

**'Highland' Epics of 'Lowland' Ancestry?
A State Project of Ethnic Solidarity as Window to Regional Consciousness**

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A Brief Note on Source Material and Translations

Hatcher Graduate Library currently houses 63 volumes of the "Treasury of Central Highland Epics" (*Kho tàng Sử thi Tây Nguyên*). Of those 63, only three ethnic groups are represented: Bahnar (17 volumes), Ede/ Rhadé (9 volumes), and M'Nong (37 volumes).

All translations from Vietnamese to English are those of the author unless otherwise specified.

Introduction

*The historical method of serialization by which events are arranged in their time sequence is of no concern to the folk narrator. He is usually more subjective and partial in his interpretation of what happened and consequently more human.*¹

In early 2001, the Vietnamese government invested almost one million dollars in a project to record, translate, and publish what had been up to that point orally-reproduced folktales and epics from the country's Central Highlands.² The resulting publication of (at the time of this writing) sixty-three volumes of tales are attributed to three state-recognized ethnic groups: the Bahnar, the Ede/ Rhadé, and the M'Nong. For the purposes of this paper, I concern myself only with those volumes attributed to the Bahnar of Kontum and Gia Lai Provinces in the northwest area of the Central Highlands, near the Vietnamese borders with Cambodia and present-day Attapeu Province, Laos.

The purpose of this paper is to consider both the content and aesthetic production of these volumes in light of Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) projects of ethico-political³ and ethnic consciousness consolidation since the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975. The politics and repercussions of folklorization and “selective preservation,”⁴ epitomized by the publication of such volumes, are both important elements of the analysis provided below. Such structural conditions, however, ought not be understood as exhibiting unfettered dominance over those living in the region, or of having robbed an abstracted 'highlander' of a past, quasi-utopian world

¹ Arthur Campa, “Folklore and History,” *Western Folklore* 24, no. 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 4

² Oscar Salemink “Appropriating Culture: The Politics of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Vietnam” in *State, Society and the Market in Contemporary Vietnam: Property, Power and Values* (Hue-Tam Ho Tai & M. Sidel, Eds.), (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 170

³ Webb Keane, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories*, (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), chap. 7

⁴ Oscar Salemink, “Sedentarization and Selective Preservation among the Montagnards in the Vietnamese Central Highlands” in (J. Michaud, Ed.), *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), pp. 124-48; see also Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 276-79

as much sympathetic scholarship on the region seems to contend. A voiced “desire for modernity,” cloaked in developmentalist rhetoric, is common in the post-revolutionary state, including the Central Highlands.⁵ The agential figures who give voice to such desires do not bemoan having lost a “collectivist moral economy;”⁶ they instead invest their time and effort in attempting to improve their lives according to, at least in the present, high modernist economic realities and/or ideals.

In its treatment of ethnicity, this paper aligns well with recent work questioning the utility of highland-lowland binaries in scholarship on the region.⁷ Taking seriously the *longue durée* of the region, this paper grounds its consideration of ethnicity in the Central Highlands in historical epochs ranging from the Kingdom of Campā (Champa) to the present-day. Although other scholars also make reference to the data cited here, their efforts seldom seem to prevent most of them from falling into the same trap they, too, sought to avoid. The romanticization of the ‘highlander’ by outside observers, which virtually always takes the form of a deep-seated pity for some special lifestyle lost, detaches these inherently mutable subjects from often carefully-reconstructed historical contexts, and instead reattaches them to hegemonic tropes which prove difficult to escape. Admittedly, maintaining a firm grasp on the historical arc to which this paper refers proves a tall order, particularly given the project’s concerns with relatively recent political activities in the region. Nonetheless, it remains important to draw out in detail, even if terms such as ‘lowlander’ and ‘highlander’ prove relatively useful for both clarity’s and brevity’s sake.

The politics of ethnicity inevitably lead into ethical questions regarding the publication and even instrumentalization of the collected epics in question. What do these works actually

⁵ Oscar Salemink, “Revolutionary and Christian Ecumenes and Desire for Modernity in the Vietnamese Highlands” in *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (2015), p. 395

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394

⁷ William Noseworthy, “Lowland Participation in the Irredentist ‘Highlands Liberation Movement’ in Vietnam, 1955-1975” in *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013)

represent? What stories do they actually tell and to what end? Into which tropes about ‘highlanders’ do they feed? The answer to this second question is actually quite simple for the sake of this project, which takes specific aim at the trope of violence associated with the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands. As discussed in the section below on the Bahnar epic cycle, there is hardly a more common theme than that of warfare in any and all of the volumes printed by the government in Hanoi to this date. Nuances of this latter point inspired the methodology chosen for this paper’s approach to folklore, which takes as its starting point a Gramscian perspective of folklore production/circulation, as well as its association with alleged class and (here especially) ethnic consciousness. In this vein, this project also takes as its inspiration Stephen Olbrys Gencarella’s work on what he calls Gramscian-based “critical folklore studies,”⁸ which seemingly echoes elements of Ann Laura Stoler’s calls for critical (re)engagement with colonial archives.⁹ According to Gencarella:

Gramscian-inspired folklore studies would move beyond description to more overtly political analyses, and then to intervention. They might focus, for example, on folkloric phenomena in competition with other expressive forms; examine folklore’s negotiation between the local and the State; analyze its educative or formative roles in identity construction; determine its ‘location’ at the center or periphery of hegemonic struggle; follow its influences, both geographic and intellectual; engage its challenge to particular ideologies; or examine counter-hegemonic and ‘subterranean tactics of resistance.’¹⁰

This paper does not address even half of the considerations listed above and certainly should not be considered as yet another intervention into the relatively well-tread field of resistance studies. Although the contributions of James Scott, Michel de Certeau, and even Ranajit Guha all significantly influence this study, my principal interest is in the aesthetics of the volumes’ production, and in those few conjectural hypotheses that can be made about political identity formation given my relatively short time in the region, and given the limited amount of recently-

⁸ Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, “Gramsci, Good Sense, and Critical Folklore Studies” in *Journal of Folklore Research* 47, no. 3 (September-December 2010), pp. 221-52

⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 87-109

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-38

published resources at hand. It follows, therefore, that the section of this paper in conversation with a ‘critical folklore studies’ indeed asks more questions than it answers and ought to be understood as a springboard of sorts for future studies of these epics and their Bahnar reciters.

Given the relative paucity¹¹ of ethnographic material on the Kontum region (with the exception of a handful of Vietnamese anthropologists whose works, as Oscar Salemink and Grant Evans contend¹², are far from satisfactory), it is my hope that this project will ultimately help contribute to wider scholarship on the region by entering into conversation with an as-yet-unaddressed (in English) feature of local highland custom. To this end, this paper is divided into four major sections. After this introduction, I provide an historical and ethnographic survey of the Central Highlands, starting from a broad picture and eventually zooming down into material about the Bahnar more specifically. This initial section has three principal purposes: the first is to provide a requisite historical and ethnographic background of the region in order to ground the reader in the region’s geographies. Next, the section will problematize the highland-lowland dichotomy and spark questions as to the (1) accuracy of such terms, and (2) limiting factors triggered by their utilization. Finally, the section will also simultaneously paint a picture of the “tribalization” or “ethnicization”¹³ of the people inhabiting region through successive, paternalistic state projects, setting the stage for the considerations of ethnic identity and consciousness provided later in the paper.

