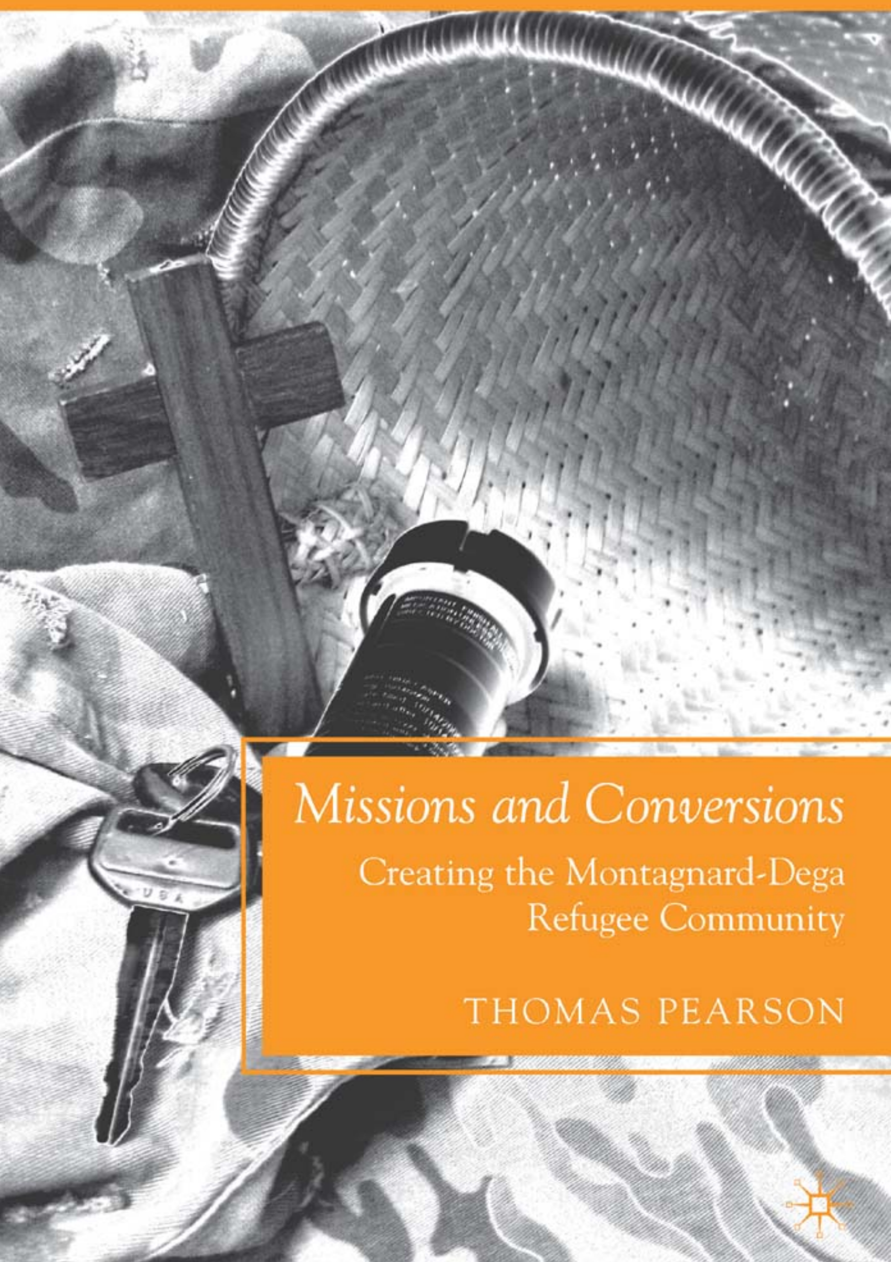
CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION

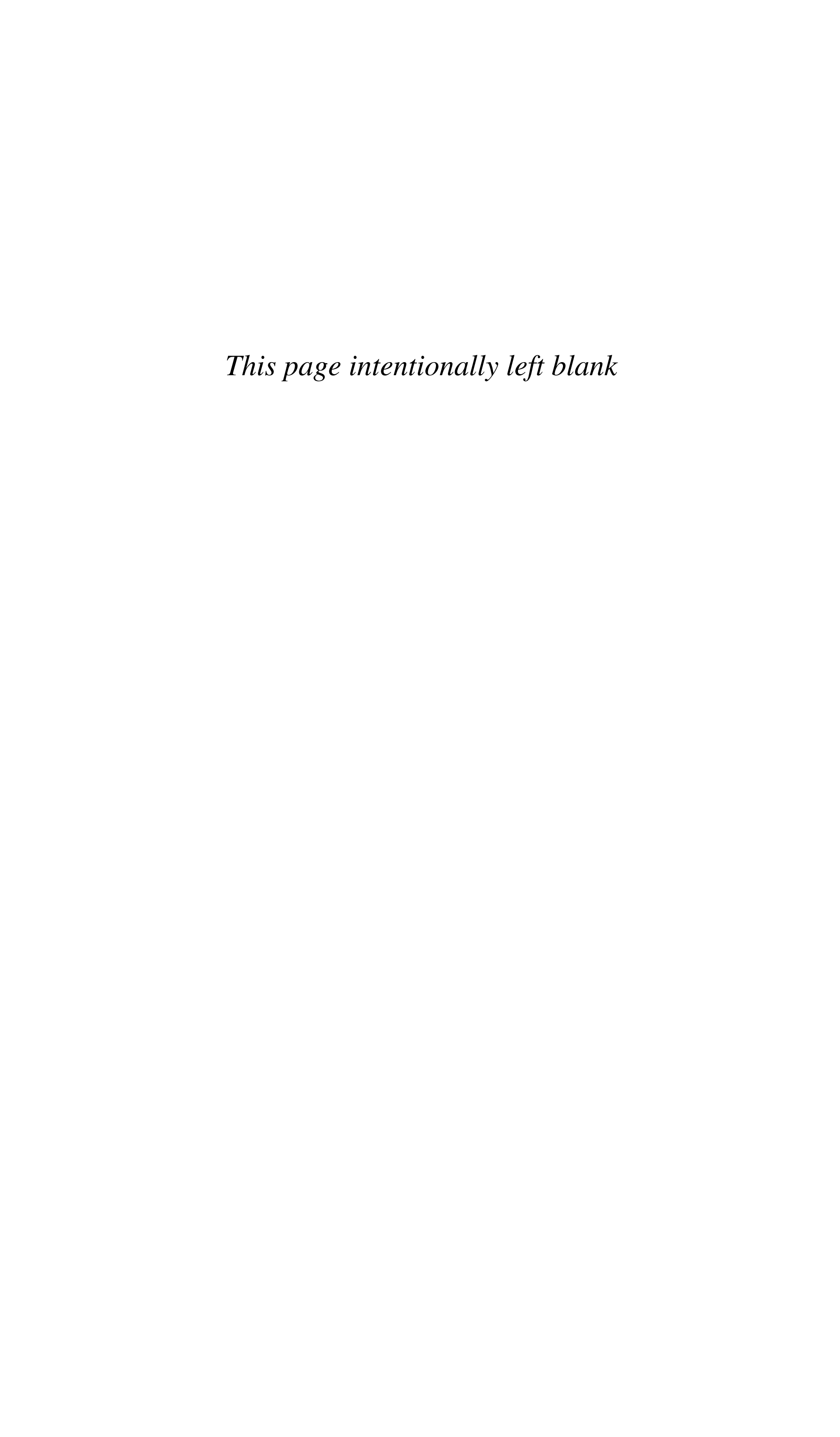


Missions and Conversions

Creating the Montagnard-Dega Refugee Community

THOMAS PEARSON

MISSIONS AND CONVERSIONS



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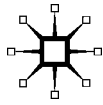

MISSIONS AND CONVERSIONS
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Hip K'Sor (Raleigh North Carolina).

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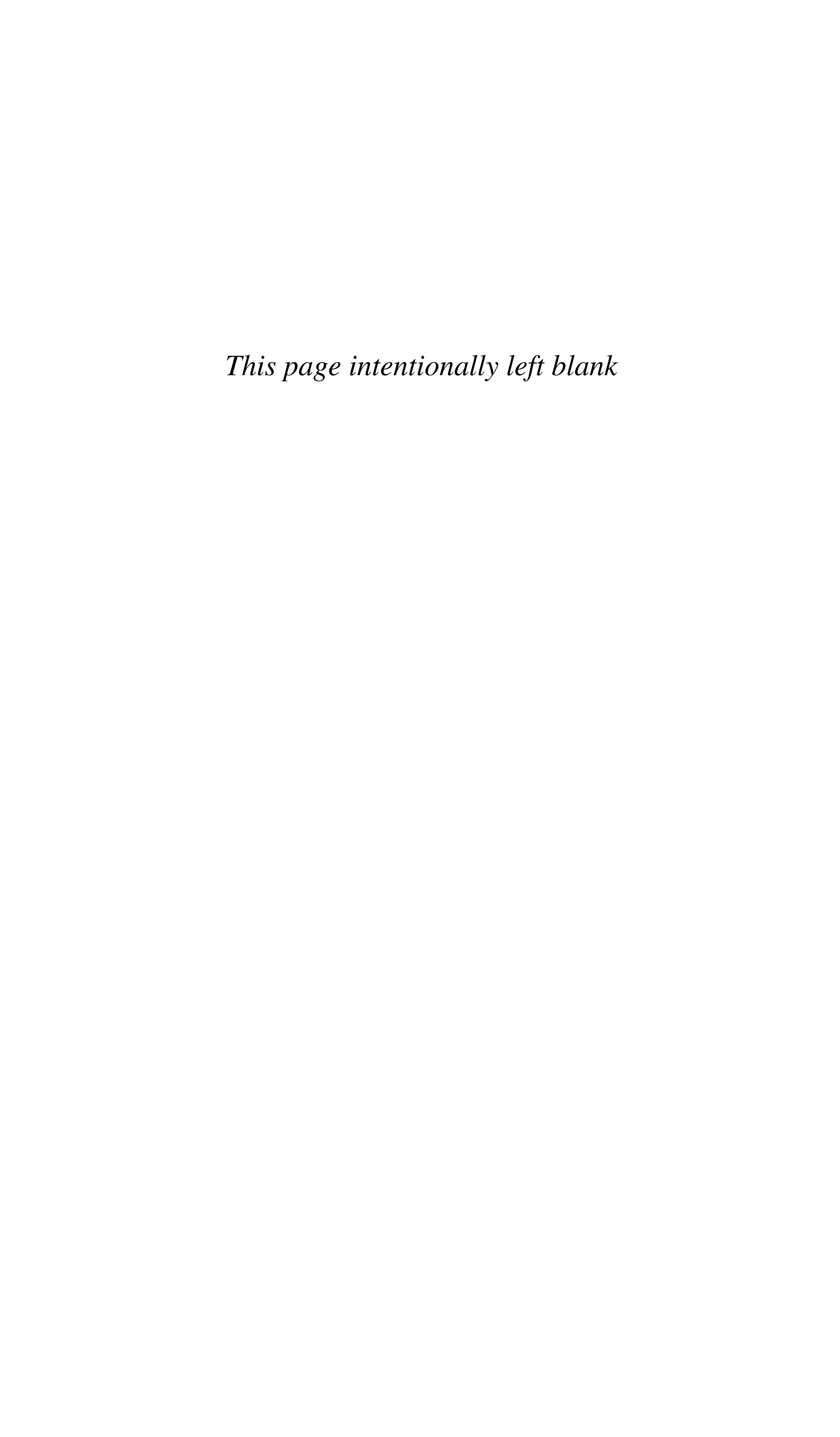
For my father—my first interlocutor.



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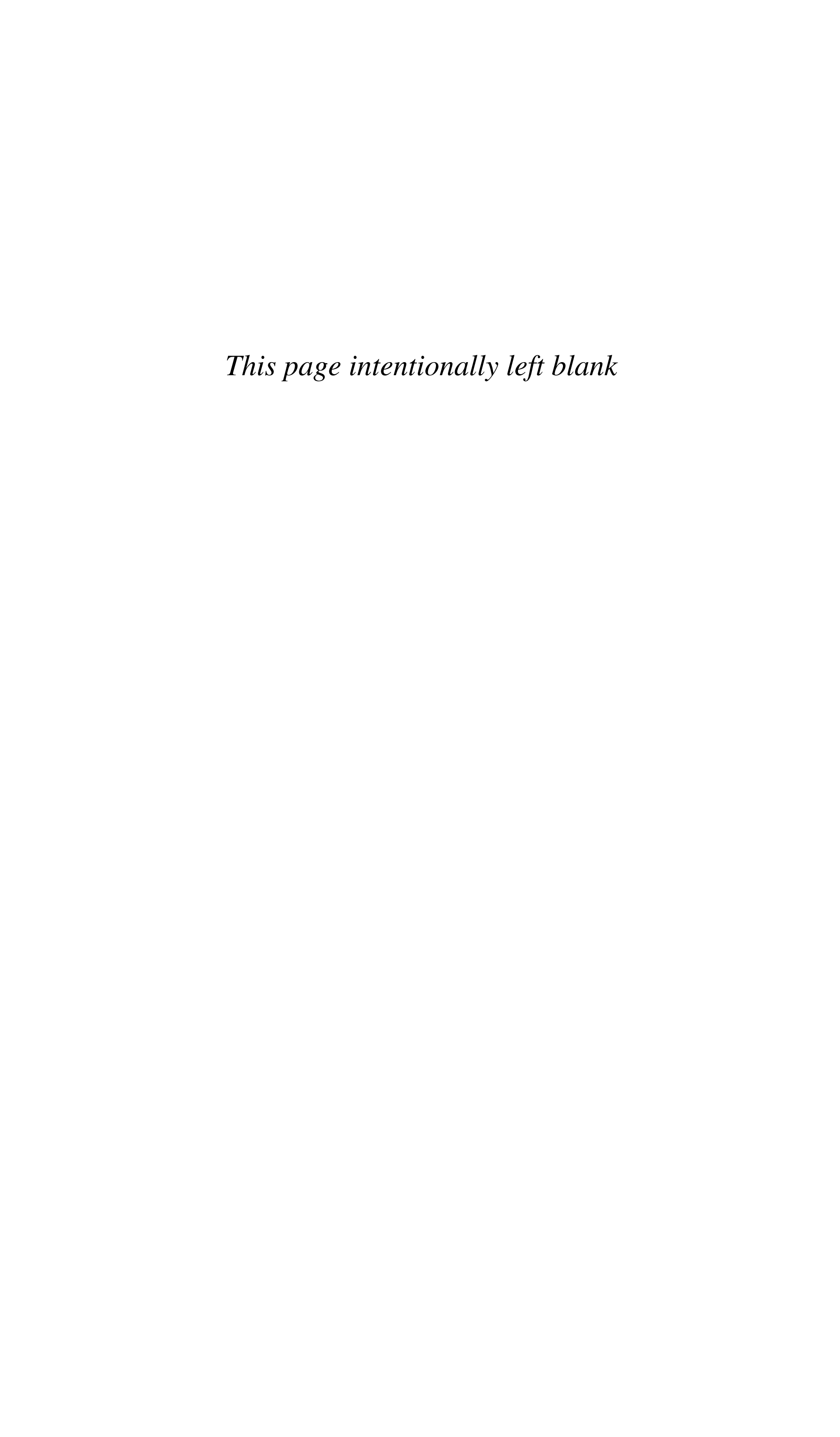
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Acknowledgments

I am enormously impressed by the resilient strength, optimism, and resourcefulness of the Montagnard-Dega refugees. Their lives dwarf whatever I may have accomplished here. So I wish to thank, first of all, the many individuals in the Montagnard-Dega community, who befriended me and made this writing possible. I especially wish to thank Hip K'Sor, Nay Rong, Y'Guk Cil, Glick Rahlan, and Khiem Ktul. This book would not have been possible without their interest and cooperation. I only hope that I have been half as valuable to them in their projects as they have been to me in mine. My chief disappointment is that this book and my academic interests do not correspond well to this community's political and social struggles. I acknowledge that I have probably not written the book they would have wanted. But at least, I think, I have done no harm.

Similarly, I want to acknowledge my gratitude, appreciation, and respect for the many Americans who agreed to speak with me about their experiences with the Montagnard-Dega people—missionaries, nurses, resettlement workers, and soldiers. I was touched by the sincerity with which they committed their efforts to help Dega refugees—who, obviously, universally, had in turn touched each of them profoundly. I am also appreciative of the fine work of the many American and French anthropologists such as Gerald Hickey, Jacques Dournes, and Georges Condominas who studied these highland groups in Vietnam. I am especially indebted to the more recent scholarship of Oscar Salemink whose authoritative study, "The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlands," was published while I was completing my manuscript and reached many of my conclusions before me.

I am grateful for the funding I received through the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: a Royster Fellowship, a Southern Oral History Interview Grant, and a Perry Research Fellowship. And I want to call out thanks to several academic colleagues in particular: Tomoko Masuzawa, Ruel Tyson, Thomas Tweed, James Peacock,

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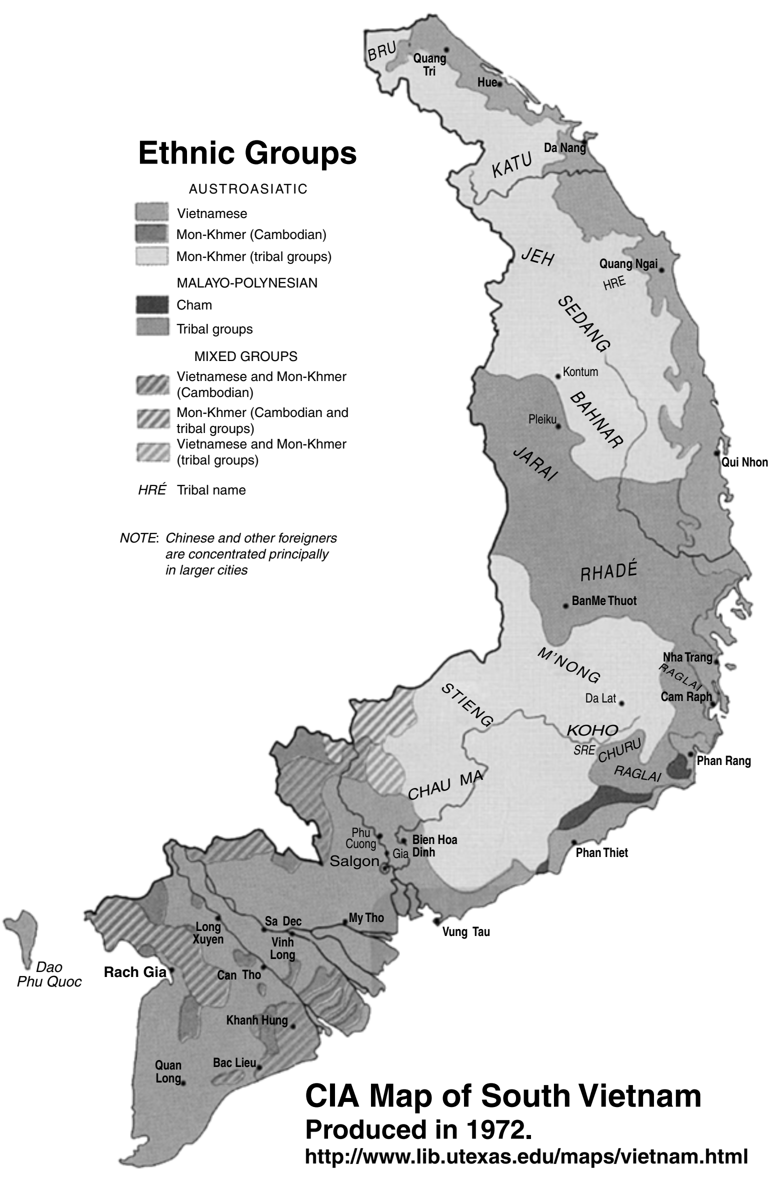
Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CMA	Christian and Missionary Alliance
CSS	Catholic Social Services
FULRO	*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races)
GVN	Government of Vietnam
LFS	Lutheran Family Services
MDA	Montagnard Dega Association
MFI	Montagnard Foundation, Inc.
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USASOC	United States of America Special Operations Command (Archives of the Special Forces at Fort Bragg, North Carolina)
VC	Viet Cong
VFAS	Voluntary Foreign Aid Service



CIA Map of South Vietnam
Produced in 1972.
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/vietnam.html

Chapter 1

Introduction and Afterword

Hip K'Sor is a refugee from the central highlands of Vietnam, a member of the ethnic minority population that was known as "the montagnards" (or, affectionately, "the 'yards") during the Vietnam War. He now lives in North Carolina. The first time I visited his home I noticed how he had turned the stereo-television cabinet in his living room into a kind of Christian altar. He had covered the top surface with a large piece of white lace on which he had arranged several framed illustrations of the Virgin Mary. Carved religious statues were displayed there too, and several crucifixes. There were a couple of electric candles, and two or three framed depictions of Jesus as well—one in which he herds sheep through an ancient arched gate, and another in which he points to his bleeding heart wrapped in thorns.

These are not unusual objects of American Catholic devotionalism. But on Hip's altar Christian iconography shared the space with a small bamboo flute and a basket woven of batten—seeming to enshrine artifacts from the culture of the central highlands. There was also a gaudy soccer trophy awarded to his son, which speaks of the family's successful resettlement in North Carolina. And over on the right-hand side, in the back, leaning against the wall, there was an eight-by-ten framed color photograph of Hip and several other highland refugees posing with Senator Jesse Helms, the notorious chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Helms and the group of highlanders all wear the brightly colored red and black tunics native to the central highlands of Vietnam. Senator Helms appears to be trying out a long bamboo musical instrument, much to the amusement of everyone.

The picture had been taken after a meeting at Senator Helms' home in Raleigh in anticipation of Senate hearings he was to hold

concerning the plight of the highland people in Vietnam. That hearing was held in March 1998, and Senator Helms opened the proceedings with a sentimental gesture extolling the virtues of the tiny North Carolina refugee community.

> During the holidays, when the liberties of the American people were safe and the Congress was not in session, and I was in Raleigh... a group of people came to my home one morning; and I never was impressed more with anybody.
>
> They played the instruments that are made from hollowed out bamboo and brought some of their tapestry and cloth. They even brought a jacket which I shall always treasure. These are wonderful people. I told them then, that as soon as I could manage it when I got back to Washington, I would schedule this hearing.[1]

It might seem peculiar that Jesse Helms, the infamous gadfly for conservative causes in the U.S. Senate, would be so smitten with these refugees so recently arrived in his state. They would not seem to exemplify the small-town American traditions that were his stock-in-trade. They shop in Asian grocery stores and cultivate "exotic" herbs and vegetables in their backyard farms. Some of them can barely speak English. Most of them have benefited from government welfare programs such as food stamps, the earned income tax credit, and subsidized housing. Senator Helms made a career opposing these sorts of "government hand-outs." Yet Jesse Helms was an outspoken supporter—chiefly because, as he explained in the hearing,

> The Montagnards' home is in the central highlands of Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, they fought valiantly alongside of U.S. troops. They suffered heavy casualties fighting against the communist guerrilla forces in the South. After the United States withdrew from Vietnam, the Montagnards continued fighting for freedom and independence. But, sad to say, to this date it has been to no avail.[2]

Senator Helms framed the Committee's discussion by locating the groups' "home" in the central highlands of Vietnam, not North Carolina. He foregrounded how they had "fought valiantly" alongside of U.S. troops, "suffered heavy casualties," and then continued fighting for "freedom and independence" after the Americans had given up and come home. Their political struggle (against America's old communist nemesis) deserves support, he said, in order to "right some of the wrongs that were done by this country"—namely, the abandonment of the 'yards after their steadfast loyalty during the war.

Remarkably, although Jesse Helms was well known for grounding his political stands in expressions of Christian piety, he did not mention that most of these refugees consider themselves to be Christian. In contrast, when Y'Hin Nie addressed the committee on behalf of the group, he placed Christianity at the core of his grievances:

> Within our highlands community we have a strong and growing Christian population of Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. About 200,000 Montagnard Christians have been persecuted. Prior to 1975, the Americans and French brought the news of Christ into the central highlands of Vietnam . . .
>
> Today, despite the government's interference and restrictions, Christian numbers are increasing. God is making miracles with his followers who do not stop going out to tell the gospel of God. Sometimes the government security captures them. On other occasions, security officers offer rewards of one million Vietnam dong for turning in the Christians.
>
> Furthermore, security threatens to kill Christians or to put them in jail for life if they continue to practice their religion. Hanoi authorities always investigate Montagnard believers. The authorities in Hanoi assert that Christians are believers in an American religion and are involved with the CIA.[3]

This is a very common rhetorical move made by this refugee group: they assert their identity as Christians as part of their complaint against Vietnamese government repression in the highlands.

Christianity has played a decisive role in the history that formed this refugee community. Initial French colonial contact with the lowland Viet along the coast of Southeast Asia spread inland in the late nineteenth century, led by Catholic missionaries who began classifying the people they encountered into various "tribes" such as the "*Jarai*," "*Rhadé*" (or *Edé*), "*Sedang*," "*Koho*," and "*Bahnar*" (see the map on p. xii). North American Protestant evangelicals from the Christian and Missionary Alliance began arriving in the 1930s. Both of these missions encouraged the highland people to assert their rights in the face of ill-treatment by the lowland Viet. During the American war in Vietnam, Christian groups funneled vast amounts of development and emergency aid into the highlands as part of the broader American diplomatic, humanitarian, and military effort to "win the hearts and minds" of the local population. And, as Senator Helms' comments attest, their hearts and minds were in fact "won." Many highlanders supported the American war effort and thousands of them fought by the American's side in irregular and civilian defense units—including

most importantly the soldiers of the growing ethnonationalist movement that had formed to resist political and cultural domination by the Vietnamese state. They saw the multifaceted American wartime intervention in the highlands as a commitment to the highland resistance. They learned to associate Christianity with the broader American humanitarian and military operation. Many of the refugees have told me of the Christian god they worship, and how he is a good god who called highland people to listen to the Americans—missionaries and military alike—and learn the progressive new ways of Western development.

Senator Helms highlighted how the highlanders' guerilla army heroically fought on against the Vietnamese communist government after the American withdrawal, but he did not mention that Christian faith and worship became increasingly important in this guerilla army—apparently completely supplanting the highlanders' traditional reliance on a pantheon of "animistic spirits." The guerilla resistance was decimated by the North Vietnamese Army. After ten disastrous years in the jungle, the remnants of this highland army lay down its weapons and sought political asylum in America, forming the initial core of the refugee population in North Carolina.

Christianity has continued to play an important role in their resettlement. Christian social welfare groups, drawing volunteers from local churches, took in the destitute refugees and helped them build new lives. Former evangelical missionaries to the highlands helped them establish their own congregations. The leaders of these independent Protestant churches (or, in the case of Catholics, the mediators between the group and the American Catholic Church) are among the most influential social and political leaders in the group. These leaders tightly link the groups' Christian faith to their ethnic identity, their political resistance to the Vietnamese government, and their efforts to adjust to American society. Thus, it is entirely fitting that Hip K'Sor's altar juxtaposed a soccer trophy, a bamboo flute, Senator Jesse Helms dressed in highland clothes, and Catholic images of the Virgin Mary.

This book examines the history of cross-cultural contact in the highlands of Vietnam, Christian conversion, and the emergence of this refugee community in North Carolina. Taking my lead from the way refugee leaders emphasize the Christian faith of the group, and the genesis of this religious faith in their historical emergence as a refugee community, I interpret the formation of this group through the paradigm of Christian conversion—the discourses and practices, preoccupations and problems by which Christians have imagined the

phenomenon of religious conversion. I compare the multifaceted political, economic, social, and cultural changes that this group of highlanders has gone through to a religious conversion. I compare the various groups that have influenced the group to missionaries. I use the categories of religious conversion to examine the formation of the refugee community, and I use the history of this refugee community as a means to scrutinize this same category—religious conversion. I argue that the formation of collective identity in refugee exile is a mutifaceted "conversion."

Admittedly, the focus on conversion reflects my own academic interests. I might instead have imposed the trope of exile or diaspora to understand this community. I might have used development, identity, ethnicity, or resistance. In fact, I *do* use these categories, but I privilege conversion. Conversion is not the language used by the American military, nor by the humanitarian aid organizations in Vietnam or North Carolina. Nor is it a term used by the refugees themselves. Only the evangelical and Catholic missionaries insist on this word when discussing highland people and this refugee community. I adopt the trope of conversion because it helps me theorize the changes that this community has passed through. It calls attention to the relationship of Christianity to the group's passionate defense of highland cultural difference against the onslaught of Vietnamese nation building. And it helps me theorize the institutional and discursive history of westerners that encountered these people in the highlands and sought to change them in various ways.

This book uses the concept of conversion to analyze the formation of a refugee community. But my ultimate interest here is the reverse: I use the formation of the refugee community as a means of analyzing the concept of conversion. This book interrogates the Western category of religious conversion by using it as a way to understand the formation of the refugee community. My application of the concept of conversion to the broad history that formed this group stretches the term quite a bit beyond its usual field of associations. I've done this quite deliberately and strategically in order to interrogate the meanings and presuppositions imbedded in the concept. This book examines the categories by which Christians have imagined conversion by examining how they are relevant not just to the description of the religious changes the group passed through, but to a broad range of phenomenon that has marked their encounter with the west. This tells us something about this cross-cultural encounter, but it also tells us something about the salience and expansiveness of the category of conversion to describe human interactions. I analyze the

historical formation of this North Carolina refugee community as I simultaneously scrutinize the construction of the category of religious conversion.

1 Dega, Montagnard, Highlander

This is a study of the conversion of the highland refugee community in North Carolina, not the people of the highlands more generally. I am not trained as a Southeast Asian scholar. My analysis of the highland context is dependent upon the authoritative, innovative and much more extensive scholarship produced by Oscar Salemink, although I have consulted many of the same sources he examines that are relevant to my study (primarily in English), produced my own readings, and reached very similar conclusions. My focus on conversion construes this refugee community as "a convert." From my scene of writing in North Carolina, I look with this group back across their conversion to the central highlands and the Vietnam War. This perspective matters because it delineates the refugee community as the subject that has changed—and they are not really representative of the Vietnamese highland population more generally.

This community was formed in exile by the remnants of the ethnonationalist guerilla movement—with the subsequent migration of some family members and other highlanders who had been imprisoned for their wartime association with Americans. None of them have anything good to say about the communists, nor anything bad to say about the American military intervention. However, apparently more than a few highlanders sided with the communists during the war, but none of them are represented in this community. This group was forged through fervent opposition to the lowland Viet, a construction that merged seamlessly with opposition to "the communists" after the war, and derived from their alliance with the American war effort in Southeast Asia. This group identity was then infused with a strong sense of Christian faith during the guerilla army's desperate decade in the jungle on the run. Most of these quite prominent characteristics of the community in exile are not typical of highland people more generally.

There are not many elders in this refugee community. They encountered Christianity when they were teenagers—and when the Vietnam War was destroying the patterns of their village life. Few of them ever practiced the traditional religion of the highlands as adults. Thus their depictions of their people's pre-Christian beliefs and practices are vague. And unlike the population still living in the highlands, virtually all of the highland refugees identify themselves as

Christians (although their personal investment in this identity and its practice varies).

The Vietnamese highlanders in North Carolina are different from highlanders living in Vietnam in that they form a small and coherent minority community. They articulate a strong politicized collective ethnic identity that is often emotionally attached to their Christian identity because of their shared experiences in the Christian guerilla army fighting in the name of a homeland for their people. This history of resistance produced their conversion and in fact produced the social collectivity that is this book's object of analysis. The refugee community is the outcome of these transformations. I signal this change by henceforth somewhat artificially and didactically using the self-ascribed label "Dega" to refer to this group of (former) highland people—in contradistinction to the label "Montagnard," which I will use to refer to the people living in the central highlands of Vietnam.

The relationship between the names Montagnard and Dega is very complicated. Both labels are used almost interchangeably in North Carolina. French colonialists invented the term Montagnard to gather all the diverse people living in the highlands (speaking dozens of different languages) into a single cultural unit. Highland people appropriated this French nomenclature in the creation of their ethnonationalist movement. On the other hand, the label Dega, while perhaps an indigenous Rhadé term (one of the languages of the highlands), seems to have not come into wide use until the years of the guerilla army resistance in the jungle after the end of the Vietnam War. It certainly had not been used until that time by the many non-Rhadé speakers who comprised the guerilla army and have since been resettled in North Carolina. This army's adoption of the name Dega marks the emergence of the group that eventually became the North Carolina refugee community.

Therefore, I strategically adopt the term Dega[4] when I refer to the refuge group, in order to signify the transformation by which this community was created. I use the term "highlander" or "highland people" to signify simply the people living in the central highlands (and whose ancestors lived there), and Montagnard to signify the highland collective identity formed through French and American colonial interventions (and appropriated by the highland people themselves) before and during the Vietnam War in the highland region south of the seventeenth parallel and east of the national borders with Cambodia and Laos. These are the people who appear in Vietnam War era publications as "the montagnards" (or more colloquially, the 'yards) and in more detailed anthropological studies as

the *Koho*, the *Stieng*, the *Katu*, the *Rhadé* (or *Edé*), the *Jarai*, the *Sedang*, and so on, speaking languages categorized within the Malayo-Polynesian Mon Khmer language families (see the map on p. xii). I use the term "Vietnamese" to refer to the lowland Viet who formed and dominated the modern state of Vietnam through political and military struggle with first the French and then the Americans (although, of course, the highland Montagnard people are also native to the region within the political boundaries of modern Vietnam, and thus could also be labeled Vietnamese).

The strategic nomenclature that I adopt for this study is somewhat unusual within contemporary Southeast Asian Studies, which has long struggled to delineate and provide authoritative labels for the various population groups living in Southeast Asia.[5] The distinction between the names Dega and Montagnard is rhetorical; it is not ultimately justified by actual use in the community (where various labels are fairly loosely and interchangeably employed). But it is deeply indicative of the scope and thrust of my argument.

The term Dega signals the postconversion discursive space that I create with this group; as I encounter them here, they tell me about themselves and their history, and I talk about—and write about—their conversion. This book is written in a postconversion space that we occupy together—the Dega community and the ethnographer. What, then, is the social space of my encounter with Dega and their encounter with me?

2 The Dega and Me

I first encountered the Dega refugee community in the mid-1990s. It is in this general time period that my analysis is based. There were probably two thousand–three thousand Dega living in the United States at that time—essentially all of them in the cities of Raleigh, Greensboro, and Charlotte, North Carolina. This makes them a much smaller, numerically insignificant group, compared to the much larger, several hundred thousand strong, U.S. Hmong refugee population living in large metropolitan areas across the country—although the two groups otherwise share many characteristics in common: they are Southeast Asian highland people (the Hmong are from the highlands of Laos) who emerged as "ethnic minority populations" within the postcolonial nation-building projects of their lowland neighbors and paid the price of their Vietnam War era military alliance with Americans by becoming outlaws in their own land and eventually refugees in the United States.

The first small group of about two hundred Dega arrived in 1986, followed by a larger group of more than four hundred in 1992.[6] Since then additional individuals and families had managed to emigrate through normal channels. They have been remarkably successful in their adjustment to American life. In contrast to the Hmong refugee communities (whose various social pathologies have peppered social scientific literature), the Dega have received very little scholarly attention and no social-worker alarm of difficulties in their resettlement. All of the Dega I met were gainfully employed, mostly in low-level service sector jobs or light manufacturing.

I heard many explanations for the relative success of this community: unlike the Hmong who spent years passively waiting in debilitating refugee camps, the Dega arrived in America after a decade or more of survival on their own in small guerilla army bands. They have thus been remarkably tenacious, opportunistic, and self-reliant. They are a small group that has stuck together and continued to help each other. They have received remarkable assistance from a range of church groups, social service agencies, and Vietnam veteran organizations. And they arrived in North Carolina in the 1980s and 1990s when the economy was booming. There were many more men than women in the army-groups that formed the initial community, and very few children. This meant that there were many breadwinners and few dependents. They lived efficiently in group apartments, went to work, language classes, and to their independently formed evangelical church congregations on Sunday.

My wife had Dega in her English as a Second Language classes at the local community college in Raleigh. In fact, I discovered that one of her teaching colleagues had married a Dega when I met him at a dinner party. I was struck by his gentle and forthcoming nature, and was immediately intrigued by the history he told me. Our meeting in a Raleigh living room inverted the classical anthropological encounter. Instead of the anthropologist venturing out to some distant and obscure corner of the world and reporting back to the academic metropole, here the "exotic" had come to the metropole and was sitting in this living room doing some "participant-observation" of his own.

Dega greeted me as they seem to have greeted all the North Carolinians who have shown interest in them: they assumed I was "a friend"—meaning, an advocate—concerned above all with how I could help them. That was my role in their community. In 1996 I volunteered with the local resettlement agency to head the "sponsorship team" that was resettling a newly arrived Montagnard family.

This allowed me to become an "insider" of sorts within the resettlement process I was studying and greatly broadened my social circle within the Dega community. And while this family's language was completely different from the one I had been studying already for a year and a half, the difficulties of communication actually contributed to my understanding of the confusions and misunderstandings of cross-cultural contact in the metropole.

As I became friends with more of the leaders in the community, they asked me to help them to fix and clarify their English grammar constructions in various documents and petitions they were presenting to the U.S. Congress, the president, and the United Nations. I was happy to help, and I leaped at the chance to view these statements. They became valuable examples of how Dega leaders present the group and their history in these specific forums. And yet my position as "translator" (i.e., correcting and organizing their English and offering advice on effective ways to communicate and present their case) inevitably implicated me in the representations that I would analyze. I am but one in a long line of friends on whom Montagnards and now Dega have drawn in order to represent themselves. I chose not to try to extricate myself from this position; instead I decided to study "from the inside" the processes of helping the Montagnards to speak for themselves—with all the complicated and interesting problems of self-reflective ethnography that this would entail.

My participation and self-implication in the very phenomenon that my book would endeavor to describe increased significantly through my work with Mr. Hip K'Sor, an important leader of the Dega community whose altar provides the opportunity for this chapter's opening vignette. I met Hip in 1996. He was friendly and gregarious, a comparatively good speaker of English, and eager to respond to my questions about the Dega. We decided to try to meet on a regular basis so that he could further my language skills in Rhadé and I could help him with his English. But Hip had his own agenda. He often directed our meetings into long passionate sermons about how the Dega had been mistreated by the Vietnamese. One day he showed me his handwritten notebook that he said catalogued the traditional religion and culture of the Montagnards. He said he wanted me to help translate this book into English so that Dega would have a record of who they were, and thus, who they are—in order to combat the brutal suppression of Montagnard traditional culture by the Vietnamese state.

I worked with Hip for more than two years on his book. My collaboration with Hip, and indeed the book that I helped him write,

became important data on which I developed my argument. And thus, just like the petitions and congressional statements that I helped to translate and shape, I had a hand in the creation of the representations that I analyze in this book. As we sat together and went through his text, he taught me his language and the details of his people's traditional religious practice as he understood them—and I struggled to find English words for the practices he described. Together we worked out a way for him to represent "the Montagnard people" to me and to the world in his book.[7] If Hip's book is about the Montagnard people, mine is more about how people like me, as well as people like Hip appropriating the language of people like me, have represented the Montagnard people.

In a third example of my evolving role in the community, the minister of one of the Dega Protestant churches sought my advice in his efforts to increase the interest and enthusiasm of his congregation. He also asked me to help him with the "Statement of Faith" he was preparing for his application to a seminary as well as letters he was writing to solicit support for his studies from other congregations. Thus I found myself in the position of instructing Dega in their Christian faith and worship—just as I was advising other Dega on the composition of their political advocacy tracts and was helping Y'Hip craft anthropological writing.

Believing in the power of my position in the academy, knowing that I was engaged in writing a book about them, most Dega I met were eager to talk with me and to tell me their stories. They wanted to broadcast to the largest possible audience the history of the injustices they had suffered—although I tried to tell them that my research was focused on "theory" and "representations of conversion." When I asked them about their relationship to the American military during the war they quite easily assumed that my book would "tell their story" to the world. I know that I have not yet written the book on their history that they would like to see.[8]

For six years I attended Dega public events, church services, celebrations, and informal gatherings. In my role as refugee sponsor I accompanied Dega to job interviews, driving tests, medical appointments, and court appearances. Besides this participant-observation, my fieldwork also encompassed an extensive schedule of formal, but unstructured and open-ended, life history interviews. I talked with a wide variety of individuals in the community—men, women, children, leaders, devout Christians, and Dega who are not leaders nor particularly devout. Although I studied several of their languages for a number of years, my capabilities were no match for their remarkable

fluency in English. Therefore our interviews were conducted in English, and my research questions quickly became focused on how they represent themselves in this new language. I always promised them complete anonymity in my study, although none of them ever seemed particularly concerned by this issue. Except where specific leaders occupy an important named position within the community or church, I have used pseudonyms.[9]

Since my research interests involved not just the Dega but also how they have been represented and influenced by the many people who have come into contact with them, I also conducted interviews among resettlement workers, health care providers, volunteer workers, retired missionaries, and retired Special Forces soldiers. As in my conversations with Dega, I tried to explain my academic interests to these people to the extent that they were interested. Of course, through my frequent participation in Dega events and the resettlement process I had numerous opportunities for less formal (and less fully disclosed) conversations.

This is the postconversion space that we occupy together, from which Dega speak and I write. So what, then, have I written?

3 The Book Ahead

In my analysis, I engage two relatively distinct fields in Christian discourses of conversion. First, Christians have often figured religious conversion in the form of an autobiographical narrative focused inwardly in self-scrutiny of the personal experience of transformation. But second, the phenomenon of conversion has also emerged through the accounts of missionaries focused outwardly at inducing and describing change in others. Thus, as a discursive expression, conversion emerges through two oppositely oriented gazes: one looking inward toward the description of internal change, and the other looking outward toward strategies for effecting change in others. My analysis of the formation of the Dega refugee community makes use of and interrogates both of these discursive traditions—the autobiographical and the missionary.

Each of the chapters in this study tack back and forth between the central highlands and North Carolina, to demonstrate the continuity and consistency with which both the autobiographical and the missional discourses are formative of the Dega and evident in the postconversion space in which I encounter them and write.

The next chapter, "Representing the Montagnards," is a long arcing argument structured to orient the reader to the material. It provides an

initial background description of the history and culture of the central highlands of Vietnam by analyzing how highlanders have been represented in a variety of Western discourses. The primary westerners in the highlands were missionaries, colonial administrators, the military, and anthropologists. These various colonial projects drew from and depended upon one another in their encounter with and representations of highland people. But for a variety of reasons discussed here, none of them was entirely comfortable with (or wanted to fully disclose) its relationship to the others. Historical records, as well as contemporary accounts offered by Dega refugees, provide a glimpse of the Montagnards operating within and between these unstable colonial discursive practices to construct a new pan-highland ethnic identity that was useful in their political resistance to the state-building project of the lowland Viet. Further, the chapter demonstrates that the way Dega refugees represent themselves today reproduces the anxiety and ambivalence of these overlapping discourses and disavowed relationships. This group's rhetorical assertions of "traditional Montagnard culture" (premised on the particularities described by anthropologists' cultural relativism) mingle uncertainly with the assertion of Christian universals that would transcend cultural difference—for it is from these discourses that highland people learned to speak about themselves in and to the west. The chapter culminates with an argument that religious conversion can be understood as a process by which a convert learns to represent himself or herself and the past in new ways. Conversion occurs when a new way of narrating a life produces a new sense of the self. Conversion is the creation of a new discursive position from which to know the preconverted self in a new way. The Dega today in North Carolina stand in this new discursive position in relation to their "old self" (Montagnard traditional culture). The scope and content of the Dega conversion is evidenced in the variety of the discourses they have appropriated to represent their preconversion self—not just evangelical or Christian discourses, but also anthropological discourses and a rhetoric of cultural relativism and development.

Chapter three, "The Conversion of the Dega," continues the analysis of autobiographical discourses of conversion through the analysis of Dega refugee testimonials and interviews relating how they encountered and came to identify themselves with Christianity in the highlands. Dega rarely tell the kind of "conversion stories" that are usually ubiquitous among evangelical converts. Instead, they tend to tell dramatic war stories (from the period of their ethnonationalist guerilla resistance movement) in which God miraculously intervenes to save

them from certain death in the jungle. I argue that these stories function like traditional evangelical conversion narratives. They constitute a "conversion to Dega" by linking the Christian god to the group's resistance to the lowland Viet. These stories produce a new self-identity, "Dega"—just as evangelicals' stories of religious conversion help produce (not just narrate) a new religious self-identity in the postconversion space from which the stories are told (not, primarily, in the historical events that the stories purport to narrate). Analysis of autobiographical discourses of conversion thus provides surprising insights into the self-representations of Dega refugees and the social tensions that characterize their community life in refugee exile.

Chapter four, "Conversion to Refugees," begins by noting how the problem of agency has bedeviled not just Christian converts' accounts of conversion, but also the strategies and descriptions offered by Christian missionaries and in fact even the explanations of conversion proffered by anthropological, sociological, historical, and psychological analyses of religious change. This chapter's analysis of the processes of refugee resettlement, and the accounts of how Montagnard highlanders became Dega refugees, demonstrates a similar problematic at work. I argue that the various paradigmatic structures that shape our understanding of religious conversion have similarly shaped the account of the Dega conversion to refugees. The processes of refugee resettlement—especially the attention that this project pays to reconstituting the refugee's agency and "self-sufficiency"—mimic the concerns that have driven conversion discourses articulated by Christians as well as scholars in the secular academy.

The missionary discourses of the humanitarian project, described in chapter four, that convert Montagnard highlanders into Dega refugees, focus to a remarkable degree on medical interventions to sanitize and transform inadequate Montagnard bodies. Chapter five, "Sickness, Sin, and Animal Sacrifice," demonstrates how this concern for Montagnard bodies extends back to evangelical constructions of religious conversion in the highlands. This chapter provides a close reading of the slippery set of tropes by which evangelical missionaries presented Christian conversion to Montagnards in the highlands. Missionary representations of Montagnards' sickness, sin, and animal sacrifice constructed conversion as a healing of Montagnard bodies and a reformation of their bodily practices. This, despite the evangelicals' rhetorical insistence that they were not medical missionaries, not "mere humanitarians"—just as the refugee workers discussed in chapter four insisted that *they* were not "missionaries." Humanitarians and evangelicals have shared a preoccupation with Montagnard and

Dega bodies. They participate in the same paradigmatic missionary discourse.

Chapter six, "Hearts and Minds," continues this analysis of the ways in which both humanitarian and evangelical missionary discourses have sought transformation through medical and bodily interventions. The American military project to "win the hearts and minds" of the Montagnards shared deep (but often disavowed) material relations and striking rhetorical similarities to the work of Protestant evangelical missionaries. Both of these missionary projects attempt to transform the internal, nonmaterial sensibilities, or "soul," through interventions aimed at the external physical body. And both are confounded by the problem of intuiting internal transformation through external physical signs.

Finally, chapter seven, "The Conversion of the Special Forces," provides an ironic reading of the special relationship that developed between Montagnards and the American soldiers of the Special Forces. Continuing the line of argument developed over the last several chapters examining conversion's problematic differentiation between physical bodies and spiritual souls, this chapter argues that it is the Special Forces solders as much as the Dega refugees who have converted. Special Forces arrived in the central highlands to change Montagnard material culture, and thereby change the highland peoples' interior hearts and minds. But in the end, it is the Special Forces as much as the Montagnards whose hearts and minds were "converted" (which the soldiers usually articulate by using the language of "loyalty"—exactly the same language they used to describe the transformation they were seeking among the Montagnards). Fittingly, it is the material forms of highland culture (the very objects and practices that the Special Forces had sought to transform) that end up being adopted by the solders themselves—marking (and in a real sense actually accomplishing) their own conversion into Montagnards.

4 The Dega Afterword

Thus, my primary interests in this book are not to recover the factual, historical, ethnographic details of the original highland culture, nor to trace what has changed and how this change was effected. Instead I analyze the phenomenon of the Dega conversion by focusing on its rhetorical production in the archival accounts of encounter in the highlands (what I refer to as the missionary discourses of conversion), and most importantly in the discursive space of the convert—the autobiographical discourses of conversion constitutive of the Dega

refugee community. This postconversion location of autobiographical self-representation might be called "the Dega afterword"—the words they produce after their conversion, after the war, after their guerilla resistance, and after their transformation into an exiled refugee community.

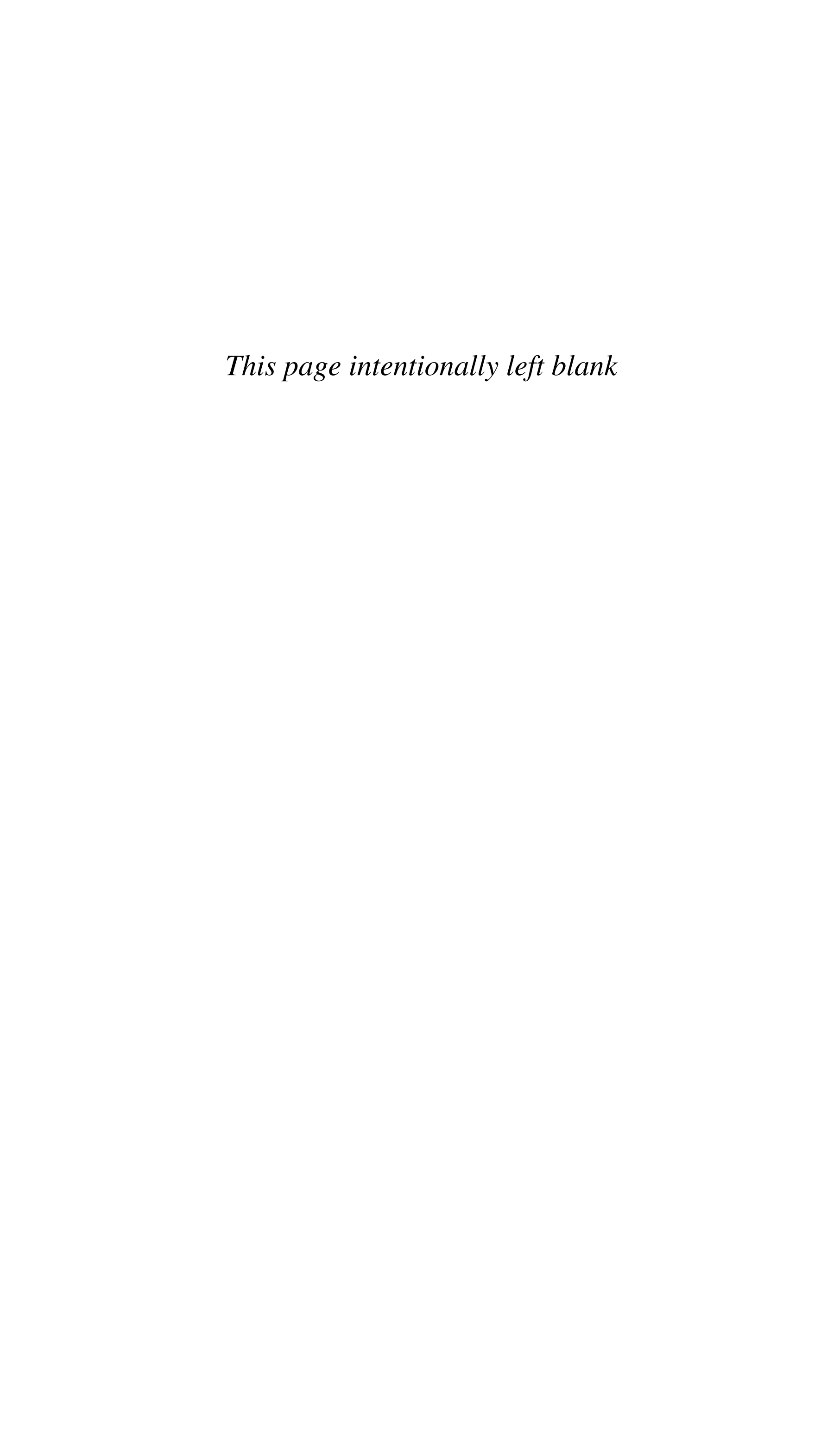
Conversion is a rhetoric; it is a style or form of representation—articulated either autobiographically by the convert or missionally by the projects aimed at leveraging a transformation. Autobiographically, conversion is an appropriation by the convert of a community's paradigmatic forms of self-representation; by adopting the community's rhetorical form, the convert produces his or her conversion. The autobiography of conversion is an explicitly positioned rhetoric. The representational perspective of conversion is positioned *after* the conversion.

And so, this study is positioned in the Dega afterword. The object of my study is the Dega community, an object that is premised on the conversion that has produced it. My access to the conversion of the Dega is through the prior recognition of this Dega object, which is then read back into the archival missionary accounts of encounter and the autobiographical stories articulated in the afterword. The Dega afterword is where I encounter Dega refugees and listen to them describe the central highlands, the Vietnam War, their guerilla resistance, and their refugee resettlement. This is where they decide how they want to present themselves to me, what sorts of things they think I want to know, and what sorts of things they want to tell me. I listen to them, ask them questions, watch them, work with them, and befriend them. This Dega afterword also drives my reading of the archive.

The afterword is the space of the Dega conversion, where my writing produces this conversion, makes it visible. My writing, which represents the Dega afterword, also produces that Dega afterword. I bring my academically trained interests to bear. I analyze their representations and the historical archive through my reading of Christian constructions of conversion and the missionary project. Through this analysis I convert exiled Montagnards into the Dega refugee community. This book is thus itself a "missionary discourse." It is I who insist on distinguishing "Dega" from "Montagnards." It is from this perspective—the perspectival position of religious conversion—that the words of the Dega become their afterword. I write the Dega afterword.

