. In the latter case, this action was the first step in establishing a local Christian community. This was done in the hope that future developments would be rewarding enough to eventually allow the erection of a full-fledged diocese headed by a formal Bishop. This last step would bring the new body into the Roman Catholic hierarchy under the authority of the Pope. This was the solution offered by Rome to Louis XIV in 1658 when officially, vicars apostolic, not bishops, were sent abroad from France to establish Catholic missions in Canada, China, Cochinchina and Tonkin.

So in 1658, François Pallu and Lambert de La Motte were made Bishops in partibus infidelium of Héliopolis and Bérythe respectively, and could thus, the following year, be made vicar apostolic for Tonkin and
Cochinchina. The commission from the Office to the new vicars mentioned that they had to create an indigenous clergy, open schools and teach the Christian faith and Latin. In addition, they had to adapt to local customs as much as possible and avoid intervening unnecessarily in local politics. They also had to remember not to make any important decisions or name a new vicar apostolic without consultation with Rome and—more importantly for us—to regularly report in writing on their progress. Accompanied by several missionaries, these two vicars left France in 1660–1661 to eventually set up their Asian headquarters in Ayutthaya in Siam, where they were liberally welcomed at the time. It was only after several consultations with France and after elaborating a strategy of infiltration into their final destination that the first representative of the party, Father Chevreul, reached the Cochinchinese coast at Faifo in 1664. His arrival officially inaugurated three centuries of state-supported French missionary work in Indochina. Another representative, Father Deyder, was the first to arrive in Tonkin in 1666, disguised as a layman, three years after the last Jesuits had been forced to leave. He remained there until his death in 1693 after serving the last 14 years of his ministry as vicar apostolic of West Tonkin. In the meantime, Lambert de La Motte, representing Pallu who had returned to France on a diplomatic mission, had become the first vicar apostolic in Tonkin when he arrived in Thang Long (today Hanoi) in 1669.

Back in Paris, during this time, the Société des Missions étrangères de Paris was born. A seminary was founded in 1663 and recognised by the Pope the next year. This foundation immediately resulted in the formation of a missionary society to administrate the seminary.

In 1679 the Tonkin Vicariate experienced the first of a series of amputations when it was split in two parts, one in the west and one in the east, each under a different vicar apostolic. These two vicariates remained under MEP control although there was some rivalry between vicars from the MEP on the one side, and Jesuits as well as Dominicans on the other. In 1696, Rome changed its position and allocated the East Tonkin vicariate to the Spanish Dominican from the Philippines, represented by Bishop Lezzoli. From then on, that vicariate was to remain permanently out of the hands of the MEP. Further north in

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4 The third original vicar apostolic to Asia, Bishop Cotolendi, destined to set up a mission in China, died in India on his way to his ministry.
5 Guennou, Missions étrangères de Paris, 74.
the Southeast Asian massif, in adjacent territory under Chinese imperial rule, a MEP vicar was set up in Yunnan as early as the 1730s, and one was named to take charge of the Chinese provinces of Kouang-Tong (Guangdong) and Kouang-Si (Guangxi) in 1848, thus covering the northern and the eastern portions of the massif.

For most of the 18th century, the Catholic Vietnam missions had to live with the perils of travelling by sea from France, endure a disengagement of the motherland from Asia after the Siamese setback of 1688, and survive with insufficient recruitment in France and a general lack of financial means. In addition they had to skirt around the many shifts in Vietnamese politics and swings of mood towards the Christian religion, and handle the disturbances caused both by dissent within the MEP and by competition with other congregations that were locally active. Progress in the conversion of Tonkinese to the Christian faith was acceptable during periods of relative calm, only to experience critical setbacks during periods of adversity. From the arrival of Father Deydier in 1666 until the French Revolution in 1789, a total of 36 French missionaries affiliated to the MEP were stationed in Tonkin for periods ranging from little under six months, as for Lambert de La Motte and Bouchard in 1669–70, to nearly 50 years in the case of Bishop Néez between 1715 and 1764. Néez was also one of 20 missionaries who died in Tonkin in the same period. Never more than seven priests were present at any one time; all were stationed in the Red River delta close to coastal areas, more precisely in Pho-hien, Nghe-an/Thanh-hoa, Son-nam/Son-tay, and Ke-vinh. Clearly, no possible testimony on the populations of upland Tonkin was to be expected from such a small and geographically concentrated group of observers.

In 1790, a stretch of 25 years without support from France started thanks to the turmoil created by the French Revolution and the First Empire. Only four missionaries were left in Tonkin. The 1780 decade had also introduced a difficult period as it was the dawn of a dynastic change and a re-organisation of the political body that was to become modern Vietnam. The Lê dynasty was in its last years and the Nguyễn dynasty was emerging in the person of Nguyễn Anh, the future emperor Gia Long. Between 1792 and 1817, not a single missionary recruit could be sent from Paris. Ad hoc MEP recruitment in

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England and Italy yielded a meagre twelve new priests scattered over the whole of Asia. The Tonkin mission, like others in Asia, had to rely on the resources of the local clergy and temporary financial support from the Office in Rome.