In the third section, I engage in greater detail with the production and content of the

¹¹ Philip Taylor, "Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam" in (P Taylor, Ed.), *Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam*, (Philip Taylor, Ed.), (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), p. 27

¹² See for example Grant Evans, “Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam” in *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 288; also Salemink (2003), chap. 8

¹³ Oscar Salemink, “Embodying the Nation: Mediumship, Ritual, and the National Imagination” in (P. Taylor, Ed.), *Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam*, (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), p. 265; see also Scott (2009), chap. 7

Bahnar epics which ultimately served to inspire this project. It should be emphasized upfront that this engagement with what might be considered primary source material is, in fact, an engagement thrice-removed by a series of transcriptions and translations. That the Vietnamese government has a heavy hand in the censorship of printed materials is not new information and will not be addressed in further detail here. Suffice it to say, picking up any book published in Vietnam demands a healthy dose of skepticism, though this should not spill into outright cynicism—even the most censored volumes tell stories. In this vein, this project also takes seriously an academic source produced about the epics, which was published in 2006 by Phan Thị Hồng, a professor at the University of Đà Lạt.¹⁴ Her extensive fieldwork in Kontum among the Bahnar reciters of the epics yielded a series of motifs, the majority of which I saw in my own readings of the epics, which serve to anchor the section's overall analysis.

Finally, before offering some preliminary conclusions and recommendations for future research, the paper will engage in an application of Gencarella's ideas on critical folklore studies, as described in greater detail above.

Historical and Ethnographic Survey

The Central Highlands of Vietnam (Tây Nguyên) spans five provinces: Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, Gia Lai, Kontum, and Lâm Đồng. According to Salemink, "of the 54 [officially recognized] ethnic groups in Vietnam, 19 belong to the indigenous population of the Central Highlands [and its environs]."¹⁵ Ito Masako, in her important contribution to the study of ethnicity in Vietnam, lists the criteria used by the SRV during its nationwide classification of these and other ethnic groups as follows: "(1) [a common] language, (2) lifestyle and cultural

¹⁴ Phan Thị Hồng, *Nhóm Sĩ thi Dân tộc Bahnar*, (Hà Nội & Hồ Chí Minh: Trung tâm Nghiên cứu Quốc học, 2006); see also Tran Thi Phuong, "The Bahnar [sic] Epic Cycle in Kontum," (publication date unknown), accessed 7 July 2015 at: <http://www.harvard-yenching.org/features/banhar-epic-cycle-kontum>

¹⁵ Salemink (2003), p. 29

characteristics, and (3) ethnic self-consciousness (*ý thức tự giác dân tộc*).¹⁶ I will specifically address the latter criteria in greater detail at the end of this section. According to classical ethnology, the region's ethnic minorities speak languages of either the Malayo-Polynesian (e.g. the Jarai, Rhadé, and Cham) or the Mon-Khmer (e.g. the M'Nong, Bahnar, and Cambodians) stocks.¹⁷ The former group are sometimes referred to as "Chamic" languages,¹⁸ a point to which we will return shortly. Of note, a problem for ethnic classification arises, however, when individuals of ethnic groups speak languages from both genealogies, as identified by Salemink.¹⁹

A hotbed of both domestic and international political contestation to this day,²⁰ the region continues to see its insular history (as recounted by French, American, and Vietnamese sources) indisputably complicated, most recently by new scholarship on the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Campā in south and central Vietnam.²¹ One result of this new material is that the region can no longer be viewed strictly as but part of an expansive, largely mountainous territorial swathe home to dispersed 'nomadic' ethnic groups at constant pains to avoid the state and its precursors (as literature on the 'Zomia'²² suggests); nor should it be understood as simply a space, in more

¹⁶ Ito Masako (Minako Sato, Trans.), *Politics of Ethnic Classification in Vietnam*, (Kyoto & Melbourne: Kyoto University Press & Trans Pacific Press, 2013), p. 32

¹⁷ Gerald Hickey, *The Major Ethnic Groups of the Southeast Vietnamese Highlands*, (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation Memorandum RM-4041-ARPA, 1964), p. 3

¹⁸ Gérard Diffloth, "The Westward Expansion of Chamic Influence in Indochina: A View from Historical Linguistics" in Trần Kỳ Phương & Bruce Lockhart (Eds.), *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), p. 348

¹⁹ Salemink (2003), p. 31

²⁰ In just April of this year, Joshua Simonidis wrote a brief for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC about the Cambodian government's expulsion of Jarai refugees from the Central Highlands back to Vietnam who were fleeing religious persecution. The story was corroborated by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) out of Brussels, which added that the Cambodian government regularly prevents Montagnard refugees from meeting with members of the UN in Cambodia who, by international law, would have to take them in. For more, see Joshua Simonidis, "Pay to Stay: Cambodia's Refugee Policy," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, April 26, 2015, (<http://cogitasia.com/pay-to-stay-cambodias-refugee-policy/>); also "Degar-Montagnards: Deportation of 36 Refugees to Vietnam," Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), March 2, 2015, (<http://unpo.org/article/18000>)

²¹ See for example Trần Kỳ Phương & Bruce Lockhart (Eds.), *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011); also Philip Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Periphery*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007)

²² See Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia" in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 20nd Planning D: Society and Space 20* (2002), 647-68;

modern times, that stands idly by in anticipation of the arrival of 'lowland' or 'valley' influence in the form of developmentalist projects, ethnic Kinh cultural and linguistic inputs, and at times outright physical violence.²³ This is not to say that the data underlying such theses should be discarded *in toto*. The point, rather, is that the abstracted binaries that arise from these discourses—those of highland-lowland and primitive-modern, most especially—hardly prove as clear-cut as some scholarly literature and, more importantly, Vietnamese official state discourse indicates. An understanding and acknowledgement of as much is not a novel point of view, but putting this knowledge into practice obviously remains a challenge for scholars and policymakers alike, and continues to block pathways to richer analysis of the region.

With these considerations in mind, this section aims to successfully introduce the region to the reader in three ways: (1) to provide an historical, ethnolinguistic, and economic contextualization of the region, with an eventual focus on the Bahnar ethnic group more specifically; (2) to emphasize those elements in the literature which problematizes commonly-held assumptions about highland-lowland interaction in the region, and also the pervasiveness of violence in the highlands more-broadly; and (3) to draw-out implications of the evolution of ethnicity under the purview of multiple state projects in the Central Highlands, a consideration of which helps to pave the way for the subsequent sections' considerations of the Bahnar epics and questions of ethnic consciousness.

The historical survey presented here begins with a discussion of the Kingdom of Campā for several reasons. First, as explored below, ties between the polity and the ethnolinguistic groups of the Central Highlands dates back centuries, though opinions as to the nature of that

see also James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale, 2009)

²³ Gerald Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*, (New Haven: Yale, 1982a), 118

relationship differ considerably among scholars of the period. Second, and perhaps more important to this project's themes, Campā seemingly had all of the characteristics of a 'lowland' or 'valley' state (this, at least, according to Georges Maspero's classic work on the polity²⁴): it boasted a series of a lone rulers or kings, practiced sedentary agriculture (at least in most parts), included (relatively) dense population centers, laid claim to important coastal hubs of international commerce, maintained the ability to raise armies large enough to wage war (both offensively and defensively) against neighboring polities, and of course produced large "pile[s] of rubble"²⁵ to serve as evidence of its past glory at Mỹ Sơn and elsewhere. Though boasting such characteristics, some scholarship (again, cited below) posits that not only did Campā maintain regular contact with various ethnolinguistic groups of the Central Highlands, it was in fact a multi-ethnic polity itself. Thus, at the outset, a methodological separation between 'highlander' and 'lowlander' becomes problematic. Scott emphasizes the importance of mobility to those living in what he calls "shatter zones,"²⁶ which includes the Central Highlands of Vietnam. But even he admits that this movement occurs in directions both away from the state (in the form of evasion), and back into its fold in order to participate in trade or other programs considered beneficial (or even necessary). According to Scott, "[t]he dichotomy between hill and valley is established by the historical fact of flight from the lowland state by a portion of its population."²⁷ But how is this dichotomy maintained given such constant movement and interaction?