This book examines the autobiographical discourses of conversion proffered by the Dega, as well as the various missionary discourses

that were deployed to try to change highland people, and to help them change themselves. It traces these representations through a history that resulted in the formation of the Christian Dega refugee community that I have encountered in North Carolina. The creation of this community is the formation of a particular location from which they can represent themselves and their history, and from which they can be represented by me. This study knits together the disparate locations of the Vietnam War and refugee resettlement in North Carolina into a single transnational field of representations and historical power relations. I use various paradigmatic Christian understandings of conversion and the missionary project to analyze the complex historical changes through which this refugee community has passed, and how by doing so they converted—they became Christians, and they became Dega.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Chapter 2

Representing the Montagnards

Many of the Dega refugees in North Carolina also refer to themselves as "Montagnard"—and in that dual name there is a complicated story to tell about how people from the Vietnamese highlands came to think of themselves as "a people," as a group with a shared history and a common and distinct tradition. Prior to French colonization of the highlands there had been no lasting political or social structures above the level of the individual village and none of the dozens of languages spoken in the highlands had a word to designate highland people as a single collectivity.[1] The collectivity known as Montagnard, or "Dega," emerged only with the invention of its name(s) in the context of French and American interventions in the highlands.

Montagnard is a French creation, both in the sense that it is a French word meaning mountain people or "mountaineers," but also in the sense that the Montagnard collectivity was first imagined and described by French colonial discourses. Highland people began to refer to themselves and imagine themselves as "Montagnards" in response to French colonial administrative strategies. Montagnard is the name under which highlanders organized an ethnonationalist movement that rose against the South Vietnamese state during the Vietnam War. A militarized faction of this movement called *FULRO*—an acronym for the *Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*, or United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races—continued to fight for political independence after the American withdrawal and the fall of Saigon. Apparently, the word Dega came into wide use in this guerilla army. In any case, it is during these years in the remote mountain jungles that this band of guerilla fighters forged the collectivity that came to North Carolina as a refugee group, referring to themselves by the name Dega. The name Dega never appears in Vietnam War era literature

and is not used in the highlands to this day. Dega are refugees, not highlanders.

Dega would seem to be an indigenous term, but its origins and referent are uncertain. Some Dega claim that the term has no semantic history in any of the highland languages but simply arose simultaneously with the *FULRO* army.[2] They are perplexed when I recount for them the derivation suggested by Gerald Hickey, an American anthropologist, who claims that Dega means "sons of the mountains" (without specifying in which language).[3] A former Protestant missionary to the highlands told me that the term derives from the name for the "*Rhadé*" people—a name for one of the highland "tribes" that is actually a French mispronunciation of the self-ascribed *Edé*. He explained that "*ga*" is a syntactically meaningless syllable added to complete the sound of "*Edé*"—producing "[E]dé-ga." By this account, Dega would seem to extend the appellation for the *Edé* collectivity to name all the highland people—which may be an appropriate narrative given the prominence of *Rhadé* speaking highlanders in the *FULRO* movement where the name Dega seems to have come into common use.

Many in the refugee community use the term Montagnard because they feel it is the name most likely recognized by Americans. But some object because it is a French term. Others do not like "Dega" because they consider it a *Rhadé* term. Some combine both names together to produce "Montagnard-Dega." The point is that even though this refugee community has a strong sense of itself as a single, distinctive, easily identified group, it cannot agree on its own name. And appropriately, this contested and unstable nomenclature is a reflection of the complicated colonial processes through which the group came into existence.

The only "origin myth" I know that narrates the origins of the highland people as a collectivity was handed to me by Hip K'Sor, a Dega refugee community leader. Hip is a native *Jarai* speaker. Thus it is interesting that he uses the (apparently) *Rhadé* name Dega in this "history taught by the elders." Hip's narrative seems to quite purposefully account for French ethnographic constructions by placing the original Dega ancestors in the "islands of Malaysia" (where people speak languages belonging to the same Malayo-Polynesian linguistic family as the languages spoken in the highlands). It also acknowledges and purports to overcome the French-identified ethnolinguistic differences within a highland population that speaks both Malayo-Polynesian as well as Mon Khmer languages (the language family shared with Khmer people living in the Cambodian lowlands). Hip's account is worth quoting at length because its dependence on

French scholarship illustrates how the French interventions, through which the Dega collectivity emerged, are inscripted even in an account that seeks to prove the group's primordial existence "from the beginning until today."

> A thousand years ago, Y'De and Y'Ga, two brothers from the islands of Malaysia, went fishing in the sea. Suddenly a typhoon came and destroyed their boat. Nearly all the people in the boat died and it sank in the deep sea. Y'De and Y'Ga were washed by the sea in different directions. Y'De reached the coast of Cambodia. From that time, Y'De and his people traveled through the mountains and the rivers. . . . They moved from Cambodia into the central highlands . . . Gradually they separated into different groups: the Bahnar, Sedang, Rongao, Katu . . . Each group was influenced by the area where it lived, and learned to speak a different language. But they all kept the same traditions and customs from their ancestors.
>
> Meanwhile, Y'Ga had reached the mouth of the Apa River in the province of Tuy-Hua. From this area Y'Ga and his descendants started to explore and traveled over the whole region of the highlands . . . Because of poverty, or to avoid disease, the groups separated and moved into such regions as: Ankje, Pleiku, Daklak, Bandon, and along the boarder of Cambodia and Laos. These tribes are known as: the *Rhade*, *Jarai*, *Hroi*, *Trung* . . .
>
> Ethnological theory has proved that the descendants of Y'Ga belong to the Malayo-Polynesian language family, and the descendants of Y'De belong to the Mon Khmer Malayo-Polynesian family [sic]. Today they have the name "Montagnard Dega People," and they have lived in the whole region of the highlands from the beginning until today.
>
> When the descendants of Y'De and Y'Ga met each other, they were very kind and loving toward one another, even though they spoke different languages. They understood each other and shared the same culture and traditions of their common ancestors. From that time on they have named themselves "Ana Y'De Y'Ga" (or Ana Y'Dega), which means "sons of Y'De and Y'Ga."[4]

Hip's mythological redaction of highland history, as it was constructed by French ethnologists, attempts but cannot manage to circumvent the apparent emergence of "the Dega people" as part of the recent highland ethnonationalist resistance movement. Unlike Montagnard, Dega may be an indigenous term but it is not ancient. It names a social collectivity that only began to articulate itself as such in the recent colonial context.

This chapter argues that Dega refugees represent themselves and their past—indeed, bring themselves into existence under the unstable

banner of "the Montagnard-Dega people"—by drawing on, and creatively amalgamating, French and American colonial representations of highland people. They have learned to represent themselves by learning how westerners represented them. The primary westerners in the highlands were missionaries, colonial administrators, the military, and anthropologists. These various colonial projects drew from and depended upon one another in their encounter with and representations of highland people. But none of them was entirely comfortable with (or wanted to fully disclose) its relationship to the others. The American military's use of anthropologists became quite controversial during the Vietnam War, as was the missionary's use of anthropology in evangelical circles. Anthropologists often relied on missionary informants, but the military manuals they helped prepare rarely mention the presence of missionaries or the growing Christianization of parts of the highland population. Missionaries declared their neutrality in the war, while they depended on military protection and spoke earnestly of how the army was "keeping the door open for the Lord." The way Dega refugees represent themselves today reproduces the anxiety and ambivalence of these overlapping discourses and disavowed relationships—for it is from these discourses that highland people learned to speak about themselves in and to the west.[5]

1 "The Montagnard Need A Book"

French Catholic missionaries were the first Europeans to encounter people living in the central highlands of Vietnam. In the early 1840s, Bishop Etienne Cuenot, vicar in a Viet coastal village, sent Father Combes and Pierre Dourisboure into the highlands with a lowland Viet deacon as a guide. They were to establish a missionary refuge beyond the steep coastal range, beyond the reach or concern of lowland Viet mandarins who periodically mounted violent persecutions of the foreign missionaries and their mostly peasant converts.[6] Few but the occasional trader ever ventured into what the lowland Viet considered the remote and rugged mountains inhabited by wild animals, malevolent spirits, and fierce people they called "*moi*"—a term invariably translated in French and English accounts as "savage" ("*sauvage*").[7] Cuenot hoped that the highlands would provide a remote hideaway where Christianity could survive in Indochina if it were wiped out on the coast where French colonial interests were still only just being established. The politically divided lowland Viet had been gradually extending their civilization south along the coast from Hanoi in the Red River delta since achieving political independence

from the distant Chinese emperor in the ninth century.[8] Until 1900, the Catholic missionaries in Kontum were the only Western presence in the highlands. They acted as the French administrators of this region and aided several French military explorations by providing ethnographic and geographic information, interpreters, and guides. Thus, from the beginning of the French occupation, missionaries were intimately involved with the institutions of governance and the authoritative discourses about highland people that informed and enabled (and was enabled by) French colonial occupation.

Oscar Salemink's scholarship, upon which much of this chapter is based, demonstrates how the French established and administered colonial power in the highlands through the production of anthropological knowledge. (Much of this historical material has been covered in earlier publications as well, by anthropologists such as Gerald Hickey and Jacques Dournes, although without the discursive critique implicating anthropology, which Salemink brings to the analysis and which I follow here).[9] Léopold Sabatier (the French *résident*, or provincial governor, among *Rhadé* speaking highlanders in the Darlac region of the central highlands in the 1920s) took a special ethnographic interest in the highland people. He developed a Roman script for their language and opened a Franco-*Rhadé* school in the newly established market-center of Banmethuot. He promoted the use of the more neutral term Montagnard—French for "mountain people"—to replace the highly pejorative Vietnamese term, "*moi*." Most significantly he sought to marshal ethnographic knowledge of the *Rhadé* to facilitate French rule.[10]

Sabatier began collecting the verses recited by village leaders when they settled village disputes. He translated these verses into French and published them as a "*coutumier*," or "customary"—a codification of traditional "tribal law" through which French authority could be exercised. The strategic development of ethnographic knowledge became an important facet of colonial administration. One French *résident* in the highlands wrote at the time:

> It is the study of the races that inhabit a region which determines the political organization to be imposed and the means to be employed for its pacification. An officer who succeeds in drawing a sufficiently exact ethnographic map of the territory he commands, has almost reached its complete pacification, soon followed by the organization which suits him best.[11]

Through this policy emerged a detailed, authoritative, and administratively valuable discourse on the Montagnards that remains today

the basis for any account of "traditional Montagnard culture"—even, and perhaps especially, accounts provided by Dega refugees.

According to this scholarship, Montagnards belonged to two distinct language families—Mon Khmer (spoken by Cambodian people as well) and Malayo-Polynesian (spoken by people in parts of Indonesia and the Pacific archipelago, to whom the Montagnards were said to bear a physical, or "racial," resemblance). French ethnology delineated various highland tribes along the perceived divisions between linguistic communities in the highlands. But despite the oft-noted differences between the tribes, French ethnography consistently attributed an essential cultural unity to the Montagnards—especially in opposition to the Vietnamese people living on the coast.

French scholarship described how, in contrast to wet rice paddy cultivation by the lowland Viet, Montagnards cleared patches of jungle on a rotating basis—a practice that led the French to describe them as "nomadic" (a characterization that has since been widely challenged and rejected). Their houses and family structure too were entirely different from the lowland Viet. Montagnards lived in large extended families in houses sometimes twenty or thirty yards long and raised five or ten feet off the ground on solid log pilings. Anthropologists described them as a "matrilineal" group because in most tribes the husband moved in with his wife's family and a new sleeping compartment was added.

French ethnographic accounts also contrasted lowland Confucian ancestor worship and Mahayana Buddhist monasteries with Montagnards' practice of sacrificing domesticated animals (primarily chickens, pigs, goats, and most prestigiously, water buffalo) to a pantheon of spirits called "*yang*" in all of the highland languages. French ethnographic studies typically concluded that belief in these spirits played a central determining role in Montagnards' lives. For example:

> Their religion is based on the belief in a multitude of spirits that are believed to have created the world and continue to govern it. The spirits are also the rulers of the world, and the maintainers of the socio-religious system. Any violation of this social organization is an attack on these spirits, and requires a reparation. These spirits occupy a primary place in their view of the world; nothing is done before consulting them for fear of punishment. For the people do not believe that the supernatural is separate; it constantly intervenes in the economy, customs, morals, and in all of society.[12]

According to this French ethnographic discourse, Montagnards lived in constant fear of the *yang*. Their world was pregnant with

signs from the spirits that they learned to read and obey. *Yang* lurked in the trees, in whirlpools, and in the mountains. *Yang* controlled the patterns of weather and were invoked during planting and harvesting. *Yang* were involved when a new house was constructed or when kinship alliances were formed. *Yang* controlled a person's destiny, bringing success or failure. *Yang* were called upon to cure sickness (which could often be caused by some sort of infraction against the spirit world). In French accounts the Montagnards incessantly implore the goodwill of these spirits through the sacrifice of animals and through elaborate prayers and oaths. The Montagnards' system for adjudicating disputes relied on divination techniques to determine the will of the *yang*. In cases such as adultery or theft a sacrifice would be offered to mollify the *yang* while reparations were paid to the offended family. French scholarship described how the slightest deviation from the intricately prescribed behavior toward the *yang* required a reparation.

Because of such practices, and because the men wore loincloths and the women were often naked above the waist, and they practiced swidden agriculture and lived in small isolated villages in the remote jungle mountains, with only simple tools, little manufacturing, and no written language, and because many of them continued to fiercely resist French authority making it difficult for the French to see them, let alone count or control them, the Montagnards were marked as "primitives" in contrast to their more civilized lowland neighbors.

This is the ethnographic record that establishes the "traditional culture" of the highlands—how highlanders lived before the French arrived, before the Vietnam War, and before the Christian missionaries. French ethnographic discourse codified the cultural traditions of the highlands and promoted the idea of "the Montagnard people"—a formulation that Dega refugees assert unproblematically and ahistorically. It is a cultural identity that was produced and reified by French colonial interventions. And it became the rhetorical focus of the emerging Montagnard ethnonationalist movement. Highland leaders could draw on this discursive tradition to represent and extol "Montagnard culture" and delineate the difference between Montagnards and "Vietnamese." This construction was reinforced by the secondary schools opened by the French in the highlands that brought together a pan-highland elite.[13] Highlanders learned to imagine themselves as the Montagnard people through their interaction with French colonial governance.

In a strategic attempt to remove the highlands from negotiations being conducted with Viet nationalists, the French established a nominally independent Montagnard country within the *Union Francias*

in 1946. The *Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois* (or PMSI, in English: "Montagnard Country of South Indochina") was then redesignated a "Crown Domain" of the Vietnamese puppet emperor Bo Dai in 1950 (acquiescing to Vietnamese political factions that the French hoped would remain loyal to some sort of colonial presence in Indochina). The PMSI was not mentioned in the Geneva Accords of 1954 that formally ended the French-Indochina War by establishing the temporary states of North and South Vietnam. The central highlands were given no special status but were simply incorporated within the Republic of [South] Vietnam (RVN).[14]

The 1946 treaty establishing the PMSI remains the basis of Dega legal claims to an independent highland.[15] Even more significantly, the northern border of the PMSI (the seventeenth parallel, also used later to divide North and South Vietnam) constitutes the northern boundary of the imagined Montagnard collectivity. Montagnard ethnonationalism emerged as a political movement only within the South Vietnamese state. Dega in North Carolina (and even Montagnard resistance leaders in the highlands during the war) have never imagined that their Montagnard collectivity extends to the people living north of the seventeenth parallel. To be sure, there are non-lowland Viet mountain people living north of the seventeenth parallel—the Muong, the Yao, the Tho, the Tai—but these people have never been included within the "imagined community" of the Montagnard nation proclaimed by *FULRO* and asserted today by Dega refugees in exile.

Finally, it is significant that the new highland elites articulated their pan-highland Montagnard ethnonationalist identity in opposition to the emerging Vietnamese nation, not French colonial rule—which managed to present itself as the protectors of Montagnard culture against the rapacious Vietnamese nationalists. French monographs after World War II replaced the presumptions and prejudices of evolutionary anthropology with an explicit cultural-relativism—often drawing sentimental and romanticized images of noble savages tragically doomed to extinction.

Montagnard ethnonationalist sentiment—and its strident defense of Montagnard culture—increased in response to the heavy handed nation-building project pursued by Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of the newly established Republic of [South] Vietnam (RVN).[16] In 1958, the *Bajaraka* movement (named for the *Bahnar*, *Jarai*, *R[h] adé*, and *Koho* tribes identified by French ethnography) submitted a long list of grievances to the South Vietnamese state, all of which revolved around the maintenance of "highlander ethnic identity."[17] In 1964, the declaration forming the more militant *FULRO* movement

denounced the "systematic politics of genocide" that threatened to destroy "our civilization, our culture, our religion, our nationality, and our language"—implying that these things were all shared in common among highland people.[18] This document, written (or at least published) in French, demonstrates the polemical and political use highland leaders could make of the French ethnographic discourse and the colonial practices of governance. It was through these French interventions that highland people could imagine "our culture, our religion, our nationality."

I saw this French ethnographic tradition put to use by Hip K'Sor in his North Carolina home. He was passionately explaining to me why it was so important that he write a book about Montagnard culture as he called it. "The Montagnard need a book," he said, "or they will not know who they are. They will become Vietnamese." He pulled an American high school textbook off his shelf and showed me the chapters on the civilization of ancient Greece. "See, all other people have a book. They have it written down, who they are and what they have done. But the Dega don't care. They throw it away. They give it to the dog to eat." Then he told me that the French had been good to the Montagnards, that they had recognized and supported Montagnard culture. "Here," he said, and grabbed from a huge stack of papers a xeroxed copy of a French language *coutumier* he had brought with him from Vietnam.[19] "The French made this book. They love the Montagnards. Here we can look in this book and learn all about our people. The Vietnamese do not like this book. They do not want us to know that we have our own way. They try to convince us that we are Vietnamese."

Then Hip showed me a small notebook, worn and frayed at the edges, crammed with his own handwritten descriptions of *Jarai* traditions, transcribed "prayers," and old stories. He asked me to help him translate this text into English. His goal, he said, was to correct and improve the French *coutumier* and to make it accessible to the Dega—in North Carolina as well as in Vietnam. Recognizing that the younger generation of Dega in North Carolina cannot read the *Jarai* language, Hip envisions a side-by-side English translation of his improved *coutumier*. He hopes that his text will help teach them the *Jarai* language through my English translation.

Hip's text follows the conventions of French ethnography. He titles his chapters using *Jarai* words that apparently came into use to translate French anthropological categories. These categories are constructed by using the *Jarai* word "*toloi*"—which Hip wants me to translate as "fact," although perhaps, "thing" is a better translation

(as the word often appears in sentences to emphasize the substantive existence of a phenomenon). Thus Hip has a chapter titled "*Toloi Phian*." He explained to me that the French used the *Jarai* word "*Phian*" to translate the French term "*Droit,*" and I dutifully offered "Law" as an English translation. Hip's reliance on the French ethnographic tradition lead him to adopt the French term "*genies*" to translate what highland people called *yang*—although English language accounts of the highlands consistently translate both *yang* and *genie* as "spirit." Apparently, Hip assumes that "genie" has the same connotation in English as it does in French. His resistance to my suggestions that we instead use the word spirit suggests that he is accustomed to speaking about the *yang* as "genies" when using what might be called his "ethnographic language."

Through Hip's instructions I repeat the colonial translation process in reverse. Where French administrators and anthropologists had ethnographic terms that they sought *Jarai* words for, I now learn to understand the meaning of a *Jarai* word by Hip telling me which French term it was the stand-in equivalent for. I then provide the English word that corresponds to this French anthropological concept.

For example, the *Jarai* word "*guat*," which Hip sometimes writes "*juat*" (better indicating its pronunciation), means "friendly, gentle, or polite" ("like, I know her and treat her nice"), but can also mean "usual" or "typical." Hip's prized *Coutumier* bears a *Jarai*-language title, "*Toloi Djuat*" (offering a third spelling variation). Thus in Hip's text I translate "*Toloi Juat*" with the English term "Customs," as the French had used "*Juat*" to translate "*Coutumier*." But until French ethnographers began analyzing and codifying *Jarai* customs, native *Jarai* speakers did not reify "*juat*" by placing the term "*toloi*" before it—becoming literally (perhaps), "the politeness thing." To this day, these words are rarely used by *Jarai* speakers in North Carolina except in a polemical political context or, for example, in the printed program of the staged music and dance performances on "Montagnard Cultural Day."[20]

Hip was perplexed when I tried to explain to him that these terms and categories—these ways of describing *Jarai* customs and practices—constitute the "invention" of Montagnard culture. Born in the 1940s and educated in a French Catholic mission school, he knows no other way to talk about the traditional customs of the *Jarai* people. He did not participate in these customs as an adult, but he knows they existed and that they were destroyed by the encroachments of the lowland Viet. (Typical of Dega refugees, he does not blame the demise of traditional *Jarai* life on French imperialism or the American military intervention and the increasing violence and destruction of the

Vietnam War.) He sees the *Coutumier* as a valuable record of *Jarai* customs. He knows that it is inaccurate in places; his task is to correct it. Before leaving Vietnam he interviewed elders and ritual specialists. Like a classical ethnographer he plied his informants with small gifts of cigarettes and alcohol. "Then they tell me the old stories, the old ways of doing things. And I write it down. And you will translate it into English and we will have our book." Hip wants to include the traditions of the *Rhadé* and *Koho* tribes (also present in the North Carolina refugee population) so that his book will be representative of the entire Dega population. But in any case, he explained to me, all the Dega people are essentially the same—thus reproducing the simultaneous assertion and denial of internal differences within "the Montagnard" population that was a hallmark of French ethnography.

"The Montagnard need a book, or they will not know who they are." Hip hopes that this Montagnard cultural identity—which did not exist as such prior to French colonial-ethnographic interventions—can be safely and strategically bound in a book for future generations to consult. "The young generations, they will—if we finish the book—they will look in the book and say, 'Ah! Our people!' " This is a topic that he is passionate about. He described the project repeatedly to me. It became his passion.[21] Hip's writing project is a strategic ethnographic representation of Montagnard highland customs in order to maintain their difference from the Vietnamese. It is explicitly dependent upon French ethnographic conventions and the French representation of "the Montagnards," which codified highland cultural difference for the purposes of colonial control.

2 Anthropologists, Missionaries, and the American Military

Thus far in my account, I have represented the discourses and institutions that Montagnards and Dega have drawn on to imagine and promote their ethnonationalist moment as having been relatively unified and unconflicted. This was necessary for the sake of brevity and to make clear the essential relationship I want to emphasize: French ethnographic research authorized and informed colonial administration, which became the source and context for the construction of ethnonationalist identity among the highlanders. With the American intervention in Vietnam, the discourses of anthropology that had been important resources for the institutionalization of French colonial control were put to use by the American military—but now this practice began to become more controversial.

In a 1972 "Distinguished Lecture" before the American Anthropological Association, French anthropologist Georges Condominas described his outrage and dismay upon discovering that his monograph of a Mong Gar village in the central highlands had been translated into English by the CIA without his permission or knowledge. Further, he said:

> You will understand my indignation when I tell you that I learned about the "pirating" only a few years after having the proof that Srae, whose marriage I described in *Nous Avons Mange la Foret*, the book in question, had been tortured by a sergeant of the Special Forces in the camp of Phii Kó![22]

This indignation, the accusation of torture, and the CIA's surreptitious "pirating" of anthropological knowledge, begins to illustrate the unstable dynamics that constitute the production and use of Western representations of the Montagnards during the Vietnam War. In this period American military, missionary, and anthropological projects overlapped and depended on one another in relationships that were often contested, disavowed, or conflicting. I proceed in this section to illuminate these tangled relations. In the next section I find the tensions and paradoxes through which Americans represented the Montagnards surfacing in the self-representations of Dega refugees.

The U.S. military's use of French anthropological texts was part of a broad pattern of American government appropriation of the social scientific academy to inform and implement domestic and foreign policy goals.[23] In the 1950s it was not controversial for patriotic and conscientious social scientists to participate in government-funded studies of social and political problems in the third world. President Kennedy's progressive, aggressive, and academically informed "counterinsurgency" strategy was perhaps best summed up by a quote printed by the *New York Times* in 1967: "The old formula for successful counterinsurgency used to be 10 troops for every guerilla . . . Now the formula is 10 anthropologists for every guerilla."[24] In another quote frequently cited by critics of the military's use of social scientific expertise, Robert S. McNamara (President Kennedy's secretary of defense) is said to have remarked that if World War I was a "chemist's war" and World War II was a "physicist's war," then "Vietnam might well have to be considered the social scientists' war."[25] A military manual written to train soldiers to work with the Montagnards explains how social science

could be put to good use:

> Success in Vietnam requires that personnel know and understand the people among whom they serve. Effective aid for the tribesman beyond the sounds of battle, requires that we know his innermost desires. We must know how his culture and religion satisfy these before we can establish points of contact in terms he can understand and accept.[26]

Another guide, published by the U.S. Special Forces in 1964, provides ethnographic information on each of thirteen highland tribes, including guidelines on such topics as "Paramilitary Capabilities," "Civic Action Considerations," and "Psychops Considerations" (the latter is an often used abbreviation for "Psychological Operations," which included propaganda and any other methods that could be used to manipulate the "target population").[27]

The cozy relationship between the Department of Defense and the American social scientific establishment blew up into a great controversy in 1964 when "Project Camelot"—an ongoing series of studies on insurrection in Latin America—was suddenly uncovered by the American press and investigated by Congress. In 1970 Eric R. Wolf and Joseph G. Jorgensen (two members of the American Anthropological Association's ethics committee) publicly aired charges of "clandestine" anthropological research funded by the Department of Defense in the *New York Review of Books.* This led to a year-long controversy within that professional society, documented by an extraordinary series of letters in the newsletter of the American Anthropological Association.[28]

Gerald Hickey is an interesting figure in this controversy surrounding the military use of anthropological research. Through the course of the war he conducted and published several studies in the highlands under the auspices of the RAND Corporation, an independent (i.e., non-university affiliated) social science research organization under contract with the Department of Defense.[29] For this activity, the approbation of his academic colleagues made it difficult for him later to obtain office space to complete his manuscript at his alma mater, the University of Chicago.[30] But in his books, Hickey consistently portrays himself as an advocate and defender of the Montagnards.[31] He supported many of the demands of the Montagnard ethnonationalist movement and urged the American embassy to pressure Saigon to redress Montagnard grievances. He played an important role in the establishment of the Ministry for Ethnic Minorities (giving highland leaders a voice within the Saigon Administration), and was a frequent consultant and advisor for this ministry. He became an outspoken

critic of American military strategy as the war dragged on—especially the indiscriminate use of napalm, the rounding up of Montagnards into squalid refugee camps, and the designation of their traditional habitat as Viet Cong infested "free fire zones."

Not withstanding the controversy surrounding social scientists' participation in the "American war machine," Hickey is a hero to Dega refugees, and their affection for him is not difficult to understand. All of the Dega who have become refugees in North Carolina say they were supporters of the American war effort. Many of them fought in the Special Forces "Civil Irregular Defense Groups" (CIDG) and later side-by-side with Americans in Mobile Response (or MIKE) Force units. In their accounts there is never even a glimpse of the image suggested by George Condominas of American soldiers torturing Montagnard villagers. Instead both Dega and retired Special Forces soldiers I have spoken to provide glowing reports of the "special relationship" and deep camaraderie that was common between Americans and Montagnards during the war. Hickey's work for the American government would seem to have facilitated this relationship. Even more important to the Dega community is Hickey's obvious affection for the Montagnard people, and his careful documentation of (and sympathy for) their ethnonationalist movement. I have seen copies of his books on shelves in many Dega homes. Most of them are at least aware that his body of scholarship exists and that it essentially supports their grievances against the Vietnamese. Dega I interviewed would frequently refer me to Hickey's books to answer my questions about highland traditional life. And one of the Dega refugee political resistance groups draws extensively on Hickey's scholarship to depict traditional Montagnard culture and to chronicle abuses by the lowland Viet.[32]

Understanding Montagnards as "a people caught in between" the warring Vietnamese factions, Hickey says he sought to use his anthropology to help the Montagnards. Yet it seems to have never occurred to him that their interests might have best been served by aligning themselves with the Viet Cong or by an American withdrawal (if that meant the rapid imposition of peace on Viet Cong terms). Although his later work is largely a chronicle of the destruction of traditional Montagnard culture by the war, and he lays much of the blame on American military strategy, he never addresses the question of whether Montagnards might have been better off if America had not intervened. Hickey assumes that the Viet Cong were opposed to Montagnard interests. Not surprisingly, this is the account that emerges from American military analyses of the period. More significantly, it is the account preferred by every Dega

refugee I have talked with. Both retired soldiers and Dega refugees point to the Hanoi regime's deplorable treatment of Montagnards since the war as vindication for their valiant fight—although it cannot be known what this history might have been and what Hanoi's ethnic minority policy might have been had the war been brief and had Montagnards not sided with the Americans.

But the personal integrity or culpability of Gerald Hickey is not what is at stake here. Instead my interests lie in demonstrating how representations of the Montagnards during the Vietnam War emerged within an unsettled debate about the nature of the American war in Southeast Asia and the participation of social scientists in support of that intervention. The military claims to have used this research to help the Montagnards—even though American military strategy left 85 percent of Montagnard villages destroyed or abandoned by the end of the war.[33] But then, in refugee exile, Dega eagerly appropriate this same scholarship to represent their traditional Montagnard culture. It is through discursive practices such as this that Dega learn to represent themselves and their history.

If the morality of social scientific research in support of the war is one tension that informed representations of Montagnards, a second more subtle concern is evident in the writing style of these ethnographic texts. Couched in the paradigmatic structure of culturally relativistic functionalism, they reproduce the French analysis that the Montagnards' "animistic religion" was central to highland social, political, and cultural life. (The primacy of religion in "primitive cultures" and its diffusion through all aspects of primitive life was a truism in anthropological analysis since the turn of the century.) Relying on the static and timeless style of "the ethnographic present"[34] to characterize Montagnard culture, none of the military training manuals ever mention Christianity among the highlanders and rarely even the presence of French and American missionaries—even though they frequently cite interviews with missionaries in their bibliographies.

Perhaps this omission is appropriate. It is difficult to measure the impact that Christian missionaries had had in the highlands by the early period of the war. However, Christianity was apparently quite common among the highland *leadership* during this period. And it is precisely during this period that many of the Dega I know in North Carolina say that they were converting to Christianity. And Christian rhetoric has since become an important vehicle by which many of the Dega in North Carolina articulate their ethnonationalist project. Thus, the absence of Christianity in the anthropological military reports is striking. It reflects anthropology's long tradition of textual

ambivalence toward Christian missionaries who have shared the anthropologists' space of cross-cultural encounter.[35] Classically, anthropologists were preoccupied with documenting cultures before they were tainted by outside influences. This led them to actively omit changes introduced by colonialism, and especially by missionaries. In the mid-century functionalist paradigm in which these military ethnographies were produced, missionaries were not part of the data to be collected and analyzed.

The omission of highland Christianity reflects the then prevailing perception that primitive cultures were stagnant and unchanging. While American analysts were well aware and concerned about how the war was changing the highlands, they tended to attribute this change to "outside agitators"—meaning Vietnamese communists infiltrating from the north. This allowed American foreign policy spokesmen to characterize the war as foreign communist aggression, not an internal civil war. It also masked the possibility that many Montagnards might actually have supported and fought for the National Liberation Front—a possibility that was more often acknowledged in practice (by, e.g., the torture of Srae documented by Georges Condominas) than in the military training manuals or reports to civilians. Military "Area Guides" and training manuals written in the ethnographic present, describing a timeless and essentially harmless culture living in harmony with the natural environment (or, at least wanting to, if left alone), contributed to Americans' sentimental affection for highland people. American accounts represent Montagnards as passive victims, too underdeveloped and unsophisticated in the ways of the world to resist the malevolent communist Vietnamese onslaught without American help. We shall see (in the next section of this chapter) how the devoutly Christian Dega refugees draw on these eulogies for traditional and timeless Montagnard culture, but weave them together with a Christian rhetoric extolling the development of Montagnard Christianity.

If military ethnography occluded Christian missionaries and Christianity among highland people, then the missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) evangelizing in a war zone were by contrast preoccupied with the American military. These missionary texts repeatedly proclaim the missionaries' neutrality in the conflict. But they also frequently depict the protection, support, and opportunities that the American military presence afforded them. They represent their activities as part of the broader "American mission" in Vietnam, and yet profess to be shocked when they are targeted by the Viet Cong.

In his book, CMA missionary Charles Long reproduces a long section of a letter he wrote to the wife of a slain soldier, describing the dark days of 1961 when it seemed that the communists would quickly overrun the country:

> Vietnam was losing the fight to preserve its liberty. That liberty may not have been perfect, but we missionaries were free to tell every man we met of Christ, God's Son. Many were converted in spite of great difficulties.
>
> In the fall of '61 and spring of '62 the U.S. began to give greater aid to Vietnam. Many thousands of our men went to help a country unable to help itself...
>
> Perhaps it would help you to know that we had 2,000 baptisms among the Vietnamese and the tribespeople during 1962. Had it not been for your husband and others, the missionaries would have had to flee Vietnam before 1962. I would like to think that Charles Holoway had some share in these 2,000 people who have found Christ as their Savior.
>
> In spite of war and trouble, missionary work continues. It continues because someone cared enough for his country to give his life...We missionaries share with you this heavy burden and we are humbly grateful for the many men who have served in Vietnam. They have been used of God [*sic*] to keep open doors that were shutting, doors that would have closed out the preaching of Christ who gives everlasting life.[36]

In statements like this, CMA missionaries render the conflict a religious war to spread the gospel. "God's war against communism" emerges as a recurring trope in many of the CMA texts from the late 1950s onward. CMA texts frequently bemoan the active presence of Satan in the highlands. In early accounts he is typically identified in the depraved rituals of the savages and the gongs ringing eerily through the dark jungle night bereft of God's light. But by the 1960s, the missionaries were finding the devil signified in the Viet Cong guerrillas—similarly lurking in the dark jungle, senselessly destroying God's good work.[37]

Probably no one would expect American evangelical missionaries to be neutral in their country's war against "communist aggressors." But by repeatedly asserting their neutrality in the war, while simultaneously linking the military struggle with "God's work," they bequeath to Dega refugees an unstable image of the natural opposition between God and communism. Their rhetoric and pattern of behavior conflate the military and evangelical missions—even while they declare their neutrality and sometimes even deny their links to

the military. The army certainly denied the relationship between military and missionary Americans in the highlands. However, militarized Dega refugees make the connection—and their mingling of military and Christian rhetoric bewildered many of their Special Forces comrades-in-arms when they turned up as refugees in North Carolina fifteen years later.

CMA missionary texts simultaneously assert and deny God's involvement in the American war, just as military ethnography omitted Christianity from their representations of "timeless" and "functional" Montagnard culture—even while they relied on missionary sources to construct these images. And as the military use of anthropology became controversial during the Vietnam War, so too did the integration of "anthropological insights" into missionary strategies cause problems for mid-twentieth-century evangelicals.

Evangelical missionaries had traditionally rejected the upstart "atheistic science" of anthropology that had intruded on their mission fields and condemned their evangelical project. But beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, evangelical missionaries began to make their peace with academic anthropology and sought to put anthropological methods and insights to use for Christian missions. An early proponent of this was Gordon Smith, the pioneering CMA missionary to the highlands. On furlough back in the United States during World War II, he researched and wrote two books that sought to apply anthropological principles to the missionary project.[38] Smith writes somewhat defensively for an audience of evangelicals whom he must convince: "In its place, anthropology can become a sharp tool, cutting through superstition and ignorance, and rendering the veils [*sic*] that hide poor lost humanity from our all too clumsy efforts to reach them with the gospel."[39] His calculated use of anthropological knowledge and methods mimics the strategic use of anthropology by French and American military administrators of the highlands.

Gordon Smith and his wife Laura published extensively on their missionary endeavors in the highlands, and they both seemed to pride themselves on their attention to ethnographic details.[40] Although not written as anthropological monographs but as exciting narratives with the obvious polemical purpose of drumming up interest and support among evangelical readers in America and Canada, their books nonetheless make frequent excursions into ethnographic analyses of "the tribesmen" and the challenges their beliefs and behaviors posed to evangelizing the gospel.

In fact, during the Vietnam War missionaries were probably among the most knowledgeable westerners on Montagnard culture. It is little

wonder that military Area Guides often drew on their expertise. Although military regulations prohibited the use of American civilians as sources of military intelligence (apparently for fear that this would compromise their security), one former missionary I spoke with claimed that they frequently passed on any information they knew to the military:

> We all did. We wanted them to win as bad as they did. So if we could help, if someone came in from the jungle and said "don't go out today, there's VC in the jungle"—because they knew. They would look out for us. They were always telling us when it was safe and where the VC was. And we'd of course pass it on if we could.

Then this former missionary described for me how he flew with a military intelligence officer and identified for him friendly and enemy villages. He bragged that Congressional legislation specifically forbidding the CIA from using missionaries as sources for military intelligence "was largely because of me." It was dangerous for the missionaries, he explained, and the State Department wanted the missionaries in the country because "we put on a good face for the Americans."

Hickey frequently depicts himself consulting missionaries. He also worked with the Wycliffe Bible Translators—a group that intentionally disguised its evangelical purposes from the academic world, and its academic purposes from the evangelical world, by operating simultaneously under a second name, "The Summer Institute of Linguistics."[41]

No one epitomizes the mid-twentieth-century use of anthropology by evangelicals—and the opportunities that could pose to Christian missions—more than the figure of Eugene Nida. His seminal work *Customs and Cultures* (1954) was important new reading in the sorts of Bible schools that CMA missionaries would have attended on their way to the highlands.[42] Drawing widely on the work of Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn, Melville Herskovits, and A.L. Kroeber, Nida's book gives easy and repeated articulation to the central thesis of mid-twentieth-century anthropology, that is, cultural-relativistic functionalism premised on the conceptualization of culture as a complex whole.[43] Nida writes: "Not only are the patterns of culture complex, but they reveal interpretation and interdependence of the various divisions of culture . . . No part of life exists in and of itself. It is all a part of the large whole and is only understandable in terms of that wider frame of reference."[44]

Nida frequently repeats the then common anthropological understanding that religion plays a central and determining role in this cultural whole. His anthropological missiology operates ambivalently within a central contradiction. On the one hand cultural relativism celebrates primitive culture as a "functioning whole." But when necessary, he falls back on the missionary's universalist imperative to *change* that culture by changing its religious beliefs and practices. And although he argues that these religious beliefs are at the "heart" of the culture, he somehow claims that this evangelical project does not thereby constitute an "imposition" of Western culture or "ethnocentric chauvinism." (These are the terms he uses.) He rarely addresses this apparent contradiction head on. When he writes for fellow evangelists (not fellow linguists), he marshals his arguments to overcome their assumed cultural chauvinism and their suspicions, if not hostility, toward anthropology. In these texts he feels no need to justify evangelism—only the need to temper it (or really, to sharpen it) through missionary practices informed by scientific ethnography. For example, he writes:

> No one must imagine . . . that cultural anthropology is the answer to the problems of Christian missions, but it can aid very materially in the process by which the missionary endeavors to communicate to others the significance of the new way of life made possible through the vicarious death of the Son of God. If a person is no longer hampered by his cultural pride and by failure to identify himself completely with those to whom he goes with the words of life, he can more fully carry out his divinely ordained mission . . . Christian missions . . . must permit the Holy Spirit to work out in the lives of the people those forms of Christian expression which are in accordance with their distinctive qualities.[45]

In this passage Nida has reduced his usually strident cultural relativism to simply the missionary's ability to "identify himself completely with those to whom he goes with the words of life." Christian missions, correctly informed by the cultural relativism of anthropology, should "permit the Holy Spirit to work out" the proper forms of Christian expression for each culture. He seems to leave it to the Holy Spirit to resolve the tension between cultural relativism and the Christian claims to universal truth.

The conundrum of cultural differences and Christian universals was broached in a somewhat different way by Jacques Dournes, a French Catholic priest sent by the *Société de la Mission Etrangère* after World War II to evangelize the *Jarai*. Dournes' text is a detailed

interpretation of *Jarai* rites and beliefs demonstrating a nuanced familiarity achieved over many years of inquisitive investigation.[46] He attempts to explain *Jarai* rites and beliefs from a perspective that he calls "the *Jarai* point of view." He says that he "looks past appearances" in order to understand the "inner meaning" that the *Jarai* find expressed by the *yang* in material objects. His culturally relativistic empathy—his attempt to represent "from the natives' point of view"—echoes what is perhaps the most important methodological preoccupation of mid-twentieth-century anthropology. But Dournes also asserts a vigorous presumption of evolutionary development and progress. In his hands, cultural relativism becomes theological and hermeneutical empathy for a noble and worthy religion, which is nonetheless destined for extinction.

Dournes' text vacillates on the trope of the "unfallen state" of the *Jarai* (whom he refers to polemically and sentimentally as "the Indians of Southeast Asia"). Are they savages or *noble* savages—original and pristine, or fallen and degenerate? Most of his argument is concerned with demonstrating how *Jarai* rites bring a real and profound (if perhaps limited) contact with the sacred. Repeatedly comparing *Jarai* rites to the ancient Hebrew's encounter with God, he articulates a theological evolutionary model in which "God prepares a meeting place" fashioned from the materials of innate (or natural) pagan custom, "and men of good will come to it of their own accord."[47] His account fluctuates between valorizing "natural" and "timeless" (if primitive) *Jarai* spirituality (expressing "man's need to become part of cosmic harmony"[48]), and decrying their moribund religious tradition that is choking in empty formalities. His mission, then, is to "base the new teaching on something they already know, to develop and purify an existing religion . . . to lead the *Jarai* religion to its completion."[49]

His empathetic acceptance of what he understands as "*Jarai* spirituality" is evident when he argues that the *yang* are like the angels of the Hebrew scriptures, mediators between man and God. "We must offer an angelology to replace the *Yang* system, and to lead the way to God."[50] *Jarai* rites and beliefs are inadequate, but they are not essentially fallacious. He strives to introduce Christianity by "converting their words" through the expansion of their meaning in light of Christian revelation—without losing their roots in traditional *Jarai* spirituality. He explains how he tries to "convert their rites" by slowly introducing Christian elements.

Dournes' interpretation of *Jarai* religion, balanced between what he presents as a culturally relativistic empathy and an insistence on the unique and universal revelation of Christ, culminates in a vision

of a truly catholic church that would recover the "original unity" within the diversity of languages. The truly catholic church would achieve "organic growth" and would "assimilate" the various modes by which God has mediated himself to man. Thus the conversion that Dournes presents as the "fulfillment of *Jarai* religion" is also the "fulfillment" of the Catholic Church. But he reverts to the image of a moribund *Jarai* spirituality trapped in a primitive dead end when he warns that if the church rejects this organic growth it will become "as dried up as the tradition of these Indians, whose system can no longer come to terms with the world it has lived to see."[51]

Dournes theological-evolutionary model purports to characterize the successes and shortcomings of the religious and cultural difference constituted by the *Jarai* and maintain both *Jarai* and Christian forms in essential unity. Tellingly, both Christianity and *Jarai* religion stand together in absolute contrast to atheistic secular culture.

> The *Jarai* have a sensitivity to the sacred, to symbols, to imagery, to poetry. And even the literate, who have been to school, have never totally secularized their ideas though they sometimes appear to have; there remains, luckily, a seed which can again become a vigorous tree once they return to their own people... Once that seed is killed, no religion can make a man whole, for though he may think of himself as liberated, what he is in fact is mutilated.[52]

Dournes' always emergent Christian universalism claims to encompass *Jarai* religion—or, as he says, "fulfills it"—without negating its difference. This vision of organic unity and growth led him to "interest [his] new *Jara*i catechists in their old religion." "They did research, writing out descriptions of ceremonies, transcribing legends and ritual invocations."[53] He complains that his *Jarai* converts are too zealous in their rejection of the old religion. It seems that he sees more worth in it than they do, and certainly more worth in the preservation of a record of *Jarai* culture.

The figure of Jacques Dournes encapsulates the tensions within and across the various discursive traditions that formed representations of the Montagnards from the west—anthropology, missionary, and military. The apparent nervousness and disavowal that these anthropological, missionary, and military projects might share more with each other than they would like becomes manifest in subtle ways in the accounts offered by the Dega in refugee exile. For, as I will show next, it is through the appropriation of this tension-ridden discursive

tradition that Dega refugees learn to position themselves and represent themselves to the Western world.

3 "Under the Benevolent Eye of God"

Hip K'Sor, whom I worked with in Raleigh, North Carolina, to translate his autoethnography into English so that the Dega refugees would "know who they are," grew up in the Cheo Reo region where Jacques Dournes had established his Catholic mission. In fact, Hip attended Dournes' missionary school, and it was one of Dournes' missionary priests who handed Hip his treasured *Jarai coutumier.* Hip seems to have been quite influenced by the theology of Jacques Dournes—although he does not claim or acknowledge the influence himself, and was unaware of Dournes' publications.

In fact, the ethnography of traditional *Jarai* culture that Hip is writing is actually a *theological* ethnography. It is a very careful amalgamation of the universal claims of the Christian faith (as learned from his Catholic missionaries) with the particularities of Montagnard "traditional religion" (as conceptualized by Western anthropological discourses). It is thus an example of how Dega self-representations operate through the tensions existing within the various overlapping discourses and practices that produced representations of the Montagnards for the west. Hip's text draws on both missionary and anthropological traditions to promote the cultural and political integrity of the Montagnards against the communist Vietnamese state.

Hip's frayed notebook announces the religious nature of his project on the first page where he has carefully drawn an image of the Christian cross standing in radiant isolation, strewn with flowers and

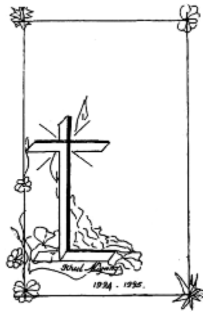


Figure 2.1 The first page of Hip K'Sor's notebook containing his ethnography of Montagnard religion.

some sort of draped mantle (figure 2.1). In small print is the simple proclamation: “In the company of angels, 1994–1995.”[54] Turning the page, Hip has sketched on the right-hand side of his notebook an image of the cover of this book that he has long dreamed of. And on the left-hand facing page he writes the book’s dedication (figure 2.2). Both pages again feature the Christian cross. On the dedication page, the cross emerges from the frame surrounding the words that read like a benediction:

THE DAY OF
THE LORD
Sing and Praise
the Lord
God
THE LORD SENDS ME
—I go

In the drawing of the book’s cover, the title is superimposed over the Christian cross, which is placed prominently at the center of the page:

Outline of the System of Genies
OF THE JARAI PEOPLE
OF THE ENTIRE
CHEO-REO
REGION

Figure 2.2 Two notebook pages from Hip K’Sor’s ethnography of Montagnard religion. The left side reads: “THE DAY OF THE LORD. Sing and Praise the Lord God. THE LORD SENDS ME—I go.” On the right is his sketch of the imagined cover of the book: “Outline of the System of Genies OF THE JARAI PEOPLE OF THE ENTIRE CHEO-REO REGION.”

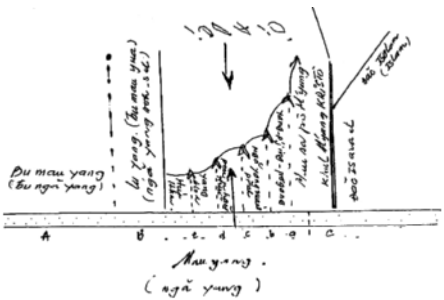


Figure 2.3 A page from Hip K'Sor's notebook outlining the "system of genies" in the highlands.

Clearly, Hip has framed his ethnographic representations within an explicit Christian mission.

Hip encapsulates the theological purpose of his writing project on the very next page where he renders a complicated diagram outlining the relationship of Christ to the *Jarai* genies (figure 2.3). Divided into three columns, he labels column A "No Genies," column B "Too Many Genies (sacrifices achieve nothing)," and column C, "Following the Way of Christ." Column B is divided into five subcategories, rendering a staircase leading up to column C. Within these five subcategories of column B, Hip delineates the pantheon of genies that inhabit the traditional *Jarai* world.

Thus, while on the one hand he would seem to be denigrating the *Jarai* genies with the category label "Too Many Genies," on the other hand the diagram also suggests that the genies anticipate Christian monotheism. Tellingly, Hip labels these subcategories from a to e in *descending order*. Starting from the left, the subcolumn labeled e designates the genies that "make us covet everything in the world"; d designates "the lying genies" (in which he groups the various systems of divination); c designates what he calls "the frightful genies"; b designates the genies to which the *Jarai* make sacrifices in order to achieve health; and finally subcategory a collects what Hip considers the highest and most exalted and important genies, "the creator and protector genies."

Hip's diagram thus counts out the stages of belief, from e through to a, finally arriving at column C: which he characterizes as "only one single genie, following the Lord Jesus Christ." Across the top of the diagram, centered over the ascending staircase from e to a, Hip has nuanced this column's "Too Many Genies (sacrifices achieve nothing)" label by writing *Oi Adai*, or "God," backward (from right to

left) with an arrow pointing straight down at the column's upward march toward Christ. Then the diagram indicates, within column C, branches for the religion of Israel and the religion of Islam—apparently signaling some kind of relationship between the religious system of the *Jarai* and that of the ancient Near East.

As I struggled to understand his explanation of this diagram, Hip began to recognize the confusion that entered into his right-to-left descending subcategory labels within column B. He reworked the diagram as we spoke, and eventually we used it as the table of contents for his book in outline form. We changed the labels of the subdivisions within column B, replacing the descending lowercase letters with ascending numerals listed thus: (1) "Genies that make us Covet"; (2) "The Lying Genies"; (3) "The Frightful Genies," and so on.[55] I am still not certain what is lost by this modification, but as I understood Hip's explanation, and as his subsequent text seems to bear out (and his diagram might be interpreted as imaging) the *Jarai* genies anticipate Christ, culminate in Christ, and approach the true God, Christ, like a staircase that in effect discards distracting and inappropriate genies as they are reduced to the few and most exalted "protector and creator genies" and then finally the single genie, Christ.

It is not that the genies are false or not real, Hip explained to me—his text gives repeated credence to their existence. It is just that the genies are *partial*. Hip believes that Montagnards in their ignorance and fear failed to acknowledge the true creator God who is revealed in Christ. The power that Montagnards attribute to the genies, actually comes from God. So if Hip's diagram juxtaposes "too many genies" to the true God revealed in Christ, his text also makes it clear that the genies do actually exist as a part of God's creation (although sometimes his text refers to the creator as "the genies and God").[56] The following passage self-consciously clarifies this matter:

> All of these come from the genies who created the ancestors. If we think hard about these statements and ask ourselves who are the genies of the ancestors, we see and feel inside ourselves that the genie who created our ancestors is God [*Oi-Adai*], because all of the things in this world are not made by people but by the hand of God who creates them and takes care of them. He himself gives us our destiny however he desires.[57]

The translation is difficult to render because the *Jarai* language does not signify the plural form of nouns (or verbs). Thus *yang* could be translated as either genie or genies. Hip insists we use the plural

form until he hits a sentence like this one, which must shift from "who are the genies of the ancestors" to "the genie(s) who created our ancestors is God [*Oi-Adai*]." Hip uses several words for God. Most frequently he uses "*Oi Adai*" (literally "Grandfather the Sky") but he also uses "*Khoa*" (which we translate as "Lord"), which is sometimes combined with *yang* to become "*Khoa Yang*" (rendered "Lord God" in our translation). Surprisingly, the Catholic missionaries seem to have taught Hip to use this modified form of *yang* although CMA missionaries warn against adopting this term because it would be confused with "the demons." The Protestants usually used *Oi Adai*, at least in *Rhadé*, which is closely related to *Jarai*. *Oi Adai* was said to name a distant sky god, not really a *yang* the Protestants reasoned, because it was not usually invoked in their ritual sacrifices or oaths.

Echoing the "angelology" of Jacques Dournes (whom, again, he has not read), Hip told me that his ethnography of traditional Montagnard *yang* "is like the Old Testament." In hindsight, he can read the presence of God back into the too many genies of the *Jarai*. The *Jarai*, he explained to me, are like the Hebrew people who did not understand the full theology of God, finally revealed completely only in Christ. As in Jacques Dournes' analysis, the real opposition for Hip is not between belief in the genies and belief in God, but between belief in "God or the genies" and belief in no genies at all—which, Hip's text explains, is the condition of the Godless communist Vietnamese regime. Hip writes:

> The communist government of the people does not have any genies. This government does not believe in the genies or the God who created mankind and everything on the earth. Therefore, they do not take seriously the power and glory of God.
>
> The people's communist government does not care about the life of the people. They consider the people to be like animals. They treat them like they don't have a soul. This is because they don't believe in God who is the creator of all people and all the world.[58]

In Hip's analysis, atheism is at the root of the communists' ill-treatment of the Montagnard people. Hip explains that the Dega thus have a special spiritual mission to bring the gospel of Christian brotherhood to the communist Vietnamese. "We bring our heart. Just send the Bible," he told me. "That's the way to make the Vietnamese people open their eyes. When they believe, they will change. Love of God will change everything."