Then, in 1822, after the MEP had recovered from this period, in order to solve the financial problems caused by the end of the era of royal patronage, it was decided to turn to popular support in France to finance the missionary work as well as the infrastructures. A new French national body was created, l’Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi,7 whose educational zeal to stimulate both human and financial commitment to missionary work overseas quickly established local branches in every diocese in the country. To whip up popular fervour and stimulate recruitment, an associated journal, les Annales de la Propagation de la Foi (Annals of the Propagation of the Faith) started being published the same year the Society was launched and was distributed to every parish in France (to which from 1868 onwards was added the additional weight of a weekly magazine, Les Missions catholiques). The former was often publicly read in church and quickly spread the stories and writings of missionaries abroad to many French households. It is certainly at this time and due to such literature that the first realisation came to the majority of the French that Siam, Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin existed. This action without a doubt contributed to preparing the public opinion for the future colonial expansion in these areas, where many priests became martyrs in the decades that followed, a fate that was widely publicised and eventually served as an excuse to start the military invasion of Vietnam.

Between the moment Bishop Lambert de La Motte set sail for Vietnam in 1660 and the 1822 innovations directed at building a new financial basis for the missions, a total of 289 MEP missionaries had travelled to Asia. After the establishment of the Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, this same figure was reached again within a much shorter time span of 30 years. In the next thirty years, 909 new MEP missionaries

7 L’Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, was initially conceived of in 1819 in France by a devout woman, Pauline Jaricot, to support the MEP and its missionary work. When it was officially set up in 1822, its target had already been widened to include all missionary societies and all missionaries wherever they worked. Inspired by this model, a century later, the Vatican launched the Pontifical Mission Societies, under the Roman Curia, which centralised donations and redistributed them to over 1500 Catholic dioceses throughout the world. It continues to this day.
were sent to Asia, a threefold increase. Then, between 1896 and 1900, in only five years immediately following the establishment of the Upper-Tonkin and Laos vicariates in 1895 and 1899 respectively, 336 missionaries were sent to ever more numerous Asian missions. This culminated with MEP having a total of 1,420 active members in 1906, the record year in its whole history. Afterwards, numbers declined under the blows of an anticlerical Third Republic in France, two devastating World Wars, revolutions in Indochina and China, and the gradual public estrangement of the Church in the West. Overall, between 1815 and 1986, the year his book was published, MEP historian Jean Guennou calculated that a grand total of 4,168 Catholic missionaries affiliated with his society joined missions.8

Back to the mid-19th century, in addition to the publicity orchestrated by Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, several other factors help to explain the surge in recruitment numbers. First, both French missionaries and Vietnamese Christians, victims of religious persecutions between 1833 and 1859 under the three successors of Gia Long, were publicly awarded the status of martyrs back in France. This, as explained in Chapter 3, attracted considerable attention amongst the population and caused devout young men to step forward to partake in the glorious fate. As Guennou put it, during those decades, “the great recruiters for the missions were the martyrs. […] Each time a missionary was slaughtered, ten volunteers came forward to take his place.”9 Virtually all of the 172 MEP priests to be put to death during their apostolic mission in Asia were killed in the 19th century, a great many in Vietnam. Yet, the most important factor with regards to the ever increasing recruitment was probably the military invasion of Indochina from 1858, which allowed for easier physical and political access and called for more missionaries to carry the Catholic flag to the Orient. Seafaring was made easier in 1869 with the opening of the Suez Canal, with the appreciable consequence that fewer recruits would fail to reach their destination.

In the second half of the 19th century, the missionary presence, both in terms of numbers, as shown above, and geographical dispersion had expanded significantly. The MEP quickly found itself in charge of ever more numerous vicariates set up where and whenever the number of mission outposts and actual as well as potential converts

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9 Ibid., 242.
justified it. In Tonkin, this time sequence reflected the specifics of the deployment of the colonial hold.\textsuperscript{10} As mentioned earlier, the original Tonkin vicariate, created in 1660, had been divided in 1679 into West Tonkin under MEP responsibility, and East Tonkin attributed to the Spanish Dominicans. In the mid-19th century, West Tonkin was again considered too large to be comfortably administered from Hanoi and in 1846 was split from its southern portion. This became Tonkin Meridional (South Tonkin) while a diminished West Tonkin nevertheless still encompassed most of the western Red River delta including Hanoi, and, in theory, all of the mountainous areas between Laos to the west, and the right bank of the Clear River (Rivière Claire) to the East, where the Dominican domain started.

By 1880, for the French, Tonkin’s northern and northwestern mountains were still an unknown domain that remained to be surveyed. It had not yet started to be an object of missionary activity. Yet, by the time the colonial ‘pacification’ of Protectorat du Tonkin was over in the mid-1890s, the West Tonkin vicariate was considered in need of being split again. Two new entities were chipped off the Hanoi-centred hub. These were Haut-Tonkin (Upper-Tonkin) in 1895, covering the high region from just north of Hanoi to the borders of China and Laos and, in 1901, Tonkin Maritime, which took over the southern coastal part.

In spite of this gradual breaking up of the hefty original 17th century Tonkin vicariate, the decentralization of missionary administration towards four secondary centres did not significantly undermine the political prevalence of Hanoi, the heart of Kinh society and the See of Catholic and colonial administration. Indeed, the vicar apostolic of a constantly shrinking West Tonkin vicariate invariably remained the ‘first among equals’ in the Protectorate’s ecclesiastical hierarchy.

