

Tây Nguyên: Lifeworld or Heritage?¹

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In the spring of 1991 I met with Mr Siu Aluân in the Jarai village of Plei Patao, in Ayun Pa district of Gia Lai province. The village had the classic Jarai layout of two rows of wooden longhouses on stilts. In the hot valley of Ayun Pa I did not see the coffee and rubber plantations that were appearing on the high plateaus, but the environment had already changed profoundly, as much of the forest had gone and the Ayun Hậ irrigation project was under construction. The late Siu Aluân was a poor, middle-aged man of rather precarious health who in spite of his appearance commanded much respect among Jarai people. The reason was that he was the anointed successor of Ơi Nhót, the last *Potau apui* or Hỏa xá [master of fire] of the Jarai and the last living *Potau* - a position of which there were once three, the others being the *Potau la* or Thủy xá [master of water] and the lesser-known *Potau Anggin* [master of wind]. The *Potau* were often called king (of fire and of water) but were never real kings; rather they were ritual masters of the fire, water and wind elements. In pre-colonial times they had played important roles representing the Jarai to the outside world. Through the middle of the 19th century the *Potau* sent regular tributes to the courts in Huế and Phnom Penh, where they were recognised as representing smaller, peripheral states.

But Mr Siu Aluân never succeeded to the office of *Potau apui*, which would have required him to go through a protracted series of rites of passage and to make a tour of the surrounding Jarai villages on the back of an elephant. At the time the Jarai lacked both the elephants and the resources for these costly rituals and the provincial authorities would not allow him to leave his village and tour the region. In fact, so shortly after the American War and with FULRO still active, the province and the Ministry of Culture and Information decided not to allow the succession to go through, as socialist Việt Nam had no use for a “king” on its territory (even if the title was the result of mistranslation) nor for endorsing costly “superstitious” rituals. This non-event marked a transition from a rather ambiguous territorial situation of the part of Việt Nam that we now call Tây Nguyên towards its definitive integration into Việt Nam’s sovereign territory. At present, Tây Nguyên is increasingly becoming celebrated as a land of cultural origins and spiritual renewal among Vietnamese intellectuals and artists. Paradoxically, this happens at a time that the landscape, demographic composition and cultural lifestyles of the region have changed beyond recognition. Let me explain this briefly in the following paragraphs.²

In the 19th century the region that was commonly referred to in Vietnamese as *Rừng Mũi* and in French as *Hinterland Mũi* was connected with Việt Nam, Cambodia, Laos and even Siam through trade networks. Through ritual exchanges these economic connections usually had political and cultural dimensions as well.

¹ This short paper is based on a number of publications on the central highlands, on religious practices, and on various aspects of heritage in Việt Nam. I list just a few publications for those interested in the sources.

² The historical account which follows has been documented in great detail in my book *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A historical contextualization 1850-1990* (Routledge and University of Hawai’i Press, 2003).

When the French conquered Indochina, they used these tributary relations as an argument to counter Lao-Siamese claims – on behalf of its then dependency Laos – to much of Tây Nguyên. Initially the French sought to rule the regions around Kontum, Pleiku and Đắk Lắk from southern Laos, but in 1904 they officially integrated these territories into the protectorate of Annam – now Trung Bộ. In practice much of the highlands remained autonomous, and practical French efforts at “penetration” and “pacification” often provoked rebellions led by figures such as N’Trang Lung, Sam Bram and Kommadam. The last indigenous revolts were only suppressed around 1938.