Like Jacques Dournes and Eugene Nida, Hip's ethnographic theology operates within the tension produced by valorizing Montagnard cultural difference while simultaneously assuming and promoting Christianity as a universalistic absolute. Hip's project celebrates and seeks to salvage the relativist difference manifest in Montagnard culture, in the name of a universalist faith. He does not want to encourage Montagnard animal sacrifices. But the traditions of animal sacrifice must be remembered, lest the Dega "not know who they are." If "the Montagnards need a book," then the specific book they need is this Montagnard Old Testament. If the Dega "know who they are"—and who they are is Christians (as revealed in this ethnographic Old Testament)—then they can bring the gospel to the Vietnamese who will then see the injustice in their repression of traditional Montagnard culture. The Vietnamese will respect the cultural-relativist difference of Montagnard tradition through the universalist ethic of the Christian gospel.

Hip's emphatic opposition between Dega Christianity and communist Vietnamese atheism is hardly unique in the Dega refugee community. Apparently many Montagnards associated the Christian missionary presence in the highlands with the American military war against Vietnamese communists. This connection would seem to have been fostered by CMA rhetoric linking the war and "God's work" (as well as by the evangelicals' participation in the vast humanitarian relief project that was an arm of the military's strategy to "win the hearts and minds of the people," discussed in chapter six). What is more, Montagnards apparently linked both the American military and evangelical missionary projects to their ethnonationalist movement—a link also encouraged by various Americans. Accounts offered by Dega refugees, as well as glimpses provided in American memoirs of the period, provide an image of the Montagnards manipulating the fluid boundaries between anthropological, military, and missionary discourses and institutions to strengthen their ethnonationalist movement and produce a representation of traditional Montagnard culture that could be useful in their political resistance.

Dega often reiterate their missionaries' images of Viet Cong lurking malevolently and unseen like the devil in the dark jungle. They insist that "the VC were against God." They complain that Viet Cong they encountered on the trails would launch into "communist propaganda." Upon learning they were "believers," the Viet Cong would harangue them with epithets. "'Why you believe in the imperialist God?!' They tell me like that. I say, 'No, I believe,' like that. They don't like, but we believe. Because we believe in God."

If Dega refugees frequently represent the communists as enemies of their new Christian faith, they also represent them as the enemies of their ethnonationalist movement. They dismiss the "communist propaganda" that made "promises and promises" about the socialist utopia to come. It is not obvious to me why Montagnards would not have believed these promises. According to Dega, they promised virtually everything the ethnonationalist leaders were demanding: local autonomy, rights to the land, and the freedom to live according to "traditional Montagnard culture." Of course, Dega accounts in refugee exile are colored by the subsequent history of severe Vietnamese communist repression of the Montagnards following the war. In the accounts offered by Dega in North Carolina, the highlanders strengthened their ethnonationalist movement by supporting the Americans and maneuvering within the gaps between the Vietnamese and various American institutions.

The American military recognized the strategic importance of the highlands and thus sought to cultivate the allegiance of the highland people and encourage their antipathy toward the Viet Cong. The South Vietnamese government distrusted American intentions in the highlands (fearing that, like the French before them, the Americans would try to separate the highlands from the Vietnamese state). Americans found themselves in a difficult situation, caught between their two allies, the Montagnards and the Vietnamese government.[59]

Apparently, it was not uncommon for highlanders to take their training and their weapons to *FULRO*—a practice that American soldiers on the ground seem to have been well aware of, even if it was against official policy of the U.S. military. For many highlanders, the two military projects were not well distinguished. A Dega told me that, "all the Montagnard joined the CIDG [the Special Forces armed and trained 'Civilian Irregular Defense Groups'] because we all understood that it was the way to fight for our own people."

If the American soldiers "turned a blind eye" to *FULRO* military activity, they were apparently truly blind to *FULRO* Christian activity. Special Forces sources never mention Christianity among *FULRO* or CIDG forces. But as Dega tell the story, God was the inspiration for *FULRO*. Ksor Kok, the president of the Montagnard Foundation and an early *FULRO* Leader, explained to me: "God showed us our rights. Praise the Lord for leading us to the knowledge of our rights, the law of the universe—that all men are equal in front of the Lord. Before, we did not know we had the right to our own country." It is difficult to say how widespread this link was between Christianity

and Montagnard ethnonationalism. It is certainly nearly universal in the Dega refugee community today. Hickey's text lists thirty Catholics and fourteen Protestants in a list of "One Hundred Highland Leaders" he compiled during the war.[60] He explains that this was because the Catholic mission in Kontum and the Protestant mission in Banmethuot were the first centers of education in the highlands.

Hickey relates several occurrences hinting at the familiar and sympathetic relationship between some of the CMA missionaries and *FULRO* leaders.[61] In other episodes, Protestant missionaries appear as significant intermediaries between the Montagnards, the Vietnamese, and the American military. For example, in July 1965 a brief *FULRO* uprising against a Vietnamese commander in a Special Forces camp was resolved when some of the *FULRO* soldiers went to Banmethuot and contacted Carolyn Griswold, a CMA missionary who Dega have told me had been the equivalent of their "Sunday school teacher" when they were children. Hickey describes her as "a close friend of the highlanders." She arranged a meeting with a Vietnamese general and worked out a truce.[62]

Several Dega refugees have spoken to me specifically about "Miss Griswold." One gushed that she was "a great woman." "She love the Montagnard people. There is very spiritual connection between missionaries and Montagnard people. It is very important to me." He said that he was in the mission station in Banmethuot when it was overrun during the Têt offensive of 1968. Carolyn Griswold died in the attack. He said that he watched as the Viet Cong singled out missionary Robert Ziemer and shot him at point blank range. Ziemer had told him earlier that "he would not leave the country, that he had given his life to Christ and the Montagnard people. That was very big for me." Another Dega tried to explain to me that "Miss Griswold spoke better *Rhadé* than me. Sometimes I don't understand what she says. Deeper things. God, but also things about my people. She know all about my people and tell me about it." This cryptic quote might suggest something of the authoritative power of the missionaries' ethnographic knowledge. It also speaks to the powerful bonds of sympathy and affection that existed between some Montagnards and CMA missionaries. Stories such as this one about Miss Griswold provide a glimpse into the ways by which Montagnards negotiated within and between various American institutions and discourses to imagine and promote their ethnonationalist cause.

The *FULRO* resistance force operated through a complicated series of undisclosed dependencies, widely held "secrets," and overlapping institutional practices and discourses: the military pretended to ignore

its de facto support for *FULRO* as they tended to overlook the Christianization of Montagnards and especially the role of Christianity in the ethnonationalist movement; the military tried to hide its dependence on CMA informants while the CMA pretended that it was neutral in the war. The military used anthropologists who used missionaries who also used anthropologists—and no one's interests were served by making any of these connections too explicit. In the narratives told by Dega refugees, highland leaders worked in the seams of these overlapping but overtly disavowed practices to gain American support for their ethnonationalist movement. This Montagnard maneuvering resulted in the explicit Christian identity of their guerilla army (discussed in the next chapter) and their eventual refugee exile in North Carolina, where they now articulate demands for the restitution of Montagnard traditions—the all important difference of Montagnard culture—through the language of a universalized Christian rhetoric.[63]

In the last decade and a half in refugee exile, Dega have learned to use authorized rhetorics and systems of documentation to represent themselves and their history and to articulate their demands. They draw on, and creatively amalgamate, the discursive traditions of the missionaries, anthropologists, and military strategists who have represented highland people over the last century. Dega consistently contrast their Christian faith to the ideology of the atheistic communist Vietnamese and their heartless abuse of the Montagnard people and suppression of traditional Montagnard culture. In these representations, the assertion of the absolute universals of Christian faith mingle uncertainly with an assertion of cultural relativism—and both Christian universalism and cultural relativism are used to justify the Dega resistance.

As we have already seen earlier, Hip K'Sor's theological ethnography brings the cultural particularity of the Montagnards' genies into a sort of harmony with the universals of the Christian God. Another example of this same impulse is articulated by Ksor Kok (no relation to Hip K'Sor), an early leader of the ethnonationalist movement, the president of "The Montagnard Foundation, Inc" (MFI), and a devout Christian. He was the individual I quoted earlier, telling me that "God showed the Montagnards their rights."

He handed me a spiral-bound packet of documents that he had prepared for the United Nations Committee on Human Rights. The packet seeks empathy and support for the Montagnards' ethnonationalist struggle. The text repeatedly relies on a functionalist and culturally relativistic rhetoric that consecrates the Montagnards as a traditional, primitive people, living in harmony with the land.

For example, on the very first page, Mr. Ksor Kok writes: "For the Montagnards, man and society are embedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces. In the highlanders' green milieu of forested mountain, sweeping, undulating plateaus, and valleys through which brown rivers flow, each ethnic group over time worked out its adaptation to nature and shaped its society."[64] The document continues in this vein by including next a copy of an open letter:

> To whom it may concern:
>
> It is a well known fact that, in the past, so called advanced races have oppressed tribal ones. We, as modern day "civilized" people look back with remorse at the plight of the Native Americans, the Polynesians, the Incas, Aztecs, Mayas and other tribal peoples. We are disgusted by the brutality and especially the apathy of humanity at that time. We wonder how decent people could allow the extermination of entire cultures and races. We read in our history books of how young children were taken out of their homes and placed in special "assimilation" schools and how the use of their native tongue was strictly fordi [*sic*]. We are deeply remorseful for the actions of our ancestors, particularly because now many of these cultures have been completely lost. Would not any one of us, having the chance, go back in time and stop these atrocities? Well, what if there existed a tribal people today that was in very real danger of extermination due to the brutality of a suppressive [*sic*] government? What would we do? What would we say? Would we try to help?[65]

The reference to the "plight of Native Americans" evokes the polemics of the French *mission civilisatrice* as well as Jacques Dournes. Ksor Kok takes the analogy one step further by later asserting that the Montagnards "are racially related to the 'Indians' inhabiting the Americas and surrounding islands," and that "their cultures and stories are remarkably similar."[66]

What is even more interesting about this passage is how easily Ksor Kok places himself in the category of "we, the modern day civilized people," whose ancestors have oppressed tribal people—because, of course, he is a member and representative of these so-called primitive tribal people who are currently being oppressed by the "modern day civilized people"—and it is the modern day civilized people to whom he is presumably writing that he refers to as "we."

It is possible that Mr. Ksor Kok is not the original author of this phrase. He may have borrowed it from one of his "modern civilized" friends. Elsewhere in the spiral-bound packet of documents his text borrows freely (and without specific attribution) from some of Gerald

Hickey's accounts. Indeed, the passage quoted earlier—asserting that "for the Montagnards man and society are embedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces"—is lifted directly from the second paragraph of Hickey's 1993 book.[67] He begins an analysis of the "Historical Perspective Of Vietnam's Indigenous People" with the same sentences as the opening paragraph of Hickey's *Shattered World* (1993):

> Visible to the west from almost any place along the central coastal plain of Vietnam are the lofty mountains that form the southern portion of the Annam Cordillera. (The French call this range the Chaine Annamitique; the Vietnamese know it as the Truong Son, or "Long Mountains.") These uplands are the abode of people who not long ago lived in a world that they themselves evolved and sustained.[68]

By copying Dr. Hickey, by voicing Dega self-representations through the discourse of colonial anthropologists, Ksor Kok has inherited and uncritically reinscribed the familiar convention of classic ethnography that would begin by introducing isolated "tribe" that would be the object of the monograph by approaching them from an outside panoramic "birds-eye" view of the group holistically embedded in its natural environment.[69] This is a remarkable perspective for someone born and raised in the culture that is being represented.

Another passage—straight out of Hickey—reemphasizes the texts' outsider's perspective on the Montagnards: "Kingdoms and dynasties among the Cham, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese flourished and crumbled, monumental cities were sacked and abandoned, and populations shifted. All the while in the background, the mountains, their peaks shrouded in mists, were silent and seemingly immutable."[70] Of course, it is only to outside chroniclers that highland people and their natural/culture-environment are "in the background . . . silent and . . . immutable."

The fact that these are not Ksor Kok's own words explains the peculiar outsider's perspective, but it only reinforces my argument that Dega in exile represent themselves by drawing on and creatively combining a disparate and conflicted matrix of discourses that had authorized various French and American interventions. By working between and through these discursive practices that they encountered, the highland people emerged as a group—emerged as "the Dega," in exile, and Christians.

This MFI document is premised on, and seeks to defend, the moral imperative of Montagnard ethnic or cultural difference from the

Vietnamese. It never mentions Christian conversion among the Montagnards—although the K'Sor family members were early converts to Protestant Christianity and Ksor Kok was good friends with CMA missionary Ken Swain (who, along with Gerald Hickey, wrote a letter in support of the MFI petition). In place of the universalized and absolute imperative of Christian faith and salvation, this MFI document invokes the universal and absolute imperative of Human Rights.

The "Information Sheet" included in the packet Ksor Kok handed me explains that the purpose of the MFI is to "restore, safeguard, and monitor the *innate and inalienable human rights* of the Montagnards as described in the covenants and declarations of the United Nations" (italics added).[71] The documents include a lengthy supplement that chronicles in great detail the "human rights violations" suffered by the people of the "Dega Republic." This appendix begins with several paragraphs quoted directly from the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (adopted in 1948): "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Many documents produced by the Dega leadership quote this phrase. It bears a curious resemblance to the language of Ksor Kok's declaration (already quoted earlier): "God showed us our rights. Praise the Lord for leading us to the knowledge of our rights, the law of the universe—that all men are equal in front of the Lord. Before, we did not know we had the right to our own country." Dega such as Ksor Kok would seem to be recognizing and marshalling support from the apparent continuity between certain kinds of Christian universalist claims and the liberal-humanitarian universals asserted by the discourses of human rights. Not surprisingly, in the following passage, the MFI specifically rejects a competing vision of universalized rights and values offered by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV):

> Since 1975 the Vietnamese government has been on a course to abolish the Montagnard way of life, replacing it with a Vietnamese culture and adaptation [*sic*], both alien to the mountain country. The SRV Vice Minister of Culture summed up the direction of future policy when he proclaimed in 1976: "It is necessary to eradicate all the outmoded customs . . . while gradually bringing the new culture to each ethnic minority. The state has the duty to bring new, progressive culture to these people . . . in order to build a new culture with socialist objectives and Vietnamese national characteristics."[72]

Here, the universal socialist utopia is impugned with "Vietnamese national characteristics" (an interpretation encouraged by the specific

language and apparent intentions of the SRV minister). The universal imperative of socialist revolution is characterized as "alien to the mountain country" where the Montagnards live in "natural harmony" with their environment.

In the next paragraph the document complains that the SRV has forced Montagnards into Vietnamese style communities where they are "prevented from observing traditional ways, notably religious practices and rites of passage." This emphasis on Montagnard traditional religion repeats the established ethnographic convention that placed Montagnards' beliefs in the *yang* at the center of their culture. It serves well the document's primary purpose to consecrate and defend the traditional culture of the highlands that marks Montagnard difference. It is striking, however, that a devout evangelical such as Ksor Kok would so elide the Christian religion that had replaced the "religious practices" and "traditional ways" in his and many other Montagnards' lives (especially those living in North Carolina).

However, these traditional ways are interestingly nuanced on the "Information Sheet" that accompanies these documents. The following quote asserts universalist claims of justice and human rights to defend the cultural relativist valuation of what it calls a "Culture on the Brink." But notice too how "churches" and "schools" are slipped in to the list of things Montagnards are losing:

> In addition to their land, schools, courts, and churches, they are now in danger of entirely losing their culture (the very essence of their existence), as they are systematically denied their traditional way of life. It remains the inherent responsibility of the world community to preserve and encourage the cultural diversity of the Montagnards and to protect their essential human rights.[73]

The phrase "land, schools, courts, and churches" is a favorite of another Dega political leader, Nay Rong, long the secretary of the MFI. The phrase appears frequently in the documents of "The Montagnard Human Rights Organization" (founded by Nay Rong and others in 1998). In an open letter to President Clinton, Nay Rong demanded that Montagnards be allowed to "live in their own villages with their own culture, traditions, tribal courts of law, schools, churches and dispensaries."[74] Note how easily he slides from "their own culture, traditions and tribal courts"—all of which were considered by French ethnographers to be entirely dependent on animal sacrifice and the worship of spirits—to "schools, churches and

dispensaries"—quintessential institutions of modernity and typically considered basic human rights by the United Nations. Earlier in the same document, Nay Rong had explained that "the first plan of the Vietnamese government was to destroy Montagnard religion by accusing the Montagnard Protestant Churches of being spies for the C.I.A."[75] So in Nay Rong's letter "Protestantism" is designated as the religion of the Montagnards, who are yet lionized as "indigenous people who . . . have been living for over 2,000 years in the Central Highlands . . . with rich cultures and traditions of peace *living under the benevolent eye of God*."[76] Nay Rong weaves the image of the "benevolent eye of God" seamlessly together with rhetoric revering the traditional, timeless, and harmoniously natural culture of the animistic Montagnards.

Thus—and this is the summary of the long argument I am making—Dega refugees' representations of Montagnard traditional culture constitute a complicated appropriation of the missionary, military, and ethnographic discourses that were productive of colonial power in the central highlands of Vietnam. French and American ethnographies—drawn on by both missionaries and the military—defined Montagnard cultural difference by placing "animism" at its center. They also venerated that culture. Dega have adopted and adapted this rhetoric and worked through and between the unstable and disavowed discursive relations between the military, the anthropologists, and the missionaries to articulate their resistance to cultural and political domination by the lowland Viet. Dega representations of the culturally relative traditions of the Montagnards mingle with Christian discourses of the universal truth and necessity of Christ.

Dega representations have displaced animism from its position purportedly shaping all of Montagnard traditional culture. They still venerate the "traditional culture" of the highlands, but the animism by which the westerners understood this culture has been subtly erased. In Hip K'Sor's theological ethnography, the genies constitute steps toward the universal God in Christ. The animistic spirits are themselves truly God (even if they were not well understood by Montagnards of earlier times). They are "fulfilled" in Christ, as missionary Jacques Dournes, would have it. Creative Dega appropriations of both missionary and ethnographic discourses (and these discourses' relationship to each other and to the exercise of colonial power) produces a new way by which highland people—now Dega refugees and Christians—can find "the benevolent eye of God" in their traditional Montagnard culture.

4 Conversion and Representation

What I have presented here is a discursive analysis of the rhetoric by which Dega refugees represent their past—represent "the Montagnards." This rhetoric constitutes a new way for them to talk about their past. The paucity of historical accounts of highlanders' self-representations has dissuaded me from trying to map out the history of the emergence of this Dega genre of self-representation. Instead I have focused on contemporary statements and found in them traces of a complex matrix of French and American discursive and institutional interventions. Their adoption of this rhetorical position enabled them to produce themselves as a people—as the Dega. They create themselves by creating a certain representation of their past. As in Hip K'Sor's origin myth of the brothers *Y'De* and *Y'Ga* that purports to be "traditional" and "from the elders" but blatantly accounts for contemporary academic ethno-linguistic evidence, we can find in many contemporary Dega accounts the marks of the rhetorical and institutional interventions in the highlands. Highland people manipulated and appropriated these discourses to represent themselves and become Dega—refugees and Christians.

Not withstanding Hip K'Sor's origin myth (establishing the Dega people "from the beginning until today") the Dega refugee community is a new social collectivity marked by the prominence of its new and unique name, Dega. One apparent aspect of this new collectivity is its manifest Christian identity. Highland people formed the collectivity they call Dega through the same historical processes by which they came to identify themselves as Christians. Thus, one component in the creation of the Dega is a religious conversion.

My analysis of contemporary Dega representations of their "preconversion" traditional Montagnard culture suggests certain similarities with some aspects of Christian conversion as it has begun to be studied in the academy: converts' conversion narratives have recently become an important topic in the analysis of the phenomenon of religious conversion. These studies look at a convert's representations of his preconversion self and analyze how he has constructed that preconversion self by drawing on the rhetoric and expectations of the religious group to which he has converted. Similarly, in this chapter, I have examined Dega representations of their "preconversion self"—that is, their representations of "Montagnard traditional culture"—and analyzed how, like religious converts, they have constructed that "self" by drawing on the expected modes and rhetorics of self-representation appropriated from their

anthropological, military, and missionary friends. This is the group to which they have "converted."

Evangelical Protestant conversion narratives follow a paradigmatic pattern. Converts report that they had felt an increased crisis in what had been a complacent life. This crisis, as they tell it, culminated in a period of utter despair, a feeling of estrangement from God and a powerlessness to change. The crisis then finally resolved in a miraculous moment in which the convert's will melts and yields to the saving grace of Jesus.[77] Increasingly, sociological and rhetorical studies have questioned the reliability of such narratives as objective accounts of religious change. These scholars have focused inquiry instead on the social construction of the conversion narrative itself.[78] For example, Peter Stromberg's meticulous rhetorical analysis of interviews with several evangelical converts, as well as Susan Harding's ethnography of conservative Baptist witnessing, both demonstrate that conversion narratives should not be seen as *describing* the experience of conversion but as in fact *constituting* it. Conversion occurs when a new way of narrating a life produces a new sense of the self. Conversion is the creation of a new discursive position from which to know the preconverted self in a new way. Harding concludes: "Getting saved among fundamental Baptists involves . . . joining a particular narrative tradition to which you willingly submit your past, present, and future as a speaker . . . Among fundamental Baptists, speaking is believing."[79]

Studies such as these analyze religious conversion as a process by which people learn to narrate a particular kind of relationship to their prior selves. The fact of conversion is demonstrated by the formulas or patterned ways that converts have learned to make rhetorical and psychological use of the preconversion self. Dega, like religious converts, have learned to think of their past in the "formulas or patterned ways" of the group(s) to which they have converted. What makes this so complicated is that they have converted not just to Christianity, but to anthropology, militaristic anticommunism, and the modern west as well. That is, they have learned to speak as "we moderns" about "the tribal people" out there—their former selves. By doing so, they have learned to "narrate a particular kind of relationship to their prior selves"—that is, to traditional Montagnard culture. The Dega have converted—not just because they are now Christians but also because they have learned certain rhetorical patterns to speak of their past, and through these rhetorical patterns they have learned to objectify that past in a new way (a particular way that indicates the community to which they have converted). They have learned to objectify their past as different in significant ways from their present narrating self,

and they have thereby produced the conversion that distinguishes their present self from this past self.

The transformation of conversion allows the preconversion self to come into focus as a new object of knowledge for the convert. The newly constructed "old self" is continuous with the converted self, yet objectified and distanced in a new way. Conversion is marked by the articulation of a new way to represent an old self.

Conversion and representation are thus deeply related. Conversion produces a "gap" between the discursive space of the convert (in which conversion narratives are proclaimed) and the preconversion object of the old self—that must be represented in a new way in order to play a different kind of role in the new self's narrative. Put another way, the fact that an individual creates and uses representations of a preconversion self in certain paradigmatic ways (which are learned from the convert's new religious tradition) demonstrates that conversion has taken place—and (as Susan Harding and Peter Stromberg argue) actually creates the psychological phenomenon of conversion itself.

The spatial trope I have adopted here—the "*gap*" of conversion by which a new "*discursive space*" is created—evokes the paradigmatic Western conceptualization of representation that emerges from the Cartesian cogito.

Famously, René Descartes isolated the "knowing-I"—the discrete, innate, and non-reducible knowing subject, whose assumed separation from the world allows it to clearly, distinctly, and objectively know objects in the world. In Cartesian epistemology, the gap between the knowing subject and the object that is known (the presumption that the object does not effect, and certainly does not help *construct,* the knowing subject) is what permits reliable representations of that object.

According to the historian Michel de Certeau, the representation of the past requires a similar kind of fissure. The discourse of history, writes de Certeau, "assumes a gap to exist between the silent opacity of the 'reality' that it seeks to express (i.e., the historical past) and the place where it produces its own speech, protected by the distance established between itself and its object."[80] In his *The Writing Of History* (1988), de Certeau analyzes the material and discursive history of the breach that produces the discursive space from which history is written. And so too in this chapter I have inquired into the discursive history that produced the discursive space from which Dega "produce their speech." In this history, as it turns out, the gap was produced by a complicated matrix of anthropological,

missionary, and military discourses and strategic colonialist practices. Through this history, the object called the Montagnard people emerged. By creatively manipulating and adopting these discourses, Dega have created a separation between themselves and this new object called Montagnard traditional culture.

It is not only the academic discipline of history writing that produces authoritative knowledge through the maintenance of a gap. Edward Said's seminal study of orientalist discourse and colonial power traces the processes by which "the west" was able to produce authoritative knowledge about "the east" through a bipolar epistemological division between the active, discerning, and knowing west and the passive and distant east that is the object of knowledge.[81]

Recently anthropologists (and anthropology's critics in literary theory) have similarly called attention to the discursive and material practices by which anthropology produces authoritative knowledge. For example, James Clifford and George Marcus focused inquiry on the production of ethnographic texts, critiquing the discursive conventions and procedures by which anthropological discourse creates authoritative knowledge.[82] More specifically, Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) analyzes how ethnographic texts use time as a distancing device.[83] Classical ethnographers write in the verb tense that Fabian calls "the ethnographic-present" (e.g., "the Nuer build their houses by . . . " and "the Guarani consecrate a marriage by . . . " as though these activities are still and always have occurred, they are timeless). This verb tense temporally delineates the time of authoritative ethnographic analysis from the time of the ethnographic encounter of participant-observation. Fabian analyses what he calls the "denial of coevalness" between the time of experience/observation and the time of writing/analysis. This rhetorical strategy of ethnographic writing creates the epistemological distance demanded of Enlightenment technologies for the production of authoritative knowledge. It produces an ethnographic object of anthropological knowledge, while it simultaneously produces itself as an authoritative discourse about this object of knowledge.

I noted earlier how military ethnographies representing the Montagnards relied on the "ethnographic present" as a rhetorical device. This is just one of many ways that the epistemologies of twentieth-century anthropological discourse made an object of the Montagnard people. What is interesting is how Dega have learned to talk about this "object" as well. The discursive distancing that permitted Léopold Sabatier to represent Montagnards in the 1920s has now been reproduced by Dega refugees themselves, representing traditional Montagnard culture.

As Fabian demonstrates, anthropology's discursive space of representation (that is, the space of writing) has been joined at the hip with the ethnographic space of participant-observation—even though, and in fact because, the authority of ethnographic discourse requires that the two spaces be geographically distanced. Classically, anthropological knowledge has depended on the ability to "go over there" (to venture out from the metropole into a distant and exotic world), to become familiar with that world (to participate in it, gain the trust and intimacy of the people there, to see the world "through the natives' eyes"), and then to bring it back to the metropole (to "translate it," to explain it, to make it an object of knowledge by bringing it back into the metropole's knowledge systems where it can be understood, compared, and placed in context of other objects of knowledge through publication and circulation).[84] Thus, as Fabian argues, the production of anthropological knowledge has been premised on a certain gap (produced by the denial of coeval time) between the knowing subject/anthropologist and the object/culture that is known—even while its goal has been to overcome that distance through the creation of knowledge about the object that lies across that distance.

The structure of anthropological representation—dependent upon both intimacy and foreignness, identity and differentiation, connection and distanciation—resembles the structure of the convert's representations of conversion. Like anthropological discourse, the convert's autobiographical conversion narrative recites the knowing-subject's differentiation from the known object of the preconversion self, and yet is dependent on its connection to that preconversion self in order to trace its transformation, in order to exist as a postconversion self. The phenomenon of conversion (particularly in the evangelical Protestant tradition) exists in the discursive formation of this difference that simultaneously distances and connects the converted narrator to the object that is the preconverted self. Similarly, the phenomenon of authoritative anthropological knowledge exists through the formation of a discursive space that simultaneously requires and denies distanciation from its object of knowledge.[85] And finally, the creation of the Montagnard people evidences the discursive formation of a difference (Montagnard traditional culture is different from both highland culture under communist Vietnamese rule and Dega culture in exile) that is yet intimately connected to the "converted narrator" (which is personified in the Dega refugee leadership). Dega are "converts" because they have distanced and objectified a past in a particular way. They have adopted the forms of representation of their

new (but not in this case, religious) community and thereby simultaneously distanced themselves from and connected themselves to Montagnard traditional culture.

To summarize, anthropology (and its deployment by French and American military interventions as well as by Catholic and Protestant missionary projects) was crucial to the creation of the Dega collectivity because it was crucial to the ability of Dega to produce authoritative representations of their past. French and then American anthropological discourses created an object—the Montagnard people. The highland people who were the object of these discourses then appropriated this knowledge—relied on these discourses, learned to manipulate and operate in and through and between the institutions, policies, and practices these discourses authorized—in order to gain French and American sympathy and support, and also to represent themselves as a collectivity. Their ability to do this constitutes the creation of a new "discursive space"—marked appropriately by their refugee displacement. Like an evangelical Christian convert, they have made an object of their "preconversion selves"—that is, Montagnard traditional culture. Their "conversion" is evidenced by a new way of representing their past and their relationship to it. The discursive space, in which the convert proclaims his conversion narrative, exhibits characteristics of the evangelical tradition into which the narrator has converted, and thereby constitutes the phenomenon of the conversion. So too, the discursive space of Dega political resistance in defense of Montagnard traditional culture bears the marks of the complicated and unstable anthropological, military, and missionary discourses and institutions to which they have converted, and thereby constitutes their conversion.

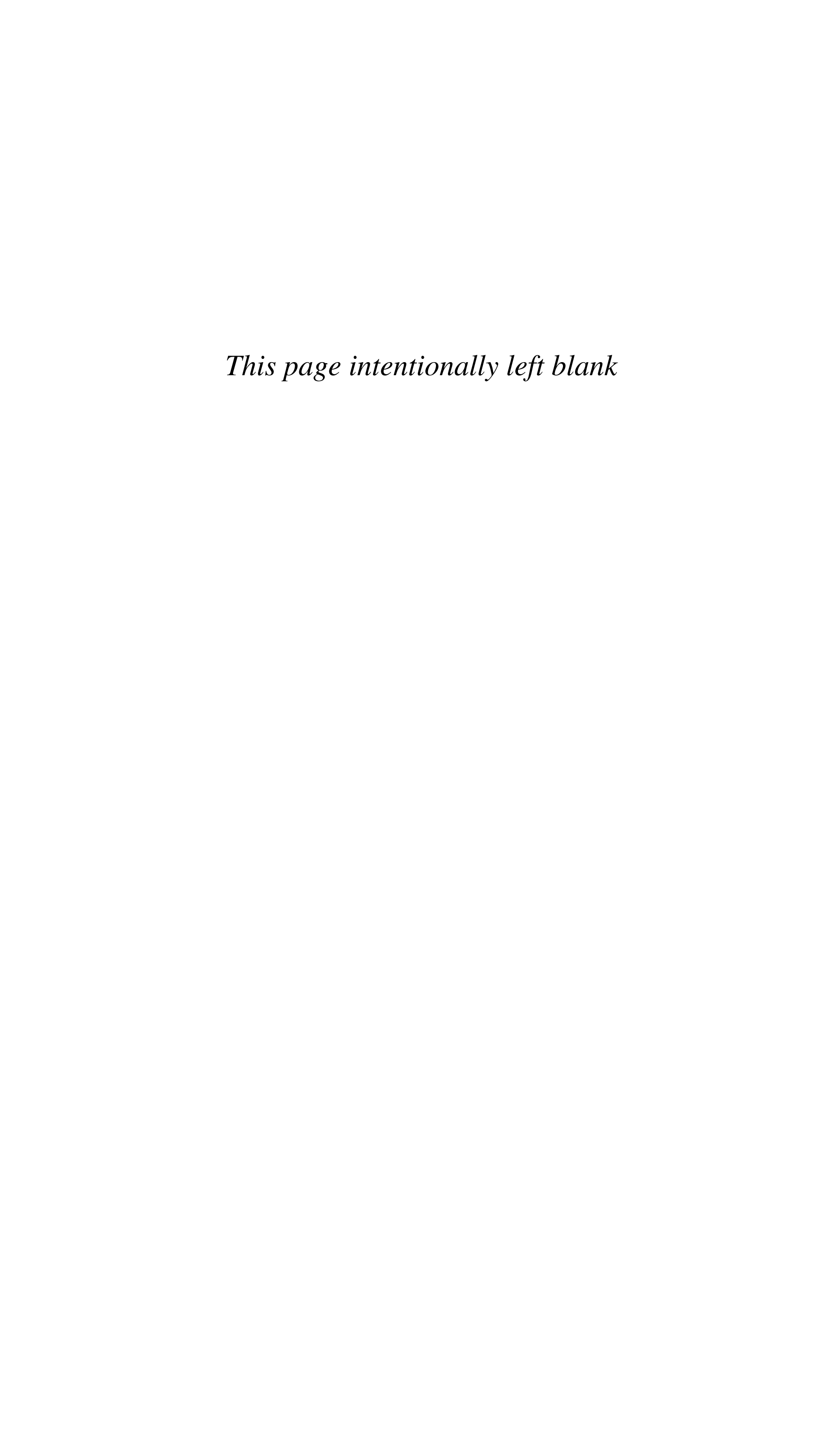
But of course, the Dega while perhaps a new social collectivity, are not truly and literally a new self. The evangelical narrative of conversion is emphatically personal, autobiographical, and most of all, experiential. The "Dega conversion" I am discussing here is a collective phenomenon. Furthermore, I have not discussed particular Dega narratives of their relation to this preconversion self (stories about how a particular Dega emerged from traditional Montagnard culture). Instead I have focused on representations of a static preconversion self/culture. But this static image is an important characteristic of this object (and revealing of the discursive form in which Dega construct it). Thus the formation of the discursive space of the Dega is both similar to and different from evangelical conversion.

But if we are discussing narratives, it must be emphasized that the story that Dega do narrate of how particular Montagnards became

Dega traces a history of loss and defeat. *This* is what connects them to their preconversion self. The Dega are *nostalgic* for Montagnard traditional culture. An evangelical convert is never nostalgic for his preconversion self. The transformation of conversion, the gap that is opened up between the narrating self and his or her preconversion past, is always narrated as victory, as improvement, as progress. The Dega narrative is a story of loss, regret, defeat, exile, and resistance to the transformation that separates them from their preconversion past. The discursive space of the Dega refugee community more clearly suggests the collective experience of the longing and displacement of diaspora than it does the personal and euphoric experience of conversion.

In refugee exile they try to resist and reverse a transformation that they have not been able to control and that they deeply regret. This is somewhat ironic since one important aspect of this new discursive space is their Christian faith, which they highly prize. However, the complicated discursive formations analyzed in this chapter suggest that the victorious transformation typical of Christian conversion is in fact evidenced in Dega postconversion representations when they narrate the "benevolent eye of God" into the traditional culture of the Montagnards. This unstable and slippery formulation reproduces the complicated history of overlapping and disavowed relations between the various discourses of French and American interventions through which the Dega emerged as refugees and Christians—just as the discourses of evangelical Christianity are visible, or audible, in the converts' narrative.

And as for personal conversion narratives, it is quite significant that individual Dega do not in fact actually narrate their *Christian* conversions at all. They do not typically tell stories about how they became a Christian. And yet conversion narratives are a primary characteristic of the type of evangelical Christianity of their CMA missionaries to which they now profess faith. This is where I will pick up the analysis of the discursive space of Dega refugee exile in the next chapter.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Chapter 3

The Conversion of the Dega

Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of the phenomenon of religious conversion as it has been discussed especially in the evangelical Christian tradition is the personal testimony, proclaimed by a convert, narrating a profound experience of change.[1] In the Protestant evangelical tradition, this experience is often the focal point in believers' explanations of the truth and certainty of their religious faith. Thus, it is significant that very few Dega in North Carolina have ever told me stories about how and why they became Christians. Most report having not been Christian in their youth, and virtually all of them describe themselves as Christians now. Thus there would seem to be a narrative of change implicit in their religious identity. But although I have tried to elicit these stories from Dega in interviews, very few of them have cared to tell me how this change came about. They show little interest in the topic.

Perhaps we should not expect to hear evangelical conversion stories from Dega. Some of them converted to Catholicism—not evangelical Protestantism—and would perhaps have been taught by their missionaries to represent their conversion very differently from the evangelicals' narrative of dramatic experience.[2] But in any case, evangelical conversion narratives are not transparent and unmediated accounts of actual experiences. They are, in a sense, a *literary genre* that has been adopted into verbal forms of spoken autobiography.[3] The genre developed in the specific historical circumstances of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English-speaking evangelism. In any case, the evangelical narrative of a conversion experience would seem to depend on peculiarly modern and Western constructions of an introspective conscience and a developed hermeneutic of one's own subjectivity.[4]

But if Dega do not offer narratives of their religious conversions they *are* very much intent on telling me a different kind of story about

the experience of God in their lives: they tell me war stories that pivot on God's miraculous intervention to save them from certain death. These narratives are told of a period in which they lived for years in small guerilla bands or in degrading prison camps, with only tenuous and uncertain contact with the wider world. Like converts' accounts of a decisive experience of conversion, Dega seem to tell me these miracle stories in order to explain their Christian faith to me and to witness to the truth of God.

In this chapter I analyze the absence of conversion narratives among the Dega as I piece together an account of how highland people encountered and came to identify themselves with Christianity in the central highlands of Vietnam. Then I analyze the stories that Dega *do* want to tell me—war stories involving miraculous interventions by God in the *FULRO* (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*) army. I argue that the Dega collectivity is created during these years in the jungle through the fellowship of Christian faith and worship as it is narrated in these miraculous war stories.

Thus, if Dega do not offer narratives of their conversion to Christianity, they instead tell stories of their "conversion to Dega." This conversion occurred when the *FULRO* army (the Montagnard ethnonationalist resistance force known by its acronym for the *Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*, or United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races) began to tell stories that explicitly linked the Christian god to their resistance struggle against the communist regime in Hanoi. A rhetoric that links Christianity and the Dega collectivity continues to animate the politics of the refugee community and its attempts to raise a voice of resistance to the policies of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This chapter concludes with a description of Dega Christian worship in North Carolina refugee exile and the ways that widely expressed fears of religious declension only reinforce the importance of Christian identity to the formation of Dega refugee identity.

1 Prohibitions and Fellowship

"Conversion is a scientifically verifiable experience," Reverend Charles Long told me. He speaks from fifteen years of experience as an evangelical missionary among the *Jarai* people in the central highlands of Vietnam. "Wherever you go in the world, people will relate the same experience of being saved by Jesus—the rebirth, new life, forgiveness, and an unbelievable lightness."

Reverend Long told me about his own conversion experience as an adolescent "thief and brawler" growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina. He explained to me that he was bad, that he knew he was going nowhere, and yet he resisted Christ. His friend, who had recently experienced "new life," witnessed to him. But, Reverend Long explained,

> I couldn't change. I couldn't not be bad. As hard as I tried, I couldn't change myself. Until one night I prayed and prayed. I was distraught. And then something changed. I felt completely different. I was suddenly able to accept Jesus into my life. I felt this incredible lightness. I knew it was true. I could feel Jesus coming into my life.

He said that he felt his sins being forgiven and that he knew he would never return to his old sinning life. This happened in 1953. By 1957 he was a missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) in the highlands of Vietnam.

Charlie Long recounts this same story in the opening of the book he wrote about his experiences in the highlands.[5] He uses the story to explain why he went to Vietnam as a missionary, the overwhelming personal significance of "knowing the Lord," and the effect that he hoped his mission to Vietnam would have on the highland people living there. The clear goal and expectation of the CMA missionaries was to facilitate among the highland people this kind of evangelical experience of sudden and dramatic religious conversion. Their missionary accounts (published in America to raise interest and money for their missionary projects) frequently turn on just such dramatic breakthroughs. After recounting months, sometimes years of resistance and obstacles, the stories always resolve with the sudden and dramatic conversion of one or more of the highlanders. They "stand up for the Lord," or "receive the Holy Spirit and ask God for forgiveness." They suddenly, miraculously, "confess their sincere desire to know the Lord."

The missionaries' texts often depict highland people self-narrating these kinds of conversion experiences. But in contrast, Y'Dhon Adrong, now a prominent member of the Dega Protestant church in Raleigh, told me that he "accepted God" in 1973 when he was fifteen years old. When I asked him how he first heard about Christianity and became a Christian, he began by telling me that he had been living away from his village for two years while going to a Vietnamese school in Banmethuot (one of the larger population centers in the highlands). He and a couple of his friends began attending the

Protestant missionary church. "I wanted to change my life a little bit," he explained. His family was poor, and the constant animal sacrifices, he said, were expensive. He began attending the curious missionary chapel in town where they were telling him that he did not have to be afraid of the *yang* (spirits) any more. At the urging of the missionaries, he took off the bracelet that recorded the sacrifices he had performed for the spirits and he deposited it into a bucket in the front of the church. He told me that he thought of it as a protective bracelet. It had been given to him by his parents the first time that they had performed an animal sacrifice for him. He told me that he "decided the new spirit is better than the old. It's not so expensive. I don't have to be afraid of the spirits anymore."

I have socialized regularly with Y'Dhon over the past several years, and he never uses the word "conversion" to talk about his Christian faith. Sometimes he tells me that he "decided to be Christian" or that he "accepted God"—as if it were a purposeful, strategic, evaluative choice. While this might sound like the kind of pivot of change that would typically characterize an evangelical conversion narrative, the story is apparently not an important one for him. It does not explain to him *why* he is a believer. That he *is* a believer is quite important to him. But this story is not why. In fact, it was I who pieced the story together by asking him again and again when and how he became a Christian. There was no moment of conversion in his accounts, and there certainly was no decisive, emotional, self-authenticating experience of God—as the evangelical missionaries would have expected and probably recorded in their journals.

Dega who are Catholic are even less likely than Protestants to offer any sort of compelling narrative of how they became Christian. In the Dalat area, where *Koho* speakers live and Brim K'Din grew up, there was a much stronger Catholic presence than Protestant. I asked him how he first became a Christian and he offered this (non)narrative of his (non)conversion:

> When we were young, we know a priest because we stayed at school. There is a priest. A French priest. [Long pause.] I don't know how I get to the Catholicism. Maybe because the priest was near to us, and we were the persons who went to school. And sometimes the French missionary need us, so that we were close to him and become Catholic. Could be. [Long pause.] They need us to translate something or go with them to explain their religion.

I asked him what attracted him to Christianity. "Hmmm . . . Nothing that attract me there. I think, because, you know the priest need us

on Sunday. So we went with him. So we became Catholic. That's all." Similarly, Paul Doi dates his Catholicism to his years at a Catholic missionary school in Kontum. "We go to church every Sunday, so that's when I become Catholic."

One clear pattern that emerges from Dega accounts of Christianity in the highlands is that they frequently portray themselves as encountering and coming to identify themselves with the missionaries' message while away at school as adolescents in the highland market towns of Pleiku, Banmethuot, or Dalat. "It was easy to be Christian in Banmethuot," many have told me. At school the young girls and boys came under foreign influences while they were distant from their parents and the daily life of the village. It was in these same schools that, according to Gerald Hickey, a highland ethnonationalist elite first formed (see chapter two). At school, highland people began to imagine themselves as "Montagnards" and apparently some of them also began to imagine themselves as Christians.

CMA missionary accounts often worry that conversions while at school would not be maintained when the students returned to their villages. These accounts usually represent conversion as the renunciation of village life—what missionary Ken Swain referred to as "the spirits, the sacrifices, the drunkenness, and the orgies." Revered Long told me: "When a Montagnard converted to Christianity, he gave up all fellowship with his community." To build a house, he said, required a community effort, required sacrifices to specific spirits for protection, good luck, and thanks. "People were banished from their villages because they wouldn't participate in the sacrifices." Revered Ken Swain told me that highland villages would ostracize people who had converted to Christianity. He explained that each individual "had an evil spirit that had to be bought-off—appeased with sacrifices and fetishes." If an individual became a Christian and refused to perform the sacrifices—"why, then he steps out of that whole circle, and the spirits would be angry at him." The villagers considered this dangerous, he said. The CMA missionaries considered it necessary.

The missionaries' portrayal of heroic Montagnard converts bravely removing themselves from the social patterns of village life would seem to operate within the same logic that leads classical anthropological accounts to find primitive religious beliefs and behaviors at the heart of every activity in "primitive cultures." According to both missionaries and anthropologists, what they are designating as "religion" extends out from a narrowly defined collection of rites, beliefs, and institutions to effect many or all aspects of primitive society. In the central highlands of Vietnam, anthropologists and missionaries

alike tended to find "Montagnard religion" expressed throughout village life. They report that Montagnards invoked the *yang* daily as they went about their tasks: planting, weeding, protecting their fields, hunting for wild animals, gathering fire wood, and preparing meals. Many landmarks in the environment were marked with named spirits that were honored and beseeched on a daily basis. Montagnards invoked *yang* during their frequent village celebrations. They relied on *yang* to cure illnesses. And they always called on them to formalize important decisions, alliances, and transitions. Thus, in these accounts, *yang* are closely associated with and articulated by what I call the Montagnards' "village habitus."

I borrow the term "habitus" from Pierre Bourdieu to figure the activities of sacrificing animals and consulting the *yang* as a "system of durable, transposable dispositions."[6] Bourdieu's notion of the habitus is helpful because it analyzes the structuring power of practice, its ability to generate and organize representations and activities, without presupposing an overriding "belief system," "world view," or preestablished "rules" held explicitly and consciously in the minds of participants. Thus, although anthropologists and missionaries both speak of "the Montagnards' animistic religion," I do not figure it here as a "religious belief system." Instead, adopting the concept of a village habitus, understood as a pattern of practices, I note how missionaries and Dega alike stumble and become vague or self-contradictory as they try to determine its proper relationship to Christian conversion in the highlands. Can Montagnard Christians participate in village celebrations? Does village life change radically in a Christian village? What needs to change and why? Both Dega and missionaries typically represent the new religion of Christianity as contrasting with Montagnards' "animistic faith." But when they discuss conversion from one to the other, the relationship they draw between these two "faiths" becomes confused or self-contradictory—thus confounding my attempts to record or describe a narrative of Montagnard conversion.

In some CMA accounts, "deciding to accept God" seems to have meant "breaking fellowship" with this village habitus and creating a new Christian fellowship. But elsewhere in these accounts, Christian conversion seems to portend very little change in the village habitus. Catholic missionaries, for their part, usually portray themselves as quite willing to work in and through the durable dispositions of village life. And yet Jacques Dournes, Catholic missionary to the *Jarai*, explicitly denounces what he calls the "collective mentality" of this

village habitus—even while he takes advantage of these forms of practice to evangelize the Christian faith. Probably missionaries' requirements for conversion and their depictions of the relationship between a village habitus and Christianity simply varied from missionary to missionary and region to region at different times across the highlands. But it is also true that individual missionaries were often self-contradictory and vacillating in their discussion of how Christianity could become part of Montagnards' lives. It was a vexing problem for them because they could not convincingly separate out Montagnard religion from the life of the village or decide finally how highlanders could be both Christians and Montagnards. None of them reaches a consistent solution. Their accounts waiver and double back on themselves to reinterpret similar practices in different ways in support of the momentary polemics of their accounts.

Interestingly, Dega refugees are also vague and inconsistent when they discuss the effects Christianity had on their patterns of village life. As I discuss in chapter two, they are caught in a bind between revering their "traditional Montagnard culture" and also celebrating their new Christian faith. Their accounts betray an uncertainty about how to talk about the relationship between Christianity and the patterns of practice that anthropologists and missionaries labeled their "animistic religion." Thus, in various guises, the habitus of Montagnard village life is an unresolved issue central to representations and explanations of conversion in the highlands proffered by Protestant as well as Catholic missionaries, and by Dega themselves.

For example, in contrast to CMA accounts, Catholic missionaries are much less likely to stress the disruptions to the village habitus caused by conversion. As I discuss in chapter two, Catholic missionary Jacques Dournes envisioned conversion as the gradual transformation of highland rites—not the separation of converts from the life ways of their "traditional spirituality." Dournes expresses concern that Montagnards separated from their villages would be susceptible to secularization. He hopes to keep them "whole" in their village habitus, and slowly convert their "spiritual practice" to Christian forms. Change must be gradual. The Montagnards' village habitus can be an aid—not a detriment—to conversion.[7]

Consistent with this tendency in Catholic missionary accounts, several Catholic Dega I spoke to went out of their way to emphasize that becoming a Christian amounted to very little change in the village habitus. According to K'Djo Ma Lein, who grew up in the

Catholic-influenced Dalat area, the ritual forms of sacrificing animals changed very little in his Catholic village:

> Suppose I come from my village to another village in which I don't know anyone. Of course, the Montagnards are very, sometimes they are very hostile to strangers. And if you don't know anyone in that village than you wouldn't have anywhere to sleep that night. They wouldn't allow you in their village. That's why first, if you go into that village, is to find your friend. And you would talk, you know, "I came from this village. I happened to stop in your village on my way to another village." And then, "Ok. Just come in, then." First they bring you a jar of wine and feed you. And probably they would kill a chicken, for a meal. Then after two or three times you pass by, then you would become like a brother. Then they would sacrifice a pig, something like that, to kind of like make it known to everyone that they are brothers from now on.
>
> There is no reason for the priests to ban that. That's something healthy. The relationship, brotherhood. It's good. It's not related to the devil.
>
> The form would change a little bit. In the past you would say prayers to the spirits, something like that. Under current society they would probably say a prayer or something. That's all.

Ha Lieng Cil, another *Koho*-speaking Catholic, explained that entire villages tended to convert together.

> Montagnards are not individualistic. They cling together. They exist for the village. Everybody exists for others. They cannot exist by themselves. For a Montagnard, if he was shunned by his village, he is nothing. If he doesn't know where he came from, if he doesn't know his family, he is nothing. Make the sacrifice. Drink the wine. Plant the farm. Have the bracelet from the mother, the father. With the *yang*. [pause] Do together.

The fellowship that the CMA missionaries described in Montagnard villages is here again tightly associated with the spirit world. But in contrast to Protestant missionary accounts, it seems that this all-important fellowship could be maintained—rather than purposively dismembered and formed again under Christian auspices. If the entire village converted together, then particular patterns of this habitus need not be changed drastically. And yet most Dega report becoming Christian while away at school, even while their explanations of conversion often gravitate toward the compatibility of Christianity and village habitus—a habitus that they in fact often had little or no

opportunity to experience because of the radical changes the Vietnam War was bringing to highland villages.

Even more tellingly, their explanations frequently imply a collective conversion of the entire village (even though their own conversions, again, often occurred while away from the village at school). Montagnards "cling together," Ha Lieng told me. And this was exactly the diagnosis of the Catholic missionary Jacques Dournes. "The group functions as a collective unconscious of amazing force," he writes of a *Jarai* village.[8] But like Dega accounts, Dournes' text is uncertain how to relate this "collective unconscious" of the group to the requirements and processes of Christian conversion. On the one hand he seems to venerate the state of nature he finds exhibited in the *Jarai*. "Like the collective instinct of an animal community," this communal life brings security. It creates a deep and abiding spirituality and natural closeness to the divine. He portrays missionary work as "converting" these natural rites into Christian forms. He sought "salvation [as] a community affair," and often depicts *Jarai* as simpler people but more powerfully Christian because of this primitive group mentality. But then, later, he represents Christian conversion as finally transcending the limitations of this collective mentality. He reports that he had to struggle to introduce terms such as "conscience" and "responsibility" to the *Jarai* language. He insists that "when God intervenes, he appears not to the group but to a particular individual, a certain, named person, for it is with singular cases that he [God] is concerned"[9]—apparently contradicting his previously stated strategy of seeking "salvation [as] a community affair."[10]

Thus, conversion for this Catholic missionary implies a reconstruction of his *Jarai* catechumen's sense of self, liberated from the "mechanical reflexes" of village life. Conversion is figured here through the trope of free will. God appeals to the individual conscience, and the private introspective conscience must respond individually, freely, and authentically with faith. This would seem to be the same internal realm of private conscience that CMA missionaries expected would experience the miraculous lifting of sin through faith. But it is exactly this private subjectivity expressing an individual's will and conscience that Catholic missionaries like Dournes argued was missing in Montagnards' village habitus and that CMA missionaries feared was overwhelmed by the fellowship of "demons and orgies" in Montagnards' villages. For Dournes, this sense of self must be created for there to be a Christian conversion; this sense of self would seem to be created *through* this very process of conversion.

As I discuss in chapter four, this kind of reconstruction of the subject is a centerpiece of the mission to resettle Dega refugees in North Carolina. The space of the authentic interior realm of the subject also emerges as a significant problem created by humanitarian missionaries trying to "win the hearts and minds" of Montagnards during the Vietnam War (discussed in chapter six, and again in the disavowed "conversion" of Special Forces soldiers discussed in chapter seven). Here, my interest is in exploring how conversion is variously represented through a tension within what Jacques Dournes called the Montagnards' "collective mentality," the CMA missionaries called the "fellowship of demons and orgies," and what I call the "spirit habitus" of a Montagnard village. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries write against it but they also seem to have used it to promote the gospel and evangelize highland villages. In addition, they present Christianity as a new community fellowship, but they also represent conversion as necessarily transcending the social patterns of the group. At times they write as though the entire village habitus must be destroyed; but elsewhere they seek to establish Christian faith within the village habitus. Significantly, this ambivalence also emerges in Dega accounts of Christianity in the highlands. They neither offer me compelling narratives of their own conversion nor settle on an account of whether Christianization brought with it significant disruptions of this village habitus.

Typically, both Catholic and Protestant Dega tell me that missionaries forbade them to participate in animal sacrifice ceremonies, to wear the brass bracelets that recorded those sacrifices, and to drink the rice wine that always accompanied any ceremonial gathering. But there is no consistency in these accounts so the prohibitions were apparently not universal among Catholic or Protestant Montagnards. Catholic Dega in particular tend to emphasize how they "Christianized" their traditional rituals or say now that they saw no contradiction between the village habitus and their new Christian faith. Among Dega in North Carolina, reports of the conscious renunciation of highland practices are no more common than the unexamined explanations that being Christian meant simply "being good" and "believing in God"—precepts that their accounts and explanations only occasionally articulate as specifically requiring the renunciation of particular highland practices.