\textbf{The First MEP Publications from Upper-Tonkin}

The creation of the Upper-Tonkin vicariate in 1895 marked the start of active proselytizing in these mountainous areas. Before, severe unrest in the highland region caused by the threatening presence of runaway troops, freebooters and marauders from China had limited a missionary presence. Thus, only a handful of MEP priests had journeyed to one or

\textsuperscript{10} This brief history on the constitution of vicariates in Tonkin is a synthesis of information found in various MEP archives, notably several yearly \textit{Comptes-rendus}.
another of the non-Kinh groups in the mountains north and northwest of the Red River delta. It is not very helpful to devote much time to their writings, which systematically lacked precise identification of the local people, tending to lump all non-Kinh into the broad category of 'tribus sauvages'.

The annual *Journal de la mission du Tonkin* later became known locally simply as *Journal des missions*, and later, *Comptes-rendus*. The pre-19th century issues of the *Journal des missions* yield useful insights into the mind sets of the authors who contributed to it, a mind set that was arguably similar to that of their colleagues who would later write on Upper-Tonkin. This journal was written in the form of a multi-voice narrative, composed of many quotations from letters of missionaries to their Bishop, linked together by a text produced by the official vicariate's editor. The facts that were presented were precisely located and the exact dates of events recorded. Yet these facts were visibly chosen to follow a particular agenda, or with the intention of making a specific point. Most of the time, the strategy was to make an impression on readers back in France with the intention of raising funds by stressing the hardships of missionary work while, in contrast, providing figures of the successful conversions obtained in any given mission. Often, such texts graphically described persecutions with the number of houses burnt or converts killed. Whenever a French missionary died violently in such clashes, the editor included an obituary on the deceased. Extremely useful from a historical point of view, these pre-conquest writings were however of little value as ethnographic text on highland populations.

On occasions, however, a pearl would appear. Such as when the *Journal des missions* included a rare story on a mission sent to non-Kinh populations. Before the end of the 19th century, such populations were always situated in the immediate vicinity of Kinh areas. For instance, in a letter dated July 3rd, 1789, author and missionary Le Roy tells his former missionary colleague Blandin about his visit to a then one-year old mission among the Muong of Lac-tho region. This area was less than a hundred kilometres south-west of Hanoi, thus within the limits of the (then) West Tonkin vicariate. Despite its proximity to a major urban and political centre, this region of moderate elevation standing
between the delta and the valley of the river Ma was nevertheless very much on the margins of Kinh civilisation. A century later, in 1889, it was one of the areas still marked as inhabited by ‘tribus sauvages’ by religious historian Launay. At the time when Le Roy wrote to Blandin, there were apparently around one thousand converts among the Muong in this location thanks to the work of a Vietnamese priest, Father Hoa. Le Roy was sent to assess the progress of this remote community, nothing more. He noted that the region was rarely visited by Europeans as the roads were difficult, and reported that the customs of those he called montagnards, mountain dwellers, were totally different from those of the Kinh. In his letter he also described the form of local authority, assessing that winning the hearts of the local chiefs would be the surest way to be able to rule over these people. Additionally, he situated their cultural evolution at a level he called the Golden Age, and recorded the physical layout of villages, the house architecture, as well as making comments on marriage and funerals, religious beliefs, and cuisine. He glumly concluded that “Lac-tho region is not an attractive country and only charity and duty could attract missionaries there.”

What is of interest in such an account, in addition to the basic descriptions that can be used for comparative purposes, was information of a political nature. Le Roy tells us that these Muong spoke a language different from Vietnamese; they paid tribute in rice to the Kinh, and were sometimes enlisted to wage war on the side of the Kinh rulers, all information of historical and ethnographic value. Moreover, Le Roy revealed an aspect of the missionaries’ persona in this location when he connected the appeal of mission outposts to the charm of the location, as opposed to selflessly conducting God’s business wherever needed be. It seems men longing for martyrdom could also have preferences. Finally, Le Roy’s letter itself did not contain any such words as ‘savages’ or ‘tribe’ but included instead the earliest mention of the generic word montagnards—not-capitalized—that I have found in relation to Tonkin, indicating the clustering of highland groups into a category, in this case an essentially descriptive one.

Between 1650 and 1895, besides their general correspondence and their contributions to the official missionary media, some MEP mission-
aries also published additional work relating to one aspect or another of the cultures of Tonkin. It would be beyond the scope of this book to name them all, so I will simply list a sample of these writings.\footnote{Some of these works have not been included in the bibliography. More detailed information on these can be found at the entry ‘Société des missions’ in Antoine Brebion’s *Dictionnaire de bio-bibliographie générale, ancienne et moderne, de l’Indochine francaise. Annales de l’Académie des Sciences coloniales, Vol. VIII. Paris: Société d’éditions géographiques, maritimes et coloniales, 1935, 354–97.}