According to Hickey, trade between the Cham and the highlanders was common throughout the region's recorded history: "those adjacent to the coastal plain [traded] with the

²⁴ Bruce Lockhart, "Colonial and Post-Colonial Constructions of 'Champa'" in Trần Kỳ Phương & Bruce Lockhart (Eds.), *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), pp. 9-24

²⁵ Scott (2009), p. 33

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7 and elsewhere

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136

Cham and Vietnamese; those on the western side of the Annam Cordillera with the Khmer, Lao, and Chinese."²⁸ In fact, he attributes much of Campā's wealth to the goods it was able to acquire from the "hinterland"²⁹ for export abroad: "elephants and rhinoceros . . . cardamom, wax, lacquer, and resins,"³⁰ among other products. Linguistic studies also lend support to these claims. Alison Diem, in her essay on ceramic evidence of Cham trade with polities ranging from China to the island of Borneo, cites linguistic evidence of Cham commercial activities in the highlands such as an "observation [by the French polyglot, Martine Piat]³¹ that twentieth-century Austronesian- [or Chamic-] speaking cultures in the Vietnamese Central Highlands, such as the Raglai [sic] and Jarai, use the phrase 'the sun plunges into the sea'" to describe a sunset—yet the ocean is not visible from the highlands and the sun does not set to the east of the Vietnamese coastline."³² Later in the same volume, Gérard Diffloth cites further linguistic evidence which proves more germane to the specifics of this project. Referring to the influence Chamic languages seemingly held over other language groups in the highlands, Bahnaric among them, Diffloth writes:

As a final remark, it is important to notice the meanings which Chamic borrowings into Bahnaric and Katuic tend to have, as this could tell us something about the sorts of social contacts which made these borrowings possible. Predictably, there are some items of trade (plates, cups, needles); simple

²⁸ Hickey (1982a), p. 28

²⁹ Ibid., p. 115

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ As an aside, not much information is available as to who Martine Piat was and what brought her to mainland Southeast Asia during the 1970's. An obscure obituary, written in French, alleges that she died while on hunger strike in Saigon shortly after the SRV's victory over the South (<http://www.aafv.org/1975-martine-piat>). In his memoir, Gerald Hickey mentions meeting her in Phnom Penh in September 1972: "At the Terrace of La Taverne we ran into Martine Piat who thought I might be interested in some historical documents concerning tributary relations between the Khmer rulers and the Jarai King of Fire she had found at the nearby archives of the Commission des Moeurs et Coutumes du Cambodge in the Buddhist Institute. She gave me the name of Madame Pich Sal who had translated them from Khmer into French." (for more, see Gerald Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict*, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 2002), pp. 335-36). On a personal note, the rendezvous he describes reminds me of one of my own, meeting with Grant Evans in the lobby of the Settha Palace Hotel in Vientiane just months before he passed away from cancer on September 16, 2014 (<http://laos.embassy.gov.au/files/vtan/Prof%20Dr%20Grant%20Evans%201948-2014%20-%20the%20Loss%20of%20a%20National%20Treasure.pdf>).

³² Alison Diem, "The Significance of Ceramic Evidence for Assessing Contacts between Vijaya and Other Southeast Asian Polities in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century" in Trần Kỳ Phương & Bruce Lockhart (Eds.), *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), p. 221

technology (rafts, planks, walls, fences); and actions indicating commerce (to buy, to borrow, to reimburse). *However, on the whole these remain in the minority.* More prominent are items of everyday life: plants and animals which are rather common and not especially exotic (leeches, crocodiles, shrimps, snails, fleas, cucumbers, sugarcane, some varieties of bamboo, flowers; natural phenomena (storms, lightning, wind, lakes); animistic concerns (spirit, corpse, taboo, to be possessed); and even body parts (bones, chest, veins, forehead, lips). [emphasis added] ³³

In identifying such ‘everyday’ words shared by the two language groups, Diffloth concludes his article by positing that Chamic languages’ suffusion throughout Bahnaric-speaking ethnic groups was not a product of “domination,” but it rather “suggest[s] situations of equality and familiarity.”³⁴

This final insight is of key importance when considering the trope of violence associated with the highlands, for two reasons. First, assuming Diffloth is right in his own hypothesis that the “borrowings came into Mon-Khmer societies mostly via the Highland-Chamic communities [i.e. the Jarai and/or Roglai] with whom they could easily relate,”³⁵ then this casts some doubt on conclusions reached by scholars from France, the U.S., and Vietnam alike: mainly, that without hegemonic state intervention (whether French, American, South Vietnamese, or based out of Hanoi) the highlands tended to devolve into some natural state of constant warfare. Hickey, in a relatively short Rand Corporation memorandum, found space to cite a 1955 article by Bernard Bourotte in which the Frenchman alleges seemingly continuous inter-highlander warfare and slave raiding in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.³⁶ “Big men” did rise in prowess and engage in slave raiding, but as Salemink writes, these men “were never absolute masters—not even within their own village or family,”³⁷ making constant warfare impossible. It may be argued that evidence for such a perpetual state of conflict within the confines of the Central Highlands is in fact largely anecdotal and cited only to lend support to discourses aimed

³³ Diffloth, p. 360

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hickey (1964), pp. 19-21

³⁷ Salemink (2003), p. 35

at differentiating opaque, ‘savage’ spaces on the colonial periphery, from those spaces boasting legible ‘civilization.’ Scott, of course, picks up on this, in his discussion of the “friction of distance,” or the difficulties of conducting military operations in mountains, dense forests or the like.³⁸ But where he emphasizes the utility of such terrain in defensive warfare, he misses a key imaginary that affected the agents of the state who would attempt to penetrate it—namely the terror of the unknown or unseen. These spaces generated a certain affect in the authorities that simultaneously required coercive penetration (though usually not overwhelming in nature), as well as the creation of a discourse which placed the space and its inhabitants within a longer story of civilizational evolution. These ‘violent brutes,’ who had not yet been given a chance at an education and cultural betterment, simply needed the steering only the state could provide. As Scott and others note, however, such schemes were and are hardly ever entirely successful in achieving their stated goals.³⁹

This sentiment, not surprisingly, made its way into the historiography of Campā. Picking up on Maspero’s depiction of Campā as a coherent polity, adherents to the “‘Hanoi Champa’ perspective,”⁴⁰ such as Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa, make the argument that “even though Cham expansion into the upland areas may have been motivated by the region’s economic resources, *ultimately it benefited the various ethnic groups living under their influence*” [emphasis added].⁴¹ This elitist perspective in fact drives Vietnamese policies in the region to this day. The SRV, through its programs of sedentarization and the establishment of New Economic Zones at the end of the war in 1975,⁴² might be seen taking up the mantle not only of Campā, but also that of the

³⁸ Scott (2009), pp. 165-67

³⁹ Taylor (2008), p. 10; see also James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998)

⁴⁰ Lockhart, p. 20

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

⁴² See Evans, “Internal Colonialism”

French colonial authority in the region some five hundred years later:

By cataloging and preserving monuments and other works of art, the French were 'rescuing' whole civilizations whose own members were no longer capable of doing so.⁴³

And here, Philip Taylor brings the same phenomenon into the present:

These modern depictions of the ethnic minorities, with their multitude of gross disadvantages, overlap uncannily with the premodern vision in lowland Vietnamese courts of those Others who lived in the inhospitable mountains and fringes of civilization, as barbarians [*man*], savages [*mọi*], and uncultured beings. *One might readily surmise that poverty has become the new barbarism, illiteracy the new savagery, remoteness the new wildness: that development is nothing other than new rhetoric for age-old chauvinistic and paternalist assumptions.* [emphasis added]⁴⁴

At this point, it should be clear that the Central Highlands must be understood as part and parcel of a wider network of economic activity connecting its populations, however indirectly, to more cosmopolitan coastal and inland commercial centers, a trend which according to Hickey began as early as the fourth century CE.⁴⁵

The narrative of Cham-Highlander interaction, however, does not end on the subject of trade alone. Its history was further enriched by more recent "revisionist"⁴⁶ historical work on the region. Writing in 1993, Jacques Népote, according to Bruce Lockhart, "places the 'territorial center' of 'Champa' somewhere around the Highlands town of Pleiku, well away from the coastal centers,"⁴⁷ in fact in the vicinity of the present-day provincial capital of Gia Lai Province.