In fact, despite the sometimes strong CMA rhetoric emphasizing the absolute difference between God's truth and the heathen worship of demons—the village fellowship that must be broken for the conversion of *individuals*—these same texts can also sometimes extol the

simple purity of communal Montagnard Christian *villages* in which the pattern of prayers and offerings that structured the village spirit habitus is explicitly retained with a new Christian meaning. Now the offerings of the first crop are brought to the church to support the pastor, and the petitionary prayers before planting and prayers of thanks at harvest were offered to God, not *yang*. Many Dega have also explained it to me this way.

Missionaries, especially the evangelical missionaries of the CMA, often represent conversion as fitting quite neatly into Montagnards' traditional practice of petitionary prayer. "Accepting God" often seems to have meant gathering God's protection around you, knowing that He was watching out for you and would protect you. To this day Dega are much more likely to proclaim the promise of God's help and protection then they are to mention the forgiveness of sins, for example. This faith would seem to mimic the relationship that Montagnards are said to have traditionally maintained with their spirits. Neither CMA nor Catholic missionaries represent conversion as necessarily giving up *belief* in the spirits—just *dependence* on them. In fact, evangelical missionaries often write as though the *yang*, or "evil spirits," are quite real. After all, the Bible is full of demons that must be exorcised. They represent conversion as Montagnards' realization that the Christian god is more powerful than all the other spirits, and a jealous god too. What the missionaries represent themselves teaching the Montagnards, and what the Dega seem to have learned, is that you do not need to fear the spirits any longer and that you do not need to make expensive animal sacrifices to them. God, with his infinitely greater power and compassionate love, will protect you much more effectively then the *yang*, which the missionaries portray as unreliable and frequently malevolent. And again, this is often how Dega refugees explain the change of conversion as well.

But if the missionaries seem to believe in the Montagnards' "demons" in their texts written in the 1940s through 1960s, the Dega refugees today clearly do not. Although they enshrine "Montagnard traditional culture" with nostalgia and a sense of loss, most Dega in North Carolina are visibly embarrassed to talk to me about the *yang*. They seem to assume that I will find these practices silly and embarrassingly primitive. When offering accounts of why the Montagnards converted to Christianity—not personal memories of an individual's conversion—their explanations are often steeped in a powerful teleological narrative of progress. The story goes: when shown the light, Montagnards rejected the misguided and outdated attempts to improve their lives by manipulating

the *yang* and saw Christianity as embodying a future of truth and progress.

For example, during a long conversation with Y'Blim (another *Koho*-speaking Catholic) his attempts to explain to me how village life was not radically altered by conversion evolved into a description of the obvious benefits of modernity that he seemed to think was naturally associated with Christianity. His use of the third-person pronoun and the abstraction of the hypothetical "you" to describe converting Montagnards epitomizes the level of abstraction that typically characterizes these teleological narratives:

> Nothing change really. Don't give up anything. Just your belief, that's all. They still had the ability to set up parties if they wanted to, if they had the capacity to do. There's nothing. The only thing they gave up, was probably a benefit to them, really.
>
> Under the old life, if somebody in your village is sick, then you have to go to another village, maybe five or ten miles away. Maybe one night away. That village have a shaman, and yours don't have. You have to go in there, ask him to come over, perform his actions. You have to bring wine to him. Feed him. And most of the time your sick, he's not better. While, living the modern way, the present way, then if you don't feel well you go to the doctor, and it costs probably less than that.

Initially, Y'Blim asserted that nothing really changed. But he quickly found himself admitting that perhaps there were in fact changes, but they can only be thought of as improvements. Notably, these improvements occurred in the area of health and medicine, not some sort of "spiritual evolution" or progress toward religious truth.[11] Western biomedicine, represented as an obvious improvement inevitably bound to replace Montagnards' reliance on *yang*, is here grafted onto the apparent inevitability of belief in God replacing belief in the spirits.

As our discussion continued, Y'Blim spoke not of his own conversion but of the inevitable conversion of some hypothetical Montagnard—or really, of *all* Montagnards. This kind of abstraction (which I heard on more than one occasion) seems to operate within the logic of the "collective mentality" that Dournes both romanticized and condemned. In these Dega accounts Montagnards convert en masse, as though Christianity was just something "in the air," unavoidable. Conversion is perfectly natural, perfectly obvious, and therefore impossible to explain. These accounts of the inevitable progression of "the Montagnards" converting to Christianity are the most prominent and articulate stories of conversion that Dega refugees ever told me.

2 Conversion to Dega

When Dega narrate “the conversion of the Montagnards” their stories become abstract and driven by a teleological narrative of progress and inevitability. Stories of their own *particular* conversions seem to melt away in a vagueness that cannot settle on how to represent the changes that Christianity prompted in the village habitus. But the fellowship that they describe in uncertain and shifting terms in their accounts of Christianity in their villages emerges in full and clear articulation in the powerful narratives of God in the *FULRO* army after the fall of the South Vietnamese state. I will turn next to an analysis of the stories Dega refugees tell of their time “in the jungle,” on the run from the Vietnamese army. They told me these stories in support of the one overriding reason that they wanted to speak with me and get their stories on record—they wanted to explain to me why they had spent their adult lives fighting the Vietnamese communists. That is what they wanted me to understand, and that is what they assumed I had come to find out.

In a sense, they were right. That *is* what I wanted to find out. For if Dega in North Carolina do not narrate their own Christian conversions, they do narrate the miraculous intervention of God in their lives. They tell stories about being captured by the Vietnamese or suddenly ambushed on a jungle trail. A bomb that should have killed them—that killed everyone else around them—somehow left them without a scratch. Miraculously they survived. How is this possible? “I should have been killed,” I heard over and over again. And then quickly, the explanation: “The only reason I lived is because God saved me,” and then, “We believe very strong in the *FULRO*, God is with us.” This explanation was in fact the point of the entire story.

These stories of religious experience, narratives in which they say they felt the presence of God, help them to justify and explain to themselves why they struggle against the Vietnamese government. But they told them to me when I asked them to talk about their faith in God. Like paradigmatic evangelical conversion narratives, these stories demonstrate to them the truth of God and their dependence on him—and faith in the Christian god is one of the primary foci around which Dega have marshaled and articulated their opposition to the Vietnamese government. In the process of linking God and the Montagnard resistance they have formed the collectivity they call “Dega.” There is a conversion in these stories, a “conversion to Dega.” They use these stories like conversion narratives to tell me why they believe in God and why the Dega cause is righteous. The two faiths are intimately linked.[12]

One such story emerged while I was having a political discussion with Y'Thih Eban, one of the early leaders of the *FULRO* resistance. In the midst of his excited polemic about the Vietnamese persecution of Montagnard people, he suddenly shifted into a very detailed story about God's miraculous intervention to save his life during the Vietnam War. He described how his platoon was captured by the North Vietnamese army and lined up in front of a firing squad. "The communists always kill the Montagnard people," he explained, drawing another lesson in his long litany of abuses. But then he paused in the story to build tension:

> They lined us up in front of the firing squad, and one guy was holding the machine gun, waiting to pull the trigger. Waiting for the order. So they tied us up and everything. And a friend of mine cried, and everything. And inside me, I said, "Ok."
>
> Among that group, it was only me that was Christian. Two of them were Catholic. But the one that was Catholic, he asked me to pray. I said, "Friend, I am not afraid. My Lord will save all of us. It's not only me, but all of us, because I am a Christian."
>
> After I said that, I thought, "How could I say that? I can't believe it. How could I say that?" How about if the enemy picked out one, two or three, and say, "Where is your god?" And everything like that, and what was I going to say? Everybody cry. And I don't know why, you know. Only me. I just told them out loud. We're going to die anyway. Not afraid of saying anything, you know. So I pray loud too. So I said, "Ok, Lord, the death of me. I'm not afraid, because it's just a bridge for me to cross and go to see you. But these people they don't know where they will go. Please give them some more time. Show them that you are the living God. Show them your power, so that they might believe you." I prayed.
>
> And then suddenly there was this one guard, you know, came out of the bush, and came in front of them and said, "Stop, don't kill them." Just stop.
>
> And then they took us to prison. And when we went to prison, I saw a lot of Montagnards were tied up in the trees and hanging up and everything. Went to prison, they kept us there for about sixteen days. And then they gave paper to us, all of us in that group, I couldn't believe it, all of us in that group let us go home. I just couldn't believe it until now.

His story of God's miraculous intervention was told almost gleefully. Like many of the other stories he told me, it poked fun at the bumbling Vietnamese and celebrated the courage and cleverness of the *FULRO* resistance. The miraculous help God could offer was

quite evident to him. In his stories, belief in God would seem to be part of the genius of *FULRO.*

This was a very common pattern in many of my interviews with Dega refugees: God's miraculous intervention proved that he was protecting them, and this protection demonstrates the righteousness of their cause. These adventure stories were long and drawn out with details, and narrated with great conviction and excitement. During my conversation with Ky Kpa, a guerilla soldier who traveled with the *FULRO* command for ten years during the guerilla resistance, I badgered him with questions about his early encounters with Christianity. He told me that the missionaries had established a church in his village and encouraged some of the more ardent followers of the new religion to hold regular prayer services. "We went to church," Ky told me, "but we did not believe. Not really." But then he continued. "I really believe when I live in the jungle. Because," and he paused to find the words, "I saw it so many times. I saw God."

At this point Ky launched into a series of stories, six in total, told in full vivid detail with humorous asides and repeated sound effects and exclamations for emphasis. His monologue spanned nearly fifteen minutes while I said not a word, except for occasional nods and grunts of agreement to show him that I was following and interested. He told me these stories with obvious relish. And he told them easily, with familiarity, arranged in chronological order, as though he had told them and thought about them many times before. He told them with dramatic emphasis, pausing for effect, waiting for me to confirm the excitement and tension of his experience. "Oh my God, the communists got me now... I prayed and prayed, silent like, so they wouldn't hear us." His stories went on for so long that I had forgotten that I had been asking him how he came to believe in God. But Ky had not forgotten—he was explaining to me *why* he believes in God.

After one disastrous battle in which he described how six hundred *FULRO* soldiers held off twelve thousand communist troops for "seven nights and eight days," he concluded his series of stories by explicitly drawing what was for him the only possible explanation: God had saved him.

> My friend was killed. Five hundred fifty but I still alive. Only fifty people get out from that twelve thousand soldiers from the communists. You know why I can get out? If I didn't believe in God, maybe I'm not here today... The reason I'm here is because God. He want to bring His word. He want me to solve his problems, his matters.
>
> If you talk about the explanation of God, you know more than me. You know all about the Old Testament, the New Testament. Every

> different type of belief. I'm sure you know. But, if you talk about what God has solved about this matter? I saw more than you saw. Very few of you in this city have seen what God has given to the human being. The reason I say that is because I saw it. [Pause] God is real.

Everyone I have spoken to who fought in this army testifies to the importance of Christian faith and worship in the *FULRO* army. One woman told me: "We pray and Bible song on Sunday and before you eat and sleep, or before you go patrol. Before you do something, pray. We think it very strong, God protect you. Feeling God stay with you. Protect you. A lot of people became Christian in the jungle."

Needless to say, these were extremely trying times in the jungle.[13] They had to learn how to scavenge from the land or were forced to make dangerous trips back to their Vietnamese-occupied villages to get supplies. Many succumbed to hunger and disease. Many gave up and returned to their villages and the certainty of long abusive prison terms. This was hardly an army. They were barely subsisting. They were not really capable of fighting anyone. One soldier told me that for several years he had exactly three bullets. He spent most of his time looking for food and avoiding the Vietnamese army. The ones who survived were the strongest and most resourceful and resilient—or just plain lucky and certainly stubborn. Six hundred survived out in the jungle for a decade or more before coming to North Carolina as refugees. Only a few of the men and women I have talked to in this group have not tried to impress on me the importance of their religious faith in getting them and the *FULRO* army through. Often Dega accounts of the jungle shift quickly from the depiction of petitionary Christian prayer to the righteousness of the *FULRO* cause. One woman told me: "Some became Christian in the jungle. They had to be Christian. They were scared. No medicine. No food. We pray and pray. Get sometime. We were fighting for the Lord." The apparent desperation of Montagnard conversions accomplished through their adoption of Christian petitionary prayers are perhaps easy to explain within deprivation models of conversion. But it is not my object here to explain how or why Dega converted. Instead I am interested in how they *talk about* this conversion. In their accounts they inevitably link Christianity to the purpose of the *FULRO* army. Christianity and *FULRO* are nearly inseparable. "We were fighting for the Lord."[14]

Protestant pastors often appear in these accounts as military leaders in the jungle. Pastors tended to be more educated than most Montagnards since they had been selected by CMA missionaries and

passed through the rudiments of Bible study to prepare them for the ministry. They were knowledgeable in the ways of God and therefore were shown honor and respect and given positions of authority. Reportedly, the soldiers looked to them for advice and guidance.

In some accounts the *FULRO* military command appears to be almost a theocracy in exile. For example, a man who became a leader of the Dega Alliance Church in Raleigh told me that he traveled with the small entourage of the *FULRO* high command. There was, he told me, a minister of communications and a minister of the treasury—the entire bureaucracy of an imaginary sovereign state government. His title, he said, was "Minister of God." In a less officially recognized position, K'Bong Bdasu (who became the preacher of a Dega church in Charlotte), seems to have been a kind of itinerant preacher among small cells of *FULRO* fighters. He traveled from group to group during his fifteen years in the jungle. In his broken English he struggled to impress on me how his military authority emerged out of his religious authority.

> That was my job. Because sometimes every Christian or every Montagnard in the jungle, they look to me, like a person from God. And everything they believe, they talking, or show them to do something for God. They believe that. And follow that, to do it.
>
> For example, today you go to another place. And before you go, you pray. And you don't go this way. You go this way. I see. Because this way dangerous. If you go this way, you die. If you go this way, you'll live. And they follow that. Because I know. If they don't listen to me, already they die.

I asked him how he knew which way was safe. "I know because God showed us security. He realizes our security from the communists."

There were both Catholic and Protestant Montagnards in the *FULRO* army. But because there had never been any Catholic Montagnard priests or deacons, the institutional maintenance of Catholic rites was not a real possibility in the jungle. Notably, Catholic worship is completely erased in Dega representations of the *FULRO* army. Descriptions of *FULRO* worship services follow the evangelical Protestant patterns taught by CMA missionaries and both Protestants and Catholics participate together. Dega tell me that they taught one another the Christian songs they had learned from their missionaries. Some say they carried hymnals with them. Services included prayers offered by the worship service leader, prayers recited in unison, and a protracted period in which each individual offered up his or her prayers to God, out loud, simultaneously—raising a cacophony of

confused voices that could last for ten or fifteen minutes or more. (This style of group prayer is evidenced in the Dega churches in North Carolina.) They prayed that their loved ones would be protected and that their group would survive another day. They tell me that they prayed for support and help. And they prayed in thanks that they had made it thus far. If there was a trained preacher present, then he would offer a sermon as well, usually I am told, on a similar theme.

There is never any mention of the *yang* in these stories of *FULRO* in the jungle. In their accounts they fight in the name of God. They depict not the fellowship of the village habitus, but a new fellowship gathered around prayer and song focused on the Christian god. It is *this* fellowship (not the fellowship of *yang*) that animated the *FULRO* army in the defense of the Montagnard homeland.

Dega recount for me how the victorious communists regime was quickly reforming Montagnard village life along socialist lines, suppressing Montagnard traditions, imposing new farming techniques, and requiring that houses be built only in "the Vietnamese style." They were trying to create among the Montagnards a new socialist Vietnamese people under absolute governmental control. That is why, Dega explain to me, they escaped to the jungle to fight the communists. But at the same time that they are telling me that they were fighting to defend Montagnard traditions, they also tell me that they were "fighting for the Lord." They articulate a new way to be Montagnard: to be Christian and to be fighting "the communists" in the jungle. In these stories they produce themselves as Dega—Christian fighters resisting communist oppression to establish a Montagnard homeland in the highlands. "We were fighting for the Lord." It is always in opposition to the communists that North Carolina Dega articulate their Dega identity and their Christian faith.

But it is not just miracle war stories set in the jungle where Dega identity forms. Many Dega in North Carolina did not serve in the *FULRO* army, but instead suffered through many years in Vietnamese prisons (or "reeducation camps"). Like the adventure stories of the miraculous intervention of God in battle, they too offer me stories that demonstrate the righteousness of the Dega resistance to the Vietnamese. They tell me how they wore a cross in defiance of the guards who were obviously intimidated by the power of God. They tell me how they prayed and prayed to find the right moment to attempt an escape. Then, at the crucial moment, a guard inexplicably turns his back and they scamper off safely into the jungle. As they recount the systematic abuse of the prison guards, they tell me how

certain they were that God was with them. They tell me of the formation of their Christian faith when they were suffering the full weight of communist oppression. The close association of the Dega collectivity with Christian faith—formed in opposition to the hated communists—emerges in these sorts of stories as clearly as in the miracle stories of God saving them from certain death in the *FULRO* army. In fact, many of these stories are themselves miraculous adventure stories.

If we speak about "the conversion of the Dega," this is when it happens. This is when the people who grew up in the central highlands, who got caught in the Vietnam War, suffered recriminations from the victorious communist Vietnamese, lost a hopeless guerilla war in the jungles and arrived in North Carolina as refugees—this is when they began to articulate themselves as "the Dega people" and it is at this same moment that they began to marshal a strategically constructed Christian identity to sustain themselves and "the Montagnard people." It is very much a *group* process, producing a *group* identity. It is a Christian-military formulation by which they have attempted to negotiate and resist their position in the world and in the new state of Vietnam. It is a formulation produced by the defiant, hard, and fortunate survivors—"I survived because I believe in God"—who resettled in refugee exile and created a new discursive space from which they now represent their past and imagine their future. They produced this new Dega Christian collective identity by narratively recreating a new habitus in the jungle (and the prison camps)—not by destroying the "collective mentality" that Jacques Dournes felt would be required in order to complete an authentic and complete Christian conversion. Their Christian faith is articulated through the Dega collectivity. Dega is a group identity articulated through the collective opposition to communist Vietnamese and tightly associated with the fellowship of Christian prayer and hymns.

3 Division, Declension, and the Christian-Dega Community in Exile

The collectivity Dega does not exist as such in the central highlands today.[15] Recent arrivals from Vietnam tell me that "Montagnard" is the most common label there and that there is little will for resistance to the all-powerful communist government among the poor and dispirited highland people. In contrast, many Dega in North Carolina are preoccupied with the resistance to the communists and the survival of the Montagnard people. This is perhaps because the refugee

community was originally formed by two bands of guerilla fighters who had dedicated their lives to that cause. Those in North Carolina who did not fight in the *FULRO* army were either imprisoned for their wartime association with the Americans or are the dependents of these soldiers or prisoners. These are survivors, and many seem to need to justify their lives—and the material comforts they now enjoy—by "keeping the faith" and continuing to work for the betterment of Montagnards in the central highlands. The leadership of the Dega refugee community is certainly devoted to this effort, and the imperative seems to be quite widespread in the community—often complicated by feelings of guilt and inadequacy among this community of atrocity survivors.[16]

Whether or not it holds true for the general population of the highlands, this refugee section of highlanders displays a remarkable penchant to associate the Christian god with their resistance to the communists.[17] In this final section of the chapter I describe how Dega Christian fellowship continued from the jungle to North Carolina without interruption and continues to play an important role in the collective social life of Dega refugees. Most significantly for my argument, Dega leaders continue to draw on Christian rhetoric and worship to articulate their plans, consolidate their power, and define the group's purposes. However, there is a widespread sense in the community that the group's Christian faith is diminishing, that "the people don't rely on God" the way they used to in the jungle. But there is an equally widespread presumption that the welfare of the Dega people in North Carolina—and especially the welfare of the Montagnard people in the highlands—depends on this trend somehow being reversed. Thus the apparent religious declension and the even more apparent *concern* about this declension seems to reinforce the importance of Christian rhetoric and Christian identity in the construction and maintenance of Dega identity. To keep faith in Dega, to continue the struggle for the Montagnard people in the highlands, is to keep faith in God.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) dispatched three former missionaries to the central highlands to meet the Dega as they got off the plane in 1986, and to move with them into their new communities in Greensboro, Raleigh, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Each of these former missionaries arranged for Dega worship space in either a local CMA church or some other accommodating Protestant congregation. Dega now lead and administer these churches themselves—under the renewed tutelage of their CMA missionaries. In fact, each of the three missionaries has exerted significant influence on Dega,

ranging from leadership of the community and church to policing personal conduct and counseling economic strategies. They have been important cultural translators for the group (aiding in their day to day adjustment to life in North Carolina) as well as significant interpreters of evangelical doctrine, worship style, church polity, and Christian counseling.

In each of the three cities, Dega gather every Sunday morning for eight o'clock services of the Dega Alliance Church that is affiliated with the national body of the CMA. These services typically draw between seventy and one hundred worshippers. They follow a regular pattern of individual and group prayer, choir and congregational singing, Bible readings, and a sermon. The services are not significantly different from other American CMA services I have attended. They offer praise to God and ask him for strength and guidance. They listen to sermons on the kingdom of God and the importance of faith. And they sing songs about God's truth, trustworthiness, and righteousness.[18]

Most Dega apparently are not able to describe their Christian faith with any degree of sophistication or nuance. They simply refer me to the religious experts among their native pastors, and tell me that they believe very strongly in God—typically because God has helped them so much in their lives (and this invariably refers to their tribulations in Southeast Asia). The expressed theology of Dega preachers does not deviate from the evangelical mainstream of CMA belief: Christ died for our sins, and faith is necessary for salvation. Certainly Christianity has completely superseded any articulation of traditional religious beliefs or practices among Dega in North Carolina. Not all of them attend church regularly (some rarely do) but no one among them promotes himself or herself as a healer or ritual specialist in the traditional religious systems of the highlands. And no Dega I have spoken with has admitted to—or has reported the persistence of—any belief in their traditional "animistic" religion. All of the Dega in North Carolina identify themselves as "Christians," or "believers," as they often say. I have yet to encounter any Dega who offers that he or she has no religion at all.

But if their style of worship and their articulated Christian doctrine differ little from other CMA churches in the region (except, of course, that they are conducted not in English but in one of the languages of the highlands, and that they are disrupted by numerous noisy children and babies), there is nonetheless an important role that this Christian worship plays in the production and articulation of the Dega collectivity in exile. Many North Carolinians who have worked

with the group cite the group's Christian faith and worship as an important factor in their remarkable success in adjusting to life in North Carolina. While these analyses generally emphasize certain Christian virtues and hope, it appeared to me that church worship services provide an opportunity for the group to gather, socialize, commiserate, and provide comfort, aid, and solidarity for one another. This was especially true in the early months of the first group's arrival when they were living with sponsoring families scattered around the three North Carolina cities. Dega CMA services are an important social occasion. Community events are often scheduled to follow church service on Sunday. Oftentimes, groups will gather in the parking lot after church to form a caravan if there is to be a picnic or meeting in another city.

When Dega gather for picnics and other community events, Christian prayers are always part of the ceremony—again evidencing the importance of Christian faith and worship to the construction and maintenance of the group. Significantly, these prayers are always offered by *Protestant* Dega and are Protestant, not Catholic, in tone and style (although I have seen Dega cross themselves in the Catholic manner when the prayer was concluded). The account of group cohesion through Christian worship occludes any recognition of Protestant-Catholic difference within the community. The Catholic-Protestant distinction is not particularly useful or relevant among Dega. It seems to have carried little significance in the jungle or in the prison camps, and does not divide the community in North Carolina either. The formation of Dega Christian identity seems to hold sway for the Dega community at large—Catholic, Protestant, or "lapsed." All Dega leaders make frequent reference to God and Christianity in their speeches. They frequently offer profuse thanks to their missionaries for "bringing the light" to the central highlands. They invoke the people's faith and trust in God—and insert it into almost every public pronouncement. All the Dega leaders—Catholic or Protestant—are regular church attenders and (if Protestant) usually serve on the governing boards of the Dega churches. A strongly articulated Christian faith seems to be a prerequisite for Dega leadership. To have faith in the Dega is to have faith in God. Those who do not articulate this formulation are rarely leaders. Church leadership and a devout Christian rhetoric are prerequisites for leadership in the North Carolina Dega community.

There are many more Protestants than Catholics in the Dega leadership. One Catholic Dega I spoke to had no explanation for this disparity except to suggest that while Dega leaders in North Carolina

have tended to be Protestant, the leadership of the ethnonationalist movement in the highlands during the Vietnam war tended to be Catholic, especially in the Ministry for Ethnic Minorities. This dominance of Catholic leadership in the highlands (illustrating the importance of French missionary schools for the integration of the Montagnards into French colonial and Vietnamese society) is confirmed by Gerald Hickey's list of "One Hundred Highland Leaders," where he counts thirty Catholics and only fourteen Protestants.[19] The shift from highland-Catholic to American-Protestant Dega leadership confirms my argument that Dega collective identity—and the leadership that personifies and articulates that collective identity—was formed in the Protestant-led worship of the *FULRO* resistance.

There is no Dega Catholic church comparable to the Dega Protestant church. Dega Catholics tend to attend mass together at a particular Catholic church in each of the three communities—St. Mary's chapel in Greensboro, the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Charlotte, and either St. Joseph's or Our Lady of Lourdes in Raleigh. Masses I have attended drew between fifteen and thirty Dega sitting more or less in a group at the back of the church. Both St. Mary's and St. Joseph's have a Vietnamese priest—although Dega quite pointedly do not attend the Vietnamese language masses held for the significantly larger Vietnamese refugee populations in each of these cities. Like Protestant Dega leaders, Catholic Dega leaders are regular church attenders and often nurture the Catholicism of Dega people by encouraging them to see to the Catholic rites of baptism, confession, mass, and marriage. But there is nothing in the Catholic Dega fellowship to compare with either *FULRO*'s (Protestant) "Ministers of God" or the emergence of the Protestant pulpit as a platform for leadership in the community.

The importance of the Protestant pulpit is perhaps best illustrated by the role it has played in several divisions that have marred the Dega refugee community. These political and social divisions have been aggravated by the inadvertent meddling of the retired CMA missionaries. Also, this political infighting has led to schisms within two Dega Protestant congregations. The schisms illustrate the continuing importance of Christian worship in the community. What is more, the political squabbling has contributed to a widespread sense of religious declension within the community. For many Dega I spoke with, this loss of faith seems illustrative of the failures of the *FULRO* movement in exile.

The divisions are a result of a bitter rivalry between those aligned with the "Montagnard Dega Association" (the MDA) and

the "Montagnard Foundation Incorporated" (the MFI, also often referred to simply as "The Foundation"). The MFI was founded by Kok Ksor, a *FULRO* leader who was marooned in the United States where he was receiving special military training when the communists swept into Saigon and won the war in 1975. He imagines the organization as essentially a political movement or government in exile. The MDA, on the other hand, is registered in North Carolina as a "mutual assistance association." As part of the humanitarian project to resettle Dega refugees in North Carolina, several Americans helped Dega establish the organization soon after the first group of *FULRO* soldiers arrived in 1986. Thus the strategies and goals of the two groups vary somewhat. The MDA focuses on the social services of resettlement while the MFI has chiefly been concerned with the ongoing politics of resistance to Vietnamese domination of the highlands. But the rivalry between these two groups seems to be driven not by these differences in strategy but by extremely personal and often petty animosities between the strong personalities of the various leaders.

This political division caused a split within the Dega Alliance Protestant congregation in Greensboro. Y'Hin Nie, a controversial leader in the *FULRO* resistance group that arrived in 1992, began to gain more power as he took over the MDA in Greensboro. Some of the Dega leadership in the Greensboro Alliance Church began railing against him and questioning his motivations—from the Protestant pulpit. So Mr. Nie led a group out of the church founded by the CMA missionaries and formed his own congregation. He solidified his political position by demonstrating his religious leadership. As one Dega said at the time: "It is good to come to church at these times, you know. You can show how you feel and also look for guidance."[20]

Y'Hin Nie is not himself a pastor, although he proudly recounts his formative years in the CMA missionaries' Sunday School in Banmethuot. He founded the "Montagnard International Bible Church" with the help of Ha Jimmy Cillpam—the son of a CMA trained minister to the highlands who escaped in 1975 and graduated from a California seminary associated with the ministry of Billy Graham. But Y'Hin obviously controls the congregation. He directs the services, making announcements from the pulpit and leading the group in prayer (although he also delegates this responsibility to others). He plays the electric piano to lead the church choir, and has formed a children's choir, which he often showcases. Reverend Cillpam, a *Koho* speaker by birth, is more comfortable preaching in English. So Y'Hin stands next to him at the pulpit and translates his

sermon sentence by sentence into *Rhadé* (for the native *Rhadé* or closely related *Jarai* native speakers who comprise most of the congregation). Y'Hin is omnipresent in the Montagnard International Bible Church.

The CMA missionaries living within the Dega communities in Raleigh, Charlotte, and Greensboro have played an important but complicated role in this schism. The CMA missionary in Greensboro lent her authority to the established Dega Alliance Church as the split occurred. She regrets the split in the congregation but probably helped bring it about by siding so adamantly against Y'Hin Nie and his controversial meteoric rise to power. She would not speak to me about the divisions that wrack the community, except to place the onus clearly on the other side of the split. Ha Jimmy Cillpam, while frequently preaching an impassioned vision of Dega unity, has denounced what he sees as CMA control of the Dega church.

The CMA missionary in Charlotte, has known Jimmy Cillpam since he was a boy in her Sunday School classes in Dalat and knew his minister-father as well. She was brought nearly to tears when we discussed his activities in Greensboro and what she described as his incomprehensibly divisive ministry. She had no patience for Reverend Cillpam's complaints about CMA control of the Dega church—although her own actions in Charlotte provide a telling example of his concerns about overbearing CMA tutelage.

When K'Bong Bdasu, a minister ordained by the CMA in the highlands (and a preacher with *FULRO* in the jungle for many years), arrived with the 1992 group, She rejected him as a pastor for the Charlotte Dega Alliance Church. As she tells the story, K'Bong had fathered several children during the seventeen years he lived in the jungle—and he already had a wife back in his village in the highlands. She explains:

> When K'Bong arrived with his family, a second family, we said he could not be the pastor of our church, because the Alliance policy is based on 1st Timothy 3 where it says that the pastor shall be a husband with one wife. His wife isn't dead. People here know her, and her family. And so we said, "You cannot be the pastor of our church." And so some of the people to whom he had been pastor in the jungle were happy with that. And they all came to our church here for awhile. And then they decided that they wanted him to preach. And he decided to. For a while they had more than we did. But gradually . . . people came back.

It is difficult to gauge the internal politics involved here, or to characterize quickly the conflicted sentiments of the Dega community

that are collapsed in her use of "we." But as K'Bong Bdasu tells the story, it was a dispute regarding financial support from the Alliance to establish an independent Montagnard congregation. The Alliance policy requiring self-supporting churches foreclosed the possibility of substantial financial contributions.[21]

Pastor Bdasu sought space in another church where the Montagnards could worship every week at their own convenience—something that was not possible under the CMA missionary's arrangement for worship. More than that, he tried to solicit money from other churches to establish an independent Dega congregation. K'Bong explained:

> We are poor. No money. No car. No job. Some have job, some don't...Three hundred thousand for a new church...How we get that? Talk, talk talk talk. We ask her, "You talk with big boss, what the answer for us for a Montagnard church? Can help us get a Montagnard church or not?" After that, a long time. The answer is no... "Can you go to another American church and ask for us?" And she answered, "No!" I don't understand why. She said: "You go with your own Montagnard people, but you do not go with other American people. NO!"...I ask her if American church help Montagnard with some money? But she said no.
>
> I don't care, if I go to American church, ok. I go to a Lutheran Church. I go worship just Jesus Christ. I don't think about organization, like this, like that. No.

Eventually K'Bong formed his own congregation with the help of a local Baptist church, and many Montagnards followed him. Thus there are two Dega Protestant congregations in both Greensboro and Charlotte, and the CMA missionaries have been party to both these schisms—much to their regret. And although the congregational splits have articulated along the political lines drawn by the political and social animosity between the MDA and the MFI (in both cities, those aligned with the MDA will all attend one church while those aligned with the MFI attend the other), the CMA is aligned with the MDA church in Greensboro but with the MFI church in Charlotte. There are no appreciable doctrinal or liturgical differences between the various Dega congregations. Instead, the schisms appear to be driven by social animosities arising from political rivalries that the CMA missionaries have tried to suppress but have only exacerbated. Dega can signal their political allegiance by attending a particular Protestant church.

Many have bitterly complained to me that "politics and church should not be mixed." This sentiment, echoing the prevailing ethos

in American politics, has been repeated in Greensboro both by supporters and detractors of Y'Hin Nie's political ambitions. Thus the political and social divisions that have split the Dega refugee community would seem to have undermined the historic association between God and the *FULRO* resistance. But what Y'Hin's critics seem to regret is the insertion of religion into the politics that *divide* the Dega community—not the politics that associates God with the Dega political agenda more generally. Y'Hin Nie powerfully combined church and political leadership to transform the MDA into a highly effective political machine. The continuing relevance of religious worship to the Montagnards' political organization is demonstrated by Mr. Nie's apparent need to solidify his political power by associating it with a Christian church that he can control.

But the politics that have split Dega congregations have contributed to the prevailing sense that the people are not as religious as they were in the jungle. I hear this from many Dega, as well as from their leaders. I hear it from religious people and people who wish they were religious or feel they ought to be. Like an individual looking back on the dramatic experience of conversion and lamenting that this level of intensity is no longer felt, Dega in North Carolina look back on the intensity of Christian faith and worship in the jungle when they "converted to Dega," and nostalgically pine for the good old days of extreme hardship and danger, when God was near and the Dega people were united. H'Buon Pin, a woman with three young children (the first of whom was born in the jungle) and a job cleaning in a department store, admitted to me, a bit shamefaced, that she doesn't go to church too often.

> Sometimes I do. There too much politic at church, so I don't go. People say this and that. They say someone is communist. They look who is here or not.
>
> The church is good. See the people. Give thanks to God. But, I don't know. Not have the time. I tired. Work late. I not go to the church every Sunday. Sometimes. I want to go, but I not go.

Everyone I have spoken to makes the uncomplicated connection between being a good Christian and going to church. I have never heard anyone suggest that one can be a good Christian and not go to church, and only a few have justified their distance from the Dega church by explaining that they go to another Christian church. To be a good Christian means to go to church. And, in a sense, to be a

"good Dega" means go to the Dega church (whichever one)—to enact the fellowship that created the Dega as a collectivity.

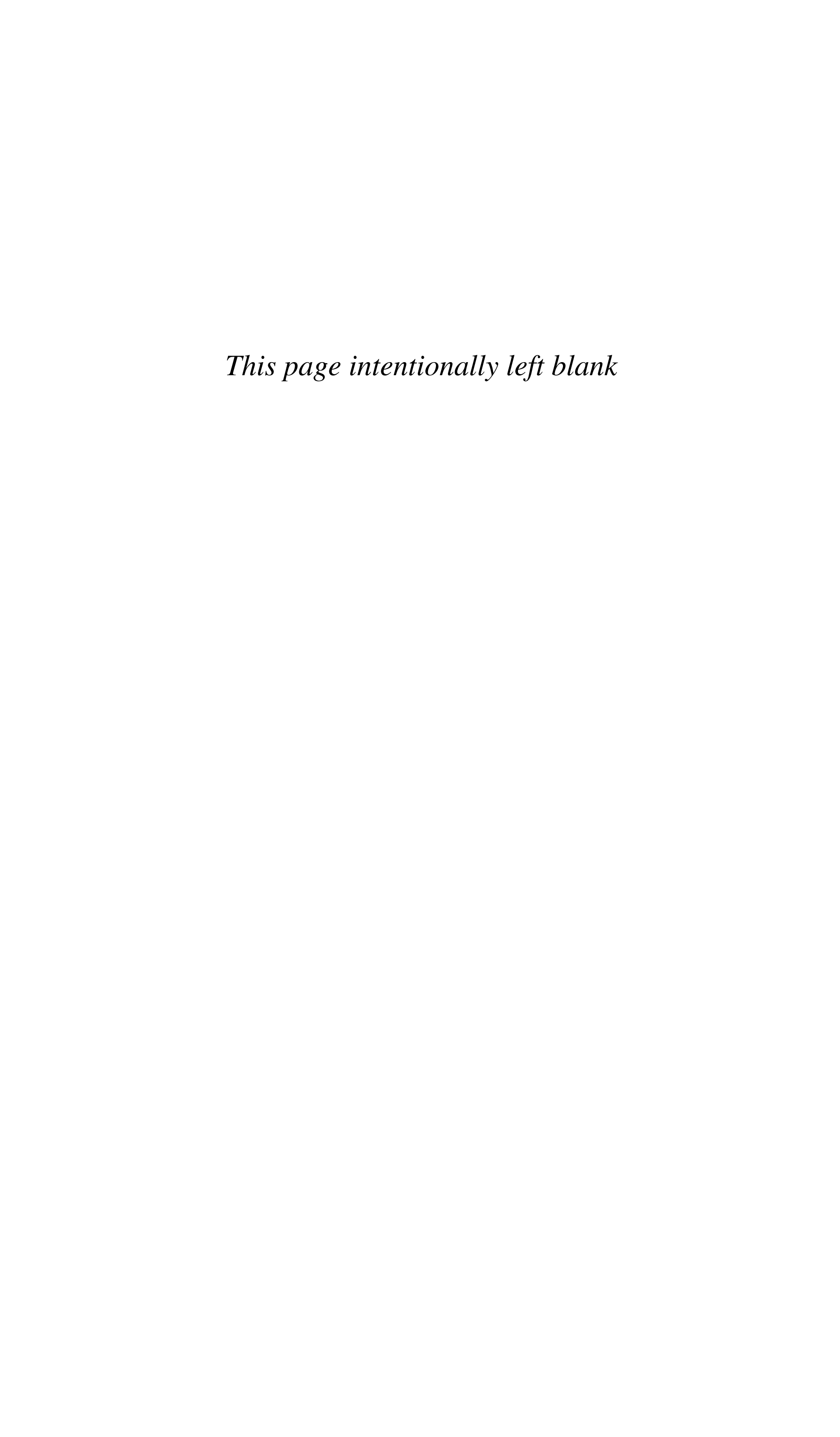
For if there is a strong sense of religious declension among the group in North Carolina, it is complemented by a strong sense that there is a great "religious revival" in progress among Montagnards back in the central highlands. They hear reports from recent arrivals and receive letters from home. They all tell me that more and more people in their village "believe in God now."[22] H'Buon Pin, the woman who told me that she wished she went to church more often quickly compounded her regret by telling me that in her village in the central highlands the government will not *allow* the people to go to church.

> But in the highlands, everyone believe now. All the people. They just believe in God. And the communists say, "No! You cannot go to church. You have to work. Go to the meeting." But the people all want to believe. God is very strong in my village today. But here, I don't know. Too many things. People forget. I should go to church.

This oft-repeated comparison between the strong faith of the struggling Montagnards in the highlands and the fading faith of the too comfortable Dega in North Carolina articulates a sense that the Dega fragment in North Carolina is failing their countrymen back in Vietnam. Not only did they fail to liberate the highlands, not only did they give up and seek political asylum, and not only have they been unable to improve conditions or send clothing medicine and money, but the historical conversion that associated God with the *FULRO* resistance and bound them together as a collectivity arrayed in opposition to the communists has slipped away as the people are distracted by petty factional in-fighting and material comforts. Again and again I hear nostalgic yearning for the inspired purpose of "fighting for the people" and the "trust in God" that accompanied and unified that project. Thus, even when represented as in decline, Dega Christianity remains all the more important as a focus for the community's aspirations and a centerpiece of the social collectivity that has been formed in dedication to the liberation of the highlands.

Oscar Salemink has argued that Christianity is a vehicle for anti-Vietnamese identity formation in the highlands.[23] Similarly, in North Carolina, being Christian is a way to be Dega. It is a way to be other than what the communists would want them to be. Sui Hanh told me, it is "to be the way the French and U.S. taught us to be. They came and helped us. We want to be like they are. We want to be

strong and free like they are, like they want us to be." Having faith that God is on their side is a primary way of keeping faith in the Dega resistance—of being Dega. To have faith in the Dega is to have faith in God. To lose faith in God, or really, to neglect the worship of God—to not go to church and thank God and be with the people—is to give up the fight for the Montagnard people in the highlands to which this Dega collectivity was formed by faith in God to defend.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Chapter 4

Conversion to Refugees

In 1986, when the first Dega refugees arrived in North Carolina, the *New York Times* provided this succinct account:

> The montagnards, fierce fighters who call themselves Dega people, fought the French and the Vietnamese before aligning themselves in the early 1960's with the Americans. When South Vietnam fell to the Communists in 1975, the montagnards continued to fight.
>
> Most are still there, but some montagnards fled into Cambodian jungles, seeking asylum in the West. Many were captured and imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. A few escaped to a refugee camp on the Thai border, where they were found by old American friends who convinced the State Department to accept them as immigrants.[1]

This newspaper clipping provides the basic structure of the story explaining the presence of Dega in North Carolina: they fought for the Americans during the Vietnam War, formed a guerilla army and fought on after the American withdrawal, suffered terrible losses, and then were discovered in a refugee camp and brought to North Carolina. Almost a decade later a former Special Forces soldier told me essentially the same narrative to explain the arrival of the second large group of Montagnards in 1992. He said:

> The 'Yards were our allies in Vietnam. Our only allies, really. Then after we left, they kept fighting. We promised to help them but it never came. We abandoned them. So they didn't stand a chance. The communists basically mauled them, chased them into the jungle where they lived on basically insects and roots. And then suddenly, twenty years later, this group, they were suddenly discovered by UN peacekeepers in the boonies of Cambodia. We got them out of there and into the U.S.—just in time too, because they would have been sent

back to Vietnam, to their deaths probably. So they've brought them here. They've become refugees.

This basic narrative structure is so obvious and intuitive that I find myself adopting a version of it as well when I tell people about the Dega. It is difficult to avoid. But I want to call attention to several elements of this story. First of all, the plot almost always pivots on the suddenness of dramatic, all-encompassing and irreversible change, at a culminating moment of crisis. At one moment *FULRO* fighters (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*) are suffering military losses and great deprivation in the jungle; in the next sentence they have suddenly turned up in a refugee camp, having traded in their weapons for political asylum. Second, this pivot is usually understood to constitute a complete transformation of their very identities—they are transformed from *FULRO* fighters into refugees. No one ever speaks of *FULRO* soldiers living in North Carolina, only Dega (or Montagnard) refugees. Third and perhaps most significantly, the story almost always relies on the passive voice construction to narrate the actions of Dega in their sudden and dramatic transformation. Things are done to them and for them, often by anonymous Americans in faceless agencies. In the sudden shift to refugee status, Dega seem to lose their agency. They *were found* by Americans, and they *were resettled* in North Carolina. *FULRO* guerilla fighters *are transformed* into the Dega refugee community. It is something that happens to them.

These same narrative conventions have also characterized paradigmatic accounts of Christian conversion—especially in the American evangelical traditions. Conversion is described as a complete transformation of identity, one that is said to occur suddenly and dramatically, at a moment of great crisis. And the convert is said to have been "changed by the grace of God"—not, finally, by his or her own efforts.

The rhetoric of conversion is irrepressible in the following newspaper account of how the Dega became refugees:

> Y Sue Eban closes his eyes, struggling through the difficult tale of the day back in August when he stopped being a soldier.
>
> His words, forceful and sharp, are spoken in the Dega language of his native Vietnam. They pass slowly from his lips. Someone translates, and his story unfolds:
>
> It was just before dawn.
>
> He wasn't sure of the time. He knew two things. That the night was retreating, having had its fill of a chilly, autumn sky. And, that he had lived to see another day.

> Then the grass rustled.
>
> Eban, 37, tells the story from a folding chair in a tiny room at the old Western Wake Hospital in Apex, now a temporary home for 68 refugees—men, women and children—known as Montagnards. Their people fought alongside the U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War.
>
> Ahead, for them, is the challenge of resettlement. But for now Eban and many of the others are still reeling from the suddenness of their departure from Cambodia.
>
> Eban's ill-equipped band of warriors was hidden away in the remote jungles of northeastern Cambodia, where it was helping carry on a war against the Communist government that has been in power since US troops left Vietnam 17 years ago.
>
> They felt sure the rustle in the grass was the enemy approaching. Then a voice called out. It explained that the intruders were United Nations peacekeepers, there to take the Montagnards to sanctuary.[2]

Narrated from the "sanctuary," this account plays on the suspense that is focused on the moment of change. The reporter describes the storyteller as having waited in solitude, suffering the crisis of a nearly defeated guerilla army. But then, with startling suddenness, a voice calls out and everything in his life changes. It is not changed *by* him, however. It is *"a voice"* that will take him to a sanctuary. His situation is suddenly transformed by forces outside of his control.

In this chapter I continue my exploration of the discourses of conversion by considering its struggles to represent agency and the related issue of the suddenness of religious transformation. I argue that the powerful cultural logic of the Protestant religious conversion narrative has structured how the Dega transformation into refugees has been represented—by those who have worked with them, by myself, and by Dega refugees themselves. The story of the Dega refugees pivots on the fulcrum of their sudden and dramatic "conversion" from *FULRO* fighters to essentially passive refugees. This pivot is narrated from a discursive position in the sanctuary of resettlement, looking back across the divide to their previous identity as resistance fighters.

Representations of the transformation of *FULRO* soldiers into resettled refugees mimic in important respects paradigmatic models of the transformation of sinners into evangelical Christians. In these accounts, the *FULRO* soldiers put down their weapons and surrender their agency. They are transformed into refugees by benevolent humanitarian refugee workers. Then, in North Carolina, resettlement agencies and a host of church sponsors transform them into new, legally documented, independent, and productive individuals. The

resettlement agencies' rhetorical emphasis on creating newly "self-sufficient" resettled refugees illustrates both the very real changes that this humanitarian resettlement mission seeks to induce, as well as the troubled place of Dega agency in their own transformation—just as the problem of agency also troubles the accounts of evangelical conversions.

1 The Agency of Converts and Refugees

The rhetorical construction of Christian conversion dates to the story of Saul on the road to Damascus, as recorded in the Bible.[3] The Revised Standard Version reads:

> Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."
>
> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him in to Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:3–9)

The blinding light incapacitates Paul, rendering him emphatically passive as the transformation is accomplished in him. Many recent scholars have argued that this biblical passage seems to have been the model under which Augustine of Hippo worked when he wrote his *Confessions* (*ca.* 400 CE). For despite the many chapters in which Augustine recounts his life of spiritual searching, his battles with himself, and his adoption of a series of philosophical schools of thought, when he comes to the crucial point in the narrative in which he describes his conversion to Christian faith, he insists on describing it as a *sudden* turning that is *beyond his control*. It is emphatically a turning in which all agency rests with God. The rhetorician Kenneth Burke explains:

> His very stress upon the importance of the will had made him especially sensitive to the fact that a change within had taken place as though from without…He had done many things, and wanted many things, and wanted not to want many things—but now he had *been* converted. The felt difference in the quality of his motivation must

> have convinced him that some power beyond him must have turned in order for him to be turned.[4]

Augustine's autobiography, pivoting as it does on his conversion, is of course an account written *after* that event, and helps to construct the reality of the conversion as a pivoting event. Many scholars have analyzed Augustine's rhetorical strategy in this representation of his conversion. Most important for our purposes here, Augustine's *Confessions* have become the authoritative model through which conversion has been understood by a rich tradition of Christian theological speculation.[5] Christians have judged the authenticity of a conversion by its compliance with this model set forth by Paul and Augustine. One recent scholar comments:

> Augustine's explanation of his conversion experience introduces ideas about God, sin, and the human will that remain important in Christian theological thought. More than anything else, however, it is his radial insistence that conversion is an *act of God* that will become a prominent feature of later Christian theological thinking about conversion. It surfaces in Roman Catholic as well as Protestant treatments of the topic...A proper Christian theological explanation must play down the volitional aspects and stress the dependence of the convert on the grace of God.[6]

There is, of course, substantial evidence that religious conversion does not in fact happen this way, that change in religious affiliation occurs through the slow accumulation of experiences and the gradual learning of the rhetorical forms used to represent and understand these experiences.[7] But because Christian accounts of conversion (especially in the American evangelical traditions) have privileged religious experience, there remains a common perception and authoritative narrative—repeated incessantly by converts themselves—that describes conversion as a sudden blinding flash of light (at least metaphorically) and a sudden spiritual awakening *in response to God*, caused by God. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, the voice of God suddenly echoes in the convert and he *is changed*. Both the essential passivity of the convert and the suddenness of the pivot of dramatic change have inspired a long tradition of theological reflection on the experience of conversion that grapples with the problem of human and divine agency.

Modern academic analyses of religious conversion have often stumbled on this same problem of the agency of converts. For example, William James' important work *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

brought Christian theological presuppositions into secular academic discourse by cloaking them in contemporary medical terminology through the metaphor of sickness and healing. James distinguished two kinds of conversion: *lysis* (or volitional) and *crisis* (or self-surrender). According to James, lysis conversion is gradual, conscious, and voluntary. It "consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits."[8] In contrast, crisis conversion is unconscious and involuntary, "the throwing of our conscious selves upon the mercy of powers which, whatever they may be, are more ideal than we are actually, and make for our redemption."[9] It is this second type of conversion—sudden and problematically passive—that James considers more interesting, and tellingly more "authentic." He thus reproduces the tradition of Christian theology in secular garb.

The problem of the passivity of the convert was raised again in a new context by American sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s trying to explain the troubling conversion of multitudes of white middle-class youths to disreputable "cults." These analyses replaced the mysterious agency that Christians refer to as "the grace of God" with the image of the perhaps less mysterious but differently problematic agency of manipulative cult leaders who gain converts through a method derided as "brainwashing." In the decades following the first flowering of sociological interest in conversion, this sociological model of the passive convert has been subjected to a withering attack. But the terms of the debate only demonstrate the persistence of the problem of agency in the academic analysis of conversion.[10]

The problem of the passive convert also arises as a problem in analyses by anthropologists and historians in the last decades of the twentieth century. Initially these studies tended to emphasize the all-encompassing power of the missionaries as part of the establishment of colonial hegemony. But more recent studies have sought to recover the agency of the colonized by emphasizing their creative appropriations of, and resistances to, colonial discourses as they forge a "vernacular Christianity."[11]

The problematic passivity of the convert that first appeared in Christian discourses and then reemerged in different forms in psychology, sociological and anthropological analyses, has thus been a significant category that has contributed to the discursive construction of the phenomenon of conversion.

Agency has also played an important role in the representation of refugees. For example, the anthropologist Liisa Malkki critiques the power relations embedded in the discourses of "Refugee Studies."[12] She has recently adapted the critical category of agency to analyze the

emergence of the refugee as an object of knowledge, intervention, and management in the "international refugee system."[13] According to Malkki "the refugee" is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It is a *legal* classification, dependent upon and presupposing a global system of discrete and mutually exclusive sovereign nation-states. It is a legal and social category that defines and delimits a legal and social problem. Refugees are people displaced from the state in which they "belong." Malkki argues that the testimony of "refugee experts" constructs a powerful narrative of emergency relief, humanitarian interventions, and "raw human need." The circulation of images depicts refugees as victims, reduced to a faceless mass of displaced humanity and subject to the healing intervention of the "professional humanitarians." This visual and textual representation, she argues, accomplishes the "silencing of refugees" who are unable to authoritatively represent themselves. They are reduced to the passive objects of a humanitarian intervention that grants them refugee status but excludes their political agency.[14]

Because by definition refugees are noncombatants, the *FULRO* soldiers had to surrender their weapons and their short-wave radio in order to qualify for refugee status. They had to give up their armed struggle and turn themselves over to the caring, encompassing embrace of the international refugee system. Therefore, Dega tend to appear in their own story as passive agents. The discursive construction of their refugee status, like the discursive construction of the convert, places them in the passive voice. *FULRO* soldiers *were transformed* into refugees; their actions and narrative agency is converted into the passive voice. They were carried across the threshold into the international refugee system and were resettled in America. It was done *to* them. One account of this transition produced by an association of retired Special Forces soldiers that has been a vociferous advocate for the Dega explains:

> Of the 8,000 plus trying to reach Thailand, only two-hundred and twelve are known to have survived. *They were discovered* in a Thai refugee camp in 1986. Friends in the area summoned an [*sic*] US Vietnam veteran with a long Montagnard history to act as liaison between the Yards and government officials. He prefers to remain unnamed and contacted [*sic*] CPT D.L. "Pappy" Hicks in Central America to expedite matters in the US. At the time Pappy's involvement could not be disclosed, but he managed to secure President Reagan's attention through Pat Buchanan. The Montagnards *were quickly airlifted* to the Philippines for six months of recovery and preparation, and arrived in the US in November 1986, *sponsored by* the Lutheran Family Services.[15]

The Dega "*were discovered*" and they "*were airlifted*"—by people who for some reason needed to remain anonymous. An army that had struggled for a decade or more with all its meager resources—very much in the active voice—*was suddenly transformed* into passive refugees. The "Forgotten Army" (as their Special Forces advocates consistently refer to them) was suddenly remembered and the Montagnards are transformed from an army into refugees.