At this stage in our exposé, one should not be surprised that the most prominent focus of published scholarship by missionaries in Indochina was indigenous languages. Not so much linguistic studies proper, which would have required appropriate intellectual education, but a utilitarian production of glossaries, dictionaries, and grammatical studies instrumental to the successful conversion of the *Annamites*. These included such tools as those produced by De Rhodes (1651), Jourdain (1872), Theurel (1877), Ravier (1880), Dourisboure (1889), or Bon and Dronet (1889). Travelogues as well as personal life stories and accounts of day to day existence in the missions were also in demand, especially in the popular religious publications as we will see in Chapter 7. Some scholarly works on Indochina history were also produced and some ecclesiastics also published personal observations on geography, culture and politics. Biographies of prominent MEP colleagues with substantial information on their lives and the milieu where they worked were commissioned for future generations to emulate, such as those by Louvet and Monteuis.\footnote{De Rhodes, Alexandre. *Le catéchisme en langue vietnamienne romanisée, 1651*. Roma, Université Grégorienne, 1956–1957; Jourdain, Denis. *Grammaire franco-annamite*. Saigon: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1872; Theurel, Joseph (Bishop). *Dictionarium annamitiac-latinum, Ex opere ill. et Rev. Taberd constans; necnon ab ill. et Rev. J.S. Theurel*. Ninh-phu: Imprimerie des Missions du Tonkin occidental, 1877; Ravier, Marcel Henri. *Dictionarium latino-anamiticum completum et novo ordine dispositum*, Ninh-phu: Imprimerie des Missions du Tonkin occidental, 1877; Ravier, Marcel Henri. *Dictionarium latino-anamiticum completum et novo ordine dispositum*, Ninh-phu: Imprimerie des Missions du Tonkin occidental, 1880; Dourisboure, Pierre. *Dictionnaire Balma-Français*. Hong Kong: Imprimerie des Missions étrangères, 1889; Bon, Henri and J.B. Dronet. *Manuel de conversation franco-tonkinois*. Késo: Imprimerie de la Mission, 1889. Examples include: De Rhodes, Alexandre. *Tonquinensis historiae libri dvo (…)*, Lyon: K.B. Denvenet, 1652; Launay, Adrien. *Histoire ancienne et moderne de l’Annaum*, Paris: Challamel,1884; Louvet, Louis Eugène. *Vie de Mgr Puginier, Évêque de Mauricacite, Vicaire Apostolique du Tonkin Occidental*. Hanoi: Schneider, 1894; Monteuis, Gustave. *L’âme d’un missionnaire. Vie du P. Nempon, missionnaire apostolique du Tonkin Occidental*. Paris: Victor Retaux et Fils, 1895.}

In addition, a handful of individual missionaries’ contributions extended into the specific field of highland ethnography. Pierre-Jacques Lemonnier de La Bissachère became a member of the MEP in 1789, boarded a ship to his mission the following year, and spent 17 years in Tonkin before returning to France in 1805. Over the troubled years
of the succession wars, La Bissachère spent long periods of time in hiding until the 1802 installation of Gia Long on the throne of unified Vietnam. Then came the normalisation of relations between Christian missionaries and the State, a direct consequence of the debt of honour the Emperor had agreed upon for the support provided to him by Bishop Pigneau de Behaine. In 1802, La Bissachère and his Bishop, Jean-Jacques Guérard, were made mandarins by Gia Long. This allowed the missionary to exercise his ministry and collect his observations freely. Once back in France, La Bissachère published two substantial books, one in 1811, the other in 1818, in which he drew a portrait of Indochina as it was known at the time, focusing on the high culture of the coastal areas and the deltas. Incidentally, part of his books dealt with the same Lac-tho area and its Muong population mentioned above, supplying general observations, some ethnographic details, and historical interpretations on the origin of the Muong and of their relationships with the Kinh.

Later in the 19th century, missionary activity developed in the remoter areas. The Central Highlands were starting to be proselytized, leading to interesting contributions by missionaries Pierre Dourisboure and Jean-Baptiste Guerlach. In the north, Pierre-Charles Pinabel, who died in 1885 at age 41 after 15 years in Tonkin, published his Notes sur quelques peuplades sauvages dépendant du Tong-King in which he described the Chau-laos, a portion of western Tonkin on the Laotian border where he had worked for five years. This was also the time when his colleague, Léon Girod, whose work will be examined in the next chapter, started visiting Upper-Tonkin proper, kick-starting a steady stream of published observations on the highland populations there.17

**Publications by 19th Century Explorers, Diplomats and Military Observers**

In the preceding chapter it was established that missionaries did not operate alone. Individually as well as collectively, they were very much

part and parcel of the colonial apparatus that favoured their proliferation in Indochina and each missionary was unavoidably embedded in this colonial ideology. What is more, publications on upland Indochina by lay fellow Frenchmen presumably also had an impact on the missionaries’ perceptions of the local space and peoples. At the time that the Upper-Tonkin vicariate was set up in 1895, a number of such works had already been made available. Some among the most prominent ones are reviewed in this section because of the role they then played in influencing the writings of all Europeans to follow.

From the 1860s, during the two decades before the French colonial army took control of the northern highlands, a few Frenchmen had ventured through the Vietnamese portion of the Southeast Asian massif. Some of the documents left by these early travellers contain variously elaborated observations of, and more or less educated opinions on, the indigenous populations encountered on their journeys. As a rule, these early travellers were pursuing political or economic objectives and only noticed in passing, as it were, the local populations.

It is not necessary to devote a lot of time to publications by early discovery teams such as the Ernest Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier expedition up the Mekong in 1866–68, or individual ventures such as merchant Jean Dupuis and his explorations of the Red River around the same period. These contributions to the genesis of colonial French Indochina were indeed considerable, but their legacy in terms of ethnography, minor. Well aware of the particular interests of their readership, their portrayal of ‘primitive’ peoples only amounted to succinct mentions. These were calibrated along the principle that the smaller the military capacity and economic significance of a given group, the briefer the account should be. At best, such as in the Doudart de Lagrée and Garnier case, some ‘primitives’ were judged exotic enough to be depicted, artificially striking a pose and grouped in an improbable assembly, on plates for the *Album pittoresque* (the Picturesque Album).