Lockhart, this time citing Bernard Gay, writes that some "[m]odern Cham texts show that several kings and high-ranking dignitaries were not ethnically Cham, but were of highland origin, notably Roglai and Chru,"⁴⁸ lending support to the theory of a multi-ethnic Campā as mentioned before. However, in the same volume Michael Vickery cites other linguistic analytical advances

⁴³ Lockhart, p. 33

⁴⁴ Taylor (2008), p. 17

⁴⁵ Hickey (1982a), p. 115

⁴⁶ Lockhart, pp. 28-31

⁴⁷ Jacques Népote, "Champa, propositions pour une histoire de temps long" in *Péninsule*, Vol. 26 (1993), 7fn; cited in Lockhart, p. 30

⁴⁸ Ibid.

which, he posits, call the timelines underlying other theses of a polyethnic "ancient Champa"⁴⁹ into question. The date Chams arrived south of modern-day Huế, according to Vickery, indicates that "Jarai, Rhadé, Chru, Roglai and any other Austronesian languages in *late* Champa and Vietnam developed out of Cham, and were probably not distinct languages during the period of classical Champa up to the fifteenth century" [emphasis added].⁵⁰ This, of course, does not outright disqualify Gay's or others' arguments—Vickery's conclusion may also be interpreted as simply lending further support to wider hypotheses surrounding extended Cham contact with numerous ethnic minority groups that predated them in the region.

The question, perhaps, is how any of this applies to a textual analysis of Bahnar epics, an ethnic minority group on which I have spent very little time introducing. Rather than regurgitate ethnographic material which will only serve to fit the Bahnar easily into the mold of 'highlander,' it is more useful to problematize the category of 'Bahnar' instead. I will do this in two ways. The first, and perhaps most straightforward, is to engage with those points in the ethnographic literature where things tend to get muddled, specifically with regard to the problem of the subgroup. Hickey introduces upwards of twenty different Bahnar subgroups, all located in a territory the size of South Carolina: Alakong, Tolo, Bahnar Bonom, Bahnar Golar, Bahnar To Sung, Bahnar Kontum, Jolong, Bahnar Ho Drong, Bahnar Krem, Bahnar Kon Do De, Hruai, Konko, Roh, Monam, and others.⁵¹ According to some, even the Rengao are a subgroup of Bahnar and do not constitute their own ethnic group.⁵² In fact, with regards to the 54 recognized

⁴⁹ Michael Vickery, "Champa Revised" in Trần Kỳ Phương & Bruce Lockhart (Eds.), *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 371. Vickery is here, of course, in conversation with the standard characterization of the language families found in the region. According to Saleminck, "languages spoken in the Central Highlands are commonly divided into two major language families: Austroasiatic (or Mon-Khmer, of which Vietnamese is considered a branch as well) and Austronesian (or Malayo-Polynesian, related to the various Malay languages)" (2003, p. 31).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 371-72

⁵¹ Hickey (1982a), pp. 13-15

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 14; see also Frank Lebar, Gerald Hickey & John Musgrave, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964), p. 145

ethnic groups in Vietnam mentioned earlier, ethnic labels such as these are regularly contested by those given them. Both Masako⁵³ and Salemink⁵⁴ write of how these classifications have, at various times, been viewed by segments of the highland population as overly-simplified on linguistic and cultural grounds, leading to outright demands for full recognition of some "subgroups or local groups"⁵⁵ by the government as recently as in 1999. As Masako writes, being recognized by the state as a separate ethnic group has "political and economic benefits;" a major drawback arises, however, in that "the 'revival' of ethnic self-consciousness should be initiated and guided by the Vietnamese state."⁵⁶ This subject will be discussed further below.

A second complicating factor actually comes out of my own experience in Kontum in March of last year. My principal interlocutor, who for the sake of this paper will go by the name Nam, self-identified as ethnic Bahnar although he was, in fact, half-Kinh. Why would he choose to do this? According to Hickey, the Bahnar kinship system is in fact cognatic,⁵⁷ therefore Nam presumably has no real reason to default to identifying with his mother. After all, by virtue of that decision, he ultimately becomes more susceptible to negative stereotypes, whether propagated by himself or others, and to the wholesale economic marginalization experienced by most ethnic minorities in Vietnam when compared to their ethnic Kinh neighbors.⁵⁸

It is useful, at this point, to return to the third criterion of the Vietnamese ethnic classification system cited above, that of "ethnic self-consciousness." Masako describes the efforts on the part of the Vietnamese state to not only identify these distinct ethnic self-

⁵³ Ibid., Chap. 3

⁵⁴ Salemink (2003), p. 31

⁵⁵ Masako, p. 65

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 188

⁵⁷ Hickey (1982a), p. 34

⁵⁸ Hai-Anh Dang, "Vietnam: A Widening Poverty Gap for Ethnic Minorities" in (G.H. Hall & H.A. Patrinos, Eds.), *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty, and Development*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 306

consciousnesses for classification purposes, but also to promote their "revival."⁵⁹ Such a "revival," however, was never to be autonomous; rather it was always to occur "under the 'guidance' of the Party and the state," in other words, "nurtured in accordance with the intentions of the authorities."⁶⁰ Philip Taylor eloquently summarizes Saleminck's own characterization of the bridge between French colonial policies and those of the modern Vietnamese state, indicating that these institutionalized programs of "'ethnic solidarity' (*Đoàn kết dân tộc*)"⁶¹ are hardly novel to the present:

Saleminck argues that the "tribal" identities assigned to the Central Highlanders in the colonial period were a refraction of strategic struggles for dominance. Once amorphous groups were "territorialized" and "ethnicized" to serve the imperatives of state power. Today they are folklorized and aestheticized in museum exhibits, festivals, and cultural performances, made into contemplative figures that reflect back to the state its vision of the nation as a multicolored "flower garden" or "mosaic" of ethnic cultures.⁶²

Through this 'aestheticization,' the state also perpetuates the conceptualization that "all cultural diversity is interpreted to conform [to] an evolutionary timescale, making Vietnam's minorities the Kinh's living ancestors."⁶³ Returning to Masako, she rightfully questions whether any such "self-consciousnesses" existed in the first place. The need for a "revival" stemmed, according to the Vietnamese, from ethnic self-consciousnesses having been "[extinguished] by the oppressive landed class under the feudal system or French colonial rule."⁶⁴ As Taylor's reference to Saleminck indicates above, however, the French efforts at "territorialization" and differentiation hardly worked toward homogeneity, at least initially. French policy emphasizing "tribalization" evolved largely in response to cycles of spatial pacification in the early 1930's,⁶⁵ followed shortly thereafter by a paradigmatic (mis)interpretation of a highland millenarian