This narrative of sudden conversion has completely eclipsed the details of military strategy that must have animated the experience of this transition for *FULRO* soldiers—even in their own accounts. One Dega told me:

> We try to fight the communists. For many years we fight them and die, and suffer, and hide. But then we had no choice. We couldn't fight anymore. We have to put down the weapon. Red Cross take us to refugee camp, to Site 2. Were taken to Philippines. North Carolina. We become refugees now.

The event that precipitated the transformation of *FULRO* soldiers into refugees was a 1985 Vietnamese attack on the remote *FULRO* Army headquarters on the Thai-Cambodian border. The Vietnamese Army had been occupying Cambodia since deposing the murderous Khmer Rouge regime in 1978. The leadership of the *FULRO* resistance force had been badly battered in the Vietnamese highlands and in 1979 had decided to try to cross Cambodia and seek outside help through various embassies in Bangkok. For years, they were held essentially captive by the Khmer Rouge Army sharing their remote jungle hideout on the Thai-Cambodian border. But with the Vietnamese attack in December 1985, the Khmer Rouge stranglehold was broken and the *FULRO* force—less than two hundred soldiers and a handful of women and children—scrambled across the border into Thailand.[16]

From their discursive position in North Carolina, more than ten years later, the details of these battles have lost their significance. Instead, in the intervening years Dega have constructed a narrative that pivots not on the decisions of military strategy, but by what has become the much larger pivot of their transformation into refugees. The newspaper narrative of sudden transformation has been appropriated by many Dega themselves, but it has become a story more often told by others. Probably it is a story that they tell only in English now—the language of their transformation—and they tell it from the perspective of North Carolina, looking back across to their great conversion to refugees.

Significantly, the detailed accounts I have elicited from Dega portray this transformation as a very nervous decision, taken on the advice of international relief workers. Their accounts portray their loss of agency. One Dega leader described for me what a Red Cross worker told him in an international-relief hospital in Thailand:

> The only way that we can help you, to save your people, if you put down the weapon. Put down the weapon and then write a letter, and I will bring the letter to U.S. embassy in Bangkok. To ask for the asylum, the freedom in another country. That can save yourself…You cannot go back and fight again. Only you get killed, that's all. You cannot maintain your struggle. You are very few. You don't have enough support. No country know about your group.

Some Dega whom I have pressed for details in interview settings have depicted the decision to "put down the weapon" and seek political asylum as a new strategy to continue the resistance by retreating to the sanctuary of the United States where they hoped to drum up new support and return with a stronger force. Yet even in accounts such as these, stressing their own agency in the decision to seek political asylum, Dega usually represent the decision as prompted by more powerful outsiders to the group—and that decision appears as their last. The passivity of their conversion to refugee status eclipses the agency of their military strategy to return with new military support.

Dega accounts of their transformation into refugees illustrate the loss of agency that Malkki describes in her critique of the power of refugee discourses. Dega narrate for me how they were led through a process that they could not control and did not even entirely understand. For example, one former *FULRO* soldier told me:

> Everyday, take us from the camp. Go into Thailand. Make paper. Finger print. For two weeks, we put on the bus inside Thailand. It's five o'clock and we're hungry. We're waiting. The army comes, says: "You go together. Tomorrow in the morning, make paper."
>
> They ask questions about what you do before. What stay in jungle. What you do. They say, "tell the truth." We say: "We the *FULRO*. We fighting, but we can't anymore." We just say, "yes, yes, yes." "Ok, you sign your name." That's all.

At the Site 2 United Nations refugee camp in Thailand Dega were processed through a series of medical evaluations to screen for infectious diseases and to treat chronic and emerging health problems. They were stripped naked and examined by medical professionals.

Their bodies were probed, x-rayed, sampled, treated, and immunized. The procedures and the results were all duly recorded on their refugee documents that would accompany them—that would speak of them and for them—in their new lives as refugees. The sanitization, and medical documentation of refugee bodies is a crucial process by which the "international refugee system" converts people into refugees. These documents establish their new refugee identity by linking their name to a photograph that is matched to an ID number, stamped with an official seal, and linked to the record of their sanitized bodies. These documents will be the foundation for the construction of their new identities in North Carolina.

Of course, Dega agency does not disappear in their transformation into refugees. But the controlling narrative that shapes the representation of these events makes it very difficult for Dega to appear as agents in their own transformation. Regardless of the actual agency exercised by the former *FULRO* fighters as they passed into refugee status, the point remains that the powerfully familiar conversion narratives that shape the representation of these events—even representations offered by Dega themselves—tend to efface Dega agency or raise it as a problem. Even if my own scholarship could recover Dega as agents, this would only serve to confirm the problem of agency that has haunted the representation of conversion.

2 The Mission of Refugee Resettlement

The category of "refugee" is a recent addition to American immigration law. Even in the aftermath of World War II, the idea of making special legal provision for refugees remained highly controversial. But by the time of the Refugee Act of 1980 (expanded by the Immigration Reform Act of 1986) the idea that the United States was obligated to take in refugees and have a generous policy toward them was no longer disputed.[17] Besides side-stepping the elaborate system of qualifications for legal immigration, the designation of "refugee status" has entailed vigorous intervention by the U.S. Department of State to fund and oversee the resettlement process—services not provided for mere "immigrants."

The State Department assigns refugees to specific communities and turns their cases over to a designated "resettlement agency" under contract with the federal government. Since 1980, the State Department has relied on local organizations that it refers to as "voluntary agencies"—typically nonprofit organizations with a religious affiliation. According to the State Department these voluntary agencies

provide more "local longevity and flexibility" than governmental agencies, draw on charity donations (reducing the expense to the state), avoid the "bias towards welfare" that might be found in governmental human resources agencies, and are "knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, ethnic differences and the special problems of refugees."[18]

In 1986 Lutheran Family Services (LFS) won the federal contract to resettle Dega refugees in Raleigh and Greensboro; Catholic Social Services (CSS) was appointed to resettle about a third of them in Charlotte.[19] These two "faith-based" social service agencies have been the primary organizations ushering Dega refugees through the elaborate procedures that take *FULRO* soldiers and transform them into new, productive, self-sufficient, consumer-selves.

These agencies define their mission as empowering refugees and encouraging their growth in self-sufficiency and independence, and in this project they have been remarkably successful. Very few Dega are dependent on welfare. In the late 1990s when I knew them, most had reasonably comfortable if modest houses or apartments and decent paying jobs in North Carolina's booming economy. Several had graduated from college. Dega established their own mutual assistance agencies and several political-advocacy groups. In sum, Dega have become remarkably competent operators in North Carolina society. Their transformation is evident in the contrast they create with recently arriving Montagnards for whom they are an invaluable resource and model.

Dega have achieved this through the comprehensive social service program of interventions designed by LFS and CSS to help Dega adjust to their new lives as refugees.[20] Sponsors and their case workers have found Dega jobs and apartments, helped them acquire identification papers, signed them up for checking accounts, encouraged them to establish credit ratings, and assisted them when it was time to pay income taxes. They have created a new life for these Montagnard refugees. In a sense, they have created new "Dega selves"—transforming passive refugees into well-integrated and self-sufficient citizens.

Dega refugees were like neophytes being ushered into a new life. They were schooled in a new set of expectations and behaviors. But unlike the traditional evangelical narratives of Christian conversion, this conversion into refugees is not figured as a sudden transformation. It is dramatic, it is all encompassing, and it can even have strong emotional-experiential correlates, but LFS and CSS accomplished this transformation through the slow schooling of Dega in the skills necessary for their new lives. The processes and procedures of refugee

resettlement more closely resemble the logic of Catholic missions. Historically, Catholics have spread the faith by incorporating new populations into the legal and cultural structures of the church. A population that is administered by the church, has the proper rites performed, and recognizes and obeys the church's authority to constitute and authorize a particular society has historically been counted as converted and Christian. This is a very different phenomenon from the experiential breakthrough expected by evangelical missions. It proceeds through the gradual reformation of neophytes to reconcile them to their new community. Reconstituted as refugees, Dega were sanitized, administered, and documented through the processes that ushered them into their new lives. Church volunteers and faith-based social service agencies oriented them and adjusted them to their new community through the patient cultivation and transformation of behaviors, expectations, and self-understandings. The humanitarian missions (or ministries) of refugee resettlement have nurtured Dega through these changes, much like a church might nurture the faith of a neophyte.

However, LFS and CSS do not consider themselves to be "missionary organizations." In fact, refugee resettlement is just one part of their broad humanitarian social service mission. But since they are "faith-based" agencies, they solicit donations and support through explicit appeals to Christian charity grounded in religious faith. For example, the 1997–1998 *Annual Report* published by CSS explains that "Catholic Social Services breathes life into the command of Jesus to care for the vulnerable and those in need among us."[21] LFS flyers recruit refugee sponsors through explicit reference to the Bible. For example, one reads:

> CHOOSING TO BE WITH THE STRANGERS IN OUR MIDST
>
> "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Matthew 25:35.
>
> In a world of ethnic diversity, racial conflict, economic uncertainty and political instability, God's grace gives people the power to overcome their fears. The Bible calls on people of faith to extend friendship and hospitality to the strangers in our midst.
>
> "You must not oppress the stranger; you know how a stranger feels, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt." Exodus 23:9
>
> "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews 13:1–2.[22]

LFS distributes bumper-stickers that proclaim "Jesus Was a Refugee," a phrase that frequently appears on their mailings and flyers as well.

But perhaps the most prominent device used by LFS to convince congregations to take on the responsibility of sponsoring a refugee family is the image of "the Good Samaritan."

LFS resettles refugees such as the Dega chiefly through appeals to Christian conscience and the Christian tradition of compassion and charity. Although it is typically the "Missions Committees" of local churches that organize their congregations' sponsorship programs, these committees do not generally understand their efforts as *evangelical* missionary work. "Mission" in these more socially liberal Protestant congregations is generally understood in the tradition of the social outreach of the church—a "ministry" of Christian compassion and service. They abjure any attempt to "convert" refugees. They describe their activity as a "Christian ministry," not a "Christian *mission*."

However, the Christian ministry of refugee resettlement certainly does seek a transformation in the refugees it assists—a transformation that is in many ways comparable to a religious conversion. They erase the transformation that is at the heart of their project by representing their goals as transparently beneficial and naturally desirable. The fact that the values and behaviors that are the goal of refugee resettlement are widely shared in the community obscures what would otherwise appear as a rigorous and carefully manipulated induction into a particular way of life and the fundamental reorientation of the refugees' self. Success in refugee resettlement requires the transformation of refugees into self-sufficient productive citizens and capitalist consumers. Although sponsors typically disclaim the evangelical missionary goal of religious conversion, the liberal humanitarian Christian missionaries who took on the task of resettling Dega refugees nonetheless worked to bring about a very definite transformation of the Dega refugees whom they served.

Not least among the transformations was the healing and sanitizing of their bodies. As in the medical screening of the United Nations refugee camp in Thailand, the transformation of Dega was exercised on their passive bodies and marked on the legal documentation that established their identities. The medical interventions of refugee resettlement foreground once again the problem of agency in conversion. The probing and immunization of Dega bodies begins their transformation to a new life in the sanctuary of North Carolina.

Christian theology has long figured religious conversion as a healing process, an overcoming of spiritual dis-ease. William James' adoption of medical language to analyze conversion merely mimics this tradition and brings it into secular academic scholarship. In North

Carolina, Dega bodies were healed through their conversion to refugee resettlement. Like converts they were swept up in forces beyond their control, processes that they could welcome and embrace—perhaps with apprehension.

The medical transformation of their bodies was recorded on the legal documents that certified their new identities in North Carolina. Sponsors walked their refugees through a complicated bureaucratic maze of agencies in order to take the documents that had been produced to create legal international refugees out of *FULRO* soldiers and convert them into papers of a legal identity that could be recognized in North Carolina. LFS guide books instruct sponsors to bring the "IOM bag"—a packet of identification documents and health records collected by the International Organization of Migration—to all the early appointments. Sponsors use the IOM documents to procure a social security card. The social security card is then used to apply for Medicaid, Food Stamps, and to document their legal status to prospective employers.

But the legal and medical transformation is only one facet of LFS's conversion of Montagnards into resettled Dega refugees. Of equal or even greater importance is their reconstruction of Dega agency. As one LFS flyer distributed to sponsoring churches reads: "The goal of the program is to help refugees become self-sufficient as quickly as possible."[23] The processes of refugee resettlement are designed to transform Dega from helpless and dependent refugees into independent, viable, and economically secure citizens. In this, LFS and CSS have been spectacularly successful. However, the incessant rhetoric of "self-sufficiency" reveals the specific conversion that the humanitarian mission of resettlement seeks to achieve, and once again raises the problem of Dega agency—this time in the guise of a particular formation of the self. Talal Asad has recently analyzed how agency is a peculiarly privileged category by which contemporary scholarship discusses the self. He writes that "the doctrine of action has become essential to our recognition of other people's humanity."[24] Agency is at the heart of modern conceptualizations of the self. The creation of a "self-sufficient self" through the careful and directed nurturing of refugees suggests the scope and significance—and the cultural specificity—of the resettlement project. More than simply "helping" refugees with humanitarian assistance, the resettlement project aims to create a particular kind of self that is suitably adapted to life in a new community.

Cast in this light, the project suggests similarities to the Christian missionary project—which is also designed to create a new self, adapted to a new community. And as the mystery of agency animates

representations of the processes of religious conversion, so too does it confound the representation of refugee resettlement. The project of creating self-sufficient selves proceeds through their essential passivity.

I was not a witness to the resettlement events of 1986 or 1992 when the two largest groups of Dega refugees arrived. But in 1996 I was intimately involved in the resettlement process as the "coordinator" of three separate church groups that had been recruited to sponsor a single Dega refugee family entering the country through the Orderly Departure Program. Unfortunately, the family that I sponsored spoke *Koho*—an entirely different language from the one I was studying. Although it seemed as though this language barrier might pose a frustrating obstacle to my research, in fact it contributed to my understanding of how sponsorship proceeds through the misunderstood gestures of pidgin English.

LFS kept me and my sponsorship team carefully informed on what steps needed to be taken as we resettled our refugee family. For example, the LFS case workers were well versed in the procedures to enroll special ESL (English as a second language) students in the Wake County School System. On the appointed day, I brought the parents of my refugee family downtown for an interview with Tim Hart (the coordinator of the Wake County ESL program). I made certain that they brought the immunization records and I-94 identification documents for each of their children. During the "interview" I furnished all the necessary information. I knew it all by rote now, having been through it so many times through the incremental steps establishing them in North Carolina. They sat mutely, smiling, sometimes nodding their heads as I spoke with Mr. Hart. He handed me documents that I passed across for them to sign. I tried to explain where their children would be picked up by the school bus, but I was not sure they understood so I dropped by the first few mornings to make sure everything went smoothly. I introduced myself to the children's teachers and we had several phone conversations to check on their progress. At one point an issue arose and the teacher and I discussed whether we should arrange a meeting with the parents and the Dega interpreter on staff at LFS. But the situation resolved itself with the end of the school year before this meeting could be arranged. I have never been certain whether the parents understood the problems their child's teacher thought he was having in school.

In many cases I have seen or heard about, the sponsor had to convince the parents of the reasons why a certain course of action should be taken. LFS understands this process as contributing to the gradual tutoring of refugee parents in the procedures of raising their own children in a radically different society. What sort of life should they

hope for their children? How can that be achieved? The sponsors act as surrogate parents, not just for Dega children in the school system, but for the parents as well.

The breadth of the sponsor's involvement is suggested in The *Volunteer Handbook* distributed by LFS:

> The roles of the sponsor are to support, advocate for and help empower refugees as they begin to rebuild their lives in the United States.
>
> Sponsors SUPPORT refugees by providing them with material items (e.g., clothing, furniture), monetary assistance (e.g., payment of initial rent and food) and emotional support as the refugees experience culture shock and begin to process their traumatic past.
>
> Sponsors fulfill an important role in serving as ADVOCATES for refugees when cultural and communication barriers prevent them from speaking for and representing themselves. Sponsors help refugees access services that are available to them and help safeguard their vulnerability to discrimination.
>
> Sponsors help EMPOWER refugees by working with them to reach the primary goal of resettlement—self-sufficiency. Appropriate sponsor involvement may include teaching, modeling behavior, and offering suggestions/advice but NOT taking on a parental role by making decisions/establishing rules for the refugees without their consent.[25]

In practice however, it is quite easy to cross the line into "taking on a parental role." The heavy-handed rhetoric emphasizing refugee agency obscures the implicit underlying assumption that this much greatly prized self-sufficiency is to be cultivated in a refugee subject who is frequently presented as essentially passive. It is, paradoxically, the *sponsors* who appear to cultivate agency in and for their new refugee subject. They create agency in another. The sponsors' job is to teach the refugee the choices he wants to make. Comparisons to raising a child are easy to make. Thus the warning by LFS that sponsors NOT take on a parental role is as urgent as it is futile. Their task is to help the refugee become self-sufficient—and that is perhaps the proper goal of any parent.

Many Dega and their sponsors have formed deep bonds of affection. Sponsors have described for me how "their refugees" became like family members. They watched out for their welfare on a daily basis, visited them repeatedly, drove them to their appointments, took care of their needs, and designed social gatherings for them. One woman described the experience this way:

> There were lots of people involved in the sponsorship. Really, two families did most of it. And are still involved. But we had a transportation

> committee, a housing committee, and a bunch of things. But as time went on, the interest fades. We continued to do things with them, just because we enjoyed doing it...In any sponsorship, some people hit it off and some people don't.
>
> We were new to this, so we did everything we could...And their life was very pleasant—I mean, relatively speaking...But they had a great church sponsor. We weren't really aware of what other churches were doing. I think our family was looked at with jealousy by other families. No one had ever said that to me, but it had to be.
>
> My children happened to go away to school soon after they came. And I looked at it as, God has given me something to do. And so these kids call me grandma. And I am interested in other cultures, so...

The reference to her children is telling. The maternal assumption of control over the new lives to be created for Dega refugees has been embraced by volunteers and resettlement workers in a nearly euphoric celebration of altruistic service. In 1986, Dega refugees were met at the airport by a large contingent of volunteers and staff workers from LFS and CSS, press photographers, local TV news crews, and even a high school marching band. As one sponsor described the scene, "everyone cheered when they got off the plane. They didn't. They looked scared. They looked like a bunch of scared little kids. Not knowing the language. I can't imagine." Barely concealed in this representation of the emotion of the event is the sponsor's desire to reach out to hug and comfort the "scared little kids."

The bewildering reception and overflowing hospitality seems to have been difficult for Dega to contextualize. The childish exuberance that nearly overwhelms the following description of arrival offered by a Dega seems to dovetail perfectly with the maternal desires of the sponsors to make a new life for their Dega refugee. Note how the narrated *experience* of this transition into childlike dependence evokes the exuberance typically recounted in narratives of conversion experiences.

> Too much happy. You cannot say anything. Just praise the Lord. Just waiting. Where they take us to? At that time they said, all Greensboro stay here and you go to Charlotte. Go this bus, you go to Raleigh. And the sponsor saw our name. And Ken Swain, he came to see me first, you know. I have not seen him before. The first time I saw him was in the airport in Greensboro. He said, "My name is Ken Swain. Former missionary to Banmethuot." *Rhadé*. Spoke very *Rhadé*...Charlie Long there [another missionary from the highlands]. All the people go to Raleigh. There were two buses.
>
> Oh Happy. I don't know how to describe it. So excited. And I cannot remember the past. No more. Just so excited. Just waiting what

> next would happen. I expected something good to happen. More than a mere happy, you know. I expect good thing to happen. Day after day after day, waiting to see. Because I expect only good thing could happen. See every different thing happen. Good. Happy . . . Every day is new, new, new. So I keep hoping, what will happen tomorrow? I keep waiting. I know that a good thing happen tomorrow. A different thing. More exciting than today.
>
> Then we separate. So every sponsor take a refugee to his house. We didn't know. Just: "you go with us"; "you go with us"; "go with us." We didn't know what happened. Just follow. They call your name, and you just follow them. You don't know where they take you. They call my name, and they call other names. Aubrey take us.

Many Dega I have spoken with readily acknowledge the parent-child relationship that develops between the sponsor and the refugee. Indeed, they celebrate it and are thankful for it. "You are my father, my mother and father," the father of my refugee family once said to me gratefully, earnestly, and joyfully. Dega have eagerly stepped into the role of the nurtured child. And through that relationship of initial dependency and even passivity, a new agency has been nurtured in them. They have emerged as legally documented and successful, consumer-selves. They have been converted.

3 Agency Converted

Lutheran Family Services is proud of the fact that today no Dega receive welfare assistance—proud of the Dega and proud of their own efforts to have enabled and encouraged this success. The "conversion of the Dega" is now complete. Many are becoming American citizens. Many now have found themselves better jobs, have moved to different neighborhoods, and purchased or built homes (often through Habitat for Humanity). Several have pursued college degrees.

There are many explanations that have been given for the remarkable success of this group. In 1986, and again in 1993, soldiers from the *FULRO* army arrived in North Carolina with only very few women, children, or elders. They were almost all able-bodied workers arriving in a booming economy. And if they lacked many of the skills required for late-twentieth-century American economic life, they had a team of resettlement workers directing them toward English classes and job-training programs. They were a small, organized, devoted group of sturdy men who were accustomed to relying on their own and each other's wits and strength in order to survive. They lived in group apartments, five or six or seven together, sharing a kitchen,

transportation, and entertainment. They pooled resources and shared incomes. They lived together and relied on each other as they had grown accustomed to living together in the jungle. They very quickly became self-sufficient.

There is no lack of agency today in the Dega community. They express this new agency both through the "rites of consumption" that celebrate their new, comfortable lives, as well as through their political organizations and "mutual assistance agencies" that provide various kinds of aid within their own community and also continue to agitate for changes in the social, economic, and political conditions of Montagnards living in the central highlands.

Signs of Dega prosperity are everywhere in their community. For example, at a four-year-old's birthday party—a typical Dega event in many ways—the street was clogged with parked cars. As I walked around to the back of the house I saw twenty or thirty Dega mingling and squatting in the shade—saying very little to one another the way that people will when they know each other well and gather together frequently. There were four or five other "Americans" there as well—church sponsors or friends and case workers who had befriended the community. Dozens of young children ran in and out of the house and around the vegetable garden in the back by the chain link fence. A man with a camcorder tried to follow them through his viewfinder. Then he panned for a long time on the food laid out on a long picnic table and the pile of brightly covered gifts at the end of the table. A couple of teenagers sat bored in rickety lawn chairs; another strutted ostentatiously in front of them in a cowboy hat with his shirt unbuttoned to his navel. He carried a portable tape deck on his shoulder. The rap music wafted and faded as he passed. The cameraman continued his slow pan from the corner of the yard. Several women squatted in the shade at his feet, nursing infants or trying to keep their toddlers out of the dust.

I was greeted immediately by the birthday girl's mother when I arrived. She looked hot in her nylon dress that bulged with the heft of her arms and torso. She took my small gift quickly without ceremony, placed it with the others piled at the end of the table and showed me where several liter bottles of warm soda stood open. I told her how much I enjoyed "Dega food" as she lifted the tin foil off of several platters filled with rice, a stew of noodles and bean sprouts, and a plate of fried egg rolls. The Dega picnic menu is remarkably consistent from one event to the next.

Y'Hin Nie (leader of the Montagnard International Bible Church, and president of the Montagnard-Dega Association[26]) called people together for a brief prayer to thank God for the beautiful day and the

bountiful food, and to remember the devout Montagnards in the highlands: "Help us, God, to raise good children, obedient to their parents and helpful to the people. May they grow up strong and smart, stay in school and have all the good things in life, that they not forget you and all that you have done for our people. Amen." Then he led them in a thickly accented rendition of the "Happy Birthday" song—after which there was quick applause and then general standing about in indecision. The women encouraged people to get a plate and very quickly a long line formed by the buffet table.

This remarkably familiar and conventional American scene is typical of my ethnographic fieldwork: the Dega gathered in a backyard or park, camcorder and cameras recording plate after plate of food, and the quiet, almost somber, familiarity among the adults, matched by the raucous confusion of babies and toddlers and the sullen rebellion of materially affluent teenagers. When the community gathers to mark the anniversary of an uprising in the highlands in 1964 (often said to mark the beginning of the *FULRO* movement) the parents gather in the rented hall and sit in folding chairs listening to political speeches and (if they have been able to arrange it) a tribute from a retired Vietnam War era military officer. But the teenagers hang out in the parking lot, racing around in souped-up cars, with loud music and roaring mufflers. They snap gum and sit in groups, watching who goes in and who comes out. There is a generation of Dega now entering high school. Born in the jungle, or soon after arrival (or arriving as a child with their parents through the Orderly Departure process), many of these kids earn better wages then their parents. They can buy their own teenage toys. Many Dega have told me that the next generation is spoiled.

At the birthday party I took my plate and sat on the dusty roots of a tree next to a man I knew from an earlier interview. I resumed my discussion with him, plying him with questions and observations about the community. He was eager to tell me about his new organization, The Montagnard Culture Association. He said he was finishing up the paperwork to have it incorporated in the state of North Carolina. He told me all about his plans to apply for grants and organize a "Montagnard Culture Day" soon. "We celebrate all the culture of the highlands—from Raleigh, Greensboro, Charlotte, everywhere. Everyone come. Play the instrument. Teach the children the dance. Have the food. So everyone will know that this is who we are." I complimented him again on his fine collection of highland artifacts that I had seen displayed in his living room when I had first interviewed him. He lives in a very comfortable suburban home with his

wife and two daughters attending the local community college. His living room is tastefully appointed with several long spears and a couple of musical instruments that he was able to bring over from the highlands. He does not play the instruments; they are museum pieces.

Later Hroi joined us and the conversation drifted toward the efforts to build a "Montagnard Village" in a subdivision outside of Charlotte. Already several houses have been built. Hroi himself now lives there. He took out his wallet and showed me a business card he had had printed since completing his certification as realtor. I was not able to ferret out how the financing for the subdivision has been worked out, but apparently Hroi has been quite successful selling lots to Dega families. Several Laotian and Cambodian families have also opted into the arrangement.

Not all Dega live this well, but by and large Dega have achieved a remarkable level of physical and consumer comfort in the brief years they have been here. And while they are justly proud of their success, and constantly expressing their thanks for all that their sponsors and friends have done for them, I have noticed as well a nagging sense of guilt that their lives now are so comfortable. "What about the people who still fight?" I often hear Dega worry. "What about the others? We still have to help them. But how can we?" Thus, today, the very success of their economic and consumer adjustment can be a source of guilt, consternation, and conflict.

Their emerging self-sufficiency marks the emergence of a new identity. They laid down their weapons, surrendered their agency, and submitted to a regime of humanitarian interventions that was premised on their passivity even as its goals were to establish their self-sufficiency. *FULRO* agency has been converted to a new Dega agency flowering now in North Carolina. One aspect of this new Dega agent is the hard-working and comfortably-consuming immigrant. Another aspect of this new Dega agent is the organizational presence of Dega agencies working to improve the lives of Dega—and Montagnards.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this new Dega agency is Y'Hin Nie and the Montagnard-Dega Association (MDA). As chronicled briefly in chapter three, Y'Hin (who arrived with the second group of soldiers in 1992) quickly took control of the MDA and has used it as a very effective vehicle both to promote his own power and to organize and support Dega in the resettlement. Working with and learning from Lutheran Family Services, Y'Hin Nie has fashioned the MDA into an active, competent, and resourceful social service agency serving the Dega population in Greensboro. He has learned how to

write and obtain grants to pay for a small staff and permanent office space. The MDA has computers, fax machines, and an Internet web page. Increasingly, the LFS office in Greensboro has delegated to the MDA much of its social service mission concerning Dega refugees. The MDA helps find Dega jobs and affordable apartments. It provides transportation to appointments and a translator too. It helps Dega learn to drive. It offers classes in English as a second language in its small office space as well as courses to prepare Dega for the citizenship exam. Sensing the opportunities of my academic background, Y'Hin asked me if I could find a grant to fund the publication of a *Rhadé-Jarai*-English dictionary. He told me that the MDA recently won a grant to provide health and nutrition classes to Dega refugees.

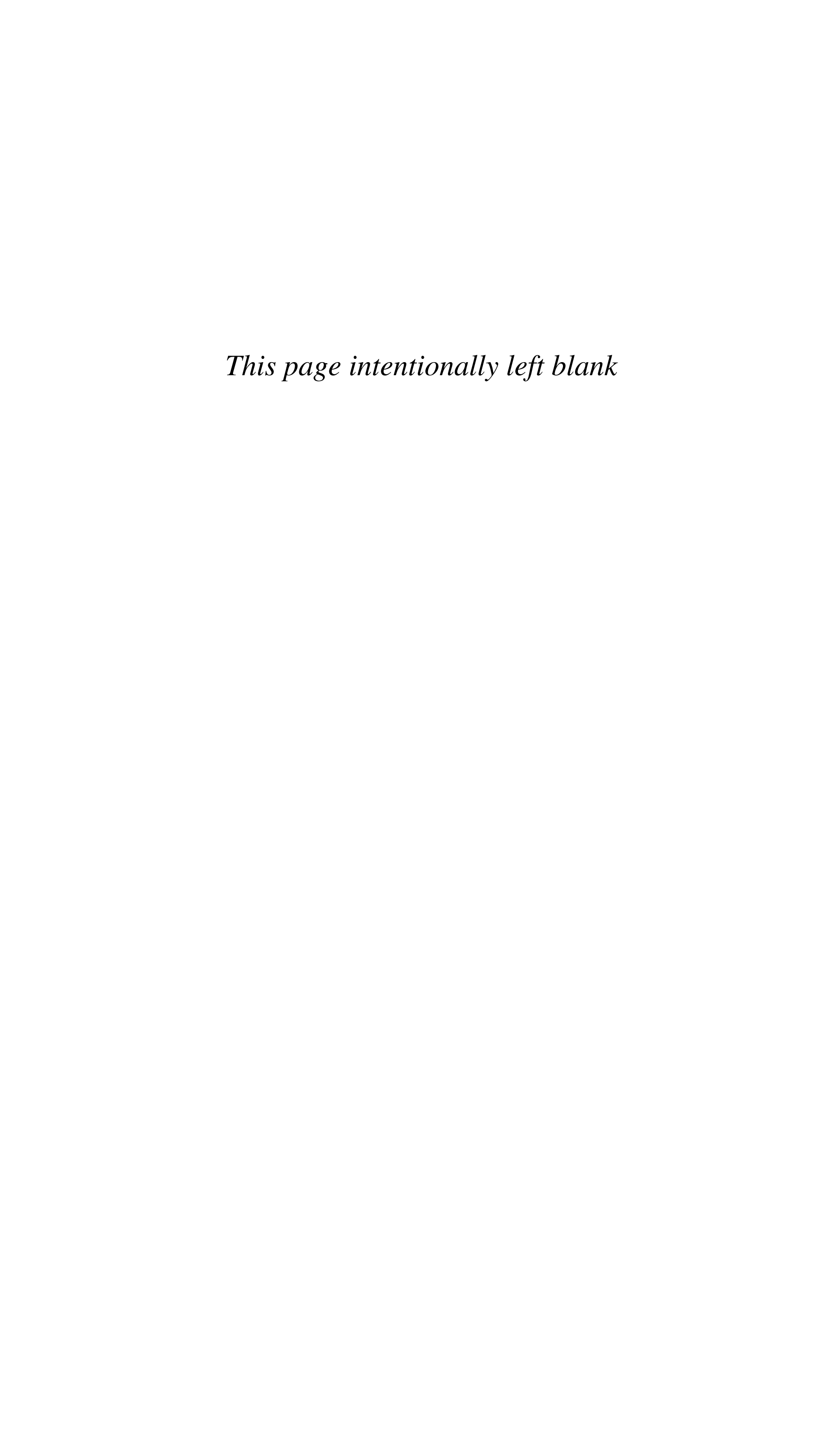
All of these social services are more typically provided for refugees by LFS in its role as refugee resettlement coordinator. Y'Hin Nie's ability to take on this role himself—through his leadership of the MDA—has greatly increased his power and authority in the Dega community.

In coordination with LFS, Y'Hin Nie is now positioned to greet newly arriving Montagnards at the airport and usher them into the social service embrace of his organization. Notably, he also attempts to integrate them into his Montagnard International Bible Church. A church ceremony in the winter of 1998 recognized nine recent arrivals to North Carolina and presented each with a "token" check of one hundred dollars to assist in their resettlement. Through the MDA, Y'Hin Nie presents this church as the Dega community's site of collective Protestant worship. Y'Hin's joint leadership of the MDA and the Montagnard International Bible Church makes this amalgamation possible and increases the influence of both of his organizations.

Y'Hin Nie has merged Dega Protestant worship with the efforts of social and economic self-help. His willingness and ability to mimic and replace the LFS social service mission offers a particularly forceful articulation of a Dega mode of operating in the world. Faith and Christian worship, ESL and citizenship classes, housing developments, and cultural organizations—all of these amount to a new Dega agency, a new way to be Dega and to be "modern." It is a mode they learned from the various French and American interventions in the highlands. For their own strategic reasons, the French and Americans offered a new way to be Montagnard: to be Christian as well as educated and literate; to be more productive farmers with access to modern health clinics; to be free and equal citizens in a just and benevolent nation-state. The Special Forces' project to arm and

train the Montagnards was clearly part of this project to produce a Montagnard future in modernity. So were the development projects of the American embassy and dozens of humanitarian agencies that sought to "win the hearts and minds" of the Montagnards. This "humanitarian missionary project" is the topic of the next three chapters. Its goals were eagerly appropriated by Montagnard leaders in Vietnam, and it came to represent all that the Vietnamese—and especially the communists—were denying them. The *FULRO* guerilla resistance force on the run in the jungle emphasized the specifically Christian component of this Montagnard modernity. Among Dega I have talked to in North Carolina the association between Christianity and the social and economic improvements of a possible Montagnard future is obvious and unproblematic. It makes perfect sense to them that it has been primarily Christian congregations that have sponsored them and Christian organizations such as Lutheran Family Services and Catholic Social Services that have directed their resettlement in North Carolina. And thus it makes sense that Y'Hin Nie amalgamates the MDA with his Protestant church in the effort to uplift the Dega people.

In a meeting of the Montagnard International Bible Church elders following a Sunday church service, the discussion turned to ways in which they could fund educational scholarships for Montagnard children in the highlands. They discussed how collected clothing and medicines could be delivered. Ha Jimmy Cillpam reported on the activities of his *Bamboo Cross* evangelical mission that broadcasts tapes of his sermons into the highlands from the Philippines. He also told of the progress of the Dega housing project subdivision that is under construction in Charlotte. And Y'Hin discussed a future meeting in Greensboro city hall regarding money for nutrition and health classes and money to expand their offices. All of this activity takes place under the umbrella of the Montagnard International Bible Church, amalgamating Dega Christian faith with a vision of a Dega future as American citizens and consumers. Together this net of relationships traces a compelling image of a way to be Dega in the modern world and illustrates the emergence of a postconversion Dega agent. The Dega have arrived. They are self-sufficient now. They have been converted.



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Chapter 5

Sickness, Sin, and Animal Sacrifice

During the time I was actively involved as a refugee sponsor, word came back from the Wake County Health Department through Lutheran Family Services that an irregular pap smear had been diagnosed in the health screening physical exam of H'lui, the mother of the refugee family I was sponsoring. I contacted the Dega interpreter on staff with Lutheran Family Services and the two of us arranged a time that I could pick her up and meet him at the County Health Clinic where a biopsy would be performed. I called H'lui's work place to explain why she would need time off. The interpreter relayed the information to the family and on the appointed day I arrived at their home. With many smiles and "oks" I directed H'lui and her husband K'Bhour into my car and drove them silently to the clinic.

I led them in single file across the parking lot and through the glass doors into the County Health Clinic. I followed directions down a hallway and up an elevator. They followed behind me without speaking. They waited as I negotiated her Medicaid card and the retrieval of her medical file with the receptionist. Then we waited together for the interpreter to show up, silently, on the formed plastic seats of the waiting room. Finally a nurse called out their mispronounced name and I followed her down the hallway; H'lui and K'Bhour trailed behind.

Closed in the examination room, the nurse quickly gave up trying to communicate with H'lui and her husband. She spoke directly to me, and I spoke for H'lui. Her husband understood bits of English and nodded his agreement when he inserted himself into the conversation, but the nurse largely ignored him. The interpreter still had not arrived, so I translated the medical requests into a system of pidgin English and gestures we had worked out together over time. K'Bhour spoke quickly to his wife and she surrendered her arm to the blood

pressure gauge and gave a blood sample. She sat mutely, a docile body. Her only eye contact was with her husband. She spoke in *Koho* to her husband, who then tried to translate into English. I then interpreted his jumbled words into standard English for the nurse, explaining to her what I guessed K'Bhour had tried to tell me that H'lui had said to him. H'lui asked no questions and apparently made no objections to what was being done to her.

When the interpreter finally arrived I consulted with him quickly, explaining in simple English what was going on. (The nurse didn't think she could communicate with him either.) Then the husband and I stepped out into the hallway. The interpreter stood next to H'lui as a white sheet was draped across her knees and she reclined for a pelvic exam and biopsy.

Afterward, the receptionist handed me—not H'lui or K'Bhour—the carbon copy of the exam record. It was up to me to interpret the checked-off boxes on the form and arrange for the next appointment. The interpreter had left already, late for an appointment across town to interpret for traffic court. H'lui and K'Bhour followed me back out of the maze of corridors, single file and silent, through the waiting room and around to the elevator. We stopped at the pharmacy and I handed a prescription across the counter. I did my best to explain to them the dosage of the medicine to be taken, showing them the numbers on the label and gesturing emphatically to indicate "today... tomorrow... next day." Then we walked back out across the parking lot to my car and I drove them home, silently.

They called me when the report of the results arrived in the mail. They of course could not read what it said, and I could not translate it for them. So I conveyed the information as best I could to the interpreter who then called the family and explained to K'Bhour the medical procedure that would be conducted (using Vietnamese medical terms not available in their native language). On the appointed day I brought H'lui and her husband single file back to the outpatient clinic. I negotiated the Medicaid Card and gave her the consent form to sign. Eventually a nurse came out and I recognized the name she was trying to pronounce. We stood up and H'lui followed the nurse alone through the swinging doors. I sat in the waiting room with her husband for two hours watching afternoon TV in the waiting room. When she came out again, we filed out of the clinic and drove home.

Thus is a Dega refugee ushered through medical treatment in the host resettlement community. But in fact, medical interventions have been an important aspect of the highlanders' relationship with the west since their first encounters with French and then Americans in

the central highlands. The perception of medical need was one of the basic justifications for the French *mission civilistrice.* Later, medical clinics were the centerpiece of Americans' attempts to "win the hearts and minds" of the Montagnards during the Vietnam War. Evangelical missionaries used biomedicines to gain a hearing in Montagnard villages and preached there that Jesus could heal them while the demons they currently worshipped only made them sick. From the beginning, westerners have focused their interventions on highlanders' inadequate bodies and ill health. This has been central to what westerners have understood as lacking among the highland people in need of conversion. This focus on the need for transformation, understood specifically as the need to treat unhealthy bodies, begins with the first French contact in the highlands and continues through to the medical interventions that mark the conversion of guerilla fighters into refugees in North Carolina.

In contrast to what I have described as the silent passivity of H'lui and K'Bhour and the coldly clinical medical practices of refugee resettlement, consider the following depiction of Montagnard healing provided by Gordon Smith (who along with his wife Laura were the pioneering evangelical missionaries to the central highlands):

> On one of our recent trips to Buon Puan an old man died of pneumonia while we were there. His daughter, a sorceress, was hard and bitter. She said the spirits were angry with the village. We tried to tell them that it was because of their lack of faith that they were having so much trouble. It was sad to hear the wails of the women and the beating of the gongs and drums again for the old man.
>
> After the evening meeting when we had gone to bed (we were staying in one of the longhouses) we were awakened by the heart-rending wails of the women in the chief's house, and the tolling of the great drum to announce another death. A little child for whom we had prayed that morning had just died of the measles. Far into the night the cries of the people, calling back the spirit of the child, sent sleep from us and made us call out to God for victory for Buon Puan. The chief's house was full of children, several of whom had the measles, and would probably die too. Nothing we could do to persuade them to isolate the well ones availed. One by one they were to die.
>
> We did our best to comfort the people, preaching in turns besides the two blanketed corpses where the families were gathered. Laura spent much time with the sorceress and we had the joy of seeing her bitterness give place to contrition and a desire to know the Lord. She prayed and as we left she clung to Laura, assuring us of her intention to give up her evil ways. We have seldom seen such a change in a person's attitude.[1]

In the accounts written by evangelical missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) from the 1940s through to the 1970s, the signs of Montagnard savagery lurk in the obscurity of night, ringing out through the dark jungle: the "heart-rending wails of the women," the "tolling of the great drum," the savage Montagnards gathered around drinking rice alcohol by a fire for their "grizzly" animal sacrifices, or howling to their spirits in the night, dying and suffering in their ignorance and spiritual darkness. The Smiths, awakened in the night by the Montagnards' suffering and death, "cry out for victory," and a victory of sorts does come. The crisis of sickness among the Montagnards opens the door for Christ. Although their prayers for the sick child had not cured her, their comforting of the "hard and bitter sorceress" effects the change they sought—they see "her bitterness give place to contrition and a desire to know the Lord."

This passage epitomizes how CMA missionaries wrote about the Montagnards and the promise offered them by Christian conversion. In these texts, graphic images of Montagnards' poor health and living conditions are closely associated with their "spiritual darkness" and especially their sinful practice of sacrificing animals to placate "evil spirits" in order to cure sickness and disease. Typically, these stories culminate in a miraculous cure through faith in Christ, which then sets the stage for a Christian conversion of one or more of the "tribesmen."

However, in these accounts the missionaries' proclamations of "Christ as healer" alternate with their encouragement of modern biomedicine for the Montagnards. The missionaries' texts tend to obfuscate the role this biomedicine plays in treating the Montagnards' sicknesses; they happily attribute the cure of Montagnard bodies to the interventions of the Holy Spirit. The missionaries then read the subsequent healing as a sure sign of the cleansing of sin and the grace of conversion.

Representations of sickness, sin, and animal sacrifice establish a set of associations by which Christian conversion was represented by CMA missionaries and presented to the Montagnards as a healing of their bodies and a reformation of their bodily practices. This rhetorical construction of Christian conversion offered by the Montagnards' evangelical missionaries thus sets an historical context for the body-reforming medical interventions that mark the conversion process of the Montagnards' refugee resettlement in North Carolina discussed in the previous chapter.

1 Christ (and) Medicine

Laura Smith, like her husband Gordon, wrote several books chronicling her missionary work among the Montagnards. Her second book offers this depiction of the Montagnards' "animistic religion," which was the enemy of God's true gospel:

> Gongs in the Night! For five long years in America we had heard them calling us back to our jungle people of Indo-China—the haunting, reverberating challenge of those great brazen disks pounding through the black, still night. The barbarous tribespeople in thousands of villages were offering up their cruel animal sacrifices to the demons. They were cutting up the meat and drinking at long rows of the rice alcohol jars in their crowded bamboo longhouses. All through the night they would clang on the gongs that hung from the roof beams and beat on the huge drums in such a frenzy that the whole jungle round about would rock with the resonance. The sorcerers were crying to the demons of the trees, hills, rivers and whirlpools to bring them good health, good crops and good luck. We must hasten back to them. We had the answer to the call of these poor tribespeople. Christ, the Son of God, alone could give them the peace for which these gongs and sacrifices vainly pleaded.[2]

According to the CMA missionaries' texts, Montagnards rely on the "demons" of the night to "bring them good health, good crops, and good luck." In response, CMA missionaries offer Christ as the direct competitor to the demons: "the Son of God alone could give them the peace for which these gongs and sacrifices vainly pleaded." Missionaries described these highland spirit practices as a debauched, violent, and fearful attempt to manipulate demons. One retired CMA missionary recently explained to me:

> The Montagnard religion was basically a religion of fear. Fear of the evil spirits. Spirits that had to be constantly propitiated with blood sacrifices. What we had to do was to convince them that Jesus—who is good—is more powerful than the spirits who need to be appeased. Turn to Jesus and you won't need to propitiate the spirits anymore.

CMA texts repeatedly represent the Montagnards' religion through polemical descriptions of their poor health and living conditions. The Montagnards' "religion of fear" frequently appears as essentially a misguided—even evil—healing practice.[3] Missionary accounts then figure conversion as a process in which Montagnards forswear sacrificing

animals to appease the spirits who control their health—spirits who have failed them and in fact *caused* their poor health. Through the trope of conversion Montagnards rely on Christ instead, and they are cured. Thus these missionary texts often link the Christian conversion of Montagnards to the reformation of their bodies and the improvement of their health. The missionaries seemed to have believed in the existence of the spirits as much as the Montagnards did. After all, they explain, the Bible is full of examples of Jesus casting out demons—and these evangelicals took the words of the Bible quite literally. But, since God is the creator of the world, the spirits do not really have the power that the Montagnards attribute to them. What is worse, the spirits are demonic. They do not have the Montagnards' best interests at heart (thus the Montagnards fear them, which is only appropriate). So sacrificing animals to overcome sickness is unreliable *and* it is a sinful reliance on the devil. Montagnards must give up their animal sacrifices and replace them with faith in Christ.

However, CMA missionaries also depict themselves dispensing biomedicine when they visited villages in the central highlands. Western biomedicine appears in these texts as a valuable weapon in the missionaries' struggle to convince the Montagnards to give up their reliance on the evil spirits. In these texts, medical interventions provide the missionaries an opportunity to preach the gospel. The missionaries gain prestige and authority by successfully competing with the demons that kept the Montagnards shackled in "spiritual darkness." The texts are constructed to associate savagery, demons, animal sacrifice, poor health, and sin—in order to present Christ as the solution to all that. They thereby obfuscate the role of biomedicine both in healing Montagnard bodies and in bringing them to Christ. In the economy of conversion established in these missionary accounts, missionaries proclaim "Christ as healer," and then dispense pills and bandages. This establishes in their texts a wavering vacillation between the healing powers of Christ and modern biomedicine.

An account by Laura Smith portrays a missionary doctor Dr. Haverson briefly stopping by the missionary station to "mimeograph some Hrey Bible lessons." He quickly returns to remote Montagnard villages to evangelize and cure:

> The doctor is able to minister to hundreds of sick tribespeople. *His medicine and good professional care replace the hideous old superstitions* and horrible practices of torturing and slaying poor animals and sprinkling their blood over doorposts, gongs, drums and the sick persons.

> There is a terrifying amount of sickness through the valley—children with distended stomachs and rickety limbs; scaly eyes, with trachoma, is rife. There are ugly ulcers and much tuberculosis, with awful racking coughs… But Dr. Haverson is a seasoned missionary-doctor and he comes to grips with these diseases *and prays the sick ones through to deliverance, as well as helping them with pills.* He preaches the Gospel to each patient.[4]

Note how it is Dr. Haverson's "medicine and good professional care" that can convince the Montagnards to abandon their "old superstitions" (which she takes the opportunity to characterize unflatteringly and then associate with "ugly ulcers" and "awful racking coughs"). The text construes these practices and their results as the rival religious system that is in competition with the truth of Christ. Thus, as the account proceeds, Dr. Haverson "prays the sick ones through to deliverance"—as though it was Christ who was healing. But the passage quickly reverts back to "helping them with pills," only to conclude in the next sentence by again describing the whole activity as evangelization.

Laura and Gordon Smith opened a leprosarium near the French/Vietnamese trading town of Banmethuot in 1949. By 1962 there were nine missionaries working there (including a missionary doctor), twenty-four "national co-workers," and nearly 1,500 patients.[5] A 1966 announcement in the CMA's *Alliance Witness* periodical looks for a

> qualified Christian doctor interested in devoting his or her skills to direct missionary work among the tribesmen in the Banméthuot area.…
>
> There are no ultramodern facilitates, no well-stocked pharmacy, no array of latest equipment. But there are thousands of people *needing physical healing and needing Christ. The opportunities for personal Christian witness are unlimited.*[6]

The Montagnards need biomedicine *and* they need Christ. "Personal Christian witness" went hand-in-hand with the promise of a medical cure, and the distinction between the two was not very clearly drawn.

George Irwin, another CMA missionary in the highlands, narrates a miracle healing story in the pages of the *Alliance Witness*:

> Ma Ba, a very lovely Chru woman had come some time previously to Di-linh for treatment. Her body was tortured with pain, and although

> many heathen sacrifices had been offered she was not better and little hope was given for her life. She wanted to stay in our guesthouse for a while, and when our people saw her condition they were all very faithful in prayer for her. Then our simple treatment started to work and God answered prayer; she steadily grew better. At the same time Mrs. Sol, our Bible woman, brought her to the sewing class, asking if she could attend while she remained with us. We grew to love her and she grew to know the Lord in a better way.
>
> When her brother came looking for her one day, he was amazed to find her well. Soon, as a result of what they saw, both he and his wife prayed to the Lord. Then they returned to their village with the story of God's power to heal Ma Ba and told all they had seen and learned at our school. Seven more families then turned to the lord and quickly built a small leaf chapel where they could meet regularly to pray and worship.[7]

CMA missionaries offered compassionate medical interventions to spread the gospel. But notice how in this passage there is no explicit mention of scientific medical procedures—only the ambiguous phrase "our simple treatment," which in the context of the rest of the passage seems to almost completely displace the role of biomedicines in the women's recovery. Ma Ba is said to have returned to her village with the news of "*God's* power to heal."

2 Evangelical and Humanitarian Healing

The CMA missionaries' repeated associations between what they understood as the Montagnards' religion and their healing practices, led their texts to frequently proclaim "Christ as Healer"—a theological position with a long but somewhat troubled history in the CMA. It is worth reviewing this history briefly here to shed light on the missionaries' equivocations regarding Christ and healing in the highlands.

"Through all our evangelizing in the highlands," retired missionary Betty Mitchell said to me, "we preached the Fourfold Gospel: Christ our Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King." This oft-repeated "Fourfold Gospel" is virtually the only doctrinal statement of the CMA, a self-professed nondenominational and nonsectarian missionary organization.[8] It is surpassed in importance only by the insistence that the heart of the gospel is evangelization—that to be a Christian is to be a missionary. The emphasis on Christ as Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King reflects the CMA's roots in the late-nineteenth-century American evangelical culture of revival.

The emphasis on "Christ our Sanctifier" adopts the language and emphasis of the "Holiness Movement." But for our purposes here, the Holiness Movement's theology of divine healing signaled by the CMA formulation, "Christ our *Healer*" is especially relevant. CMA founder A.B. Simpson cast the theological position of "faith healing" in somewhat defensive terms, and this ambivalence was picked up and echoed in subsequent statements and historical accounts sanctioned by the missionary organization. The missionaries' ambiguity surrounding healing, prayer, and biomedicine in the highlands reflects their organization's nervousness surrounding the issue of faith healing.

In the late nineteenth century, widely popular traveling evangelists such as Dwight L. Moody excited crowds and promoted revivals across the United States and England. Protracted outdoor "camp meetings," bible conferences, and tent revivals marked a great surge of evangelical renewal.[9] These evangelical revivals emphasized the divine inspiration, authority, and prophecy of the Bible, the "sovereignty of God," the imperative of "new birth in Christ," and the necessity of "personal holiness." This evangelical fervor reawakened the tradition of revival that had marked the earlier decades of the nineteenth century when itinerant Methodist preachers such as Charles Finney crisscrossed farm towns in rural America. At the turn of the century America was increasingly industrializing and the revivals that had been systematized by Finney were readopted for an urban environment and an emerging capitalist middle class (although the excitement and "excesses" of the revivals often tainted them with lower-class sensibilities). The famous "Kenswick meetings" in Scotland sparked what has been known as the "Holiness Movement" within the Wesleyan tradition. This fervor, quickly spilling out into other denominations, sought the emotional release of personal holiness through "sanctification" by the Holy Spirit. In the context of this social and theological excitement, A.B. Simpson, a young Presbyterian minister (born in Canada but serving churches in Louisville, Kentucky, and then New York City) "threw himself upon the might of the Holy Ghost" and began a charismatic ministry that soon resulted in the founding of the CMA.[10]

A.B. Simpson was a charismatic preacher who raised money for his missionary organization through "missionary conventions" (in the tradition of evangelical camp meetings, conferences, and conventions). Having experienced a life-transforming divine healing himself, he incorporated faith-healings into his evangelical meetings. But Simpson always tried to position the CMA as a noncontroversial, nonsectarian, nonfactional organization. Thus he shied away from

the more strident confrontational language of the Fundamentalists, and he struggled with the emerging Pentecostal movement's insistence that "speaking-in-tongues" was a necessary sign of personal sanctification. Yet including healing in his "missionary conventions" gained notoriety and much-needed cash for his missionary organization. At the same time, accused on more than one occasion of "casting a spell on his audiences," he was wary of the somewhat marginalized and disreputable forms of Holiness and Pentecostal religion at the turn of the century. The official CMA accounts of his healing ministry strive to disassociate him from "quackery and self-serving charlatans." So while divine healing was a significant part of the founder's ministry, the CMA has not emphasized this practice and has couched the history of this practice somewhat defensively. A 1966 article in the CMA's *Alliance Witness* titled "A Ministry of Healing" provides abundant scriptural reference for the church's healing ministry. But then it admits that "one of the first hindrances to a ministry of healing is that there is a stigma to it. This is an artifice of the devil. Satan also uses fanatical and heretical behavior to frighten the believer from his inheritance. The aura of eccentricity has been cleverly associated with the ministry of healing."[11]

By mid-century in the central highlands of Vietnam, the doctrine of divine healing through the atonement of Christ takes on a peculiar cast in light of the Montagnards' apparent attempts to heal through animal sacrifice. But it also comes in for different treatment because of the number of "humanitarian aid missions" in the highlands during the war. Despite their focus on healing Montagnard bodies, CMA missionaries had a lot at stake in differentiating themselves from what they thought of as mere medical missions. "In all our humanitarian work," writes CMA missionary Charles Long, "one hand was for medical aid and the other for the gospel of Christ. We tried never to forget our primary reason for being in Vietnam."[12] The primary reason was, of course, to proclaim the gospel and gain converts for Christ. The tendency of the CMA accounts to associate the Montagnards' religion so closely with their healing practices, and to continually vacillate between crediting prayer or biomedicine in the Montagnards' "marvelous cures," drew to the fore the evangelical missionaries' historical ambivalence regarding not just faith healing but also the role of medicine and humanitarian interventions in the Christian missionary project. In the passage quoted earlier, Charles Long is being careful to disassociate himself from the "medical missions" of the Social Gospel tradition in twentieth-century American Protestant missions that conservative evangelicals repudiated.