18 Cf. Osborne, Milton. *River Road to China. The Mekong River Expedition, 1866–73*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1975. This is not to mean that these individuals were not scholarly in one way or another. Garnier did publish some ethnographic accounts and suggested some interesting historical connections between groups (1873b: 329ss). Dupuis spoke Mandarin, was a member of the Société académique indo-chinoise de Paris and published on political events and trade in Tonkin (Dupuis, Jean. *L’ouverture du Fleuve Rouge au commerce et les événements du Tong-Kin, 1872–1873. Journal de voyage et d’expédition de J. Dupuis, 1879*).
forming the first part of the *Atlas du voyage d’exploration en Indo-Chine*, an approach resolutely reminiscent of the naturalist sketching plants and animals for his records.¹⁹

At about the same time, in this case in the late 1860s, Emile Rocher, an administrator for the French China Customs (*l’Administration des douanes impériales de Chine*), travelled from Tonkin to Yunnan. He did so as a member of a diplomatic mission launched in the wake of the recent agreement made with the Yunnan authorities aimed at providing local rulers with the Western weaponry they needed to crush the Muslim uprising (also known as the Panthai Rebellion) that raged in the region from 1855 to 1872. Rocher published his account of that visit in two books in 1879 and 1880. To my knowledge, these constitute the first French language published accounts on the high region that included a section devoted specifically to the ethnography of highland societies, which makes this document worth looking at.

Facing important delays in the delivery of artillery pieces to Yunnan-sen (today Kunming), Rocher kept himself busy with investigating the mineral resources of the region. Over a period of two-and-a-half years, thanks to the travel documents granted to him as an official guest of local authorities, he was able to visit numerous remote areas around the Yunnanese capital and gather the data he needed to write his books. These books were designed for administrative consumption, with the aim of informing on the topography, the layout of roads, the communication systems, the regional history, the current rebellions, production and commerce, and in particular, indigenous metallurgy. Over a total of 500 pages, a modest but significant 26 pages are specifically devoted to a description of the *tribus indigènes*. While Rocher, in his capacity as the official envoy to Yunnan, was rather bold in his account of Yunnan in general, Rocher the ethnographer was more prudent. He declared:

> The vast area from the point of view of races is indeed among the most interesting ones and would require special knowledge; true to our role as an impartial witness, we reproduced what we could learn, leaving to more scholarly persons the care to speak on these matters in an authoritative way.²⁰


Why, one might ask, was such a cultural section necessary to an inventory on the riches of Yunnan written to the attention of the colonial administration? The author certainly had a strategic purpose in mind when he wrote that all the non-Han groups which he encountered were fiercely opposed to assimilation by the Chinese. This, indeed, made them potential allies for a conquest operation, should the French authorities wish to launch one from Tonkin. As a writer, Rocher was also aware of the particular interests of his readership in France, and he undoubtedly wanted to entertain them with accounts of exotic races and customs. As many authors before him eloquently showed, this sort of intention can lead to the best, and the worst. Overall, Rocher does comparatively well. Though data was obtained through interpreters, it was still a first hand account in the field. In terms of configuration, this section was given a loose structure and touched on a number of topics in varying proportions depending on the group: history, geography, physiology, material culture, agriculture and trade, relations with Han Chinese, character, marriage, and family. Some sweeping statements such as ‘ils ne connaissent aucune religion,’ they know no religion, certainly highlighted the author’s unawareness. A dreamy standpoint also drove the Frenchman to adopt a semi-poetic, gender-biased style when describing Lo-lo women, revealed in particular by a concern with assessing exactly the degree of appeal these representatives of the sexe faible could reach on his personal scale.

Finally, Rocher used no methodological tools beyond observation and interviewing a random selection of people and taking notes. His account is weak on the empirical front; for instance, no indication is given of the demographic importance of any of the groups he presents and discusses nor are the location of places named in the text. The exact duration of fieldtrips, number of informants talked to, number of visits to such informants, and the exact circumstances in which the interviews were held, are all lacking. He divides the non-Han population of Yunnan between the Miao-tzu, Man-tzu, Lo-lo, and “an array of tribes without much importance.” One is left without an explanation regarding the logic of these categories, while half of the 26-page ethnographic text is devoted to the Lo-lo alone.

21 Ibid., 24.
Contemporaneous to the Rocher books, Marquis D’Hervey de St-Denys, Chinese language professor at Collège de France, published in 1883 *Ethnographie des peuples étrangers à la Chine*, which was in fact a translation into French of a series of Chinese texts devoted to the non-Han peoples on the southwestern Marches of the Middle Empire.23 These had been written in the 13th century by Chinese administrator Ma Touan Lin. Properly speaking, Ma’s text did not include ethnography and in this sense, de St-Denys’ book derived all its information, be it the original Chinese text or the numerous footnotes that de St-Denys added, from second or third-hand sources, if not plainly from tales, gossip and hearsay. However, it has been widely read by subsequent observers and ethnographers, and in its position as one of the most ancient known accounts of the peoples in the Southeast Asian massif available in French, has been used repeatedly by French scholars thereafter.