⁵⁹ Masako, pp. 39-41

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 40

⁶¹ Saleminck (2003), pp. 258 & 264

⁶² Taylor (2008), p. 16

⁶³ Saleminck (2003), p. 285

⁶⁴ Masako, p. 40

⁶⁵ Saleminck (2003), pp. 100-107

movement as indicative of wider pan-highland revolt in 1937.⁶⁶ Only upon the onset of the First Indochina War did French strategic concerns impel them to revisit the underlying assumptions of their previous policies: "From tribes with different languages and cultures, inhabiting bounded territories, the Montagnards were now conceived of as fundamentally one ethnic group - despite perceived linguistic and cultural differences - opposed to major nations of Indochina, in particular the Vietnamese."⁶⁷ The consequence of this policy, artificially pitting 'highlanders' against 'lowlanders' in the Central Highlands, informed the official discourse of South Vietnamese and U.S. policies through the decades that followed, and indeed continues to do so to this day. In this vein, writing on the subject of ethnic self-consciousness, Masako concludes that "[it] was in large part a new creation of the state policies . . . the intentional result of nation-building, which was initiated from the top-down."⁶⁸

Careful consideration of such an imagined self-consciousness, and the repercussions of folklorization, are deeply important to this project, both conceptually and ethically. With regards to the former, the title of the paper indicates a goal to identify elements of what might be considered a 'regional consciousness' as refracted through state projects of 'ethnic self-consciousness.' The point is not to psychologize so much as to consider what impact, if any, the publication of these epics might reasonably be expected to have on those individuals either who either self-identify, or are identified as, Bahnar in post-revolutionary Vietnam. In the following section, I enter into an analysis of the Giông Epic Cycle of the Bahnar. This section provides detail not only of the motifs to which the stories adhere, but also considers their import to, and effect on, everyday Bahnar livelihood more broadly. This perspective does not limit itself to imaginaries of stationary peoples who never move, nor does it assume the existence of the

⁶⁶ Ibid., Chap. 4

⁶⁷ Salemink (2003), 178

⁶⁸ Masako, 40

quintessential ‘highlander’ as a nomadic "barbarian."⁶⁹ Rather, questions about self-consciousness are addressed in the closing section of this paper, wherein I engage in a critical discourse regarding this project’s utility toward future research.

The Giông Epic Cycle of the Bahnar

What is perhaps most striking about the composition of what I will call the Giông Epic Cycle of the Bahnar, or at least those relatively few stories printed to date, is a consistent combination of instances of mundane everyday life (courtship, hunting, fishing, farming, etc.) with regular instances of warfare in virtually every story. The mass majority revolve around a central hero, Giông,⁷⁰ whose traits include especially good looks, great health, a natural ability to lead, and whose generally exceptional character and important role in protecting the community earns him the loyalty of both the young and old alike.⁷¹ Tables 1, seen below, provides a list of translated titles of the 17 Bahnar epics published to date. Of note, even those tales with titles as innocuous as “Giông bundles eggs” include instances of warfare, whether offensive or defensive, and as often both. The pervasiveness of this violence will be addressed below.

The Bahnar epics are traditionally chanted or sung (*hri*⁷²), and are constructed in the form of a long poem called *h'mon*⁷³ in Bahnaric. Admittedly, my only having access to these epics in print, by not hearing them chanted in their native Bahnaric dialects, there exists precisely the threat of decontextualization, and loss of meaning to which Salemink refers in his definition of “folklorization.” For him, folklorization is the process by which "particular cultural practices are decontextualized from the cultural setting in which they acquire locally specific (social,

⁶⁹ Salemink (2003), 69

⁷⁰ Phan Thị Hồng, p. 63

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 63-67

⁷² Phan Thị Hồng, p. 31

⁷³ Ibid., 31-32

Table 1: Translated volume titles of the Giông Epic Cycle of the Bahnar. Where volumes include more than one tale, titles are separated by a semi-colon.

Vol. 1	Giông and Gió, orphaned while young
Vol. 2	Giông builds a tomb
Vol. 3	Giông goes in search of a wife
Vol. 4	Giông kidnaps Bia Phu; Giông defeats the demon Bung Lung
Vol. 5	Giông rescues hungry villagers everywhere; Giông climbs the extraordinary sugar cane stock
Vol. 6	Giông takes Kei Dei's sword and shield; Giông and Gió hunt the tiger of Dăm Hơ Dang
Vol. 7	Giông sleeps in the longhouse of an abandoned village; Giông hunts buffalo
Vol. 8	Giông strikes out to save villages downstream; Giông bundles eggs
Vol. 9	Giông destroys a boulder
Vol. 10	Brother Glang Mam; Kơ Tam Gring Mah
Vol. 11	Dăm Noi; Gió goes to climb a <i>jrang</i> tree
Vol. 12	Giông trong Yuăn (Giông-in-Kinh)
Vol. 13	Set goes to the plain to visit friends; Giông takes the women fishing
Vol. 14	Giông goes to collect a debt; Giông kills a lion in Set's village
Vol. 15	Giông marries Khi
Vol. 16	Giông venerates the mountain spirit for making him rich; Giông befriends Glaih Phang
Vol. 17	A tiger kidnaps Giông in his childhood; Bia Phu poisons Giông

economic, ritual, religious) meanings, and [are] re-contextualized for a different public for whom aesthetic meanings are paramount criteria."⁷⁴ Nita Mathur, writing of chanted narratives in India, describes the importance of such context with regards to her own work: "Researchers have long accepted that the narrative component in dramas, theatre, songs and other forms of expression enshrine the sacred knowledge, wisdom, and beliefs of people and operate within the larger

⁷⁴ Salemink (2013), p. 168

framework of social context."⁷⁵ In her own fieldwork location, Mathur observed that the music of Santhal community songs change depending on the context: for example, the songs that are performed as part of rituals, not surprisingly, sound entirely different from those which embody acts of protest.⁷⁶ The music, devoid of the actual words, serves as part and parcel to the message of each song. As for this project, the context even of recently-posted videos online of Bahnar tales being chanted⁷⁷ still remains mostly obscure given the fact that I do not speak Bahnaric. However, a key difference between the Santhal narratives and the Bahnar epics lies in the fact that the latter “are not part of a religious rite or ceremony, but can be performed and sung at any large gathering such as that following a ceremony or a celebration, at a wine party, after a hard day’s work, or at a party to welcome guests.”⁷⁸ Further, “[t]he person singing or performing the epic can be either sitting or lying down, and is not required to wear special attire.”⁷⁹ The performance of the Bahnar epics, then, take on a character of the informal, or the everyday—the singer perhaps in the end has more in common with an unemployed bard⁸⁰ than with a purveyor of esoteric knowledge.