Historians trace the contemporary division between liberal and conservative American Protestants to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time a theological position know as "premillennialism" argued that human nature (and thus human society) was inherently flawed and evil was getting worse, and could not be improved by human means. It gave new emphasis to the perennial Christian anticipation of the immanent return of Christ, the end of human history, and the establishment of Christ's thousand year reign of peace and justice (the "millennium"). Thus, these Protestants felt that the appropriate task facing Christians was to evangelize as widely and quickly as possible in order to bring as many people as possible into the proper relation of faith in Christ so that they would be saved when he returned. "*Post*millennialists," on the other hand, argued that Christ would return only *after* a thousand years of peace and justice had been established on earth (thus, Christ's return was thought to be "post," or after the millennium.) Therefore, they reasoned, the proper Christian response was to work for social justice and peace, to bring about the millennium.[13]

As this schism became more pronounced within American Protestantism, premillennialists began to reject the theological emphasis on Christian charity and social services being articulated by the postmillennialists, while the more liberal and progressive postmillennialists increasingly strove to bring their Christian doctrine into line with the cultural authority of contemporary scientific knowledge and procedures. This postmillennialist position—emphasizing humanitarian relief, social justice, and economic reforms—came to refer to itself as "the Social Gospel." It mobilized Christian theology to inspire Christians to ameliorate the pressing problems of urban poverty caused by rapid and unregulated capitalist industrialization. It advocated the use of the emerging new sciences of health and social engineering that were becoming professionalized and granted new prestige at the turn of the century.[14] From these roots emerged faith-based social service agencies such as Lutheran Family Services and Catholic Social Services that have overseen the resettlement of Dega in North Carolina.[15] Thus, the medical and social service interventions that mark the resettlement processes make full use of the professionalized fields of biomedicine and social scientific expertise. The Christian humanitarianism of Lutheran Family Services and Catholic Social Services is often quite indistinguishable from the humanitarian efforts of the state and other secular agencies—and this has been a chief complaint voiced by conservative evangelical Protestants who trace their lineage to the premillennialist position originally articulated in the late nineteenth century.

Conservative evangelicals of the premillennialist persuasion have articulated a much more ambivalent relation to biomedicine. While finding it difficult to question the efficacy of professionalized scientific medicine, their Christian theology places greater emphasis on "saving souls." Premillennialists, positioned as religious conservatives at the turn of the century, argued that the Social Gospel was far too optimistic about human nature and the possibility of reforming an inherently sinful humankind. They rejected what they saw as the liberalizing and secularizing trends in the Social Gospel including its eager accommodation of godless scientific and secular culture. They took up the banner of "Fundamentalism" in defiant defense of the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith.[16] The CMA traces its lineage back to these conservative premillennialist evangelical Christians at the turn of the century.

This split between the positions labeled "evangelical Protestant" ("conservative," premillennialist, and Fundamentalist) and "Social Gospel" ("liberal Protestants" of what became known as the Protestant "mainline"[17]) played out as well in the mission boards that were sending missionaries overseas. Most of these mission boards came to be dominated by the mainline denominations that were the heirs to the Social Gospel. In response, evangelicals eventually established their own explicitly evangelical missionary societies that defiantly focused Christian missions on saving souls for Christ, in contrast to mainline denominations that increasingly conceived of foreign missions in terms such as "ecumenical religious dialogue," "humanitarian relief," and "Christian Service." Ironically, this shift toward a more humanitarian understanding of the Christian missionary project coincided with (and, some have argued, even caused) a decline in interest in Christian missions—at least among liberal Protestants. Conservatives, who felt increasingly embattled and marginalized from mainline Christianity at home, became by mid-century the overwhelming majority of American missionaries abroad.[18] Arguably, much of the liberal Protestant energy for humanitarian missions has gravitated out of church-affiliated organizations and into governmental and explicitly nonreligious groups such as the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development.[19] Thus, Charles Long was concerned that the CMA "never forget our primary reason for being in Vietnam"—evangelization, not medical relief. But the evangelical rejection of medical missions was never an easy one, as we see in CMA missionaries' obfuscation of the issue in the highlands.

Harold Lindsell and Harold R. Cook were among the evangelicals who responded to the challenge of this "liberalizing and secularizing"

trend in missionary thought. Lindsell's *Missionary Principles and Practice* (1955), and Cook's *Missionary Life and Work* (1959) were two of the most widely read and influential textbooks in the Bible colleges and seminaries training new young evangelical missionaries for the field—missionaries such as those in the CMA who served in the central highlands of Vietnam.[20] These texts articulate the still emerging and somewhat ambivalent position of evangelical missionaries toward "medical missions" of humanitarian relief.

In *Missionary Principles and Practice*, Lindsell explains why Christians must restore the old foundations of the Church lost by unspiritual (i.e., liberal) leadership. He argues that there is no salvation outside of Christ, that the Bible is the infallible word of God, that it is the necessary grounds for understanding the call to missions, and that it is the best guide to how missions ought to be conducted. Similarly, Cook lambastes Christians who are "fuzzy" in their thinking about the goals of missionary work. Should it be evangelical or humanitarian, improve living conditions or offer salvation, establish schools or plant churches, provide medical assistance or inspire spiritual regeneration? Cook replies by invoking the "word of Christ himself." The goal of missionary work is that men "may know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."[21]

Both Lindsell and Cook discuss medical missions through a defensive rhetoric marshaled against what they sensed was the unfortunately dominant stream in Christian thought that had recast missions as humanitarian relief. And yet, ironically, both of these authors felt called upon to make lengthy detailed arguments *in support of* medical missions to their conservative evangelical readers. Their arguments in support of medical missions betray the same kind of uncertainty about biomedicine that we see in the CMA missionary accounts from the highlands.

For both Cook and Lindsell, there are several ways in which medical missions fit into the evangelical goal of missionary work. First, in keeping with their strident and defiant "biblical basis for missions," they both call attention to the New Testament depiction of Christ as a healer. Lindsell explains:

> The healings that Christ performed play a very important part in the gospel narratives. Preaching and healing went hand in hand. Furthermore, when Christ sent out the Twelve, "He sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:2). Later, when He sent out the Seventy He commanded them, "Heal the sick…and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:9).[22]

Both Cook and Lindsell reinterpret the idea of medical missions as a call to reenact the healings performed by Jesus in the New Testament. They present medical missions as part of the spiritual change induced by salvation through Christ.

A second evangelical argument for medical missions emerges in Lindsell's telling diagnosis of the cause of suffering in the world. He notes the "spiritual, physical and moral morass of the pagan world"—explicitly linking the physical suffering of poverty and disease to wrong religious belief. He argues that this suffering is all "the consequence of sin" and the "spiritual darkness" in which pagans live.[23] But later he acknowledges the usefulness of scientific medicine in treating disease, seeming to locate the cause and cure of ill-health in the natural world. What is more, he links the "true gospel message" to scientific knowledge: "A true gospel witness brings enlightenment in the scientific realm. Ignorance of basic scientific truths can be attributed to the work of darkness, and the medical missionary brings with him knowledge of the sources and cures of disease on the level of community sanitation, hygiene, etc."[24]

Lindsell's argument oscillates between the gospel combating "darkness," and scientific knowledge combating ignorance. The two sometimes merge—or really the centrality of Christ and the gospel message tends to cast a different sort of light on the significance and purpose of scientific knowledge and modern sanitation practices (although he explicitly argues *against* the conflation of Christianity with the culture and civilization of the west, which can be equally "heathen").[25] According to Lindsell, "spiritual darkness" is the rubric under which the pagans' ignorance of science should be understood—because spiritual darkness is the cause of the suffering that science must strive to alleviate. Physical suffering is tied to spiritual darkness because both are the outcome of superstition and immorality. In Lindsell's argument, the image of the pagans' ignorance of scientific advancements gives way to polemical condemnations of the unrepentant sinfulness of men living in darkness without the saving gospel. Sin, finally, is the cause of suffering.

Harold Cook's *Missionary Life and Work* makes a third argument for evangelical medical missions. They are, he says,

> an expression of the life that we have in Christ. It is a demonstration of Christian concern for man, that he may be made whole in every way. Just as Christ Himself had compassion on the sick, so do we. As He healed without discrimination, so do we. But as He constantly associated His spiritual ministry with

> his healing and emphasized the superiority of the spirit over the flesh, so also do we.
>
> We do not heal simply to win converts. Neither do we heal simply to be healing. We heal because as Christians we cannot be indifferent to human distress when we have the means for relieving it. But also as Christians, and especially as Christian missionaries, we take advantage of the opportunity we have in healing to present the Great Physician of the soul. Often this may be our only opportunity of presenting Christ to the one who comes.[26]

This passage shifts from medical missions as a demonstration of the compassion and love to which Christ calls the missionary (a position essentially in harmony with the Social Gospel idea of missions and that need not entail the evangelical emphasis on salvation), to a fourth argument for evangelical medical missions: providing medical treatment is often the missionary's best means of gaining access to potential converts. This strategy was explicitly rejected by liberal Protestants, and was often feared and distrusted by host governments where missionaries served.

Cook and Lindsell reconcile medical missions with the conservative evangelical missionary project by first spiritualizing and moralizing sickness (while ambiguously acknowledging the ability of scientific medicine to relieve suffering), then by reclaiming historical notions of Christian compassion (which had been emphasized by the Social Gospel they claim to oppose), and finally by recognizing the strategic advantages of humanitarian medical missions of compassion to gain access to the heathen heart. Their arguments betray a great deal of anxiety about the role of medicine in the Christian missionary project. This ambivalence is the result of the evangelicals' rejection of what they perceived as the secularizing trend in Christian missions that had been articulated by the Social Gospel since the turn of the century.

The defensiveness of these arguments, and the shifting terms in which they contrast and then associate scientific biomedicine, Western civilization, and the Christian gospel, are reflected in the accounts of conversion written by CMA missionaries in the highlands during this same period. "Medical missions," if they were the primary activity of the missionary, became suspect for promoting a Social Gospel style of secularization and an idolatrous faith in modern science. Thus, as I have shown earlier, CMA missionary accounts betray a nervousness surrounding the mediating role biomedicine played between highlander

and missionary. The provision of biomedicine may show Christian compassion, and it may bring highland people to the gospel, but it should not be the focus or goal of missionary activity.

As I have argued, the ambivalence surrounding biomedicine is only heightened by the tendency of CMA missionary accounts to collapse the broad social functions served by Montagnard spirit practices (as analyzed by anthropologists) into a single function: healing. Since these texts diagnose this heathen religion (i.e., their healing practices) as in fact the cause of their physical maladies, they often figure Christian conversion as a healing transformation. The health of Montagnards was a religious issue, not for reasons of Christian charity but because Montagnards tried to heal through the rival religious practices that the missionaries were trying to replace. Therefore, CMA missionaries urged Montagnards to give up their healing practices and believe in Christ instead. But their textual accounts inevitably vacillate regarding what is responsible for the healing: belief in Christ or biomedicines. Laura Smith quotes herself preaching to Montagnards:

> Give the Gospel a fair trial. You have been misled in your beliefs. You cannot go on believing in these old lies. You have been enslaved to wrong. Have the courage to break away now and follow Christ in truth and right.
>
> We'll leave with you these quinine pills. If you get a fever, take one pill three times a day and pray to God in Jesus' name. Don't call on the evil spirits. Don't kill your animals in sacrifices.[27]

3 From Sickness to Sin, Through Sacrifice

For the missionaries, animal sacrifice was the surest sign of savagery and demonic darkness. Worse than misguided, it was *sinful*—because it relied on demonic spirits that worked against the truth and goodness of Christ. But as the CMA missionaries set about to convert the Montagnard tribesmen, they seized on the practice of animal sacrifice as a vehicle for explaining to the Montagnards the significance of the Christian gospel message. Although the missionaries understood animal sacrifice as the essence of the Montagnards' heathenism, they also found in it a powerful connection to their own theological concepts. After all, Christian theology too centered on a "blood sacrifice"—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Betty Mitchell, a missionary who followed Laura and Gordon Smith into the central highlands in the 1950s, told an interviewer: "Most of the tribal people in every group

that I know of, they had some kind of sacrifice. And it was usually a blood sacrifice. Because they *knew* the importance of blood. It was easy to transfer their culture about sacrificing to how Jesus sacrificed *his* life on the cross *for them*."[28] The missionaries explained that God, the all-powerful creator of the world, had sent his only son to earth to bear the burdens of man's sins and to offer himself up as a sacrifice once and for all for all mankind. This blood sacrifice, in the missionaries' telling, made all subsequent sacrifices unnecessary. In the following account offered by Reverend J.C. Fleming, the trope of sacrifice provides the key to explaining Christian theology:

> The Bahnar preacher and I struck up a conversation with several of the people and the subject naturally turned to sacrifices. Soon the preacher was telling them about the sacrifices that Cain and Abel brought to god. As he told of Abel killing a lamb to offer to God, they nodded approvingly, but when they heard that Cain had brought fruit as a sacrifice, they laughed uproariously. Whoever would think of sacrificing fruit! There is no blood in fruit. They understood immediately why God rejected Cain's offering. The preacher went on to tell them how down through the years men had sacrificed animals to God in order to atone for their sins. Then came the story of God in his Love providing the one final Sacrifice for sin.
>
> In this situation that had looked so hopeless to us at first the people readily understood the simple gospel story. Truly the Holy Spirit leads His servants in giving forth His Word. We know that this same Holy Spirit can open the darkened minds and hearts of all these Bahnar people and bring them to God. Will you pray with us for these people?[29]

But an important transformation takes place in this trope of sacrifice as the missionaries try to trump individual animal sacrifices with the ultimate, once and for all, sacrifice of Christ on the cross. First there is the obvious disconnect between animals that are sacrificed *by men* to "appease" the spirits, versus a sacrifice *by God* that men must decide to accept for themselves. But the issue that I want to explore is these texts' edgy transformation of animal sacrifices to overcome sickness into Christ's sacrifice to overcome *sin*. This transformation is enabled, of course, by the Holiness theology that construes sickness as caused by sin and proclaims "Christ as Healer." But as we have seen in the uncertain vacillation between "Christ as Healer" and "biomedicine as healer," so too is there a nervous slippage

between animal sacrifices that cure sickness and Christ's sacrifice that cures sin.

Montagnards' willingness to give up their animal sacrifices, and the bracelets on which the sacrifices were recorded, was for the missionaries the primary sign of a sincere conversion. The transformation from sickness to sin through the trope of sacrifice confounds the missionaries' accounts, and seems to confuse the Montagnards as well. For example, Gordon Smith offers the following account:

> At Buon Ye, when the appeal was given to follow Christ, thirty men gave up their sacrificial bracelets.
>
> "Two buffaloes," one man would say as he handed me his bracelet.
>
> "Six pigs," said another, showing me the six nicks he had cut on his.
>
> "I sacrificed three cows," an old man confessed, "but the spirits did not help me. I want to follow Christ."
>
> At Buon Krum the old village sorcerer, his solitary tooth wavering as he spoke, announced his intention of following the Lord.
>
> "How about those bracelets?" I asked, pointing to two with a number of nicks on them.
>
> "Oh these are just for ornament," he lied.
>
> "You may hide your sins from me but you cannot hide anything from God" I warned him. "Unless you are willing to do away with your sacrifices and your bracelets you cannot follow in the new road that leads to heaven. Do you choose Christ or the Devil?"
>
> "I surely want to have good health and never die. I would like to become young again. If I became a Christian shall I ever get sick again?"
>
> "Your soul is more important than your body. Pretty soon you may die," I went on as the crowd stood by listening, "and your withered old body will have to be buried. If you trust in Christ He will give you a new body in heaven that will never know sickness or death. Won't you give your heart fully to Christ?"
>
> "I do believe and want to go to heaven," he said. It was not without some more explanation on our part that he gave up one of his bracelets, still fearful of the consequences.
>
> "This other bracelet I shall keep in case I get sick again," he said. Again we tried to show him that God demands all from him. At last,

> "Here, Grandfather," he shouted to me with a note of finality, "Take this other bracelet. Die or live, I'll follow Christ with all my heart."
>
> There and then he prayed to God for *forgiveness of sins.*[30]

This account's troubled transition from sickness to sin is remarkable. It is not altogether convincing that the "old village sorcerer" made the transition himself. More likely, he was "praying" for good health, not forgiveness of sins. The passage continues:

> Old Ama Hrook soon learned how to pray and made good progress. Then he became very ill for some time. We prayed for him and he gradually regained his strength enough to sit up by his fireside, his thin, bent body wrapped in a dirty old blanket. I asked him one day how he was and he replied:
>
> "O Grandfather, I thought surely I was going to die. I did not want to get better. I wanted to wake up in my new house above. I did not want to sit beside this fire again. Why didn't God take me?"
>
> It was not long after that that old Ama Hrook went to be with His Lord. What an awakening it must have been for him![31]

Here again we see Christian prayers for healing offered by the missionaries in place of the Montagnards' traditional healing practice. But then, as the text proceeds, healing in this world is displaced by the healing of *sin*, which guarantees a healthy body in the next world.

Animal sacrifice is the central trope representing the sinful lives of the tribesmen. But it is also the trope that turns into the sacrifice of Christ by which the missionaries explained Christianity. Sacrifice thus links sickness and sin in these texts. Preoccupied with the association Montagnards seemed to make between animal sacrifices and health, the missionaries strove to transfer the Montagnards' belief in sacrifice to cure sickness onto the sacrifice of Christ. But then sin is always tagged-on as the remainder, coming back to haunt and reinvest the understanding of both sickness and sacrifice. Sickness, sin, and sacrifice emerge as extremely slippery tropes in the missionaries' representations of Montagnard religion and their conversion to Christianity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the CMA texts often represent Montagnards telling similar miracle stories of God's healing. For

example, Laura Smith writes:

> The crowd returned for the night meeting. We began with testimonies and they were a joy to hear.
>
> One man said, "the Lord is with me in my rice field, in my field shack, in my longhouse, in the village, and on the road. I praise the Lord all the time."
>
> Another testified, "Before, I sacrifice animals. Now I believe in Jesus' sacrifice. I've taken Him."
>
> A woman told us, "A snake bit my child. She was all swollen up and nearly died but the Lord healed her."
>
> A man, too, witnessed, "A snake bit me also, and I thought I was sure to die, but I called on God and He healed me."[32]

But although these testimonials published by the missionaries portray Montagnards converting to the CMA's understanding of the close association between sickness, sin, and sacrifice, I have never heard Dega refugees narrate Christ as a miraculous *healer* in North Carolina. The more devout Christians pray when they are ill, but they all go to the doctor (provided through the humanitarian mission of resettlement). And although I have heard Dega thank God for their recovery, I have never heard any of them *attribute* it to God (although, as I argue in chapter three, many of them attribute other events in their lives to God's benevolent intervention). Accounts of divine healing appear only in the missionaries' accounts of the highlands, where they emerge as a privileged trope of conversion.

When I talk with Dega about healing in the highlands, their accounts tend to be vague and uncertain. Given the small refugee population, few experts in healing have made it through to North Carolina. In any case, Montagnard traditional village life crumbled in the 1960s from the onslaught of the war. The vast majority of the Dega in North Carolina were adolescents in the 1960s and 1970s when they "accepted God" and stopped sacrificing animals. They had not yet learned to perform spirit practices as mature adults. Then they spent the next ten or fifteen years in the jungle where, reportedly, the spirit practices played no role whatsoever. Today, traditional healing practices are just something that they remember from childhood. They are, for the most part, not very interested in recounting them for me and cannot explain them with any convincing detail. Thus the tradition of healing remedies, closely associated with the jungles of the highlands and knowledge of the spirits, seems not to have made it through the conversion to refugees.[33]

Typically, Dega repeat back to me their missionaries' characterizations of traditional highland spirit practices as essentially a misguided attempt to heal. When I asked a devoutly Christian Dega woman about spirit practices in the highlands, she explained:

> They believe in that. They believe in their way. If they're sick, then some leader who helps the people says, "you have to kill cow, and you get well." And some people kill cow. "You have to kill pig, and then you get well." Kill buffalo. It's crazy. We don't know then. Kill anything what the leader said. *Like we believe the doctor now.* (Emphasis added)

This sort of response is typical of my discussions of this topic with Dega in North Carolina. She responded to my purposely vague question about "the spirits" by focusing on their traditional role in healing—thus reproducing her missionaries' severe circumscription of the broad social functions of belief in the spirits. Notice how she compares the "crazy" cures offered by the "leader" with "like we believe the doctor now." The crazy cures have been replaced by her faith in the doctor, not her faith in the healing sacrifice of Christ.

Although the Montagnards' missionaries consistently describe the Montagnards' spirit practices as "evil" or "devil worship," Dega in North Carolina almost never use this kind of language—even though they clearly construe spirit healing practices as a rival religious system to Christianity, just as their missionaries did. Instead of seeing them as evil they present them as *foolish.* They are embarrassed to recount for me the old beliefs. They laugh at their old foolishness. After all, everyone knows that sacrificing a water buffalo will not restore health; you have to go to the doctor and get some medicine if you want to get better. The idea of faith healing, through which the missionaries presented conversion to the Montagnards (always in ambivalent and ambiguous association with biomedicine), seems to not have come through the conversion. The missionaries' ability to link Christianity with biomedicine seems to have been a very successful strategy, but the ambiguity of the link was not lost on their Montagnard converts. Reliance on animal sacrifices to heal was replaced by both faith in God *and* "faith" in doctors. Missionaries themselves rely on doctors (not without praying too, of course). But because they understood the highland people's rival religious system as essentially a healing practice, they represented conversion as a healing of Montagnards' bodies. They thus introduce a theme that would mark the interventions of conversion clear through to refugee resettlement in North Carolina.

Gerald Hickey, Oscar Salemink and others have documented how western interventions in the highlands produced a devastating cacophony of change in which CMA missionaries operated. The missionaries' provision of biomedicine quickly became but a small part of the introduced technologies, enforced changes in patterns of living, and the increasingly indiscriminate military violence that destroyed Montagnards' traditional way of life. In the devastating concluding years of the Vietnam War, the only Montagnards that missionaries would have known or been in contact with would have been closely associated with the American/Vietnamese war effort or corralled into carefully guarded resettlement villages and refugee camps. These Montagnards would have received a wide array of medical treatments and they would have been without the traditional village life that supported their belief in spirits. But even late in the war, CMA missionaries continued to represent Christian conversion as a healing practice in competition with the Montagnards' traditional reliance on "demonic spirits."

Charles Long brings to a climax his book recounting his missionary work in the highlands by portraying a "great revival" that swept the highlands in the early 1970s. Long describes ecstatic preaching sessions that lasted deep into the night and started up again the next day (much like the tent revivals of the American evangelical tradition). "The pattern," Long explains, "was conviction—deep, awful conviction of sin—followed by confession and the tremendous comfort as God brought cleansing. Then exhilarating praise and finally witness to others."[34]

Earlier, his text enacted the same slippery association of sin, sickness, and sacrifice that confounds the Smiths' texts. In this final depiction of "God's work in the highlands," he once again explicitly links conversion with healing through Montagnards' rejection of the demons they had previously relied on for healing before the gospel arrived. Long describes how the revival meetings included "anointing for the many who pressed forward for healing."[35] He explains that "in a new surge of faith the young people led the way in praying for those who were sick or physically afflicted. Countless ones were healed, demons were cast out."[36] In another episode, a village sorcerer accepts Christ: "He then prayed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Instantly, demons attacked him and knocked him down. Other Christians prayed for him and the demons departed. He was restored and filled with the Spirit."[37]

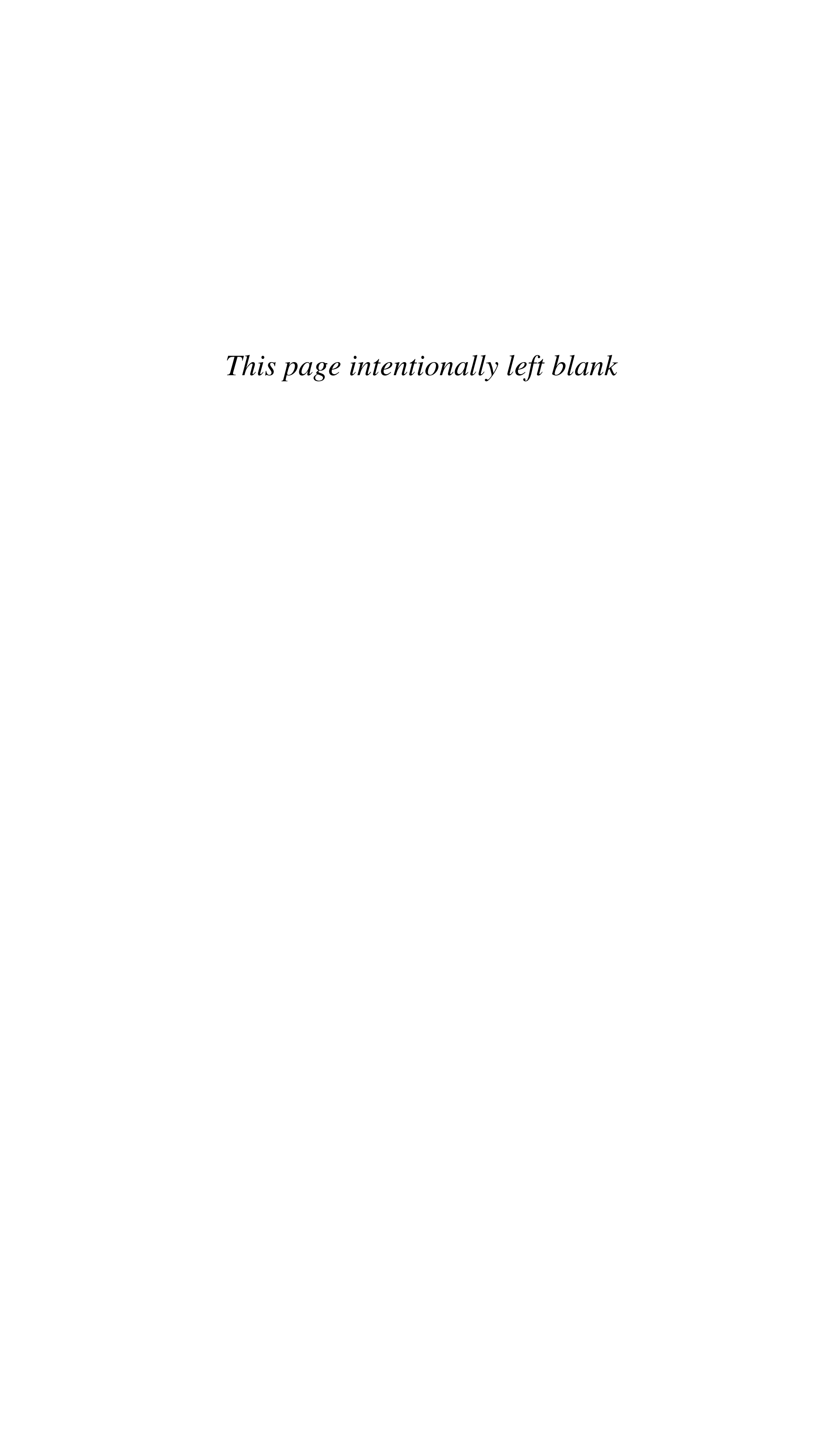
This passage illustrates the real belief in spirits that the missionaries shared with the Montagnards. Long's image of demons attacking

Christ's true believers, seemingly borrowed from biblical accounts, takes on a different resonance in the discursive context of CMA representations of Montagnards' religion. In his account of the "revival" sweeping the highlands, Charles Long depicts Christ beating the spirit demons at their own game, healing illness through miraculous intercession. This healing is then given the new Christian explanation of "conviction of sin" and "the acceptance of Christ's forgiveness."

These accounts were written about a society devastated by a decade of war. Whole villages had been destroyed. Refugees had been gathered into squalid camps and deprived of their livelihoods. Many were suffering shrapnel wounds, napalm burns, rampant disease, and malnutrition. Yet in Long's accounts, they were "healed" through the cosmic struggle of the Holy Spirit with the evil demons Montagnards had previously relied on for good health. And then this healing is represented as a victory over personal *sin*. According to Long's account, Montagnards can miraculously step out of their sin, and in the process be healed, by transferring their faith from the evil demons to the goodness of Christ.

CMA missionary texts figure Christian conversion as the healing of Montagnard bodies. I argue in chapter four that healing medical interventions also mark the transformation of Montagnard guerilla fighters into Dega refugees. Thus, Americans have consistently sought to transform highland people by healing their bodies. As the evangelical missionaries of the CMA figured conversion as a reformation of Montagnards' healing practices, so too have the humanitarian missionaries of refugee resettlement figured their project as treating the physical inadequacies of highlander's bodies. What highland people have lacked, and what they must be converted to, has consistently been figured in the language of health, sanitation, hygiene, and the inappropriate or insufficient technologies under which they have suffered. "Conversion"—whether to Christianity or to refugee status—saves Montagnards and their bodies from the ravages of their unfortunate circumstances. This is the consistent theme that extends from the conservative evangelical Protestants' first contact with highland people in the 1930s to the construction of new identities for them as resettled refugees by liberal Social Gospel Christian groups in the 1990s in North Carolina.

In the next chapter I continue to explore how missionaries sought to transform highland people by treating the physical ailments of their bodies, turning the focus to the American humanitarian mission to Vietnam and its connections to the American military mission to "win the hearts and minds of the people."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Chapter 6

Hearts and Minds

From the 1930s through to the end of the American war in Vietnam, writing by the missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) consistently represented Christian conversion as a healing intervention focused on Montagnard bodies. As late as the 1970s, Missionary Charles Long continued to mobilize the tropes of sickness, sin, and demons to represent conversion—at a time when the heavy firepower of the American military's war against the Viet Cong guerrillas was destroying Montagnard houses, villages, farms, and bodies, and displacing hundreds of thousands of Montagnards into squalid refugee camps. But the CMA was not the only Western missionary organization active in Vietnam during the war. Organizations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, and United World Mission carried on similar evangelical work on a smaller scale. In addition, there were several dozen humanitarian relief organizations active in the country during the war—not as evangelists of the gospel, but as "witnesses for peace" in Vietnam.

Oscar Salemink's research has established that institutions such as the CMA's leprosarium and their strategy of dispensing biomedicine for evangelization existed on the fringe of a vast humanitarian mission that was encouraged and supported by the American government financially, diplomatically, logistically, and militarily.[1] Religiously affiliated agencies such as Catholic Relief Services, American Friends Service Committee, and Vietnam Christian Service differed little from their "secular" counterparts such as The Red Cross, CARE, International Rescue Committee, and International Voluntary Services, which were also active in Vietnam during the war. Both the secular and the church-affiliated organizations were focused on ministering to the bodies and physical needs of the people of Vietnam.

This humanitarian mission poses interesting questions of the conversion that marks Dega refugees' encounter with the west. Like the humanitarian mission of Lutheran Family Services and Catholic Social Services that have overseen Dega refugee resettlement, these interventions have not generally been marked as "missionary" in the widely used sense of "seeking conversions." But their rhetoric of merely "helping the people" elides several important characteristics they share with evangelical missions. What is more, these humanitarian missions were effectively co-opted by the American military project. The evangelical, humanitarian, and military "missions" to Vietnam shared explicit material relations and striking rhetorical similarities. This multifaceted American project was remarkably successful at "winning the hearts and minds" of the Montagnards. Many Dega refugees in North Carolina enlisted in and worked for these aid programs during the war and they now strongly identify their ethnonationalist movement with the goals of this humanitarian project. Thus the broad evangelical-humanitarian-military project to win the hearts and minds of the Montagnards has been a significant factor contributing to the "conversion of the Dega"—and what phrase better epitomizes the Christian missionary project than "to win the hearts and minds."

1 The Humanitarian Mission to Vietnam

Having juxtaposed in chapter five a scene of medical intervention in the Dega resettlement with accounts of sickness and animal sacrifice in the central highlands, I will approach the analysis of this humanitarian mission in Vietnam by offering a third scene of medical intervention. This one was written by Hilary Smith (no relation to CMA missionaries Gordon and Laura Smith), a volunteer nurse at a Catholic missionary hospital known as Min-Quay, serving Montagnards in the Kontum area of the central highlands in the late 1960s. Ms Smith's description of healing in the highlands offers a third very different representation of medical practices in the arena of cross-cultural contact. Ms Smith writes:

> Some patients, by virtue of their character, their illness or their treatment were unforgettable. The ladies with evil spirits were a case in point. They appeared at Minh-Quay before my time, but the tale had passed into legend and seems worth recording. There were six of these ladies, brought to Pat by their village chief in search of help with the knotty problem. The evil spirits possessing them crept out when the

> women slept and ate the souls of other villagers. They were therefore a serious threat and must be exorcised, but the chief had exhausted his resources. No ritual of exorcism or sacrific [*sic*] had worked and the village in its own defense was reduced to keeping the women from sleep so that their spirits couldn't get out. Could not Ya Tih cut the spirits out in surgery, the chief asked? Pat was initially dubious but it became clear that the women were in danger of exile and perhaps even death if something weren't done and she finally agreed to give it a try...
>
> Only one of the ladies knew the location of her spirit: it lived in the web of skin between her thumb and forefinger. The others required examination before surgery, an elaborate process of palpation and auscultation for the benefit of the watching village chief. Then a fleshy portion of an arm or leg would be chosen, the incision made, probed gently, and the departure of the evil spirit marked with cries of excitement and satisfaction. After which the wound was neatly sutured. Evidently Henning and the surgeon put on a good enough show to satisfy all concerned. The ladies went home that afternoon and Pat never saw them again. They failed to return to have their stitches out, but had there been further problems in the village, Pat would most likely have heard of them. It seemed that the evil spiritectomies had been a success.[2]

In obvious contrast to the CMA accounts of sickness and spirits in the highlands, there is no attempt here to convert these Montagnards from their beliefs in the spirit world. Hilary Smith's book is full of affection and bemused respect for the Montagnards and their culture. She describes Montagnard beliefs and practices with compassion and tenderness:

> The chanting of the grief-stricken husband rose, filling the ward. It was the ritual chant, the moi, the tune unvaried, strict as Gregorian chant but with an unrestrained primitive throb to the words, a quaver added to each note. The words, improvised as they are at every death, recounted incidents of the dead woman's life, details of the disease and the efforts made to treat it. The moi is a ritual but I rarely heard it chanted without deep emotion. The young husband chanted with tears streaming down his face, the words forced out against sobs.[3]

In this passage she even manages to exonerate what she had first dismissed as merely "a ritual" by proclaiming its emotional sincerity. She is clearly impressed and touched by the Montagnards and what she describes as the "fragility" of their culture. Hilary Smith is not in Vietnam to convert the Montagnards, she is there to "help them." But as with the processes of refugee resettlement, because the discourses

of the humanitarian mission in the highlands were so righteously focused on reforming Montagnard physical bodies they tended to obscure the intentions to leverage very real changes as well in the *internal*, immaterial subjectivities of Montagnards.

Hilary Smith volunteered in Vietnam "to help." Her motives are typical of several accounts written by humanitarian (non-evangelical) missionaries in Vietnam.[4] Some emphasize their desire to demonstrate a particular model of Christian charity and to be a "witness for peace"—a phrase meant to evoke resistance to and protest against military violence. They are there to put "Christian-American concern for the Vietnamese people into action without guns and killing."[5]

Relieving suffering was certainly the most prominent aspect of the humanitarian service organizations' work (the bulk of the humanitarian work consisted of distributing food and clothing and providing emergency medical attention in the many burgeoning refugee camps), but the few published accounts and the promotional brochures that circulated at the time carefully foreground efforts to promote lasting change through programs of "agricultural community development," "social work," and "training national medical workers." Most humanitarian organizations felt called upon to justify their programs by the permanent changes they could introduce in Vietnamese society. And although such organizations consciously aligned themselves against the "civilizing mission" associated with nineteenth-century imperialism, accounts such as the one offered by Hilary Smith betray an uneasy and unresolved relationship to the "white man's burden":

> It's a perjorative [*sic*] term these days, "white man's burden," but it need not be an evil fact. Such aspects of it as existed at Minh-Quy were beneficent and existed with the enthusiastic support of the Montagnards. In no way did they feel themselves ready to function independently at the hospital, although they were more nearly ready than any of us knew. But the support, assistance and charity implied in "white man's burden" is a dead end street without growth on the one side and gradual abdication on the other...When I started my classes, I found the enthusiasm of the Montagnards—their growth, my abdication—more moving and more satisfying than almost any other aspect of my experience at Minh-Quy.[6]

Hilary Smith recognizes how nineteenth-century representations of colonial conquest were dressed in the altruistic rhetoric of the civilizing mission. Many colonialists imposed their own values and prescribed changes. They assumed the superiority of their own way of life and encouraged or required others to emulate it. At the height of

the civilizing mission, the distinction between the value of Christianity and the value of Western civilization was difficult for many colonialists to draw. In the civilizing mission colonialists understood themselves as offering the natives a gift—whether that gift consisted of Christianity, or clothing, schools, medicine, roads, a rationalized bureaucracy, the structure of representational government, or the production of an agricultural surplus and the generation of wealth. All of these things, which collectively marked Europe and the west as superior, were "offered" to the colonized world. Impositions were justified as improvements. But this altruism accompanied, authorized, and ameliorated the positioning of colonized regions at the bottom of the global political economy. They are now disempowered, vulnerable, and suffering—and the process that put them there was glossed with a rhetoric of aid.

This pejorative legacy of the white man's burden may exceed what Ms Smith had in mind. For if she is uneasy about the burden to "civilize" the Montagnards, she makes herself comfortable with the burden to help them "grow." There is no colonialism here, just the natural, altruistic, and nurturing processes of growth. But of course the term "growth" is similar to the more widely used term "development," which along with "progress" has long been central to the Western notions of civilization—thus her worried parsing of the white man's burden.[7]

In Smith's account there is no sense of anything being imposed, in part because her colonial presumption of superiority dominates the text. In her account there is no question whether the Western medical staff provides improvements. In her text, the Montagnards themselves see the benefits in the changes that she is trying to introduce in their healing practices. The Western staff offers medical knowledge, technology, and training, and they are eagerly accepted by the Montagnards.

But evangelical missionary discourses have *always* represented conversion as something that is desired by the convert. It is never imposed, but always offered. Evangelical missions can always be justified by the fact that *after* conversion the convert is necessarily grateful for the change that has been wrought (or else the change cannot be said to have occurred). Missionary discourses—both humanitarian and evangelical—return repeatedly to the problem of how to convince the natives that they ought to desire the change that is offered. For humanitarian missions, this was typically accomplished through demonstration plots, model farms, and the inducements of free supplies and start-up costs.[8]

Philip Jones Griffiths, a reporter and photographer in Vietnam during the war, exposed the arrogance and uneasy repression of colonialist aggression in America's humanitarian mission by quoting an unnamed American aid worker:

> "I've told them, the American people will give them the cement, the lumber, the tin roofing to build the sites and it will import the piglets . . . but godammit, I've told them, they've got to build it for themselves. Otherwise they won't think of it as theirs!"
>
> Always the pressure was to "help" and to "give" and the only thing asked in return was for whatever was offered to be accepted. For, if it was not, refusals might necessitate taking a tougher line and anything resembling firmness would smack of that work which every USAID [United States Agency for International Development] worker detested more than all others—colonialism. To be described as colonialist was felt to be so unjust because America was obviously not there to take as France had been. Unfortunately, it was believed—not surprisingly by a property-fixated society—that the Vietnamese would give their hearts and minds to America far more readily than they had given their rubber to France.[9]

In the second step of her defense of the white man's burden, Hilary Smith explains: "The greatest service we could offer both staff and patients was education. Treatment of disease was important, but teaching was vital. It was an idea to which we all gave lip service, but . . . we began to put it into practice and the result was a new excitement and enthusiasm throughout the hospital."[10] In fact, the success of this teaching mission culminates the narrative of her book. As the communist Vietnamese slowly win the war and bring the fighting closer to the American occupied areas, the Western hospital staff has to evacuate before a Viet Cong attack. She can no longer report on the hospital as it sadly fades away behind the veil of communist-imposed isolation. The book's last fleeting images of the Montagnard hospital are gleaned from snippets of TV war correspondents, but seem to offer hope that Sister Gabrielle and the rest of the Montagnard staff are bravely and competently carrying on the duties taught by the Western aid workers.[11] Ms. Smith says she feels that she has perhaps succeeded if she has been able to teach the Montagnards some of the techniques of the modern clinic—if they have learned and adopted the improved practices she offered and they have made the hospital that the Americans created "indigenous" to the highlands.

I use the awkward and counterintuitive phrase indigenous, because I want to draw out the parallels between these humanitarian aid

missions and the theology of "the indigenous church" first broached by John Nevius at the turn of the century and proudly proclaimed since then by evangelical organizations such as the CMA.[12] He noticed that after several generations of continuous and concerted missionary effort in some areas, the question occurred: do these regions remain forever as "missionary fields"? When do these people become simply Christians and no longer the objects of our missionary project? Nevius argued that the missionary church can grow faster and stronger under local/native administration. The goal of the Christian missionary should be to slowly work himself or herself out of a job. Missionaries should make converts, start a church, and train the new converts to go out and evangelize others. With this accomplished, the evangelical missionary can move on to a new area.

The indigenous church is a curious phrase because it would appear to be a euphemism if not an oxymoron. How can the Christian church, which is imported from elsewhere, be considered *indigenous* to its new cultural environment? The term carries with it a complicated theology of the relationship between the universal truth of Christianity and the human partiality of cultural difference. Used by the CMA and many other conservative evangelical missionary organizations by the middle of the twentieth century, the term also functions to counter arguments coming from liberal Christian groups that the Christian church ought not to be in the business of "imposing" Christianity on other people, or trying to destroy their traditional culture and faith.

The indigenous church and the indigenous hospital also find a revealing parallel in the Lutheran Family Services rhetoric of "self-sufficiency" that marks the refugee resettlement process discussed in chapter four. Refugee sponsors are not trying to convert anyone; and yet they transform dependent refugees into competent self-sufficient citizens. The life skills of consumer culture become indigenous to them.

These various missionary rhetorics—in Vietnam and in North Carolina—tend to efface any sense that change is being proselytized or imposed. Instead, the texts present altruistic volunteers healing bodies and attending to the physical needs of economic well-being. This emphasis on the physical body would seem to define the humanitarian mission and distinguish it from its disavowed pedigree in the evangelical missionary movement. But the distinction between humanitarian and evangelical missions that workers on both sides seek to maintain is undermined by both sides' implicit strategy to transform internal subjectivities through treating external physical

maladies. And each of these missionary discourses demonstrate the altruistic intentions of the missionaries and the universal benefits of the conversion by representing the indigenization of the change they have offered and the gratefulness of the converts for the gift.

2 To Win the Hearts and Minds of the People

The American government premised its military intervention in Southeast Asia on fears of a worldwide communist threat emanating from America's Cold War enemy, "the Communist Bloc," which seemed to threaten American security and the American system of prosperity around the globe. The American government, representing "the free world," went to war in Vietnam to contain the spread of "world communism" in Southeast Asia. This military mission took on several significant characteristics reminiscent of the Christian missionary project.

First of all, the American war in Vietnam was not primarily a battle for territory.[13] The U.S. military could take essentially any piece of land it desired and hold it for as long as it remained there to defend it. But the American government was not interested in occupying Vietnam. It hoped it could train the army of South Vietnam [ARVN, or the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam] to defend its own territory—just as Hilary Smith hoped she could train the Montagnards to run their own hospital. But on a more fundamental level the American government realized that simply "training" was not enough; the Americans needed to convince the South Vietnamese population, and perhaps even the current leadership, that they should want to fight the communists themselves. Like an evangelical mission, the American military mission was a project of persuasion. Americans had to convince the people of Vietnam that the American system of capitalism and freedom was better than communist tyranny.

In a sense, the American military and CIA sought to "indigenize" its anticommunist crusade—just as evangelical or humanitarian missionaries indigenize the Christian church or the Western hospital—so that the Vietnamese would take on America's battle against world communism themselves. Believing that communist insurgencies thrive on poor economic conditions, American military strategists planned to win the war by securing improvements in the people's physical and economic well-being and making indigenous the state apparatus that would be required in Saigon to deliver these improvements.[14]

A principal advocate of this school of thought was Walter W. Rostow, an MIT professor of economic history who became a close foreign policy advisor to President Kennedy. According to Rostow, communism is a "disease of the transition to modernity."[15] In Rostow's analysis of economic history, the introduction of modern technology offers the possibility of tremendous economic growth but also necessarily entails a transition period that destabilizes traditional social and political relations. Communists, he argued, prey on the fragility of this transition. Rostow counseled a policy of vigorous economic aid to hasten and ameliorate this transition to modernity, lest it be "diseased" by a communist takeover.

As conceived, this transition to an undiseased modernity was a missionary project, but it was conducted in an environment of "competitive proselytizing." (Similarly, Salemink has described highlanders' "communist conversion.") Since communists prey on the disruptions in the conversion/transition to modernity, America was responding to the threat that people might otherwise, in a sense, "convert to communism." The image of competing proselytizing emerges in the following American military analysis of Viet Cong strategy and activities:

> While Diem [South Vietnamese head of state from 1955 to 1963] offered political stability and measured economic growth, the communists promised immediate social and economic change, broadcasting the same message that Mao tse-tung had spread successfully throughout the Chinese countryside several decade earlier. The southern Communists, or Viet Cong, promised land reform, education, social and sexual equality, responsive government, social welfare, appealing mainly to the rural peasant. Many Viet Cong cadre were experienced and well-trained native southerners who had the added prestige of having fought and defeated the French. With little interference from Diem's government, they proselytized large segments of the Vietnamese rural population, especially at the hamlet and village levels, and, through a mixture of persuasion and force, organized them into an insurgent political structure. Participation was the key element; the better cadre relied on the people themselves to carry out the promised economic and social programs at the lower levels. Under Viet Cong direction, the peasants formed their own local governments, committees, judicial boards, and their own police, intelligence, and militia forces. To outlying Saigon administrators, the first open signs of trouble might come months and even years later when taxes or rents went unpaid, minor officials were harassed, or confrontations took place between Viet Cong militia forces and province police.[16]

Note how this military historian, writing with the authorization of the American military (in 1988), uses missionary language when he

describes how the Viet Cong "proselytized" the rural population. Further, the chief challenge that he identifies in this passage is that this movement became (what I have called) "indigenized" in the rural population. Thus the "missionary activity" of the Viet Cong thrust the American government into the role of developing its own opposing missionary project. It set out to "win the hearts and minds of the people."[17]

This phrase was first associated with America's purposes in Vietnam by President Johnson in a 1965 speech. He (or his speech writers) paraphrased John Adams' analysis of the American Revolution. Noting that Adams had said "the Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people," Johnson explained that "we must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but the ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there."[18] Thus hearts and minds is a phrase that harkens back to America's sacred history, to its "founding fathers," and to the noble, even spiritual, ideals on which the country is said to be founded.

Johnson was probably not unaware that the phrase has biblical overtones (which Adams was apparently referencing). Philippians 4:7 reads: "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Revised Standard Version); and in Hebrews 8:10 the phrase evokes the profundity of the covenant itself: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Revised Standard Version).

The phrase hearts and minds evokes the mysterious non-materiality of subjectivity that animates the physical materiality of the body. The heart and mind inhabit, indeed *constitute*, the secret authentic interiority of the subject. It is secret because it is only knowable by that subject; it is authentic because the subject's experience of itself is granted an unquestionable truthfulness and self-evident reality that cannot be challenged by others who (by definition) do not have access to it and cannot truly know it except by the reports of the subject himself. The heart and the mind together constitute the seat of the subject's experience. The faculties of both will and desire, memory, motives, and fears are all wrapped-up together in an interiority that others cannot access. It is thus an interiority that defines personal subjectivity. It would seem to correspond to the Christian soul, the focal point of concern in the Christian missionary project.

To "win" the heart and mind means to convince or convert this authentic interior subjectivity, to triumph over its resistance to outside

influence. It means reforming it, gaining its allegiance, and effecting change in it. "Winning hearts and minds" means changing the interior essence of the human subject. It is an enterprise conducted by others from outside that interior essence. It is, then, an enterprise of proselytizing. It is a kind of evangelization. Thus, the American government's efforts to win the hearts and minds of the people of Vietnam was like a missionary project—as that endeavor has been constructed and pursued by the long accumulating tradition of Christian apologetics.

The American government pursued this missionary project to convert the hearts and minds of the people by tending to the ailments of their bodies. The Montagnards' "conversion" to an undiseased modernity would be achieved through (as Rostow had counseled) economic development and humanitarian aid. The interior, immaterial, subjectivity of the heart and mind would be leveraged by treating the infirmities of the exterior, physical body.

This aspect of the military's strategy was frequently referred to as "the other war." It involved everything from dropping plane loads of propaganda flyers to handing out buckets of candy to children. The other war built roads, bridges, and dams, provide electricity, potable water, teachers and schools for villages, demonstrate new farming techniques, organize cooperatives, and improve livestock breeds and seed hybrids. The other war provided doctors and hospitals. It aimed to make a material difference in the comfort, health, and well-being of the people of Vietnam, so that they would experience the benefits of "freedom" and support the South Vietnamese government in its struggle against communist tyranny.[19]

However, the other war was repeatedly bogged down by the inability of the Vietnamese and American military to protect this new economic infrastructure of modernity or to provide anything like the security necessary for improving economic and social life. Instead, villagers were rounded up into "resettlement villages" that were little more than refugee camps. The destruction of the war made economic development unfeasible. Humanitarian aid was reduced to handing out emergency food supplies and inadequately treating civilian casualties.

But the American government shared more than a *rhetoric* of conversion with Christian missionaries, it actually co-opted their missionary organizations as well. To a significant extent, the other war was fought by a plethora of faith-based humanitarian agencies that the U.S. government coordinated, encouraged, and protected. Throughout South Vietnam, the evangelical, humanitarian, and governmental

missions of Americans in Vietnam were tied together not just by a shared missionary rhetoric, but also through explicit *material* relations as well.

In the mid-1960s, the U.S. government's "Voluntary Foreign Aid Service" (VFAS), a division of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) "Office of War on Hunger," distributed an informational pamphlet offering the following narration of its own history:

> Throughout the course of American history the people of this country have demonstrated a deep compassion for the sufferings of all mankind, the expression of which—by individuals, by private groups and, in recent years by State and Federal government—has brought relief to human distress in many countries and under many and difficult circumstances. This characteristic concern for the world's less fortunate underlies an American belief in human dignity and respect for individual freedom.[20]

Notice how this pamphlet erases the *religious* affiliation of American humanitarian aid agencies in the innocuous phrase, "private groups"—ignoring their historical emergence through the American Christian missionary project and eliding important issues involving the separation of church and state.

The strategy to win the hearts and minds emerged in a broad consensus of the American foreign policy establishment in the aftermath of World War II. Following that war, projects such as the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe reversed the prewar sentiment of "American isolationism" and codified the idea that American aid and development could be a principal instrument of U.S. foreign policy.[21] The Federal government appropriated American humanitarian missionary institutions and the work of American Christians who were motivated by an ideology of "Christian Service" to relieve suffering and witness for Christ. In its attempts to "to win the hearts and minds of the people," the U.S. government took on the role formerly played by American missionaries seeking to "civilize" the heathens in the interest of a triumphant west at the vanguard of progress.