Into a similar category falls the work of another fellow sinologist, diplomat Gabriel Devéria, who spent nearly twenty years on official postings in China between 1863 and 1882 before returning to Paris and eventually taking up a position at *École des langues orientales vivantes*. From his work on Chinese texts conducted from Paris, Devéria published in 1886 *La frontière sino-annamite, description géographique et ethnographique d’après les documents officiels chinois*, an account which, as its title indicates, made use of official Chinese written sources. Despite his lack of real first-hand knowledge of the peoples whom he touched upon in this document, Devéria’s publication nevertheless influenced several of his successors in Asia, starting with MEP missionary Paul Vial who considered him to be the authoritative source on the political history of non-Han people in Yunnan.24

On the French Indochina side, medical doctor and diplomat François-Jules Harmand, a companion of military officer Francis Garnier during the 1873 military operations in Tonkin, and who became France’s top man in Hanoi for a few months in 1883, published extensively on Indochina with regards to a number of fields. With a medical background, many of his papers present a strong leaning towards what today is called physical anthropology—biometrics, etc. Most of his papers are on Kinh

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culture, except for a few among the southern Central Highlanders. Out of his more than fifty publications, only a handful, including his 1912 *De l’état de l’ethnographie indochinoise*, hold interest, though moderate, for one studying the northern highlands.25

In the category of expedition literature addressing the northern Vietnamese uplands, one body strongly stands out, that of the publications derived from the Pavie Mission to Indochina which unfolded intermittently for 16 years from 1879 to 1895. Auguste Pavie, a Breton with a well-to-do family background, was a civil servant turned diplomat. His imprint on Indochina is of historic importance, not least because he was influential in the annexation of Laos to the French domain. He also paved the way for the pacification of northwest Tonkin thanks to an alliance with White Tai leader Deo Van Tri. He conducted a vast exploration of the mountainous regions on the fringes of the French colonial domain, directly contributing to claiming territory and defining borders with Siam, China, and British upper Burma. However, it was the scientific dimension of the venture, the *Mission Pavie*, which was to make him famous.

Officially, Pavie and his team were commissioned to go on a political reconnaissance representing France as part of a multi-lateral international border delimitation team along with the British and the Chinese. In spite of the clearly political nature of the project, valuable contributions to the ethnography of highland societies found their way into the official prose. In this regard, and unlike so many other contemporaneous ventures, it is of particular interest that the Pavie Mission was primarily composed of scholars and educated officers. Accordingly, its documents incorporated infinite details on itineraries (including maps), places visited, practicalities of the journeys, significant people met, the content of discussions with local leaders, estimations of the economic and political potential of allies, and a general political and strategic reflection. Such a fertile combination is a rarity. This explains in part why the Pavie Mission, being a reconnaissance trip to detail economic and strategic resources, has remained the richest single French contribution to the exploration of remote frontier territories and little known highland groups of Indochina.

These years under Pavie’s overall leadership involved a number of separate sub-missions headed by several of his collaborators. They resulted in ten volumes published in France between 1898 and 1903.26 The substance of the seven volumes forming the Géographie et voyages series, the most interesting series from an ethnographical point of view, was based on daily notes taken during trips by collaborators of Pavie, or even Pavie himself when he happened to be part of the expedition.

For anthropologists of the highlands, the two most interesting books of the Pavie Mission are Captain Pierre-Paul Cupet’s Voyages au Laos et dans les régions sauvages du sud-est de l’Indo-Chine [Voyages in Laos and the savage regions of southeastern Indo-China] (1900), and Voyages dans le Haut-Laos et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie [Voyages in Upper Laos and on the borders of China and Burma] by Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis (1902). Captain Cupet’s book focused on non-Kinh societies in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. As important as his text is for the ethnography of highlanders in that area, it is not related to the northern situation and will not be further commented upon here. With Lefèvre-Pontalis’ Voyages on the other hand, we are touching the core of the social space interesting this book. So who was Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis, and what did he write that was to prove so interesting?27

Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis was born and raised in an aristocratic family with his father being, in Pavie’s own words, ‘one of France’s considerable personalities’. While still studying to become a diplomat, Lefèvre-Pontalis lobbied actively to approach Pavie in the hope that he would be per-


mitted to join Pavie’s Mission in Indochina. The two men first met in Paris in 1885 several years after the Mission had started. Lefèvre-Pontalis had obtained a degree in Vietnamese and Malay languages from École des langues orientales quickly followed by another degree in Law. Pavie saw the value of this recruit and arranged for him to be attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With his mentor’s support combined with additional powerful patronage, the young diplomat was sent to Indochina in 1889 to join the Mission. He became Pavie’s personal secretary and followed him for a year from Bangkok to Phnom Penh, Saigon, Hanoi and Luang Phrabang, receiving first-hand, on-location teaching on Asian-style diplomacy.

Pavie also included in this apprenticeship deeds akin to the work of an ethnographer. In his mind, this appears to have fitted the category of ‘distractions’:

Captivating as the Mission’s work may be, I [Pavie] would soon show him [Lefèvre-Pontalis] that it also allows for distractions, for useful pass-times the voyager must seek; that walking on paths or near creeks bordered with luxurious vegetation presents to the traveller’s eyes elements for the most interesting of natural histories; that one can, without even slowing down as it were, collect curious plants, shells and shiny insects; that the caravan’s indigenes are skilled in catching, dead or alive, birds, fish, and small animals of all kinds; that there is no better way to make pleasant and fruitful the rest periods and the evenings spent in villages inhabited by peoples of all origins than to carry out, by interrogating the elders, research started by our predecessors and which can be, for a long time ahead, productive in terms of documents on the past, mores, customs, languages and folklore. […] All these occupations I undertook myself with pleasure and was happy to introduce to him in turn.28

