PART ONE

SETTING THE SCENE
CHAPTER ONE
MISSIONARY ETHNOGRAPHERS
IN AND AROUND TONKIN

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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