The American voluntary agencies operated in league with and subordinate to the American military mission. They followed the military into pacified areas and worked to provide the services promised by freedom. They distributed surplus American food provided by USAID. They often used military transportation and relied on the protection and emergency evacuation provided by the American military. They fraternized with the troops and often supplied the military

and CIA with intelligence information gleamed from their grassroots contacts in the rural countryside. The U.S. military, the CIA, the American Embassy, the U.S. Information Service, USAID, and various humanitarian voluntary agencies worked closely together (and with their counterparts in the South Vietnamese government) in a broad continuum that reached from digging wells, teaching agriculture techniques, and distributing food and clothing, to rounding up civilians into resettlement or refugee camps, providing village security and interviewing suspected infiltrators, to conducting "search-and-destroy" missions in the rural countryside, napalming "enemy" villages, intercepting war material and fresh troops coming down through Laos and Cambodia on the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," and carpet bombing the territory of North Vietnam. American humanitarian missions were an important part of the American war effort. "Civic action" (or humanitarian aid) might be provided by a U.S. Marine, a representative of the RVN, an employee of USAID, or an evangelical missionary from the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

Many of the American voluntary agencies clearly identified their humanitarian mission with the broader American military mission in Vietnam. But some resisted the association. The Mennonites and the American Friends Service Committee in particular often chafed at the role assigned to them. Douglass Hostetter, a Mennonite missionary who became an outspoken critic of the willingness of humanitarian missions to be appropriated by what he saw as an immoral war, offers this description of his missionary assignment:

> What it comes down to is a religious battle in which the U.S. gods and the U.S. troops travel together. If a new area is "pacified," the missionaries, the voluntary agencies, the Christians and the relief services go in and help the people. If the area is being taken over by "the enemy," the first ones to be evacuated are the missionaries and the relief workers. There are a number of cases where VNCS [Vietnam Christian Service] personnel and missionaries were evacuated in U.S. military vehicles.
>
> Essentially, while all the U.S. voluntary agencies, not just VNCS regarded themselves as humanitarian, "good will" organizations, they are being used politically by a government that's only too happy to turn them to its own purposes. It was very clear after I got to Viet-nam, got situated and looked around, that all the voluntary agencies—"naive" as they were—were tolerated, supported, cajoled and encouraged simply because they were helping with the government's psychological warfare efforts. The minute that a person or an agency deviated from these efforts and refused to be part of the "American team," they got in very hot water.[22]

The sentiments and motivations of American humanitarian aid workers were not monolithic. Individuals probably fell on a spectrum between those who enthusiastically supported the American war effort, to those who felt its excesses were unfortunate and needed to be reined in, to those who tried to openly defy the military's expectations and saw themselves as a "witness for peace" resisting American aggression at close hand rather than in the streets of America. However, the American military tolerated humanitarian missionary agencies only to the extent that they perceived them as contributing to America's strategic efforts to win the hearts and minds of the people. The material relations between the military and humanitarian agencies were obvious, and rarely challenged. Nor did any one notice the similarity in the rhetorics that authorized the two American missions (humanitarian and military), and their similarities to the traditional evangelical mission of organizations such as the CMA.

The American government spoke of "helping the people," a rhetoric that was steeped in American exceptionalism—just as nineteenth-century colonialists had adopted the rhetoric of the civilizing mission that was steeped in the presumption of European superiority. America's effort to "help" the Vietnamese—to help them "develop," to help them "grow," and to win their hearts and minds so that they would want American's help—was essentially a missionary project, focused on bodily interventions to leverage interior change. Humanitarian aid would relieve the people's physical suffering, cure their diseases, and given them more to eat. American strategy in Vietnam was premised on the faith that these bodily interventions would leverage the internal subjectivity of peoples' political allegiance, would win their hearts and minds, would convert them to an undiseased modernity.

3 Internal Change and External Signs

One difficulty encountered by any missionary project trying to transform the interior space of the heart and mind through humanitarian aid focused on the exteriority of the body is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine with certainty if an authentic conversion has actually occurred. This problem has riddled missionary discourses—evangelical, humanitarian, and military.[23]

For example, CMA missionaries sought evidence of the transformation of interior souls in the transformation of exterior ritual practice (chiefly, the abandonment of the practice of animal sacrifices). Further, they sought to influence the soul by treating the illnesses

and inadequacies of the Montagnards' bodies and material environment. Their ambivalence toward mere "medical or humanitarian mission" reflects an uncertainty about the relationship between physical bodies and the hearts and minds that they sought to transform. They expected "improvements" in the living conditions of the villages that converted to Christianity, and they frequently reported them in their accounts sent back to supporters in America—contrasting the "sloth" of a traditional Montagnard village with the tidiness of a Christian Montagnard village. Most explicitly, when it came to the hallmark of heathen religion—animal sacrifices—the conversion of the healing practices of the body was the prerequisite for a conversion of the soul. Protestant missionary discourses more generally, and certainly those of the CMA, frequently rely on the close association of physical inadequacies and spiritual deprivation.

The following quote by CMA missionary Gordon Smith reflects his concern about the sincerity and authenticity of the internal change that the Montagnards profess. If the Montagnards' heathen heart is externally evidenced by animal sacrifices, is the transformation of that heart demonstrated when they cease the animal sacrifices? Smith worries whether it is yet time to mark their apparent internal transformation to Christ with the physical sign of baptism:

> The Gospel fire spread and the people began to ask for baptism. The students went from place to place instructing the people and thought many could now be baptized. We were confronted with a new problem. This was the first mass movement we had witnessed amongst the tribes and we wondered whether they really meant to follow Christ with all their hearts, or whether one followed another simply because many others were doing it. They urged us to "put them in the water," and "make a covenant with God," and said they would give up all their sacrifices…
>
> What should we do? Should we wait until they more fully understood the step, before baptizing them? or should we help them clinch their desire to follow God? If this were really a step towards God, however faltering and fearful, should we not encourage them to make their stand and witness to the world that they would henceforth follow Christ? How deep had the work of the holy Spirit been in their hearts? Were they thinking only of their own material blessings, good health, good crops, good luck? How many of them were sincere and how many followed the crowd? If many were sincere, would not the rest be helped to go all the way too? Could we refuse them when they said with all their hearts that they truly believed in Christ and would leave their sacrifices?
>
> We decided to give them the benefit of the doubt, feeling that God knew their hearts and if they truly believed He would save them.

> We cried out to God to make it a definite work of grace in each heart, not simply a mass movement of baptized heathens that would later return to their old ways.[24]

Since proof of conversion lies only in the private experience of the convert, Gordon Smith must search for some physical manifestation of a nonmaterial transformation. His last paragraph holds out hope that God might make the physical act of baptism "a definite work of grace in each heart"—that the materiality of baptism might actually *prompt* the internal transformation of the heart, not just mark the transformation that has (hopefully) already occurred.

In contrast to the Protestant evangelical missions of the CMA, the French Catholic missionary Jacques Dournes (active in the highlands during the 1950s and 1960s; see chapters two and three) offers a clearly articulated theological position on the relationship between the exterior physical rites of the body and the interior transformation of the spirit.

> The Jarai have a faith; to attack it would do nothing to build up the Catholic church. It would be more likely to drive them away from religion altogether. My job must be rather to base the new teaching on something they already know, to develop and purify an existing religion, and therefore to seek a point of contact…
>
> I had to work to convert all the elements of their religion…
>
> Their myths are transmitted and made to become part of their lives through ritual. I therefore would not set out to give them an academic course, or make them the audience of any kind of representation, but tried from the start to make them take part in the liturgy and the apostolate.[25]

For Dournes, a Catholic, the immateriality of God expresses itself and is knowable in human terms through the physical rituals of Christian worship. Scandalously, he argues that God also can work through pagan rituals—though not as fully or completely as he does through the revealed dictates of Christian ritual. His job as a missionary was to gradually "purify" and "ennoble" these pagan rites, "to lead the Jarai religion to its completion."[26] Thus, for example, he inserted Christian prayers into *Jarai* burial rituals. He also introduced Catholic liturgical elements, slowly transforming the practices of *Jarai* rituals into suitably Christian forms. The *Jarai* would be converted when their rituals were converted. It is as though the physical sign *compels* the interior transformation. The external signs of an interior spirituality would be brought into alignment with Christian worship.

Without entering here into an extensive discussion of Jacques Dournes' missiology, I want merely to suggest that despite the contrast between Protestant and Catholic theories of mission there is a perennial missionary concern for the troubling relationship between the exteriority of human bodies and the inferiority of authentic individual subjectivity (the spiritual self that is the missionaries' object of concern). The CMA hoped that changes in bodily practice were a sign of a corresponding change in the soul. For Jacques Dournes, the gradual "conversion of Montagnard rites" could eventually accomplish the conversion of their souls. Similarly, humanitarian missionaries employed by the American government hoped that a transformation of the Montagnards' physical living conditions would spur a transformation in their interior political allegiance.

But it proved impossible to read the secrets of the heart. A Viet Cong cadre could access government services as a loyal citizen by day, and ambush military patrols by night. Like the missionaries of either Protestant, Catholic, or humanitarian intent, the American government was confronted with a problem of its own construction—how to influence interior subjectivities through external interventions, and how to determine whether an internal alteration had in fact occurred.

The material aid of the humanitarian mission was supposed to transform the populations' hearts and minds so that they would no longer support the Viet Cong insurrection, but would align their interests instead with the South Vietnamese state. This strategy must have been at least somewhat successful, because the infrastructure of economic development and humanitarian aid was frequently a target of Viet Cong attacks (offering evidence that at least the Viet Cong also believed that programs of material aid could transform hearts and minds). Therefore, providing humanitarian services required that they be defended against attempts by the Viet Cong to sabotage them. Increasingly, the military relied on herding dispersed Montagnard populations into refugee camps—given euphemistic labels such as "Resettlement Villages" and "New Life Hamlets." From within the fortified fences of these villages, the RVN (or its American military, and/or humanitarian agency counterparts) could begin to implement and demonstrate the advantages of freedom. Paradoxically, providing security entailed forceful military actions, including the physical relocation of entire Montagnard villages, and the careful monitoring and documentation of the highland population. The military and CIA called this process "population control"—all in the name of freedom.

As in the processes of refugee resettlement discussed in chapter four where the American government's documentation marked a transformation in the identity of Montagnards as they passed into the humanitarian embrace of refugee status, so too in the highlands of Vietnam in the context of a raging guerilla war, the state apparatus of the RVN issued identifying documents as physical proof of the Montagnards' new allegiance and citizenship. This process amounted to fencing off the "loyal" population (so as to exclude and isolate the guerilla element) and incorporating them into the state.

A book of photographs published by a British photojournalist extremely cynical of the Americans' "pacification" program and the conduct of the war in general offers this caption to a bleak and dramatic photograph:

> Peasants... approach their new world through a dust storm caused by the helicopters. It was a piece of barren ground on which had been erected 40 long tents, in each of which 800 people were destined to live. The camp into which the people were concentrated was officially described as a "center." It was surrounded by barbed wire and at the entrance was a sign saying "Welcome to Freedom."[27]

A considerably more positive representation of the military's project of "rural pacification" emerges in a training manual archived in the Special Forces library at Fort Bragg. The manual describes a "model response" by a Special Forces camp to a refugee emergency that resulted when the American army "liberated" several hundred Montagnards from communist control by destroying their village. Note in the following quote the absurdly confusing shorthand of abbreviations and acronyms that identify the first wave of humanitarian aid in "the other war": "Government officials, advised and assisted by US CA/PsyWar/Med personnel swung into action. Supplies of food, clothing, blankets, and medicine had been stockpiled for such an emergency. A refugee processing center and temporary housing was set up in the form of a 'tent city.'"[28] In this Special Forces training manual, the transformations of pacification proceed with "military efficiency":

> Each refugee then moved through a medical station, where he was given a medical exam and emergency medical treatment...
>
> An intelligence station screened the refugees for infiltrators, and gathered intelligence information volunteered by the refugees...
>
> The heads of each family then moved through an issue point, where they were given food, clothing, blankets, health and comfort items,

> and assigned to temporary shelter... The refugees, under the direction of village health workers, dug latrines, and garbage dumps. By evening, the area was bustling with activity...
>
> Plans for permanent buildings (school, dispensary, wells, and latrines) were made, and building materials ordered from USSF CA [United States Special Forces Civic Action] funds. CA/PsyWar/Med Patrols [Civic Action, Psychological Warfare, and Medical Patrols] were sent, twice a week to the New Life Hamlet, to issue food, give propaganda lectures and hold sick calls. A village chief was appointed by the district chief, and a council of elders was set up. A village administrator was assigned from district.[29]

The manual continues for several pages describing the orderly and efficient construction of a new Montagnard village—a "New Life Hamlet," securely resettled in the benevolent embrace of the emerging modern South Vietnamese state. Not coincidentally, the manual mentions that "many of the young men have joined the CIDG [Civilian Irregular Defense Group]"—the Montagnard military units, led by American and South Vietnamese Special Forces officers.

The account of the model response then concludes with testimony offering evidence that the material aid of civic action has indeed transformed the hearts and minds of the Montagnard villagers.

> If you ask a tribesman today, he will tell you, "we are very happy here. The children and old people are well and we have plenty of food." The tribesmen are proud of their new village. Many visitors say it is the cleanest hamlet they have seen. It is a rare occasion when visitors leave without an invitation to share some rice wine and food with the tribesman. In their own way they show that the government has won some friends and new citizens.[30]

Yet, despite this document's assurance that "the government has won some friends and new citizens," the actual allegiance of these newly documented citizens in their "proud" and "clean" hamlet remained a troubling preoccupation of the RVN and the American military and CIA throughout the war. The South Vietnamese flag flying over the New Life Hamlet's medical dispensary, the newly built public school, and the model livestock breeding center, all surrounded by layers of bamboo stockade and barb wire to keep out the Viet Cong—these were to be the material signs of internal, nonmaterial, subjective allegiance. But the Viet Cong did not need to storm the gates of the stockade; they could infiltrate in the ranks of the "pacified" population. For in the end there was no reliable physical sign of the interior

condition of their hearts and minds. Colonel Kelly, who served at the top of the Special Forces command for a time in Vietnam, wrote later in a lengthy history and evaluation of the Special Forces' conduct of the war:

> The American and Vietnamese officials were acutely aware of the opportunity for Viet Cong infiltration and developed control measures to be followed . . . The village chief had to certify that everyone in the village was loyal to the government and had to reveal any known Viet Cong agents or sympathizers. Recruits vouched for the people nearest them in line when they came for training. These methods exposed five or six Viet Cong agents in each village and these were turned over to the Vietnamese and Rhade leaders for rehabilitation.[31]

Perhaps the social relations of Montagnard villages rendered this screening process more effective that it might appear on paper. But the analyses of the Special Forces' own "After Action Reports" demonstrate the military's failure to identify Viet Cong infiltrators until they had betrayed a camp by aiding a Viet Cong attack. Similar problems were recurrent in the hastily constructed New Life Hamlets. One reporter mocked the pretensions of the pacification program when an officer told him that it was not safe for him to enter one of these New Life Hamlets less than a year after it had been created. Despite being counted as a "pacified village," it was in fact run by Viet Cong.[32] Nevertheless, the American military and government carefully enumerated the New Life Hamlets constructed and the always growing population dutifully documented as loyal to the RVN—their hearts and minds won to the cause of "freedom and (un-diseased) modernity."

Strikingly, evangelical missionaries commonly resort to this same method to measure their success and drum up support on the home front. For example, as Betty Mitchell wrote in the CMA's *Alliance Witness* in the 1960s: "There are good reports from the Mnong area. Y'Huh, chief of Dak R'Tih . . . sent word that in another village . . . about 113 people have burned their fetishes and believed on Christ . . . Pray earnestly that the man of God's choosing will go to minister to the more than 900 Mnong believers."[33] This reliance on numbers was of course aimed partly at demonstrating success for the churches at home who were asked for support—just as the military's numbers were broadcast to the American public to win *its* support. But as we have seen in Gordon Smith's ambivalence regarding the sudden mass conversion of entire villages, the interiority of the hearts and minds of the converts was more difficult to ascertain. The use of numbers in

order to measure success (whether military or evangelical)—the charade by which missionaries and the military pretended or believed they could enumerate the authentic, interior, and thus inaccessible, transformation that is the goal of conversion—betrays the paradoxes inherent in a missionary project seeking to intuit internal change through external signs.

4 Gathering the People

A Special Forces' training manual for population control, represents refugee resettlement as the "liberation" of Montagnards enslaved by the Viet Cong:

> For months these tribesmen had been forced by the Viet Cong to act as bearers for parties moving up the Nuoc Lo Valley. Their rice fields were taxed, and their young men impressed into fighting for the Viet Cong. On 30 May 65, a large-scale military operation liberated these villagers and brought them into the secure area of Ba To.[34]

A somewhat more complicated picture emerges through the representations of Dega refugees in North Carolina. In these accounts, the military measures of population control often seem quite brutal as the Montagnards are pulled forcibly between the warring Viet Cong and American/RVN armies. But most Dega refugees came to identify with the American humanitarian project, eagerly worked for it, and pinned their hopes for the future on its promises to help the people. Represented from hindsight in the postconversion Dega resettlement, these humanitarian and military interventions appear to the Dega as a decisive step in the formation of their collective identity that is now so forcefully articulated in opposition to the category of "communist." Ironically, it was only in the humanitarian social services of refugee resettlement that Americans were finally able to deliver on the promised bodily improvements of health and economic security.

From the comfort of his studio apartment in Raleigh, Nay Jak narrated for me the traumatic events of his childhood when the government of South Vietnam forced his family's village to relocate near the highway where they could be more easily protected from the Viet Cong guerrillas. His account is worth quoting at length for its depiction of Montagnards being pulled back and forth between the warring Vietnamese sides, and for its vivid description of the intrusion of war into a child's life (remembered in adulthood as bucolic and peaceful), and for its less then positive account of the

military's "civic action" program from the perspective of one who has received the aid.

> We lost everything. Our family had a lot in the house. Everything broke. Everything. Government didn't pay anything. We lost a lot…I can say we were rich, but not compared to here. We had buffalo, we had elephant to carry it. Took almost a month, for everything to carry out. To hide it in the jungle, our property. We didn't have anything…
>
> They push us to the street. And then the communists come in the night, pull us back to the village. Then South Vietnam, President Diem's Army, come back and pull us out. And then, in the night, the communists come and pull us back…
>
> The third time the communists push us, we didn't want to go back. We just stayed along the river. We just stay. We don't want to go back again. We know that if we go back there, the Diem Army is going to pull us back again. So we stayed there. And the communists stayed with us. And at about ten, nine o'clock in the morning the army came. Fight together. Oh man. People screaming, crying…Because the communists stay with us. And the army doesn't care. They just shoot…
>
> I was a little kid…That was the first fighting that I saw. I was crying. I don't know where to run. I heard the sound of bullets. I thought, "oh my God they're going to kill me." I cried and cried. My aunt pulled me…Some families lost their kids because they didn't know. They were scared. They never heard the gun sound. They were scared. Because the people were living peacefully. They didn't hear anything about the gun. Even though airplane sound, they just lived naturally. Day time, sun come up, go to farm, go to, you know. Sun go down come back to the village. Sleep, playing, drinking rice wine. Suddenly the war came up and people were very scared. Lost their property. Lost their house. Lost their cow. Lost their buffalo. Lost their horse. Everybody lost their lives, some of them…
>
> The government said they would build us a new place before they pulled us out, but they didn't. When we got to the new place, we had to cut the wood. Just a small place. Just for the day and for the night. Just if it was raining. For the old people, ok. But for the kids, oh my god. Crying and crying. Because they never stayed in the dark condition before. And suddenly they're living in that case. So old people they understood, but the young people they didn't know what. So they're crying. In the day time too hot for the people. In the night time, cold for them. Unbelievable.

Apparently the government's New Life Hamlets were not always founded as the result of Montagnards "voting with their feet," "choosing freedom," and "escaping communist servitude"—as the

government accounts would have it. But it would be inaccurate to assert that Dega in North Carolina represent themselves as resisting or resenting the population control measures of the American government and the RVN.

For example, compared to Nay Jak's account, Y'Lui gave me a quite different perspective on the processes of population control in his story of a military action in which he apparently had a leadership position and worked quite closely with the Americans. "We had to go far away and look for the people, and bring them back to live peacefully by the Saigon road," he explained to me. I asked him if it was hard for the people to move, remembering the account given me by Nay Jak. "Oh yes. It was hard," he said. "We used helicopter." I tried again. "Did they *want* to move?" He responded:

> They *should* be that. Because they run away. They were scared. We tried to catch them. We tried to put our troops around. But they still escape. They scared, because they hear the Vietnamese propaganda. Like the American people kill you, or torture you. You cannot go to live with the South Vietnamese people or American people. You have to run away. They scared people like that. It was hard to get them back. They build a nice village on the road. But new. And close. Easy for them to buy some stuff, if hungry, no rice. Give the sheet [of aluminum] for the roof.

Y'Lui is apparently not concerned by the military violence that troubles his account. And this sort of representation of the material benefits of military "liberation" is not rare in Dega accounts provided from the distance of more than twenty years of guerilla resistance to the communists. The category of "communist Vietnamese" would eventually form the unproblematic opposition around which "Dega" identity could be gathered. But this opposition is the result of a transformation that the postwar and post-refugee Dega population is heir to. The animosity between Montagnards and communists was apparently not so natural and inevitable in the early years of the war, nor for every Montagnard during the war, as Salemink's scholarship has clearly demonstrated. The Dega in North Carolina represent a selective sampling of Montagnards—a fraction that vociferously resisted Vietnamese communism and lived to tell the tale, from refugee exile. Their accounts completely erase the existence of Montagnards who sided with the communists. They even obscure the transition Montagnards passed through as they came to identify their hopes for the future with the American humanitarian aid program.

But a glimpse of this transformation can be gleamed by returning to the childhood reminiscences of Nay Jak:

> The communists came to the village. Not very often. Just sometimes. Usually, I heard about that, because during that time I was small, little kid. I didn't pay attention very much. They told me that usually the communists went to meet the people on the farm. In the garden. Something like this. Go to the farm. Help people pull the grass. Help people harvest a lot.
>
> They tried to get people involved. They try to win over South Vietnam that way. During that time, the communists, they help very very much. Generous. A lot of people, they didn't know, the way they try to get over the South. To conquer more people to follow them.

The Viet Cong seem to be engaged in their *own* humanitarian missionary project. When I asked him whether people in his village supported the communists, he hedged his answer with hindsight. They did, he said, because

> the people didn't know. Yes they did [join the Viet Cong]. Because the communists talk. Not only they talk, but the people saw the way they work. What I mean is they talk, they explain, "Communism is very good. To help people. To bring people a life. Help each other. Don't want to be like this person better than another. Each person want to behave everyone equal." So, yes, before that people did believe on them. But after that, no.

When I asked him if he saw many Viet Cong in those days, he told me that as a child he was not afraid of communists. In fact, he would have followed them north to Hanoi for schooling had his mother not stopped him. Nay Jak first asserted that he knew of no Montagnards who joined the Viet Cong. But when I pushed him on this, he admitted that in fact someone as close to him as his *father's brother* "went to the jungle" to join the communists. He explained: "The communists played very sweet. Very Very Sweet. Sweeter than honey...My uncle fell in their trap...My father didn't want to go. He was married. But my uncle, he was single. So that's why." Nay Jak seemed to want to present me with an untroubled history of Montagnard opposition to the communists. When he was forced to qualify that appraisal he did so by trying to explain away his uncle's regrettable decision as the result of seductive manipulation. His father, he recalls, did not want to "go into the jungle" because he was married. As it turned out, he finally joined the Special Forces CIDG program after his village had been forcibly relocated.

His decision here would seem to have been premised on the powerful successes of population control efforts as well as the improved civil infrastructure and security being offered by the state.

A Dega leader in Charlotte told me that the communists had kidnapped him to carry ammunition to the front. But when I asked him to explain, it turns out he was at first a "communist sympathizer":

> I really wanted to fight with the VC at first . . . Because where we lived in the village, with the VC surrounding us. We had to fight with them. Had to support them. And the government did not want the Montagnard to help the VC. And they pulled the Montagnard close to the district.
>
> Viet Cong pull on the left side and the government pull on the right side. At that time, the government is stronger, in control, than the Viet Cong.

Here the image of Montagnard *bodies* tugged by either side emerges with definite clarity. Their hearts and minds are leveraged through the population control of their bodies—even despite the apparently pervasive communist "proselytizing."

> The cadres would teach doctrines. They taught theory very high, like propaganda. They teach very good doctrine. They teach more deeply than the South Vietnamese. So some people think they have to follow the Viet Cong. But the government side is strong with the army. They control more of the people than the Viet Cong . . . But they talk. They convince people. They talk very good theory . . . Like they promise, "This is our country. Everything belongs to us. Not belong to French. Not belong to American. Why you follow American? Why you follow the foreigner? We have to protect our country. Our nation." That's what they say. "And when we win the south, everything will belong to me. All the car. All the house. All the material will belong to you." That's what they promise [laughing]. "We fight for you, not for myself."
>
> At last the government soldiers came to the village, and surrounding, take all the people to the city . . . We no longer allowed to live in the jungle anymore . . . I be seventeen or eighteen. Concentrate close to the city, and that way we join the army. I joined the Special Forces when they moved our village to the highway. It's the stronger way. They have the U.S. It's the better way. The VC too few people. Nothing they can do. But the government side, good weapons.

The American government and the RVN appeared to be the more powerful side, and in any case, they came and forcibly removed the

village from Viet Cong territory. “We no longer allowed to live in the jungle anymore.” So he signed up to fight with the American Special Forces, as previously he had been “impressed” into fighting for the Viet Cong (as military reports would have it). And in hindsight—after the victory of the Viet Cong and their severe retribution against the Montagnard people following the war—the Viet Cong promises of a material utopia appear laughable.

Bling Rong, whom I spoke with in Greensboro bragged that when he worked with the Special Forces during the war he could recruit “four battalions” of Montagnard soldiers “in about two weeks.” “They all wanted to fight. Cause they don’t like communists. Because communists threaten them, steal their stuff, kill them, harass them and everything. That’s why they don’t like them.” I asked him if any of the Montagnards had fought on the side of the Viet Cong. He answered: “This is the thing. The ones that were completely controlled by the communists, they couldn’t get away. So they have to be loyal to the communists. But the ones that were able to get out from the communist tribe, no. They like ours more than the communists.” I pushed him further to make sure, because the American military analysts of the period report a significant percentage of Montagnard Viet Cong guerrillas. “Didn’t any Montagnards try to escape from the government to join the communists?” But he was certain. “No, no. Not many.” His friend, sitting with us in his living room, felt called upon to intercede in our interview at this point, to set straight this important point of history.

> None. The French and Americans, they bring something healthy. They bring something godly. The teaching. They did not kill someone in my people. That’s why they compare, the communists and the French and the United States American. They different. Why they don’t like the communists. And why they like the United States and France, because they know, they realize, they see, and they understand—good and bad. That’s why. So most who had been living in the communist control, they want to come out. But sometimes they can and sometimes they cannot. That’s why they have to live together with the communists, but they don’t like. Nobody like . . .
>
> Only lie. They talking the things sweeter than honey, but they didn’t do anything. Also they stole something from my people. They stole a cow. Food sometimes . . . The communists only lie and kill. That’s why they don’t like them.

Representations offered by Dega, articulated from the position of postwar refugee exile in North Carolina, draw a clear and easy

opposition between Viet Cong "lies, talking sweeter than honey," and the Americans' ability to deliver the humanitarian aid and development of modernity—"they bring something healthy." The Montagnards appear as unwilling prisoners under Viet Cong control. The communists just burn their villages and steal their property.

Ami Bling offers this account of her life during the war:

> I saw communists when I was young, and I so scared until now. I don't like communists too much…I six year old. Oooh, communists go to village to ask for rice, ask for food, and ask for clothes, like that. And anything they want, they went to village to ask for something. And some people help, some people don't help.
>
> Communists, no nice…Everyone scared. I said myself, from I small till now, I scared, I afraid communists.
>
> I don't scared for freedom Vietnamese. They is nice. They help people.
>
> American help me. They give me food. They give me clothes. They give me dress. When I was young, and I don't have nothing, and Red Cross help me a lot. They take shower for me and give me medicine and give me clothes. And I look nice. When they go back, I look dirty again [laughing].
>
> They help people. Sickness and poor. They don't have nothing to eat, they give food. I see Red Cross a long long time ago. They help me a lot.

The American's humanitarian mission offers a clear alternative here to the extortionist Viet Cong. She is not afraid of the "freedom Vietnamese"—her term, apparently, for the RVN and their Red Cross civic action allies. As she continues in the following quote, the "freedom soldier" of the South Vietnamese and American armies—juxtaposed in the previous quote to the fearful communists in the jungle—merges imperceptibly with the postwar Montagnard *FULRO* (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*) soldier. Now the good guys are "in the jungle" but they are still in this account emphatically oppositional to the fearful communists who now do not just come at night but actually *control* her village. She continues first by describing the Viet Cong demands for support:

> They don't like the people to believe the freedom soldier. They want the people to believe them. To go with them in jungle…
>
> When they burn our village, we have to rebuild again. And they burn again. Again. I so scared. I scared of the communists until now…
>
> My family don't go to the communists. We don't like. My family, we be a soldier. My brother have a soldier.

> They burn all the village. Some people have family be too soldier, and they get mad.

And then her account makes a nearly imperceptible shift to the period after the American withdrawal, when the sides had shifted and the communist Vietnamese were in control of the villages:

> My husband went to jungle, they get mad to me. They do to me what they want. They let me work for them, no pay. And every Sunday, they have to take me to listen to their way, like that. The same before. Before, who family to be a soldier, they take that family and go to jungle to teach their way and tell the son or brother, to be a soldier, to go back to village and to go their way, like that.

This jungle is not the Viet Cong jungle of the war years, but the *FULRO* jungle of the postwar resistance movement. In her narrative, both before and after the communist victory, it is the same—the communists don't like the "freedom soldier," and take retribution on his family.

Krong Bling, who spoke with me in Charlotte, explained that he had worked with the RVN's Ministry for Ethnic Minorities during the war. This Ministry was established by the RVN in the mid-1960s after Americans pressured them to acquiesce to some of the Montagnards demands. The Ministry conducted needs assessment surveys, lobbied for better government treatment of the Montagnards and more government services, and funneled American aid into Montagnard villages. In fact, many Dega refugees were once involved in the humanitarian project to help the highland people and several report having worked for the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities. Another was an agricultural specialist educated in an American university. Working in and through a variety of international aid and governmental programs, he helped establish model farms in the highlands and worked to improve livestock breeds and seed hybrids. I know several Dega who trained to become nurses in American funded clinics. Dega who worked in this broad humanitarian project usually worked closely with Americans. Of course, as I discussed in chapters two and three, many Dega living now in North Carolina served in the American Special Forces (where *FULRO* soldiers received their first training). But many of them were also interpreters for either the military, CIA, State Department, or humanitarian missions. The vast majority of Dega refugees participated in and identified with the American humanitarian mission

to the central highlands. Many of them first formed their adult identities through this effort to improve the living conditions of their fellow Montagnards.

Krong explained that during the war he was "developing the village":

> I worked with the Special Forces, training the people to use the dispensary. Build the school. How to keep the people together. Because the North Vietnamese were trying to convince the Montagnard against the South. The Montagnard were caught in the middle of the conflict . . . We don't want that they should fall in the trap of the North Vietnamese.
>
> And the Americans, the Special Forces, build many schools. But then the war increased. No place is safe. No one can go to teach. They kill everyone. Everyone stayed in the city . . . Not problem because of American; problem because of the war.

This statement leaves no doubt that the civic action programs were an effort to win the hearts and minds of the Montagnards. The Americans built schools because they did not want the Montagnards "to fall in the trap of the North Vietnamese." But as the war dragged on, the quote continues, it became increasingly difficult for the Americans and the RVN to fulfill their social welfare promises. It is remarkable that Dega never blame Americans for the incredible devastation that occurred after America intervened in the war. In Krong Bling's telling, it was "not a problem because of the America; problem because of the war." The American war made Montagnard traditional living patterns untenable and turned many Montagnards into refugees. They became tenants of the ill-equipped welfare state of the RVN that was unable to deliver the health, schools, and economic improvements promised by the rhetoric of freedom.

The U.S. Army's official history offers this description of a Montagnard refugee camp late in the war. It is no longer referred to as a New Life Hamlet:

> The Thieu regime resumed the practice of forcibly relocating the tribes from their traditional homelands, generating some 52,000 Montagnard "relocatees," or refugees, in 1970–71. General Dzu, the II Corps commander felt that the action was necessary because of his inability to provide security for the scattered Highlander villages and his conviction that many were aiding the Viet Cong. In early 1971 Gerald Hickey, the noted Rand Corporation sociologist, visited some of the relocated villages, reported the resettlement effort badly mismanaged, and attempted unsuccessfully to halt or slow down the movements.[35]

But Dega refugees themselves never narrate the appalling conditions caused by the American military intervention, nor do they complain that the Americans never delivered the material assistance that they had promised. Instead they usually recall the processes of population control as a crucial step in the Montagnards' emerging ethnonationalist organization in opposition to "the communists." An early leader of this movement explained to me:

> We went out to Buon M'gah. We tried to get the people to come back close to the outpost, to leave their huts, you know. Because the North Vietnamese try to get them in the jungle. So we have to fight, and look for them to take them home, you see... Because it was almost empty now, since the French left there...
>
> During [the regime of] Ngo Diem, they [RVN] put the Montagnards in refugee camps. They [Montagnards] follow Ho Chi Minh again. And they block the road, destroy the bridge, so that nobody, like Vietnamese troops, cannot go over there. Like empty, you know. So when the Special Forces work together with the Montagnard, recruit Montagnard to fight back, to gain those remote areas. Almost destroyed. Nobody there. When we fight, destroy their villages in the jungle, try to pick up them to return home. So we train them again to protect their own village again after that.

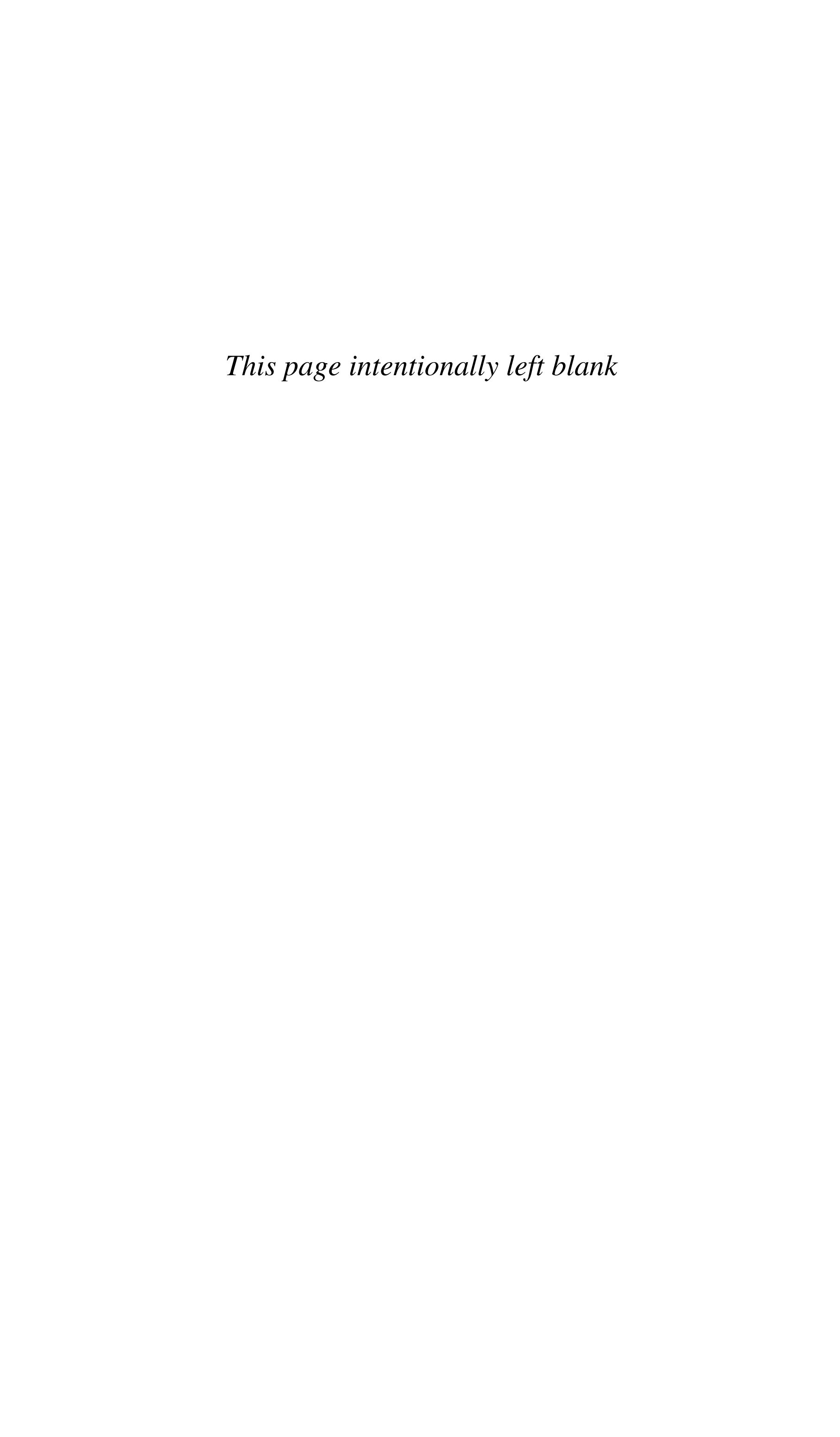
This particular Dega was an early convert to the American strategy of controlling and ministering to Montagnard bodies. He unproblematically represents the Viet Cong communists as the obvious enemy of the people. His rhetoric unselfconsciously links the Viet Cong, violence, dispersion, and lack of control. "It was almost empty... all the villages around there disappear... almost destroyed... nobody there." This "gathering of the people" is exactly the same language he uses to discuss the first months of the *FULRO* resistance force gathering in the jungle in 1975 to resist the now victorious communist Vietnamese: "We have to gather our people. We were scattered. Not know where we are. The communists, they don't want us to come together. We have to find our people, to protect the villages."

In Dega memories of the war years, the Viet Cong lurking in the jungle are represented through the prism of twenty years of *FULRO* opposition to the communist Vietnamese victors. Given that Dega identity is now articulated in opposition to the category of "Vietnamese communists," it is nearly impossible for them to represent the RVN and American military population control strategies to win the hearts and minds of the people as anything but the first organized Montagnard opposition to the Vietnamese. And if, as Gerald Hickey's

report attests, the Montagnard refugee camps can hardly be considered a sterling example of the benefits of freedom and modernity, the American government finally did deliver on its promises when the Montagnard "freedom fighters" arrived in the United States as refugees.

Most of the Dega with whom I have spoken do not really want to go back to Vietnam. They might, they say, if the regime changed, and they could "work for the people" there—and if they could live there the way they live here. Some say that they would like their children to be able to live there, if they finish their schooling here first. If there was "opportunity in the highlands," they could go back as leaders and developers. Really, they seem to like better their children's chances here in North Carolina.

The hearts and minds of the Dega have been won. They are patriotic Americans now. In "the freedom country," as they often call it, they can work for and have all the blessings of modernity that are denied their Montagnard relatives stuck back in the central highlands. The contrast is all too evident for them. The American missionary project to win their hearts and minds, that turned to the strategy of population control, was appropriated by the Montagnards themselves. Their definitive association of the American interventions with the Dega identity-formation against the communists was disastrous for their people after the war. But for those who survived the long guerilla campaign against the communist state, or managed to get out of the central highlands to America by some other means, the material assistance of the benevolent state has succeeded in ways that none of them could have anticipated. The conversion of their hearts and minds is written on their consumer bodies.



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Chapter 7

The Conversion of the Special Forces

Significant material, ideological, and rhetorical relations bound the American government's military intervention in Vietnam with evangelical and humanitarian missionary projects. None were more involved in the program to "win the hearts and minds" of the Montagnards than the American Special Forces or "Green Beret" as they were popularly known. They too were a kind of missionary to the Montagnards. One officer explained at the time: "We're really a military version of the Peace Corps. We are social workers with rifles."[1] While the Special Forces were actually quite successful in this project to win the hearts and minds of the Montagnards, their mission seems to have had a profound effect on themselves as well. The men of the Special Forces, in a sense, passed through a "conversion" of their own. Their "hearts and minds" were won *by the Montagnards.* Trying to win the loyalty of the Montagnards, in the end it is the *Special Forces* whose loyalty is won. This conversion has become evident in the resettlement of the Dega in North Carolina where retired Special Forces soldiers have worked passionately to promote and defend Montagnard interests.

The historical process of this conversion of the Special Forces was marked by specific material objects of highland culture and the ritual performance of oaths of allegiance. The conversion of Special Forces soldiers goes unnoticed because it is conducted on the level of physical objects and gestures, which apparently no one would think would affect the interior subjectivity of the soldiers—reproducing once again the dichotomy between interior selves and exterior bodies that troubles missionary discourses of conversion.

The men of the Special Forces came to the central highlands to change Montagnard material culture, and thereby to change the interior hearts and minds of the Montagnards. But in the end, it is the

Special Forces as much as the Montagnards who are "converted"—by very material artifacts and customs of the highland culture in which they sought to intervene. This narrative of *Montagnard* actions producing Special Forces loyalty subverts the dominant narrative of *Special Forces* activities to produce *Montagnard* loyalty.

1 The Missionary Discourse of the American Special Forces

The U.S. Army's division of Special Forces emerged from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) after World War II.[2] Highly trained in the skills of "unconventional warfare," Special Forces commandos were taught to operate alone or in small teams behind enemy lines to organize "partisans" into a guerilla resistance force that could disrupt enemy supply lines and infrastructure. They were the Army's elite force, carefully selected, supremely conditioned, and rigorously prepared. The unit cultivated a certain mystique by attracting and encouraging "a special breed of soldier," one who excelled at creative innovations and carried a brash "can-do" attitude—a soldier who "chafed at rigid discipline and who didn't care what the career managers at the Pentagon said or believed."[3] Prominent in this myth is the story of the young President Kennedy, smitten with the unit's image of excellence and vigor, visiting the Special Forces training camp at Fort Bragg during the first year of his administration, and personally intervening in military protocol to insist that members of the Special Forces be allowed to wear the jaunty green beret that many soldiers had taken to wearing. He called it "a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom."[4] The Special Forces eagerly associated itself with the image of youthful optimism, serious intent, and applied expertise cultivated by the Kennedy administration. Upon his death, the Special Forces renamed their Special Warfare Center The John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School. "Quite fittingly, a green beret now rests permanently on President Kennedy's grave in Arlington National Cemetery," the Special Forces' *Green Beret* magazine remarked in its inaugural issue in 1966.[5] The JFK Special Warfare Museum on the base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, enshrines the image and rhetoric of Kennedy's early idealism of the 1960s.

Kennedy conceived the Special Forces as a unit to combat low-level communist insurgencies. He effectively reversed the Special Forces' mission from guerilla commandos to counterinsurgency experts. Their first assignment in this new role was in Indochina, where they

were sent in small twelve-man "A Teams" into remote Montagnard villages to organize and train Montagnards to defend themselves against communist guerrillas operating in the jungle. If the Montagnards could be convinced to align themselves with the South Vietnamese government against the Viet Cong, then the guerrillas would be denied the base of support in the rural population on which they depended for rice, fresh recruits, and hiding places. The trick was to convince Montagnards that their interests lay with the government and against the guerrillas. This was to be accomplished by providing them the material benefits of citizenship in the emerging Republic of [South] Vietnam (RVN)—medical clinics, economic improvements, and security from the guerrillas. Improvements in their material well-being would win their allegiance, their hearts and minds.

The effort appears almost cynical in an account narrated to me by the Special Forces sergeant who had entered the highlands in 1961 through the auspices of the CIA. Disguised as an aid worker with the International Voluntary Service and presenting the forged credentials of an anthropologist, he approached Montagnard villages with the gift of Western biomedicine. When his clinics proved successful and popular, he would offer to establish a permanent medical dispensary in the village and train the Montagnards to diagnose and treat common ailments. As he explained in an interview, the dispensary was used like bait to capture the Montagnards' political allegiance:

> In order to get the dispensary, the village would have to agree to build defenses to keep the VC out—or the VC would take the medicine for themselves. Well, once you have a fort, then the village is marked as off-limits. The village has committed itself against the Viet Cong. And so, like that, the village would be brought onto the U.S. side of the war. Then we had to train a village militia to defend themselves.

Thus was born the village defense program known as the Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG).

This humanitarian aid project was supported by social scientific expertise, a kind of secular "missionary discourse." Salemink chronicles how soldiers read social scientific analyses such as "*Promoting Change in the Village*" and "*How Changes Occur in Human Behavior*." Special Forces training manuals reviewed and reprinted French ethnographic analyses of the highlanders to provide guidelines and strategies for inducing change and winning the allegiance of the Montagnards.[6]

One such training manual catalogs the individual tribes, deploying categories such as "social structure," "individual characteristics,"

"customs and taboos," "health and medical," "religion," "economy," "history," and "ethnology" (referring to languages). The entry for each tribe concludes by offering advice on such topics as "Civic Action," "Paramilitary," "Guidelines for Rapport," and "Psychops Considerations" (a frequently used abbreviation for "psychological operations," meaning propaganda).[7] The American military's review of French ethnography demonstrated that the Montagnards religion was central to their social, political, and cultural life, and the key to inducing change and winning their hearts and minds. Religion was the location of their "inner-most desires" that must somehow be accessed and understood, for this is the level at which change must be implemented. Thus one Special Forces training manual instructs that "the Jarai are not very willing to accept any change unless they are sure that it will be good for them, or that it is not opposed to their religious beliefs and taboos."[8]

The manuals are actually quite inept, however, in their attempts to apply ethnographic data to the Special Forces' missionary project of inducing change. They are filled with vacuous advice such as: "The psychological approach to winning the Jarai begins by treating them on an honest and fair basis"; and "civic action considerations must be based on talking with and convincing the Katu, face-to-face."[9]

Colonel Ronald A. Shackleton's analysis of his own attempts to implement the "Village Defense" strategy devotes a lengthy opening chapter to an ethnographic description of the *Rhadé*, which he organizes under the headings "religious beliefs," "superstitions," "marriage system" "family relationships," "village system," and "rituals." His analysis is well informed by ethnographic data as it was being codified and collected by American social scientists contracted by the Department of Defense. But surprisingly little of this ethnographic data enters into his recommendations for implementing change through civic action programs in a *Rhadé* village. For example, he offers these words of advice: "The techniques, employed to enlist popular support and acceptance for VD [Village Defense], are simple. Display consideration for the customs and traditions of the people; provide security; and conduct programs which will improve existing conditions without 'westernization.'"[10] His only use of the anthropological data of cultural difference is his acknowledgment that it exists when he counsels "consideration for the customs and traditions of the people." Yet the programs that he specifically recommends—treating illness with biomedicines, improving the economy (through encouraging the sale of traditional handcrafts, establishing a "country store," and offering vocational training), providing agricultural

assistance (including fertilizer, farm equipment, and new seed hybrids), building an elementary school, and offering "home economics" classes—would all seem to constitute the "westernization" that he specifically warns against. Ethnographic difference is reduced to "outdated and time consuming methods." The discrepancy between "consideration for the customs and traditions of the people" and interventions aimed at "improving existing conditions" is left unexplained. He reiterates several pages later: "civic action does not mean 'westernization;' It means improving social standards, environment and health."[11]

As a missionary discourse, informed by the best anthropological materials the Defense Department could buy, the Special Forces training manuals operate with a remarkably naive and under-theorized notion of change and its relationship to cultural difference.

But apparently, the Special Forces missionary project was actually carried out pragmatically and experimentally, in a learn-as-you-go approach. The Special Forces men I have talked to in North Carolina can hardly recall these training manuals and certainly do not remember them being particularly helpful guides to their mission in the highlands. Instead, methods of effecting change spread by word of mouth and hard-won experience. Published historical accounts privilege practical expertise and celebrate the extraordinary resourcefulness and effectiveness of the unit's elite soldiers.

Stories of successful civic action projects frequently appeared in *Green Beret*—a periodical published from 1966 to 1970, and distributed among Special Forces men in Vietnam and probably among supporters and family members at home.[12] Nearly every issue offered a brief portrait of several Special Forces camps, highlighting military successes and then—inevitably—emphasizing the importance of civic action initiatives. The periodical's frequent privileging of civic action projects demonstrates their importance to the Special Forces leadership—but it also, perhaps, betrays an uneasiness that the Special Forces' recommendations for transforming the Montagnards were not being implemented with the fervor and purpose that the leadership desired.

This suspicion is borne out in my conversations with retired Special Forces personnel in North Carolina. Although they acknowledge the existence of these civic action projects and their official importance, it always seems they were carried out by someone else in the unit. In the recollections of these men, the civic action projects are not the important story to tell. Instead, these men want to talk to me about the loyalty and fighting spirit of the Montagnards—their military skills,

bravery, and dependability (especially in comparison to the often denigrated South Vietnamese soldiers).

The Special Forces' program of village defense coupled with civic action gave way after a couple of years to a more aggressive strategy of guerilla interdiction. CIDG camps were moved from their original locations next to native villages out to the frontiers of the country, along the Cambodian and Laotian borders. From there, Special Forces led small patrols of Montagnards to harass Viet Cong supply lines coming down the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" into the central highlands of Vietnam. These precarious and isolated Special Forces outposts needed emergency support whenever the Viet Cong concentrated its forces in an all out attack. Thus the American military developed the mobile strike, or MIKE, force—composed mostly of Montagnards, and led by Special Forces officers. By the mid-1960s, the idea of Montagnard villages defended by *civilian* irregular defense groups had given way to a highly effective Montagnard *army* organized either in remote Special Forces camps or in rapid response units. The American military, however, continued to refer to these units as "irregulars"—and they *were* irregular, in that the Montagnard soldiers were not conscripted into the Vietnamese military (as any other Vietnamese citizen would have been), but fought essentially as mercenaries under American commanders (who were technically "advisors" to the ARVN Special Forces commander in the camps).[13]

2 Ritual Inductions of Special Forces Soldiers

The ambiguous knowledge of "experience" proved powerful and effective. Montagnards became very loyal allies of the Special Forces (if not of the Republic of Vietnam). This is the unanimous judgment of Dega in North Carolina, Special Forces histories, and the reminiscences of retired Special Forces men. This account is confirmed, they all argue, by the focused retribution that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has visited upon the entire Montagnard population since the end of the war. Previous chapters have described the strong association North Carolina Dega make between their ethnonationalist movement known as *FULRO* (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*, or United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races) and the American military, CIA, and Special Forces interventions. Similarly, retired Special Forces soldiers in North Carolina articulate an intense and emotional identification of *themselves* with the Montagnard *FULRO* resistance. These American soldiers, learning by experience to "offer help" and thus leverage change among the

Montagnards in the highlands, were themselves changed by the Montagnards. They came to empathize and identify with—and become personally and emotionally invested in—the Montagnard ethnonationalist movement. In a peculiar sense, they "converted to Montagnard." This conversion is marked by certain physical rituals and objects that shaped the relationship between Montagnards and Special Forces soldiers.

American soldiers in the Special Forces camps strove to ingratiate themselves with Montagnards, as their training manuals advised. In certain areas of Montagnard cultural life, the men of the Special Forces eagerly submitted to the Montagnards customs as part of their strategy to transform the Montagnards. One retired Special Forces captain I spoke with told me about his camp in the remote and northern mountainous region of the *Sedang* tribe. There were just six or seven Americans there, he explained, and a few Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers, to lead about five hundred Montagnard troops who had been recruited from local villages. One officer was designated as a lieutenant in Psychological Warfare. "His role was to do civic action," the Special Forces captain explained to me: "He put out the propaganda line. He thought that the best way was to get buddy-buddy with the villagers. He lived out in the villages. Drank rice wine with the chiefs. He kind of went native, I guess. He wore beads. Went shirtless." This camp commander's rather casual depiction of the strategy of civic action perhaps betrays a less than missionary fervor for what military strategists' promoted as a significant means by which the internal subjectivity of Montagnard hearts and minds could be transformed. But notice here that it is the "psyops" officer who appears to be transformed, taking on the native trappings of the Montagnards.

In a 1991 interview published by *Vietnam* magazine, Edmund Sprague (a retired Special Forces sergeant and State Department "Rural Development Officer" in the highlands) was asked how, since the Montagnards were such "superstitious people," he was able to "gain their confidence and penetrate their inner circle." He answered:

> Number one, be yourself, and, this may sound strange, if you did not drink their rice wine—forget it—you couldn't do anything with them. The drinking of the rice wine evolved around every function—deaths, funerals, marriages, births, everything... They were very religious people and would pray to their yangs. This was a spirit. There was the forest yang, the mountain yang, the water yang, and so forth.[14]

The rice wine, especially, seems to have played a significant role mediating cross-cultural contact in the highlands.

French ethnographer George Condominas, writing in the late 1950s, explains that the rice wine or alcohol jar (really a "rice beer," he clarifies) was "opened only to honor the Spirits or a 'foreigner.'" He emphatically distinguishes the Montagnards' consumption of rice wine from the "social drinking" of the west. "There must be a reason for drinking," he explains. To "initiate a round of drinking—to offer anything like a cocktail party, for instance—without a religious purpose, they would find inconceivable."[15]

Evangelical missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) also noticed this custom. By contrast, however, they repeatedly condemned rice wine not just for its intoxicating effects (long considered a sin in the North American context of the temperance movement), but also for its association with Montagnards' religious practices—what Ken Swain described as "drunken pagan orgies." An important rule for Montagnard Christians prohibited their drinking this intoxicating beverage. And there is ample evidence that Montagnards' themselves associated rice wine with the spirit practices condemned by their missionaries and replaced with a sober belief in God. Many North Carolina Dega who will drink an occasional beer would never think of brewing up some rice wine (although they often try to reproduce other parts of their highland diet). According to the ethnography being written by Hip K'Sor (see chapter two), virtually every invocation of "the genies" involved offerings of rice wine. The ritual verses Hip records beseech the genies to accept these gifts, in the hopes of abundance, good luck, and good health. On the other hand, when I asked a North Carolina Dega—who had been a preteen in the 1960s—what he remembered about the Special Forces soldiers, he said only that they loved to come into the village and drink the rice wine: "they came all the time. Drink the rice wine, sit around at night. We always like the Special Forces, they come and drink the jar."

My interest here is not to recover the actual, original, and authentic meaning of rice wine drinking, and decide whether it involved some sort of "religious purpose." But men such as Edmund Sprague seem to have been trained (or learned through experience) to use the apparent cultural significance of drinking rice wine to shape their relationship with Montagnards—or perhaps Montagnards were themselves using the rice wine to shape their relationship with the Special Forces soldiers. As Sprague said: "If you didn't drink the rice wine—forget it—you couldn't do anything with them." There are numerous accounts of the Special Forces in the highlands that record the specific

ritual use of rice wine to adjust the relationship between Montagnards and Special Forces soldiers—especially when the rice wine is accompanied by the Montagnards' ceremonial bestowal of a brass bracelet.