From 1945 until 1979 the Tây Nguyên region was a highly contested arena of war with France, the US and Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge). During the negotiations of Đà Lạt and Fontainebleau in 1946 the French sought to carve out *the Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois* from Việt Nam, but this move was fiercely protested by Hồ Chí Minh; instead, France turned it into “Emperor” Bảo Đại’s personal Crown Domain in 1948 – a move that sparked a desire for political and cultural autonomy among pro-French and pro-American highlander militias. In 1963 this desire materialised in the constitution of the FULRO movement among the militias commanded by US Special Forces, which in some form remained active for decades. The cultural assimilation policies of South-Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm and his successors and the savage warfare tactics of the South Vietnamese and US military fuelled this desire for autonomy. Significantly, the liberation of South Việt Nam in 1975 started in Tây Nguyên, reportedly with active support from many highlanders, including FULRO factions around Buôn Ma Thuột. Immediately after 1975, the socialist regime moved urban populations into New Economic Zones in the highlands.

During Đổi Mới, many lowland people – mostly Kinh people from poor northern and central provinces – moved to Tây Nguyên in order to set up coffee gardens, which became highly profitable in the new market conditions. This migration was spurred on by further agricultural successes in rubber, tea, cashew, pepper, cassava and other cash crops, turning this once remote region into the world’s number two coffee producing region and first cashew and pepper producing region and hence into a hotspot of globalisation. In the process, forests were converted into plantations and gardens, mostly owned and worked by millions of relative newcomers from the lowlands. Highlanders such as the Jarai had to give up their claims to the land, their agricultural techniques, their lived sociality, and their lifestyles as the combined results of the resettlement [*định canh định cư*] programs. In other words, with *Đổi Mới* the region became rapidly and indelibly integrated – economically, demographically and culturally – into Việt Nam’s sovereign territory. This transformation changed beyond recognition the environmental and cultural lifeworlds of the highlanders, who largely abandoned their traditional livelihoods and religious practices. In the face of active opposition from the authorities, they broadly embraced a new, modern and international religion, namely evangelical Christianity [*Tin lành*], which rejected their former religious practices as superstitious and their former cultural lifestyles as un-modern and immoral.³

³ My analysis of Christian conversion in Việt Nam’s central highlands has been published in detail in a number of publications, including my *Revolutionary and Christian Ecumenes and Desire for Modernity in the Vietnamese Highlands*. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16(4), 2015: 388-409.

When in 2001 Christian highlanders took to the streets to demonstrate for land guarantees and religious freedom, one of the first responses of the Vietnamese government was to fund a massive research, collection, documentation, translation and publication project of the historic epics [*sử thi*] of the various ethnic groups of Tây Nguyên. Carried out by the Viện Văn hóa in Hà Nội, it was Việt Nam's biggest research project in the social sciences and humanities to date (amounting to one million US dollars), yielding over 63 published volumes which were circulated widely, but did not make much impact – not even in Tây Nguyên itself. The project did little to ameliorate the predicament of contemporary highlanders, who in the eyes of Vietnamese officials and researchers alike remained mired in the past of the historical epics rather than - culturally speaking - in the present of Christian modernity.

After the demonstrations around Easter 2004 the authorities redoubled their efforts to have “The space of Gong Culture” [*Không gian văn hóa cồng chiêng Tây Nguyên*] recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage – an effort that bore fruit in 2005 when it was listed on UNESCO's “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity,” to be transferred to the new ICH List of “Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” in 2008.⁴ Though Việt Nam was successful in inscribing its intangible cultural heritage on the UNESCO list, protecting gong culture in Tây Nguyên proves to be an intractable challenge, precisely because the *space* for it – i.e. its ecological, economic, social and cultural environment – has changed beyond recognition over the past decades. Moreover, what was ignored in this backward-looking initiative is the fact that by the mid-2000s the majority of the central highlanders had already converted to evangelical Christianity and readily abandoned gong music as a superstitious remnant of the past that they had left behind.