Promoted to head of sub-missions, Lefèvre-Pontalis had the opportunity to explore upper Tonkin, upper northern Laos, and southern Yunnan over two trips separated by two years. His specific commission for these journeys was to map the periphery of the French colonial domain, make contact with local leaders, and conceive of a strategic use for the populations and places visited. He was also to target good economic potentials, and imagine the possible organisation of trade networks that could root and support the profitable expansion of French commerce on these frontiers.29

29 This would in time include the production and trade of salt, silk, cotton, beeswax,
The first, briefer trip unfolded from April to June 1891; the second lasted ten months from June 1894 to March 1895. Léfèvre-Pontalis' trips were made in the company and under the guidance of Deo Van Tri, the White Tai leader of the *Sip Song Chau Tai*, his family's feudal domain in the upper basin of the Black River in Tonkin. This established jurisdiction had been recognised by France in a treaty signed on a visit by Pavie in April 1889 which resulted in the political and military submission of the Deo family to the French colonial authority, bringing an end to the staunch armed opposition by the Tai ongoing since the colonials had first set foot in Tonkin in 1873.

With Deo Van Tri and his men, Léfèvre-Pontalis visited most of the main valleys of upper northern Laos, parts of the Tai Lue domain of *Sip Song Phan Na* in southern Yunnan, a section of eastern Burma on the right bank of the Mekong river, and nearly all of the *Sip Song Chau Tai* stronghold in Tonkin. He also navigated the Black River up and down to Hanoi several times. The diplomat went up the Mekong to check the application of the 1893 border treaty with Siam and to explore the Nam Ta River, its population and resources. He joined the multilateral commission in charge of setting the borders separating China from French Indochina between the Mekong and the Red River, and the Anglo-French border commission in western Laos set up to draw a mutually agreeable limit between the two colonial domains at the only point in the Far East where they actually touched. One can see without difficulty that with such an extensive coverage of the southern Southeast Asian massif coupled with language skills and *in situ* training, Léfèvre-Pontalis became the most significant French ethnographer of that era on the northern highlands of Indochina.

Two-thirds of his writings in *Voyages dans le Haut-Laos et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie* relate to his second trip. This is in a way unfortunate. On his second journey, it is a more mature diplomat who revealed himself, one who had gained in experience, confidence and authority, busier than before with the promotion of France’s interests among the local population. He held audiences, reprimanded local leaders, delivered passports, and saw to the enforcement of treaties. He encouraged the consolidation of existing trade networks and marketplaces that were
of interest to France’s political and economic ambitions in the region. In the evenings, around the fire, the little time left that could have been used for the “useful pass-time” of interrogating elders, was spent instead on strategic discussions with fellow Frenchmen and local allies. In this second trip, Lefèvre-Pontalis had come as the political arm of the conqueror, and he intended to leave those encountering him in no doubt about it. As a consequence, the space given to the description of the highlanders and their societies shrunk markedly from the first trip, leaving less to ponder in terms of interesting ethnography. Focused on the people whose authority had to be tamed, clipped, or won to the colonial cause, Lefèvre-Pontalis forgot about the unimportant people carrying little political weight.

The ethnographic material *Voyages* contains is thus of uneven value. For most of the book, it is mingled with a prolific prose. Provided that enough energy is devoted to the task, the reader can extract facts about, and learn valuable information on, the inhabitants of the mountainous area, in particular on the complex political situation linking together, or pitching against each other the many local groups. The same applies to the relationships between local groups and the regional powers in the surrounding mid- and lowlands.

A decisive factor that helped Lefèvre-Pontalis to nevertheless competently conduct first-hand observations of highland commerce and politics was the presence in his caravan of Deo Van Tri and his men. With a legacy built from years of Tai feudalism, tough politics, and occasional banditry that Deo’s family took part in around these mountains, the White Tai had long been a force to be reckoned with on regional trade circuits. Of course, the trip publicly displayed the commitment to the French cause of Deo Van Tri, which was certainly Pavie’s strategic goal. Yet, it was also a golden opportunity for the White Tai leader to visit distant trade partners in prestigious and powerful company and make progress on ancient deals, renew alliances, and secure new ones in less familiar areas visited by the expedition in this time of fresh peace.