The aesthetic character of the book, however, would seem to indicate otherwise. As seen on the next page,⁸¹ each volume is initially introduced with a picture of the individual credited with singing the tale for the researcher. Each individual appears in what may be assumed to be

⁷⁵ Nita Mathur, "Chanted Narratives of Indigenous People: Context and Content" in *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2008), p. 104

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 108-112

⁷⁷ See, for example, this news report (date unknown), attributed to a YouTube Channel, “Homeland Diary,” and posted September 26, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9fghfCICA>; see also Hà Thảo, “Người dịch hồn mơ chuyện cổ,” VOV, (April 11, 2014): <http://vov4.vov.vn/TV/van-hoc-nghe-thuat/nguoi-dich-ho-mon-mo-chuyen-co-c1257-8253.aspx>

⁷⁸ Phan Dang Nhật, “The Timeless Epics of the Ethnic Minorities of Viet Nam” in (O. Salemink, Ed.), *Viet Nam’s Cultural Diversity: Approaches to Preservation*, (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2001), p. 88

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

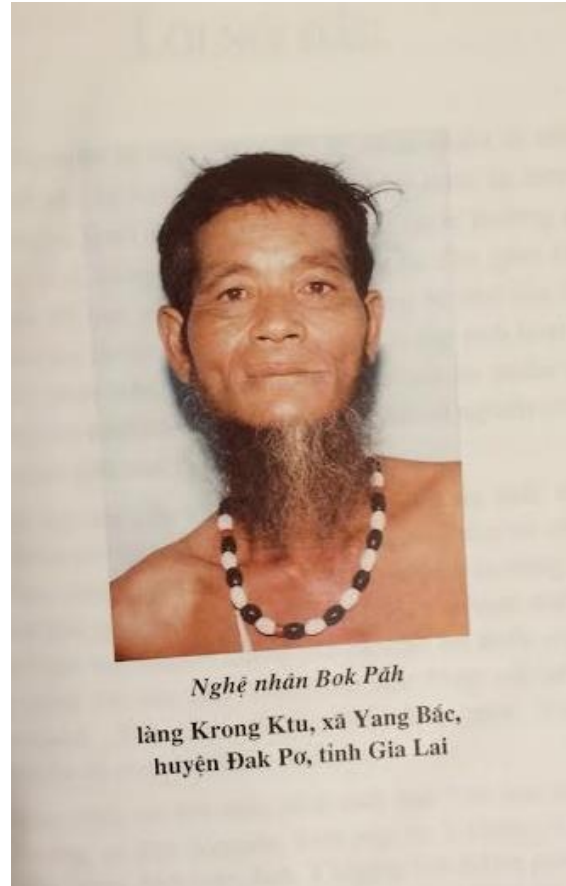
⁸⁰ Thanks to John Whitmore for this comparison.

⁸¹ Photo Credit: (Nguyễn Quang Tuệ, Ed.), “Giông trong Yuấn” in *Kho tàng Sử thi Tây Nguyên: Sử thi Ba Na* Vol. 12, (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, 2005), p. 7

traditional attire of some sort—precisely other than what Phan Dang Nhât posits above. Instead, these individuals might be said to play the role of primitive for the camera. Each book contains a series of photographs with a similar charge, tucked away between the Bahnaric transcription of the tale and the Vietnamese translation at the volume’s end. The pages typically include pictures of women dressed in traditional garb, standing next to thatched-roof structures in the village. Oftentimes there is a picture of an ethnic minority individual shaking the hand of a government official as he receives some sort of certificate acknowledging his importance to this project capturing the epics in the highlands.

There are usually self-congratulatory photographs

of the volumes being delivered back to the provinces post-publication, an exchange, of course, between individuals in more normal clothing. Each volume’s movement from Bahnaric to Vietnamese, along with the inclusion of photographs such as these, simply serve to reinforce the teleological argument made by the Vietnamese government, as summarized by Phan Dang Nhât, of an eventual alignment of ethnic minorities within a nation-state.⁸² Per his argument, however, this would occur only after prolonged, low-level conflict between “tribes.” Conveniently enough for his thesis, the actual tales seem to back this claim.



Translation: Artist Bok Păh
Krong Ktu Village, Yang Bắc Hamlet
Đak Pơ District, Gia Lai Province

⁸² Phan Dang Nhât, p. 98

Of the fourteen motifs Phan Thị Hồng identifies in her book (see Table 2), ten deal explicitly with violence in the forms of warfare, kidnapping, or thievery. There include instances of fighting over women,⁸³ efforts to collect on debts or exact revenge, and even stories describing

Table 2: List of motifs identified by Phan Thị Hồng in her survey of the Giông Epic Cycle of the Bahnar

Motif of navigating the forest and crossing the mountain

Motif of destroying a boulder and cutting down a tree

Motif of the kidnapped beauties

Motif of unsuccessful warfare

Motif of drinking much wine but not getting drunk

Motif of successful warfare to save beauties

Motif of the snake

Motif of warfare to reclaim a wife

Motif of valuables taken

Motif of unsuccessful warfare to claim a debt

Motif of victorious warfare to claim a debt, gain revenge

Motif of the raid

Motif of suffering humiliating defeat

Motif of successful revenge and self defense

battles lost. The consistency of the violence would seem to lend credence to what I earlier called the “trope of violence” in the highlands, especially if the epics are at all considered valuable in the sense of providing traces of historical data. Both Phan Thị Hồng and Phan Dang Nhật appear convinced that such traces do exist and are quick to cite information about the precarious nature of pre-state highland societies. The former cites Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, who describes village life in Gia Lai and Kontum provinces as constantly militarized, saturated with the anticipation of having to defend oneself.⁸⁴ The latter paints only slightly more complex a picture:

⁸³ The gendered nature of these epics is beyond question. Women tend to be depicted as little more than a spoil of war, or as object waiting patiently to begin a conflict. At risk of being lumped-in with other scholars who provide throwaway statements on the subject of gender, this footnote serves as little more than an acknowledgement of this paper’s elision of the question of gender from the discussion above, as it stands largely outside the purview of this initial engagement with these materials.

⁸⁴ Phan Thị Hồng, pp. 53-54

When the epics were created, Western Highland⁸⁵ society had reached the last stage of a society without class differentiation. Although the gap between rich and poor was widening, clearly defined social classes did not yet exist, nor did exploitation or oppression. The village was the basic social unit (*plei, bon, buôn*); within it, people were united and worked together, and it was on the whole closed to outsiders. *Wars frequently broke out between villages. There were many reasons for this, a minor even sometimes leading to a major war. Most often, such wars would only end when the victors had enslaved the vanquished, taking their possessions and land.* [emphasis added]⁸⁶

Not two pages later, however, *Nhật* makes reference to the “high degree of social harmony and unity” found in the area, which he ties, without explanation, to the “heroism and harmony”⁸⁷ embodied in the heroes and other characters depicted epics. How reliable a source of historical data is folklore such as that which is embodied in these epics? The question, perhaps, only takes on major significance when the information collected is then instrumentalized by the state or other hegemonic structures in order to coercively legitimate historical, ethnic, or other forms of discourse within its sphere of influence. The importance of this question will be further explored in the closing section.

Finally, along with reinforcing the trope of violence in the highlands, the epics also paint a picture of a society inhabiting a numinous world, as indicated by continuous references to different *yang*, or spirits, in each of the volumes. Phan Dang *Nhật* writes, “[t]he ethnic minorities of the Western Highlands have a profound belief that everything from gongs, earthen jars and houses to *carabaos* and elephants possess a *yang* spirit, which gives inner life to every animate and inanimate object in the world.”⁸⁸ In a similar vein, the volumes also include abundant references to wildlife, also of particular spiritual import, a subject already taken up with some vigor by at least one graduate student in Vietnam.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Literal translation of Tây Nguyên, referring to the same Central Highland region as the rest of the paper.