Whatever one might think of their decisions and actions, these highlanders are motivated by a desire to be recognised as modern rather than as remnants of the past. With some notable exceptions such as Nguyễn Ngọc, Vietnamese intellectuals continue to locate highlanders in an imagined past narrated in the form of epics and performed with dance and gong music, even when the ritual context for this has disappeared. Highlanders are even made to dance during one of Việt Nam's newer intangible cultural heritage events, namely the Hùng King Festival in far-away Phú Thọ, which commemorates Việt Nam's long-ago mythical ancestors [*ngày giỗ tổ Hùng Vương*]. The festival organisers seem to assume a connection between the contemporary culture of Tây Nguyên and the Đổng Sơn culture prevailing at the time of the Hùng kings, thus suggesting that the culture of the Tây Nguyên ethnic groups are similar to the culture of the Việt people more than 2000 years ago. As contemporary ancestors of the Kinh, Tây Nguyên people are denied coevalness, i.e. they are seen as living the past.

The global post-1970s heritage turn makes culture into a spectacle to be consumed by outsiders against the backdrop of tourism, but simultaneously indexes a nostalgic yearning for slowness in times of rapid change. This nostalgia is predicated on *absence*, as sites, objects and practices that disappear become precious and

⁴ See my “Is there space for Vietnam's gong culture? Economic and social challenges for the safeguarding of the Space of Gong Culture.” In: Izabela Kopania (ed.), *South-East Asia: Studies in Art, Cultural Heritage and Artistic Relations with Europe*. Warsaw & Torún 2013: Polish Institute of World Art Studies & Tako Publishing House 2012, pp. 127-134; and “Scholarship, Expertise, and the Regional Politics of Heritage.” In: Oscar Salemink (ed.), *Scholarship and Engagement in Mainland Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai 2015: Silkworm Books, pp. 167-195.

receive the label of heritage in order to fence them off from the fast pace of the society surrounding it. In this way, a space of willed “slowness” seeks to slow down time but is itself dependent on the globalisation of heritage in the context of tourism. Some artists seek creative inspiration in situations of radical alterity from a present marked by rapid change that threatens to render everything unfamiliar. But that rapid change has already profoundly changed the lifeworlds of the highlanders from whom they seek such inspiration – some change imposed by others (e.g. *Định canh định cư*), some willed by themselves (e.g. *Tin Lành*).⁵

Siu Aluân died years ago, and with him disappeared one of the most characteristic cultural phenomena of the Jarai and other ethnic groups in the central highlands, so beautifully described by the French ethnographer Jacques Dournes.⁶ The English poet Oscar Wilde wrote that “each man kills the things he loves”. In the case of the lifeworld of the highlanders of Tây Nguyên and perhaps of much intangible cultural heritage, we must inverse this phrase: even with the globalisation and localisation of nostalgia for heritage, we apparently love the thing we have killed.

⁵ Cf. my “History and Heritage – Past and Present: Thinking with Phan Huy Lê’s Oeuvre.” In: Trần Văn Thọ, Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, Philippe Papin (eds.), *Nhân cách sử học* [A historical personality]. Hanoi 2014: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, pp. 547-568; and “Described, inscribed, written off: Heritagisation as (dis)connection.” In: Philip Taylor (ed.). *Connected and Disconnected in Vietnam: Remaking Social Relations in a Post-socialist Nation*. Canberra 2016: Australian National University Press, pp. 311-345 (open access <http://press.anu.edu.au/?p=337653>).

⁶ Jacques Dournes (1977), *Pötao: Une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois Jörai*. Paris: Flammarion. See also my “Barefoot in the Mud: Reflections on Jacques Dournes. In: Andrew Hardy (ed.), *The Barefoot Anthropologist: The Highlands of Champa and Vietnam in the Words of Jacques Dournes*. Paris 2015: École Française d’Extrême-Orient and Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books (EFEO-Silkworm Book Series), pp. 93-98; in Vietnamese published as “Lời bạt – chân trần trong bùn: những suy ngẫm về Jacques Dournes” [Afterword – Barefoot in the mud: reflections about Jacques Dournes]. In: Andrew Hardy, *Nhà nhân học chân trần: Nghe và đọc Jacques Dournes* [The Barefoot Anthropologist: Listening and reading Jacques Dournes]. Hà Nội 2013i: École française d’Extrême-Orient and NXB Tri thức : pp. 159-166.

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