Lefèvre-Pontalis tells us that verywhere the French-Tai caravan went, the White Tai chief was feared and respected. Lefèvre-Pontalis paid a great deal of attention to these encounters, eager as he was to understand local politics and a history that the French were still discovering. He liked to take part in the discussions held by Deo Van Tri and his trade partners. From this vantage point, he could ascertain the layout of regional power relations. He could for instance tell that the relationship between the White Tai and the
other Tai-speaking groups in the region, in particular the Lao, Shan, Youne and Lue, was generally good enough to partake in common and profitable trade networks. These networks, in particular, were regarding an all-important merchandise, salt, brought from the Delta through regular river convoys on the Black River. He learned about ancient alliances and feuds that could have an impact on the enforcement of colonial rule. He mentioned that the Black Tai, whose territory was centred on the Dien Bien Phu plateau and the middle Black River valley, were loathed by the White Tai who considered the former to be stupid and cowardly.\footnote{Incidentally, proof of this long term inimity continued to be found until the time of the Dien Bien Phu campaign of 1953-54. Cf. McAlister, John T., Jr. “Mountain Minorities and the Viet Mīnh: A Key to the Indochina War.” In Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations, ed. Peter Kunstadter. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967; Michaud, Jean. “The Montagnards in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975. A Historical Overview from Exogenous Sources.” Ethnohistory, vol. 47, no. 2, 2000.} Around Muong Sing in upper Laos, the Tai Youne resented their northern cousins the Lue, who had invaded them on many occasions and were still posing a threat in the late 19th century. In Xieng Khong on the Mekong, the Youne paid tribute to the Nan principality for fear of military exactions they had often endured before, and this tributary relationship infuriated the Lao of Luang Phrabang who claimed lordship over Xieng Khong. As for the non-Tai groups, Lefèvre-Pontalis consistently depicted them as clients of one or several nearby Tai groups who had long used them as coolies (he names the Asong, Ounhi and Lolo), farmers (the Yao, Meo, Lolo), trade partners, or providers of food when a caravan crossed a village.\footnote{Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Voyage dans le Haut-Laos*, Chapter IV, ‘Chez les Khas Kouen’, and chapter X, ‘Chez les Mou-See’.} Reading *Voyages*, one is actually left with the lasting sense that the non-Tai highland groups had little else in common with each other than to live in the upland jungle in precariousness and poverty, and that they existed in a state of economic and political dependency, even exploitation, by the feudal Tai groups.\footnote{“In the end, it is the eternal question of the Thai exploiting the Kha and trying to appropriate their labour at the cheapest cost.” Ibid., 286.} Lefèvre-Pontalis noted that these non-Tai highland groups were on a course of irreversible linguistic and cultural assimilation to the Tai, and the lower geographically the location of their villages, the faster the pace. Such examples, and many more contained in *Voyages*, offer a unique window onto the social relationships of power and commerce amongst Tai principalities in the mountains of the Peninsula.
All things considered, one is led to think, reading *Voyages*, that, assuming Lefèvre-Pontalis was genuinely interested in conducting ethnography, the tone that he used in his accounts certainly has him fit nicely with what George W. Stocking Jr. called the benevolent colonial administrative despot as ethnographer. Still, our man was a rare breed. Of all the forty or so French officers, diplomats, administrators, physicians and other scholars who joined the Pavie Mission over its 16 year life, Lefèvre-Pontalis is the only one who published independent pieces devoted specifically to the ethnography of the peoples living in the remote regions that were visited. Why did he endeavour to write and publish this? Did he conceive of himself as being particularly well equipped to deal with issues such as language, taxonomy, culture and history of exotic peoples? Perhaps not. In a time when French professional anthropology was still a few decades away, a task involving fieldwork in the remotest possible locations an educated European could conceive of, was of immense appeal to whoever fancied the intellectual challenge. Lefèvre-Pontalis was simply a suitably prepared man finding himself in the right place at the right time. He had studied Vietnamese and Malay languages, true, though hardly any highland language. In terms of his acquaintance with the relevant literature of the time, he mentions that when preparing for his missions in Paris, he had read Alexander Colquhoun and British administrator Lord Lamington, and was familiar with the published works of fellow French explorers and officials such as Doudart de Lagrée and Garnier, Henri Mouhot, and medical doctors Harmand and Paul-Marie Néis. Later, he read dozens of additional authors to underpin his analysis in further publications. This may be just about the best that can be expected from a non-professional anthropologist at a time when direct experience of ethnographic techniques was by and large the only way to learn the trade.

33 In addition to *Voyages*, he published in the *Journal asiatique* and *T'oung Pao* respectively the two “Notes sur quelques populations du nord de l’Indo-Chine” (1892 and 1896 mentioned above), and two papers on “L’invasion Thaïe en Indochine” (1897 and 1909). He also published a volume titled *Populations du Nord de l’Indo-Chine* (1897) and a few pamphlets on the Kha and the Youne. It would be fair, however, to also acknowledge attempts by two other fellow members of the Pavie Mission, one by Joseph Vacle in his input to volume Two of the Mission’s *Géographie et Voyages* series; and, in addition to a participation in volume 4, one by Capitaine Armand-Joseph Rivière: “Notes sur les Méos et sur le commerce du Mékong” published in 1893–94 in *Annales de Géographie*.

34 On his first trip, any form of Tai, for instance, was by and large alien to him. He confessed conferring with Deo Van Tri using some composite tongue mixing hand signs, Vietnamese, French and only a few words of Tai.
And finally for this chapter, at about the same time as Pavie and Lefèvre-Pontalis were on their first joint journey in Indochina, it is not superfluous to mention a French aristocrat who followed in Pavie’s footsteps of 1888 along the Black River, the Nam Ou, and the Mekong River, and went on to explore western Yunnan and Assam. Prince Henri-Philippe-Marie d’Orléans, directly related to the heir to the throne of France, not being able to find a comfortable place there under the Republic, had been refused the possibility of a high-flying career in the French military and turned to less orthodox means to prove himself. He published extensively on his travels through Indochina and has been credited with ‘discovering’ the sources of the Irrawaddy River. What he left in terms of ethnography of the peoples he met during his journey, notably in an account published in 1894, amounts to some reasonably well informed discussions on similarities in vocabulary between different groups. To Hmong specialists, one attractive contribution of his venture was the fact that he reported having met no representative of the Miao-tze—today’s Miao and Hmong—on his journey. This supports the hypothesis that that group had not, at least at that time, yet used the route through western Yunnan to eventually enter Burma and Thailand.35

Having completed this short survey of secular authors, it is now time to meet missionary authors and enter the specific history of missionary expansion in highland Tonkin as well as the particular history of the Upper Tonkin MEP vicariate. As such, this will go a long way in revealing the administrative and, arguably, intellectual space within which the conceiving of upland cultures and identities took place.