⁸⁶ Phan Dang *Nhật*, p. 97

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97; see also Gerald Hickey, *Shattered World: Adaptation and Survival Among Vietnam's Highland Peoples During the Vietnam War*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 255

⁸⁹ Ngô Thị Hồng Vân, “Thế giới Động vật trong Sử thi Bana,” thesis submitted as partial fulfillment of master’s degree at the University of Hanoi, (September 2008)

In this section, I principally introduced the thematic elements driving the *Giông Epic Cycle of the Bahnar*. Given the survey nature of this section, one may question whether or not more motifs could be gleaned with a deeper reading of a select number of volumes. In fact, that was the original intent of this project, but upon beginning in such a manner, it became increasingly that, though some place and character names changed, motifs by and large did not. As such, a wholly different analysis became appropriate, as will be made clear in the closing section. After engaging with Gramscian theory regarding folklore, this paper's trajectory turns to a critical analysis of the epics' production and content as just recounted, taking into account well-documented⁹⁰ structural disadvantages that ethnic minorities continue to face throughout Vietnam, though perhaps most severely in the Central Highlands.

Of Theory, Consciousness, and the Way Ahead

One purpose of this paper is to enter into conversation with folklore studies as a space from which to make more sense of the effects of what Salemink identifies as folklorization in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The field of study also proves useful in the consideration of any role the publication of the *Giông Epic Cycle* may have in the construction (or enclosure) of regional consciousness among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Before jumping into the theory which drives the remainder of this paper, however, it is useful to return briefly to Nam, my Bahnar interlocutor whom I introduced earlier.

Shortly after meeting Nam in Kontum, I asked him directly about what looked to me to be an extraordinary level of deforestation on the Vietnamese side of the border. I had just come from Laos where the forest cover throughout the mountains still appeared quite dense. He hinted at what I, in fact, already knew: that the Vietnamese government's policies of sedentarization in

⁹⁰ See Salemink (2003)

the region sparked logging on a massive scale, precipitating a drop of forest cover in Vietnam from approximately 55% of this landmass in the 1960s, to around 17% by the 1980s.⁹¹ Whatever the logging companies failed to clear, Nam told me, the military or local populace (both ethnic Kinh as well as minority groups) removed for regional consumption or, more often, sale on the black market. He then stated that which gave me pause. Even surrounded by what he, himself, identified as an ecological disaster, largely caused by the policies of the predominantly ethnic-Kinh government in Hanoi, Nam stated that, unlike ethnic Bahnar such as he, "the ethnic Kinh are not lazy." This form of negative consciousness⁹² struck me as doubly problematic given the fact that Nam was in fact half-Kinh himself. The remainder of this section will engage with theoretical materials which may help render Nam's ethical perspective more legible. I begin with this question: in what way, if at all, does the publication of the Bahnar epics serve enclose Bahnar consciousness? But first, we will turn to a brief consideration of some pertinent strands of folklore and social science theory.

Writing from prison in 1929, the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, bemoaned folklore as a key impediment to the establishment of an enlightened proletarian class consciousness Italy and elsewhere. In his notebooks, he characterizes folklore as "a 'conception of the world' of particular social strata which are *untouched by modern currents of thought*" [emphasis added].⁹³ Efforts to "overcome"⁹⁴ such inertia, he writes, must firstly begin with modifications in the way

⁹¹ Rodolphe de Koninck, *Deforestation in Viet Nam*, (Ottawa: International Development Research Center, 1999)

⁹² I take as my inspiration for the use of this term Ranajit Guha's own focus on negation in his now famous *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. The basic idea is that the subaltern, Indian peasants upon whom his study focuses often self-identified themselves in negative terms in relation to the nobility, inverting values and, in this way, exercising agency in self-identity, and ultimately creating space for resistance in the process. For more see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), chap 2

⁹³ Antonio Gramsci (J.A. Buttigieg & A. Callari, Trans.), "Observations on Folklore" in *International Folklorists: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore* (Alan Dundes, Ed.), (Lanham, Boulder, New York & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 134

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135

it is studied by the enlightened Marxian: "[F]olklore studies need a change of attitude besides greater depth: folklore must not be conceived as an oddity, a strange, ridiculous or, at best, a picturesque thing; rather, it must be conceived as something very serious and to be taken seriously."⁹⁵ Although Gramsci's recognition of the importance of folklore in the development of social consciousness is rightfully lauded as an important point in the history of folklore studies, his characterization of folklore as unchanging and pre-modern is problematic.

Alessandro Portelli identifies as much in his analysis of sport as an exemplary component



(Photo by R. Coveney – 1971)



(Photo by J. Turner – 2014)

Photos depicting the extent of the deforestation in the vicinity of Poley Kleng Airfield, a former Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Border Ranger and U.S. Army Special Forces Camp near the Lao-Vietnamese border, Kontum Province.

of "mass culture,"⁹⁶ similar in ways to folklore. Because sport is able to bring people from different social strata into interaction with a single institution and "keep[s] diverging or conflicting meanings together under the same set of signs,"⁹⁷ sport manages to blur the boundaries between viewers' and participants' differing worldviews. According to Portelli, "people's culture loses coherence"⁹⁸ during this process and is open to change. Folklore, as a

⁹⁵ Ibid., 135-36

⁹⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and meaning in Oral History*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 159

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 159

similar form of mass culture, "no longer appears as the residue of an archaic past, but rather as the contemporary, constantly renewed product of the permanent disruption of the culture of working people in the encounter with the cultural messages of the elite—and of its remaking in cultural resistance."⁹⁹ Thus folklore lives on in the consciousness of people, able to adapt, or be adapted to changing times.

There are obvious limits as to the applicability of such Marxian interpretations of folklore, but Gramsci and Portelli combine to provide a coherent basis from which to begin this section. Both acknowledge folklore's role as an archive,¹⁰⁰ and perhaps even as key in the development of coherent (though no less mutable) social consciousness. In Portelli's case, this mutability is directly linked to an idea of folklore as taking the form of oral narrative, inevitably leaving it to the mercy of interpretation by those individual(s) recounting it: "narratives in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns the individual and what concerns the group, may become more elusive than in established written genres, so that personal 'truth' may coincide with shared 'imagination.'"¹⁰¹ But in the case of this project, I am working with oral narratives in written form which stand, as it is, two languages removed from their original expression. Robbed as they are of the other, highly meaningful inputs Portelli describes above, the epics must be accepted as highly-decontextualized. And it is this decontextualization, I argue, which allows for their instrumentalization by the SRV, as described below.

Before reengaging with the Bahnar materials, it is also useful here to bring in Michel de Certeau thoughts on the subject of fables¹⁰² which help us to see more clearly what helps to

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ I use this term here with the purpose of pointing, again, to Stoler's essay calling for critical reengagement with colonial archival material.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 49

¹⁰² Michel de Certeau (S. Rendall, Trans.), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London:

explain the Vietnamese state's rationale for publishing these fables in the manner in which they continue to do so. According to De Certeau:

To define the position of the other (primitive, religious, mad, childlike, or popular) as a "fable" is not merely to identify it with "what speaks" (*fari*), but with a speech that "does not know" what it says. When it is serious, enlightened or scientific analysis does indeed assume that something essential is expressed in the myths produced by the primitive, the dogmas of the believer, the child's babbling, the language of dreams or the gnomic conversations of common people, but *it also assumes that these forms of speech do not understand what they say that is important.*¹⁰³ [emphasis added]

De Certeau's insights into the "silent production"¹⁰⁴ of reading is also key. The reader inevitably introduces to her understanding of the text her own ingrained views regarding any number of issues that impose themselves into the process. My own reading of the epics, for example, was certainly driven by ideas such as the meaning and causes of socioeconomic and other types of inequality in the region, the consequences of different forms of dispossession, the proliferation of different means of "everyday resistance,"¹⁰⁵ what historians believe to be the historical record of the region, the problem of ethnicity, and on *ad infinitum*.

Earlier in this paper I spent a considerable amount of time attempting to complicate the highland-lowland dichotomy with which many scholars throughout the world continue to describe the Central Highlands. My principal target in doing so was to demand reconsideration of what I call the trope of violence in the historical discourse of the highlands region. This trope, as discussed earlier, is associated with a teleology which views the highlands as an inherently lawless, chaotic space up until the opening of effective Vietnamese state intervention. At the moment of state contact, according to this perspective, the ethnic minorities became the "younger siblings" of the ethnic Kinh, in need of education, guidance,¹⁰⁶ and of course infusion

University of California Press, 1988), pp. 154-162

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 160

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. xxi

¹⁰⁵ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1985)

¹⁰⁶ Salemink (2008), pp. 264-67

with communist revolutionary ethics.¹⁰⁷ Salemink writes that, in such a program, ethnic minorities were treated as children in a state-authored hierarchy of societal evolution. However, these same minority groups were also forced to take on the role of ancestors to the Kinh. As both the younger sibling to, and the ancestor of the majority Kinh, these ethnic minorities eventually came to be “trapped” in discourses holding them up as “authentic” and in need of preservation.¹⁰⁸ They were simultaneously prodded into modernity while newly-chained to the state’s discourse about its past.¹⁰⁹ Part of this overall program, of course, included the folklorization and “selective preservation” of the orally-reproduced epics of ethnic minority groups in the highlands region. The term “selective preservation” immediately draws us back to De Certeau’s thoughts on what might be called the interpreter’s ‘colonization’ of the discourse of the ‘other.’ In the process of listening and transcribing, for example, the interpreter holds the power to coax, or to help the ‘other’ say what it is he or she is ‘really’ thinking. The process is accomplished even more easily through reading, where the interpreter takes note of precisely those data points which she intended to find from the start.

This is, I ultimately believe, very likely part of the problem with the publication of these ethnic minority epics. They speak only to those subjects which the state’s teleological project of state unity requires, all in order to maintain its unfettered hegemonic position over the region. I am not here implying that these epics would be entirely devoid of violence if read absent of the state’s intervention, this even while taking into consideration previous SRV schemes to change the lyrics of folk songs in Kontum in order to better align with party-state ideals.¹¹⁰ That the region has been ravaged by violence for centuries is well-documented after all.

¹⁰⁷ Keane, p. 234

¹⁰⁸ Salemink (2008), p. 279

¹⁰⁹ Salemink (2015)

¹¹⁰ Salemink (2000), p. 137

According to Tony Day, "Wars [in pre-twentieth century Southeast Asia] were fought to capture manpower and bring it home rather than to maintain boundaries that kept people out."¹¹¹ He is careful to caveat, however, that just because the principal goal of an invading army was to take captives whose labor would be exploited in the future, "does not mean that [wars] were not brutal and destructive."¹¹² The twentieth century was not much kinder to the region, with successive wars having a severe impact on the region. Not only did the Central Highlands figure heavily into the first two Indochina wars, the region also stood at the front lines of the Vietnamese war with Cambodia in 1978/79. In fact, Nam, my Bahnar interlocutor, confided in me that he lost five of the six friends he had who were conscripted by the SRV for the invasion and occupation of Khmer Rouge-administered Democratic Kampuchea.

The Vietnamese state's publication of the epics in effect acts as yet another enclosure of the Bahnar and other ethnic groups whose works are also included in the collection. On a scale weighing the effect of the program on these ethnic minorities, however, it is hard to ascribe much of an impact given (1) the relative scarcity of the epics' recitation in the present-day highlands, and (2) the significant effects of programs and discourse already long-established in the region. Salemink effectively captures the effects of the discourse, alone, on ethnic minorities in Vietnam, which I quote at length:

There should not be any doubt that such political discourses about the relationship between ethnic groups, between ethnic majority and minorities, and the between state and ethnic groups exercise strong influence over the way in which such categories, differences, and relationships are internalized in vernacular thinking. The combined effect of these categorizations is to construct the discursive authority, the political power, and the cultural responsibility for the putatively more advanced Việt [Kinh] majority to take care of the nation's ethnic minorities. In this way, the classificatory project of the party-state meshes very well with the neo-Confucian family metaphor in a paternalistic state.¹¹³

The question becomes, then, what role critical folklore studies could possibly play in

¹¹¹ Tony Day, "Violence and Beauty" in *Fluid Iron: State Formation in Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), p. 228

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Salemink (2008), p. 267

such a situation. Perhaps the most important effort would be to capture and disseminate those folktales that, perhaps, do not speak to constant warfare in the region, should they exist. As mentioned earlier in the paper, Chamic language influence on Bahnaric includes many everyday terms, which indicates that the relations between the Bahnar and Jarai, as an example, may not simply have been one of slave raiding or other exploitation. A second, and perhaps more attainable goal, would be to complicate the framing of the discourse on the violence in the tales. The men who now, in their 80s, are among the last to recite these tales lived through a succession of three brutal wars. What thematic elements of the Giông Epic Cycle might have been elided as over the past 60 years as a result of entertainment moving more towards mourning than toward alcohol-infused socialization? Might the violence to which the tales refer, then, in fact prove more-recent?

We return now to Nam and the question of consciousness. Like Stan B-H Tan,¹¹⁴ when I arrived in the highlands I was shocked by what I could only digest as an ecological and development disaster. Not only was every hilltop as far as the eye could see entirely stripped of trees, but the roads leading out of Kontum and into the countryside seemed as though they had been shelled. When I met Nam, he was wearing a baseball cap not unlike my own. He was gruff, eager to get the day going, as he needed to prepare to host a foreign NGO the following day. He explained to me that he regularly hosted such organizations, that hardly a day went by that he was not industriously trying to better his community in Kontum. Such efforts, in fact, dated back to his having taught Vietnamese to other Bahnar in the jungle, opting for that assignment in lieu of carrying a gun in Democratic Kampuchea. He described to me a lifetime of doing what he was supposed to do in the post-revolutionary state, and felt the need to describe

¹¹⁴ Stan B-H Tan & Andrew Walker, "Beyond Hills and Plains: Rethinking Ethnic Relations in Vietnam and Thailand" in (P Taylor, Ed.), *Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam*, (Philip Taylor, Ed.), (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), pp. 119-20

his own ethnic group, and perhaps even himself, as lazy participants in the new politico-economic order.

In 1986, James Scott wrote of revolutions the following:

Whatever else the revolution may achieve, it almost always creates a more coercive and hegemonic state apparatus—one that is often able to batten itself on the rural population like no other before it. All too frequently the peasantry finds itself in the ironic position of having helped to power a ruling group whose plans for industrialization, taxation, and collectivization are very much at odds with the goals for which peasants had imagined they were fighting.¹¹⁵

Nam seemed stuck in precisely this situation. But to leave it there, to write that in the space wherein he lives, and under the auspices of the government for which he pays, he has nothing but choiceless decisions simply does not suffice. After all, just as Salemink¹¹⁶ and Holly High¹¹⁷ observe among those with whom they worked, the desire for a modernity within which Nam might also receive benefit never dissipates, even as he continues to be re-inscribed by the state *back* into a discourse wherein he would seem to have no real way forward. Perhaps the answer lies in the mourning of others who, like him, lost so much over the past 60 years. Perhaps that testimony might someday shed new light on which, if any, violence really maintains influence over the ‘ethnic consciousness’ of the Bahnar to this day.

¹¹⁵ James Scott, “Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance” in (James Scott & Benedict Kerkvliet, Eds.), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia*, (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1986), p. 6

¹¹⁶ Salemink (2015)

¹¹⁷ Holly High, *Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014)