Howard Sochurek, a journalist on assignment with *National Geographic*, happened to be in a Special Forces camp on the night of September 19, 1964, when *FULRO* launched a coordinated uprising in several camps. The few Americans present and the Vietnamese officer they "advised" were badly outnumbered by the several-hundred-strong Montagnard strike force. The uprising was not aimed at the Americans but at the Vietnamese government. Nearly thirty Vietnamese were killed in the several-day course of the uprising, hundreds more were taken captive, and twenty Americans were "held hostage."[16] Captain Gillespie, the American commander of the camp, had to figure out how to keep his Montagnard troops from joining the rebellion, taking the camp, and attacking the radio station in the nearby city of Banmethuot.

The captions for Sochurek's photographs narrate the events of that day with all the tension of a suspense thriller:

> Y Jhon Nie . . . Montagnard battalion commander at Buon Brieng, disregards radioed orders to attack the Vietnamese and instead defers to his friend Captain Gillespie, ranking American in the camp. Though his men finger their weapons, Y Jhon tells the tall American, "I trust you. We will wait. We will make a sacrifice, and the sorcerer will invoke the spirits to help us."[17]

According to Sochurek, Y Jhon Nie seems to be searching for a way to extricate himself from his conflicting commitments to *FULRO* and Gillespie. Since the Montagnards' life is "dominated by an endless number of spirits that rule the fate of men and animals, control the elements, and govern the harvest,"[18] the solution that Nie devises involves what Sochurek calls a "loyalty rite" including a ritual sacrifice to the spirits. Sochurek's analysis is quite plain: the leaders of the Montagnards, Vietnamese, and Americans will participate together in a religious ceremony that will unite them in allegiance and effectively transform them from potential enemies into explicitly allied friends. While this is not a conversion in the Christian sense of the term, in Sochurek's account of Y Jhon Nie's reasoning, it certainly represents for Nie a definite transformation in the status, if not the identity, of his American and Vietnamese superiors. Sochurek's account would seem to offer an example of a Special Forces officer winning the allegiance of the Montagnards not by transforming them, but by himself *being*

transformed—at least, transformed in the eyes of the Montagnards who are inducing the transformation. The men establish an alliance by means of their performance of the ritual together.

While the article describes the Montagnard commander as a "simple man," the "tall American" commander is praised for his wisdom and understanding. In tune with the Kennedy image of the exceptionally trained, capable, decisive, and creative Special Forces soldier, Gillespie demonstrates his expertise through his ability to apply anthropological knowledge to deal with a difficult situation and transform the allegiance of the Montagnards. The reading that it is *Gillespie* who is transformed subverts this narrative of the soldier-scholar creatively doing what is necessary. Sochurek's narrative (and probably Gillespie's as well) applies anthropological expertise to imagine how the internal subjectivity of Y Jhon Nie's military allegiance could be effected by the performance of his own culture's rites. But of course, in this narrative these rites would change nothing of Gillespie's subjectivity—although it is easy enough to read that Sochurek (and Gillespie) understand that Y Jhon Nie believes that they do. Who is transforming whom here?

Sochurek's accompanying photographs offer images of the tall and lean, blond-haired and crew-cut, American captain walking gingerly in bare feet across the packed-mud Special Forces camp in the drizzling rain. He is festooned in a loincloth that stretches to his shins and a *Rhadé* blouse woven of brightly contrasting red and black cotton. This is the "ceremonial garb" for the "loyalty rites" to follow. Sochurek provides this careful ethnographic description:

> The climax of the ceremony came when the sorcerer, after one particularly long draught of brew, crouched alongside Captain Gillespie and fastened a brass ring to his right wrist. This—joining a twin ring from the previous ritual that had united Gillespie and Y Jhon—would give notice to the spirits that a suitable offering had been made.
>
> Captain Truong, too, received a like bracelet, as did Y Jhon. Now all three were bound in alliance. The spirits having been appeased, the ceremony ended...The rice liquor that remained in the seven jars was distributed to the soldiers in the strike force, as were the sacrificial chickens. The tension in the camp eased considerably.[19]

Although the ceremony may "climax" with the fastening of the brass bracelets, as Sochurek's photo-essay continues to narrate the events of that day he shows an agreement by another Special Forces captain that is marked by the ubiquitous *American* gesture that

physically attests to a transformation. The caption of a closely cropped photograph reads: “Handshake seals agreement to keep the peace between a U.S. officer and montagnard, whose white arm band identifies him as a rebel.”[20]

Perhaps even more important than the alcohol jar, the Montagnard bracelets seem to have occupied a crucial position mediating the relationship between highlanders and American military personnel. Georges Condominas, the French anthropologist briefly referenced earlier, does not mention bracelets with anywhere near the frequency of alcohol jars. He offers no general interpretation or analysis of their significance. They are exchanged during marriage ceremonies; they are brandished as part of a long “festival of the soil” as the “spirits are sent away, sated and satisfied”; and he mentions them again as “tokens of commitment to spirits” during the sacrifice of a buffalo that takes place as a sorcerer tries to heal a young girl. He refers to the bracelets in his index under the category of “Law and Economy . . . conclusion of contract, by exchange of bracelet.”[21] But this analysis (such as it is) does not emerge in his text, although it does provide a curious supplement to an account offered by a Dega man in refugee exile:

> For hundreds of years my people have worn these bracelets as a sign of friendship among our tribes and with our friends in our native country in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The bracelet is traditionally given to a friend during a sacrifice ceremony or a party for a special occasion. During these events our new friends eat our food and drink our rice wine—and that is good.

Frequently glossed by Dega refugees as a token of friendship, the bracelets seem to have signified that “friendship” is a contract of alliance—thus the analysis offered by Condominas that the bracelets represent a “conclusion of contract, by exchange of bracelet.”

Christian Dega no longer “sacrifice” animals (although they do continue to kill and eat animals to mark important events) and do not record their ritual feasts on bracelets. But the bracelets seem to have survived the Dega conversion to Christianity. I know a Catholic Dega man who claimed to have been a frequent officiator at Montagnard Catholic ceremonies when he was in the highlands, and yet also presided over the more or less “traditional” exchange of bracelets in the forging of family alliances in Vietnam—blessing them, he said, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Dega in North Carolina have sometimes bestowed a bracelet as a gift to an American friend (without animal sacrifices or markings). I myself have received

such a gift—from a minister of the Dega Alliance Church, in fact. "It means friendship," he explained to me.

From my epistemological position with the Dega in North Carolina, after their conversion and refugee displacement, it is difficult but perhaps not important to reconstruct the original and authentic significance of bracelet exchange in the central highlands. Oscar Salemink's meticulous analysis of several generations of highland ethnography conclusively demonstrates their significance in Montagnard exchanges and apparently for contracting alliances as well—with frequent and obvious invocation of the spirit world. A Special Forces' ethnographic training manual mentions the bracelets when it warns against becoming too involved in the Montagnards' religion.

> It is a very popular thing for U.S. Special Forces in the Montagnard areas to be initiated into the tribes of the area where they work. This involves drinking rice wine, and the Montagnards will normally have a buffalo sacrifice. When this is completed, the Montagnards will present the men with brass bracelets to wear, showing that they are brother of the Montagnard [*sic*] and members of that particular tribe. There is nothing wrong in this by itself. It is one of the best ways to win over a group or village. At the same time, Americans do not know, nor are they aware of all the religious beliefs and, as a general rule, should not get too involved with these ceremonies. As stated before, the Jarai are anamist [*sic*] in their religion. They have many objects that should not be touched. At the same time they will decide one morning that a certain trail or path is taboo. This would be very hard to keep up with even if you could understand the language.[22]

Thus many of the men of the Special Forces seem to have been "initiated into the tribes of the area where they work"—at least according to their own understanding of the meaning the ceremony held for the Montagnards. The brass bracelets became for Special Forces soldiers a ubiquitous material sign of intimacy with the Montagnard people. Linked to rites of initiation and alliance, the bracelets materialize the Special Forces' "conversion to Montagnard"—or at least their "induction" into a particular tribe. But these bracelets were not generally thought of by most of the men in the Special Forces as constituting a conversion as such, for the bracelets circulated (for the Americans) in the material world of mere physical objects without constituting a fundamental change of their interior self. Yet, as we have just seen, the bracelets *did* seem to function *for the Montagnards* as a mark of the reorientation of the men's interior selves—the hearts and minds, of Special Forces soldiers (at least that is how the soldiers seem to have

understood how the Montagnards would have been perceiving things). And while most of the soldiers' accounts would explicitly reject the idea that any transformation took place in the Americans, the prominence and intense valuation of the bracelets by the Special Forces men would seem to suggest otherwise.

The record of the Special Forces' encounter with Montagnards in the highlands is sprinkled with innumerable accounts of Special Forces soldiers being "inducted into the Montagnard tribe" with which they worked. The twelve-man Special Forces "A Detachments," isolated in remote jungle outposts, ingratiated themselves with Montagnard villages by participating in their ceremonies. In interviews, retired Special Forces men cannot seem to stress emphatically enough the depth and emotional charge of the affection they feel for the Montagnard people. The bracelets always figure prominently as a material sign of this bond.

I spoke for three hours with a retired Special Forces captain in a conference room in his professional offices in a high rise building in Raleigh. "I was sworn into a couple of tribes," he said. "I still have the ceremonial loincloth, the bracelet . . . It's a pagan ceremony. The rice wine, the sacrifice of a chicken." Then he considered for a moment and added, "It's not something a Christian should do. I didn't think of it that way then. But it's a forbidden thing. Jesus says some pretty strong things about that. I don't know, I guess I've changed. It's not something I would do now, but at the time . . . all of us were doing it."

He talked for some time about how Special Forces soldiers would "start to dress like Montagnards—especially if they've been out there for a long time." He explained how some soldiers prided themselves on their identification with Montagnard culture—"the food, the rice wine, bracelets, trapping animals, hanging out in the villages." Although he certainly did not claim this for himself, he said that "some kind of went native, I guess."

His conversation followed this thread of the transformation not of Montagnards but of Special Forces men while in the highlands. "It was like '*Dances With Wolves*,'" he said, referring to the 1990 motion picture about an American soldier (played by Kevin Costner) stationed alone on the Indian frontier in the late nineteenth century gradually coming to empathize with the Indians:

> I identify with the Costner character . . .
>
> It was an attractive culture. I admired their social structure. The equality between men and women. The women were leaders sometimes, village chiefs. The women were the head of the family . . .

> They were a very honest people. Communal. Trusting. They shared their food if there was a bad crop. There was no crime or anything. Banishment was the only punishment, like for stealing or something.
>
> It's ironic that the Sedang were so communal. These people were *communists*. But there you have it. It was a messed up war. We were fighting *against* communists and here these people—our allies—*were* communists. They were great people though. And I really admired their culture. We helped them any way we could.

In this quote there is not much left of the missionaries' reflexive assumption of cultural superiority. Still, he says, "we helped them any way we could." But who is transforming whom here?

Another Special Forces soldier, identifying himself as George "Sonny" Hoffman, posted on the internet a passionate description of his experiences with the Montagnards.

> In short order, I became a Koho. In a ceremony like the blood brother ritual of the American Indian, I became bonded for life. They placed a brass bracelet on my right wrist with the markings of the Koho tribe and the band of Cai Cai. We drank rice wine and they christened me Y Sonny Eban. The bracelet was never to come off. I swore it would not.[23]

I will return to his reference to Indians momentarily, for the image of "the Indian" emerges as *the* dominant trope of his text. But as the essay reaches its conclusion, the bracelet takes on growing importance as an all too physical sign of his loyalty toward the Montagnard people. He tells us that he brought two bracelets home and initiated his sisters ("complete with the wine ceremony . . . I made them Kohos") and proudly proclaims that one sister has never taken hers off and the other's was removed only for surgery. His own bracelet came off when a demolition demonstration went awry and blew up in his hand, "taking the arm at the mid-forearm." But his valiant loyalty transcends mere physical suffering:

> Two weeks later, after I could talk, my commanding officer—Lt. Colonel Sedgewick—was the first to see me. He was a bit taken aback when my first words were, "Did anyone find my bracelet?"
>
> After I explained how much it meant to me, he organized the Recondo students and cadre in a shoulder to shoulder sweep of the demolitions range. Although they found pieces of bone from my arm, no trace of the bracelet was found. I have this nagging feeling that the last Koho died on January 21, 1977.[24]

I will return to his rather melodramatic, if not solipsistic reference to the death of the last *Koho*. As it turns out the bracelets figure prominently in the Special Forces' project to save the Montagnards from this fate. But first I want to explore how the personal significance of his identification with the *Koho* emerges here through the circulation of highly valorized images of "the primitive"—tightly associated with his own nostalgic romanticism for the American Indian, for this is something that Oscar Salemink has also explored in some depth:[25]

> The mountain tribes people of Southeast Asia do not look Oriental. Most look Polynesian, and their language sounds more Polynesian than Oriental. They are the locals; the Vietnamese are the new kids on the block. The Yards viewed the arrival of Orientals much as the American Indian viewed the arrival of the white men.[26]

The American's relationship with the indigenous peoples of America is here replayed and redeemed by the Special Forces' relationship with the Montagnard/Indians. "I never met a Yard I didn't like or one that did not offer me unqualified friendship. Yards gave their lives to save Green Berets; Green Berets did likewise."[27] The malicious "Orientals" (against whom the white Americans were fighting) are conveniently placed in the role of the "white man."

His description of the Montagnards trades on the valorization of simple and primitive people. It is this primitiveness, demonstrated by their animal-like senses in the jungle, that makes the "Yards" so valuable to the Special Forces:

> The jungle is where the Yards really shined. The jungle was home. Watching them operate in that environment was awe inspiring. They were so tuned-in to the sights and sounds that nothing got by them. They could tell if people were nearby—hiding, moving, or sleeping—simply by the sounds the animals and insects made. While running recon [reconnaissance] missions with Yards, it was not uncommon for the point man to halt the patrol at a fork in the trail, listen, taste a leaf or two, then walk back and say while pointing out one trail, "We go, we die." A smart team leader would alter course. I was a smart team leader.[28]

But it is the specific association of Yards with American Indians that produces the most intricate trope in this brief essay. "The more I learned about Yards, the more they reminded me of little Cherokees," he remarks. As it turns out, his grandmother on his father's side was a "full-blooded Cherokee, born on the reservation." He admits that

this has always been a source of pride for him. “I saw getting in tight with the Yards as getting in touch with my tribal roots.” But this essay’s association between the Yards and the Indians grows more complicated: “My first lesson was that Yards do not identify with American Indians; Yards are cowboys. The reason Yards identify with cowboys is because John Wayne is a cowboy, and John Wayne is a Yard. He accepted the bracelet of the Rhade in 1967.”[29]

John Wayne made a heroic movie called *The Green Beret* in 1967 (at a time, probably not coincidentally, when the war was becoming increasingly unpopular among liberals and counterculture activists in America). Sonny Hoffman makes it sound as if the *Rhadé* gave John Wayne the bracelet. However, the film was not shot in Vietnam, and other sources explain that it was the Special Forces A-Team serving as the film’s technical advisors who presented him with the bracelet. Yet the end result is the same. “ ‘Duke’ never took it off and wears it today.”[30]

> The movie industry helped further push the Yards into the cowboy camp. Westerns dominated the movies of the fifties and sixties. These westerns did not portray the American Indian as a noble savage. Cowboys, on the other hand, were super heroes—none more super than the Duke himself.
>
> After the Duke starred in the Green Berets and accepted membership into the Rhade tribe by wearing their bracelet, it was a done deal. When the Yards saw the movie, and saw the Duke wearing their bracelet, he was elevated to the status of a God. VC were Indians. VC country was Indian country. The Duke hates Indians. Nuff said! I . . . took on the brass bracelet of the Koho. I became a cowboy . . .
>
> John Wayne and hundreds of Special Forces troops underwent similar ceremonies. They became Bru, Jarai, Koho, Rhade, Bahnar, or Sedang. John Wayne took his vow seriously. In every movie after the Green Berets, you can see his bracelet. From True Grit to the Shootist, the Duke was a Rhade. I understand, he wore it to his grave.[31]

Obviously there is a lot at stake for the Special Forces in these bracelets. Marked as the authentic paraphernalia of the Montagnards, they circulate in a series of images of noble savages—both Indians and cowboys, primitives and superlative modern-day soldiers, loyal even unto death. The American “white man” as exterminator of the North American Indians is redeemed here by his identification with the Montagnard “Indian.” But the Montagnard/Indians identify themselves as cowboys, not Indians. They root for John Wayne, and they know that John Wayne wears their bracelet—or is it a “Special Forces

bracelet" that he wears? It was given to him by the film's Special Forces technical advisors and he plays a Special Forces officer in the film. It is *Special Forces men* who wear bracelets—but they wear them to identify with Montagnards, whom they think of as Indians but who themselves want to be cowboys. Hoffman, the one-quarter Cherokee Indian, writes: "I became a cowboy"; and the cowboy John Wayne, by becoming a heroic Special Forces soldier, becomes a Montagnard.

In another telling of what was apparently not an uncommon set of associations, Captain Richard Bishop describes how he wrote a letter to "the Duke" to tell him that the Montagnards "bust into cheers" when they saw his bracelet in the movie *True Grit*. Bishop had told the Montagnard troops that "[John Wayne] is the greatest cowboy actor in the whole world . . . If they looked closely he wears a Montagnard bracelet, and he wears it out of respect to all CIDG in Vietnam."[32] "The Duke" responded: "You can tell my friends that I am proud to wear it—that I have not removed it since it was bent around my arm."[33]

3 Special Forces Loyalty

The bracelets are a materialization of the Special Forces' soldiers' emotional bond with the Montagnards. The bracelets mark a transformation undergone in the highlands, a conversion, perhaps, to Montagnard. Special Forces soldiers still remain loyal to their Montagnard alliance, even unto death, or at least unto severe bodily destruction. And this loyalty is graphically embodied in the materiality of Montagnard bracelets. Although Sonny Hoffman (a.k.a. "Y Sonny Eban") feared the death of the *Koho* when his bracelet was destroyed with his arm, the Montagnards survive and the bracelets continue to circulate in their new life as Dega refugees in America. The Greater Co-Active Montagnard Association (GCMA), an organization of retired Special Forces soldiers, begin offering them for sale to raise funds for their activities on behalf of the Montagnards and Dega refugees.

The GCMA changed its rather awkward name to the more straightforward and direct, Save the Montagnard People, Inc. Their motto, always included under their organizational name on their web pages and letterhead, reads: "aborigines of Indochina, abandoned by the U.S. . . . a vanishing culture" (the ellipsis is in the original). This slogan aptly summarizes the group's preoccupations. Their literature frequently describes the Montagnards as "primitives" and explicitly links them to the nostalgia and guilt inevitably surrounding images of the American Indian.

The Montagnards are described as a proud, "aboriginal" people, the rightful owners of the highlands, who are now denied their birthright by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) through a policy of "cultural leveling (long term ethnic cleansing)." The SRV only appears in Save the Montagnard People newsletters as malicious and vengeful. Recall that the victorious communist government was the American military's enemy during the long Vietnam War, and the strident rhetoric of this organization of retired Special Forces soldiers takes on the bitterness of the memory of an unsuccessful mission. Their invective is aimed at the SRV, "a third-world country that never won a major engagement with US servicemen on the battlefield, yet masterfully exploited the weaknesses in our system and severely crippled our national resolve."[34] But it is equally leveled at the "bureaucrats," "flower children and anti war protestors of the sixties" who lost the war.[35] The Montagnards are "the Freedom Fighters of the Forgotten Army" (always capitalized) and "our most distinguished and loyal ally."[36] They are the only people, it seems, who really appreciate what the Special Forces were trying to accomplish up in the highlands.

The literature of Save the Montagnard People persistently rehearses a narrative of United States government abandonment of the Montagnard people after the war. These rugged and independent Special Forces soldiers exorcise the bitterness of a lost war through their vigorous and virtuous activities on behalf of the Montagnards. On more than one occasion, North Carolinians active in the Dega resettlement have explained (or complained) to me that "some of the Special Forces guys haven't given up the war."

The camaraderie that develops between men in battle makes a lasting impression that is magnified when the war goes badly and promises made (explicitly or implicitly) cannot be delivered in the frustration of defeat and the regrets of history. It is probably not necessary to invoke the Special Forces' ceremonial "induction" into Montagnard tribes to explain their conversion to the Montagnard cause and their heartfelt allegiance to Montagnard interests today. But it is interesting to notice that the rice wine and the bracelets—the specific objects by which Montagnards' materially intervened to transform their relationship with the Special Forces soldiers in the highlands—continue to circulate in Special Forces' projects on behalf of the Dega in North Carolina. The bracelets and the rice wine are simultaneously the most prominent surviving materializations of "traditional Montagnard culture" and also the most obvious material signs of the Special Forces' emotional bond with the Montagnards.

The focal point of the Special Forces' efforts to "Save the Montagnard People" is the Long House project, or The Montagnard Cultural Resource Center. Designed by North Carolina State University architecture student Holly Grubb, in partial fulfillment of her master's degree, the center aims to "imitate or evoke" the traditional Montagnard longhouse, using North Carolina materials and building codes.

The Montagnard Cultural Resource Center is chiefly promoted not by Dega refugees but by their Special Forces advocates (and it is these men with whom Holly Grubb has been chiefly in contact). According to the literature of Save The Montagnard People, the Center will "replicate a small Montagnard village and serve U.S. Montagnards for ceremonies and cultural preservation," and it will be "the only facility in the world dedicated exclusively to these magnificent people, the aborigines of the southeast Indochina [*sic*] dating to 200 BC."[37] It will "memorialize their culture, their contribution to the cause of freedom and their futile struggle for survival as their unique culture rapidly vanishes into history."[38] Furthermore, Save the Montagnard People hopes that as an educational vehicle for the public,

> Their ecosystems of [*sic*] the Central Highlands will be showcased. There is much we can learn from a people that revered their environment and lived in harmony with nature for over 2,000 years. U.S. Montagnards will have a facility to hold ceremonies, display their art, musical instruments, and historical artifacts. All traces of their ancient heritage in the Central Highlands of Vietnam are being destroyed by the communist policy of Cultural Leveling (long-term ethnic cleansing). For the Rhade, so much of their heritage is symbolized in their Longhouse construction, that the communists no longer permit them to be built.[39]

Thus the longhouse is a project of cultural survival—conceived and promoted by outsiders to that culture, trading on the highly valorized image of Montagnard primitives, seamlessly woven together with the rhetoric of "freedom" which authorized the Vietnam War and was betrayed by American "politicians" and "flower children."

To raise money for this project, the organization is "making available," at forty dollars each, "authentic Montagnard bracelets," made by a *Koho* refugee in North Carolina, machine stamped with the words "Longhouse Project."

The material artifact through which Montagnards sought a sign of the transformation of the hearts and minds of the men of the Special

Forces thus takes on a new life and continues to circulate as a sign of Special Forces loyalty to the Montagnard people. In order to raise the money to "save Montagnard culture," retired soldiers from the Special Forces (not the Dega themselves) have commodified these bracelets (the material substantiation of authentic Montagnard culture) and thereby transformed them into a new cultural idiom. Certainly some Dega participate in this exchange, but this is chiefly a Special Forces scheme to raise money among other retired Special Forces soldiers who's lives were transformed in the highlands and would like a physical memento or object to mark that transformation. And what more suitable object could there be? The Montagnards' bracelet continues to bind Americans to Montagnards, but now through an entirely different system of exchange that is, ironically, dedicated to preserving that previous Montagnard cultural system.

Special Forces soldiers and Dega alike now refigure the signification of these bracelets. Where they once marked a "contract of exchange" (as Condominas had it) or the "ties of allegiance," or the "induction into Montagnard tribes," they are now simply "a prestigious symbol of friendship and respect." But the image of "contract" or "allegiance" would actually better fit the exchange and commitment that is now being produced by these bracelets.

The activities of this Special Forces group are motivated by an urgent, even desperate, sense of loyalty to the Montagnards. But it is the loyalty of the *Yards* that is always invoked—not the loyalty of Special Forces soldiers to the Dega people. Oscar Salemink, too, has written on this special bond.

This strong sentiment of loyalty betrayed is the result of the final months of the war. Jim Morris, a retired Special Forces soldier, frequent contributor to *Green Beret* magazine and author of several novels set in the highlands during the Vietnam War, offers this succinct synopsis of the Special Forces relationship with the Montagnards. It is couched in the punchy, rebellious language that captures well the attitude and warrior code of the Special Forces soldiers I encountered in North Carolina.

> Probably half of the Special Forces of the day formed bonds of deep love and affection for these people. They were honest, straightforward, courageous once they got the idea of it, and loyal unto death.
>
> So were we.
>
> Our government was not.
>
> When it came time to bail out on the people of Vietnam, one of our number, Ed Sprague, was working for the, uh, USG in Pleiku.

> [USG stands for United States Government, the "uh" would seem to hint at covert CIA connections.] He was present at a meeting at the Embassy in Saigon at which the Montagnards offered to fight on if they were backed. The response was equivocal. The Montagnards don't know from equivocal. If they ask you a yes or no question and the response seems positive, that means yes . . .
>
> Soldiers cannot forget the bonds of comradeship forged in battle. But governments cannot remember them. The promises you make are binding on you, and on your subordinates. They are not binding on your successors or your superiors.
>
> Politicians come and go, but governments are administered by bureaucracies, and bureaucracies, whatever their ostensible purpose, exist for one thing only, to expand their budget, personnel, and power. Anything which does not contribute to this purpose is betrayed.
>
> Sorry about that.[40]

So, in the narrative of these retired Special Forces soldiers, the "cultural leveling," and "ethnic cleansing" will continue to its sorrowful conclusion. Soon "the last *Koho*" *will* have died—but not if Save the Montagnard People can stop it. The John Wayne cowboys (Indians) in white hats (or green berets), selling authentic Montagnard bracelets, will build the Montagnard Cultural Resource Center. Somehow, the can-do boys of the Special Forces, having lost the war when the "peace-nics" and "flower children" in this country stopped supporting them, will purge America's betrayal of their best allies in the war and "Save the Montagnard People (Inc.)"—that is, save the aboriginal culture of the central highlands of Vietnam, a culture that they had set out forty years ago to develop and transform into an undiseased modernity.

On July 4, 1999, the Special Forces Association (a fraternal organization of retired Special Forces soldiers) arranged a half dozen buses to bring Dega refugees down to their picnic grounds adjacent to the Fort Bragg training center. In the grueling North Carolina midday summer sun, they awarded a "Certificate of Recognition" to a hundred or so Dega who had served with Americans in the military, State Department, or CIA during the war. The festivities lasted all day. In front of the American, Special Forces, and *FULRO* flags, several Americans gave brief, nearly inaudible speeches recounting again the great loyalty and honor of the Montagnard people. One of the Dega leaders, a former *FULRO* commander, read a brief statement in English, offering heartfelt thanks for all that the Americans had done for the Montagnards—in North Carolina and Vietnam.

Afterward, there was a display of Special Forces prowess as three skydivers jumped from a plane overhead and descended to the picnic grounds spewing red white and blue smoke from canisters strapped to their ankles. Long lines soon formed for a picnic of hot dogs, hamburgers, and potato salad. The beer was cold but disastrously filled with foam. Most Dega drank soda pop in any case. Next to the beer stands, tied securely to a post, were several rice alcohol jars. But again, it was mostly the retired Special Forces men who consumed this intoxicating beverage. They are more committed to traditional Montagnard culture than are the Dega refugees—at least when it comes to celebrating certain distinct and easily identifiable icons that have passed strangely through the conversion to refugee exile. Most Dega do not wear the bracelets. I have never seen any of them drink rice wine.

Aging now, their broad shoulders filled out with ample bellies, sweat trickling out from under their ball caps, the retired Special Forces soldiers sported their bracelets and talked to newspaper and television reporters about their glory days in the Vietnam War—and most of all about the bravery and loyalty of the Montagnard soldiers.

As the day wore on I followed some Dega across the picnic grounds to the Special Forces Association building, seeking relief from the heat and the sun, as groups of Dega had been doing all afternoon. Inside, in the cool darkness, there opened up a large exhibit hall documenting Special Forces missions over the last fifty years. I saw folded parachutes and well-worn canvas backpacks. I looked at framed letters from dignitaries, marking promotions or new missions and rewarding feats of great valor. There were innumerable aerial photographs of CIDG camps bleakly scratched out of the empty countryside. And there were lots of photographs of twelve-man "A-Detachments," standing at ease in their army fatigues and green berets.

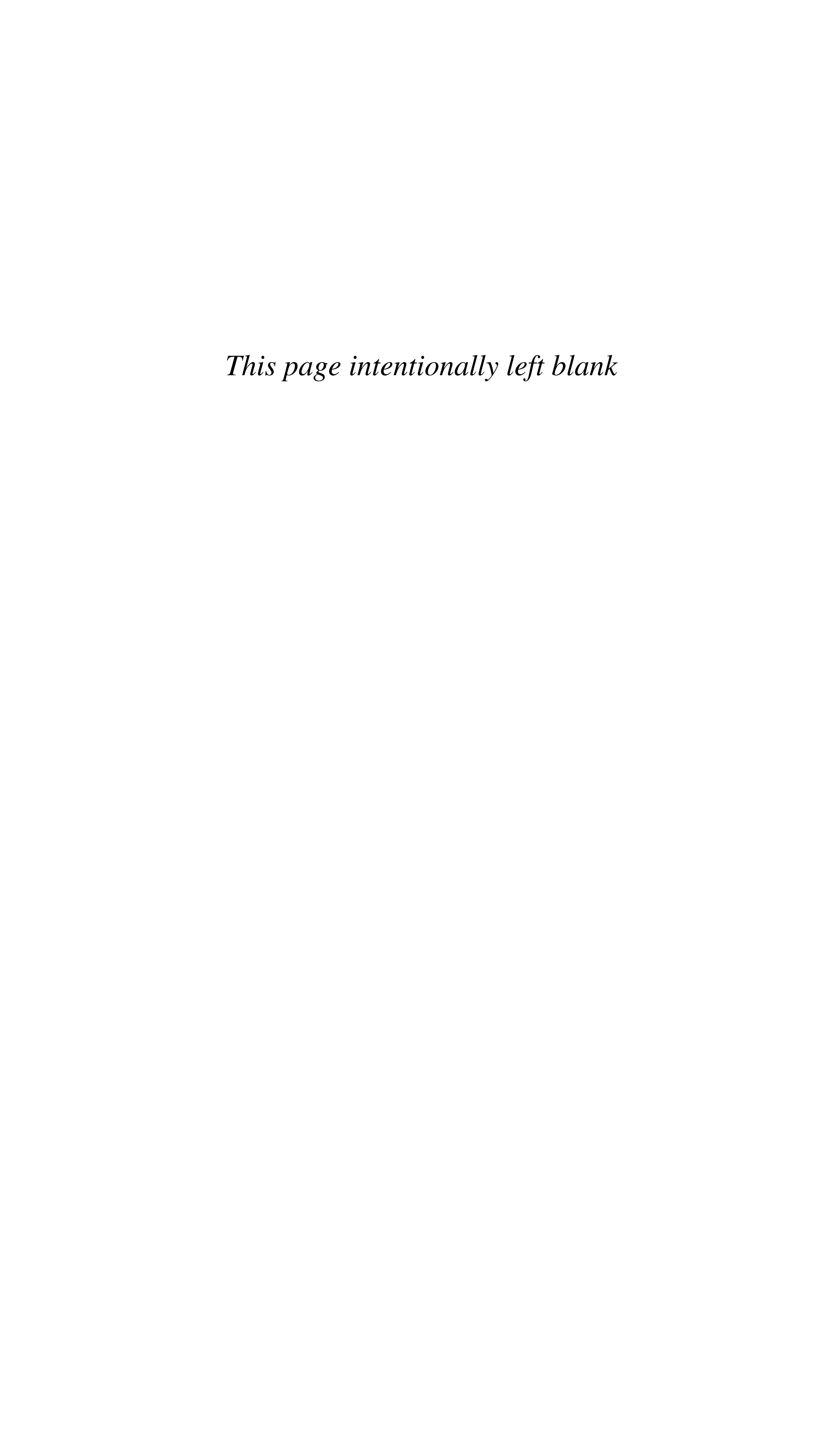
"No pictures of Montagnard," a Dega friend of mine commented somewhat bitterly. He seemed to feel that the exhibit slighted all the Montagnards who had fought in the CIDG program. "See? Where are they? We're not here. No Montagnards." And he was right. There were no images of Montagnard soldiers depicted. The Montagnards were represented by a glass display case of highland artifacts: "handmade knives," some small musical instruments, a crossbow and spear, and—inevitably—several brass bracelets. These were the material objects of the culture that Special Forces soldiers were trained to understand and manipulate, so as to win the hearts and minds of the Montagnards—to introduce changes in order to speed the transition

to modernity. And this is the culture that Save the Montagnard People is now dedicated to preserving. But the Montagnard people, and the strong emotional bond of friendship between Montagnards and Special Forces soldiers was entirely absent.

In another part of the exhibit room I noticed a large reproduction of the famous sepia-toned photograph of the aging warrior Geronimo. Large print text celebrated his military prowess and bravery, and briefly chronicled the sad history of broken promises and betrayals by which he was subdued. The ostensible point of the exhibit was to explain why airborne troops holler "GERONIMO!" as they leap from the safety of the airplane out into the danger of battle. It is because they want to honor Geronimo's valor and integrity. The exhibit notes how Geronimo was tricked and betrayed and eventually humiliated in defeat. The American government showed no such loyalty to the integrity of the warrior code. Once again, I thought, Special Forces and Indians, betrayal and honor. I tried to piece together the associations.

Across the exhibition space was a similarly sized photograph of the dashingly young and confident President Kennedy. He warranted an entire display case exhibiting reproductions of his letters and comments lauding the boldness, bravery, and patriotism of the Special Forces. Included was his oft-repeated benediction describing the green beret as "a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom."

Around the corner there was a third poster-sized black and white photograph. This one showed the familiar image of "the Duke" (John Wayne) in full cowboy regalia. The caption here called attention to the brass bracelet of friendship with the Montagnard people that was visible on his wrist. And it quoted one of his letters: "I am proud to wear it . . . I have never removed it since it was bent around my arm."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Notes

1 Introduction and Afterword

1. Senator Jesse Helms, "*The Plight of the Montagnards*," Hearing Before The Committee Of Foreign Relations United States Senate, One Hundred Fifth Congress, Second Session (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 10, 1988), 1, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cg...senate_hearings&docid=f:47 64.wais, 10-5-99.
2. Ibid., 3.
3. Y'Hin Nie, in ibid., 24.
4. The word "Dega" is used by the refugees in both singular and plural constructions (e.g., "A Dega family arrived from Vietnam this week," as well as "Many Dega gathered for church.").
5. For a recent analysis of the historical emergence of names for population groups in the highlands of Southeast Asia, including the central highlands of Vietnam, see Keyes, "The Peoples of Asia," 1163–1203.
6. There are no published studies of the Dega refugee community, but see: Cecily Cook, "*The Montagnard-Dega Community of North Carolina*" (University of North Carolina: MA Thesis in Folklore Studies, 1994); Cheyney Hales and Kay Reibold, *Living in Exile, Raleigh* (a film produced by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1994); and David L. Driscoll, "*We Are the Dega: Ethnic Identification in a Refugee Community*" (Wake Forest University: MA Thesis in Anthropology, 1994).

   Studies of the Hmong include: Robert Downing and D. Olney, eds., *The Hmong in the West* (Minneapolis: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, 1982); Shelly R. Adler, "Ethnomedical Pathogenesis and Hmong Immigrants' Sudden Nocturnal Deaths," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 18 (1994): 23–59; Kathleen M. McInnis, Helen E. Petracchi, and Mel Morgenbesser, *The Hmong in America: Providing Ethnic-Sensitive Health, Education, and Human Services* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1990); and Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
7. Unfortunately, Hip's book has not yet found a publisher.

8. In fact, there are already several texts presenting sympathetic accounts of highland history. See Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, and *Free in the Forest*. Both volumes were published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1982. Cecily Cook's master's thesis culls the long story of the guerilla resistance army through interviews among Dega refugees ("*The Montagnard-Dega Community of North Carolina*"). See as well the video produced by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, *Living in Exile* (Hales and Reibold, Raleigh, 1994), which many Dega had a hand in making, and a documentary film about Gordon and Laura Smith's evangelical mission to the central highlands that offers a very touching portrayal of Christian faith among the highland people. (See Smith, *Vietnam Mission*.)
9. This research project was approved by the Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina for Research on Human Subjects.

2 Representing the Montagnards

1. Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*. See as well, Keyes, "The Peoples of Asia," 1163–1203. For years the most comprehensive and authoritative English language history of the central highlands was Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains* and *Free in the Forest* (both published by Yale University Press in 1982).
2. I heard this account of the emergence of the term "Dega" in many of the interviews I conducted among these refugees. See as well Pierre M. K'Briuh, "*The Montagnards*," http://www.nccbuscc.org/mrs/pcmr/asianpac/montag.htm, November 14, 1999; and Salemink, "The King of Fire," 516.
3. Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 251.
4. K'Sor, *The Situation of the Montagnard Dega People*, 1–3.
5. For a discussion of similar issues involved in naming a group that is the object of an anthropological study, see Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, 3–39; and Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 86–126. The history of the emergence of the Dega collectivity that I trace in this chapter supports many points in Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.
6. Christian Simonnet, a mid-twentieth-century French Catholic missionary in the highlands, provides this historical interpretation for the founding of the Catholic mission in Kontum in his edited version of a nineteenth-century missionary account. See Dourisboure and Simonnet, *Vietnam: Mission on the Grand Plateaus*.
7. The European term, "savage" carries with it the burden of nineteenth-century anthropological preoccupations with cultural evolution. The Vietnamese term "*moi*" is perhaps closer to the Chinese idea of "barbarian," signifying any and all people living outside the orbit of the Chinese empire, with all the cultural deficiencies that that entailed.

8. See Marr, *Vietnam*; SarDesia, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity*; Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*.
9. Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, and *Sons of the Mountains*; Jacques Dournes, *Minorities of Central Vietnam: Autochthonous Indochinese Peoples* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1980).
10. Ibid., 73–100. See as well Hickey's discussion of Léopold Sabatier in *Sons of the Mountains*, 294–308.
11. Colonel Galliéni, *Galliéni au Tonkin: 1892–1896, par lui-même,* Paris: 1941, 217, quoted in Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, 64.
12. LaFont, *Toloi Djuat: Coutumier de la Tribu Jarai*, 12 (my translation).
13. Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, 385–439.
14. Fall, *Street Without Joy*; and Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China*.
15. See, e.g., Montagnard Foundation, Inc., *Human Rights Violations*, 2–4.
16. Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 47–89.
17. Ibid., 55.
18. "*Declaration du Haut Comité du Front Unifié de Lutte de la Race Opprimée; 20 Septembre 1964,*" reprinted in Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia*, 221–222 (my translation). The source listed for this document is: Front Unifié de Lutte de la Race Opprimée (*FULRO*) (1965), *Historique* (Phnom-Penh), 18. See as well LaBrie, "FULRO: The History of Political Tension in the South Vietnamese Highlands."
19. It was LaFont, *Toloi Djuat: Coutumier de la Tribu Jarai.*
20. An event organized by Broi Toploi (founder of "Montagnard Cultural Heritage and Research, Inc."), March 13, 1999, Greensboro Cultural Center, Greensboro, NC.
21. Ironically, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, much hated by the Dega refugee population, is actually pursuing a surprisingly similar project to "save" highland culture. Another article by Oscar Salemink analyzes what he calls the "selective preservation" and "folklorization" of a "Montagnard culture" that is commodified for the tourist trade and purged of elements that the government considers wasteful. Controlled and orchestrated cultural performances of specific rituals and handicrafts allow the Vietnamese government to describe the pluralistic Vietnamese national culture as "a garden of scented, colorful flowers" (Salemink, "The King of Fire," 516). But, as Salemink points out, it is the ethnic Vietnamese who are the "gardeners" of this culture. These cultural performances are decontextualized from the rest of highland life, which is increasingly forced into Vietnamese forms, so that the ethnic Vietnamese people within the national family can help develop and modernize their more backward "younger brothers" (ibid., 507). According to Salemink, Vietnamese policy emphasizes the expressive and aestheticized aspects of culture and works to undermine their relation to the ethical and cognitive (ibid., 518).

The analysis of actual Vietnamese cultural and political programs in the highlands exceeds the bounds of this study, which is concerned with Dega and American representations of the highland people. Significantly, no Dega has ever mentioned this Vietnamese cultural policy nor the problematic Vietnamese rhetoric of a multiethnic state. See as well, Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*. For similar discussions (on which Salemink draws), see Evans, "Vietnamese Communist Anthropology," 116–147; and "Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam," 274–304.

22. Condominas, "Ethnics and Comfort," 4.
23. See Deitchman, *The Best-Laid Schemes*; and Lyons, *The Uneasy Partnership*.
24. Baestrup, "Researchers Aid Thai Rebel Fight," 7.
25. Walter A. McDougall, "Back to Bedrock: The Eight Traditions of American Statecraft," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 141, as quoted by Marquis, "The Other Warriors," 79.
26. Mole, *The Montagnards of South Vietnam*, iii.
27. United States Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups*. This military literature is discussed in greater detail in chapter seven in this volume.
28. Wolf and Jorgensen, "Anthropology on the Warpath in Thailand," 26–35. Critical essays on "Project Camelot" are collected in Horowitz, ed., *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot*. See as well Deitchman, *The Best-Laid Schemes*.
29. In a brief autobiographical introduction to *Free in the Forest*, Hickey explains that he did his dissertation fieldwork in a Vietnamese village in the Mekong Delta (*Village in Vietnam*). He was then funded by the RAND Corporation from 1963 to 1973, a position he accepted because of his desire to "participate in the events of history" (*Free in the Forest*, ix).
30. This controversy was reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, 11-18-71: 1, and the *New York Times* 11-21-71: 79 (as cited by Deitchman, *The Best Laid Schemes*, 307).
31. See Salemink's discussion of Hickey in, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*. See as well Seymour Deitchman's comments in *The Best Laid-Schemes*, 381.
32. See Montagnard Foundation, Inc., "The Montagnards."
33. This statistic is cited by a saddened and melancholy Gerald Hickey in his 1993 text, *Shattered World*. According to Hickey, "When the Vietnam War ended, of the approximately 1 million highlanders... somewhere between 200,000 and 220,000 civilians and military personnel had died" (xxxi).
34. See Fabian, *Time and the Other* for an analysis of this style in ethnographic writing.
35. Christopher Herbert provides the most interesting and nuanced discussion of this issue in chapter three of his book *Culture and Anomie*.

36. Long, *To Vietnam*, 68–70.
37. Homer E. Dowdy's fictionalized account of Montagnard Christians (culled from a visit to Vietnam in the early 1960s; Dowdy was a professional writer not a missionary) enacts this shift within a single volume: *The Bamboo Cross*.
38. Smith, *The Missionary and Anthropology*; and *The Missionary and Primitive Man*. A good review of this development in evangelical missiology can be found in Taber, *The World Is Too Much with Us*.
39. Smith, *The Missionary and Anthropology*, 5.
40. The Smiths were prolific writers, considering they were also full time "missionary pioneers." See Mrs. Smith, *Gongs in the Night*; Smith and Smith, *Light in the Jungle*; Smith, *The Blood Hunters*; Mrs. Smith, *Farther into the Night* and *Victory in Viet Nam*. The husband-wife team was also instrumental in several documentary films to which I have seen references: *Jungle Blood Hunters, Now We Live,* and *Light of The Jungle* (all originally distributed by Baptist Missionary Films of Wheaton Illinois).
41. The organization is named for John Wycliff a fourteenth-century English reformer responsible for the first English translation of the Latin Bible. Generally uncritical histories of the organization written by fellow evangelicals include: *Pass the Word*; Pike (one of the organizations most prominent linguists and authors), *The Summer Institute of Linguistics*; and Wallis, *Two Thousand Tongues to Go*. A more critical history is offered by David Stoll in *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?*
42. Nida, *Customs and Cultures*. This depiction of missionary preparations in the 1950s is drawn from a lengthy interview with Dr. John Ellenberger (professor of missions, Alliance Theological Seminary) on May 23, 1997, and private correspondences with Dr. Allison (professor of missions, Toccoa Falls College, Toccoa Falls, Georgia). An excellent review of the evangelical context of Nida's work is provided by Taber, *The World is too Much with Us*.

    See also by Nida, *God's Word in Man's Language*; *Message and Mission*; and *Religion Across Cultures*. Especially relevant for evangelical missionaries' representations of Montagnards during this period, see a short book that Nida coauthored with William A. Smalley, *Introducing Animism*.
43. For an intriguing analysis of "the culture concept," see Herbert, *Culture and Anomie*.
44. Nida, *Customs and Cultures*, 46.
45. Ibid., 22–23.
46. Dournes, *God in Vietnam*.
47. Ibid., 115.
48. Ibid., 88.
49. Ibid., 71–72.
50. Ibid., 59. The French reads, "*angélologie*" (Dournes, *Deu aimes les paiens*, 50).

51. Dournes, *God in Vietnam*, 162.
52. Ibid., 69–70.
53. Ibid., 128.
54. Hip K'Sor, *Outline of the System of Genies of the Jarai People of the Entire Cheo-Reo Region*, trans. Hip K'Sor and Thomas Pearson (*Toloi Yang R'bang Ana Jrai Chu-Chreo (Cheo-Reo) Tolui*) (Raleigh, NC: unpublished manuscript).
55. Ibid.
56. In Hip's text, the genies and God are often interchangeable, written in a serial manner. For example, "Mankind cannot refuse the destiny that God or the genies have fixed for us. However they fix our destiny, that is how we should live" (ibid., 16).
57. Ibid., 44.
58. Ibid., 1.
59. American military activities and strategies are covered in more detail in chapters six and seven.
60. Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 304–307. Hickey explains: "The list is not a random sample but rather a compilation of names of those that I and highlanders I know would consider leaders or, in the case of the younger ones, emerging leaders" (205).
61. Ibid., 51, 58.
62. Ibid., 134.
63. I agree with, and my analysis helps support, Oscar Salemink's argument that Christianity among highland people in Vietnam today is a defiant articulation of ethnic difference from imposed Vietnamization. Salemink writes about highland Protestantism in the 1990s: "I have not come across any Montagnard counterdiscourse relating Protestantism to political opposition. What Protestantism does provide, however, is an organizational and ideological autonomy which allows space for a separate Montagnard (Jarai, Ede) ethnic identity in a context of increasing discipline, surveillance and governmentalization" (Salemink, "The King of Fire," 522–523). I would add that in North Carolina Protestantism is quite definitely a "counterdiscourse" of political opposition.
64. Kok, "To whom it may concern," 1–2.
65. Ibid., 1.
66. Ibid., 2.
67. Hickey, *Shattered World*, xiii.
68. Ibid.
69. Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places."
70. Montagnard Foundation, Inc., "The Montagnards," 2. Find this passage in Hickey's *Shattered World*, xiv. For an analysis of this and other tropes of ethnographic writing, see Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places."
71. Montagnard Foundation, Inc., "Information Sheet," 1.

72. Montagnard Foundation, Inc., "The Montagnards," 5 (ellipses appear in the MFI's quote of the SRV minister's statement).
73. Montagnard Foundation, Inc., "Information Sheet," 1.
74. Rong, "If you read this Letter," 5.
75. Ibid., 3.
76. Ibid., 2 (emphasis added).
77. The academic analysis of this pattern was classically put forth by William James in his Gifford lectures published in 1902 as *The Varieties of the Religious Experience*, but it has been analyzed in many studies of evangelical Christianity since then. See, e.g., Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America.*
78. See Snow and Machalek ("The Sociology of Conversion," 167–190) for a helpful review of sociological literature arguing that "converts' accounts ought to be treated as topics of analysis, rather than as objective data on why and how conversion first occurred" (176). Rhetorical studies include: Payne, *The Self and the Sacred*; and Lawless, "Rescripting Their Lives and Narratives," 53–72.
79. Harding, "Convicted by The Holy Spirit," 167–181 (quotation is from p. 179). Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation.*
80. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 3.
81. Said, *Orientalism.*
82. Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture.* See as well Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*; Marcus and Cushman, "Ethnographies as Texts," 25–69; Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*; and Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture.*
83. Fabian, *Time and the Other.*
84. See Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, for a series of essays discussing various aspects of this process.
85. My argument is thus somewhat different from other, quite persuasive, arguments set forth by several scholars exploring the motif of conversion that is activated in ethnographic writing. These analyses point out how anthropologists often represent themselves going through a psychologically wrenching transformation to gain the perspective and insights of the native's point of view—a transformation that these ethnographic texts often structure as a dramatic and sudden experience seemingly pattered on the paradigmatic evangelical narrative of conversion. For the most nuanced discussion of this trope in ethnographic writing, see Herbert, "Savagery, Culture, and the Subjectivity of Fieldwork," 150–203 (especially 172–174), in his book *Culture and Anomie.* See as well Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places," 27–50. A classic example of this trope is found in the opening pages of Clifford Geertz' famous article "Deep Play," 412–454.

    This "conversion of the ethnographer" is often figured as some sort of "cultural penetration." The ethnographer becomes a cultural

insider, becomes one of them. And yet "going native" is a strong taboo in anthropological discourse as it has been thought to preclude effective, objective, analysis and communication with the anthropological community. There is thus a tension between inside and outside—or as I have been suggesting—between connection and distance. Thus Herbert's and Pratt's analyses might be marshaled in support of my argument describing the joining and distanciation that is characteristic of both ethnographic and conversion texts.

3 The Conversion of the Dega

1. See especially James, *The Varieties of the Religious Experience*; Brauer, "Conversion: From Puritanism to Revivalism," 227–243; Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America*.
2. Catholics have traditionally imagined and discussed conversion through the logic of incorporation within the institutional liturgy of the Catholic Church. This is especially true of Catholic missionary discourses on cross-cultural conversion. The still classic review of Catholic missiology is Schmidlin, *Catholic Mission Theory*. See as well Bosch, *Transforming Mission*; and Dunn, *Missionary Theology*. Vicente Rafael's more recent *Contracting Colonialism* provides a very interesting, novel, and nuanced reading of this dynamic in the colonial Philippines.
3. This observation, discussed in chapter two, is especially prominent in Booth, "The Rhetoric of Fundamentalist Conversion Narratives"; Lawless, "Rescripting Their Lives And Narratives"; Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation*; and Harding, "Convicted By The Holy Spirit." In addition, K.F. Morrison (*Conversion and Text* and *Understanding Conversion*) constructs a strong argument for the literary device of conversion in Medieval Christian texts.
4. For analysis of the historical construction of the modern and Western sense of self that is evidenced in evangelical piety, see, e.g., Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics," 151–181; Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," 78–96. For an interesting analysis of Protestant missionary presuppositions about this self-reflexive interior space of the religious subject, see Keane, *Christian Moderns*.
5. Long, *To Vietnam with Love*.
6. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.
7. Dournes, *God in Vietnam* (*Dieu aimes les pains*, Paris: Aubier, 1963). Dournes' fears of secularization are articulated on pages 69–70 of his book.
8. Dournes, *God in Vietnam*, 31.
9. Ibid., 137.
10. Ibid., 148.

11. In chapter five I discuss the significance of CMA missionaries' use of the tropes of sickness and healing to represent religious conversion to the highlanders as well as the missionaries' readers back home.
12. Cecily Cook who conducted research among Dega refugees in the late 1980s was also impressed by the passion of Dega to tell their war stories. As she explains in her Introduction: "I was interested in researching the traditional life of these new Americans . . . to record people playing traditional musical instruments and mothers singing lullabys. I hoped to find men who could tell me stories that they had learned from their fathers and grandfathers—stories that would give me insight into what the world of the highlanders was like." Instead what she heard were the prison and war stories that I discuss in this chapter. She continues: "What I found, when I finally stopped badgering people for traditional origin myths long enough to listen to what they really wanted to tell me, was the account of how they came to be here—which, in a way, is another kind of origin myth." Thus Cecily Cook went in search of origin myths, was told war stories instead, and then understood them as another kind of origin story. Similarly, I went in search of conversion narratives, was told war stories instead, and can now understand them as a kind of conversion story. The stubbornly creative powers of the academic intellect should not be underestimated. See Cook, "The Montagnard-Dega Community of North Carolina," 8–9.
13. The history of the *FULRO army* in the jungle is more thoroughly narrated in Cook, "The Montagnard-Dega Community." See also the video by Hales and Reibold, *Living in Exile*.
14. Some of the Special Forces soldiers I have talked with are skeptical of this image of a religiously devout *FULRO* army. They saw no sign of it during the years of the American war. They say something like, "Sure, some of the 'yards were Christian, I guess, but not really." One former soldier even went so far as to question the bamboo chapel that appears in a documentary film. "That's a fake," he told me. "Did you see how it's made of fresh bamboo? But they'd been living at that hideout for years. They built that for the cameras. They were savvy enough to present themselves as persecuted Christians seeking refugee status because of religious persecution. That's all." (The film in question is Hales and Reibold's, *Living in Exile*.)
15. Because the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) has limited foreign access to the highlands, there are few published accounts of current conditions. For analyses of the contemporary politics of culture in the highlands, see Salemink, "The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy." Also by Salemink, "Sedentarization and Selective Preservation." See as well Evans, "Vietnamese Communist Anthropology," 116–147, and "Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam," 274–304. In addition Schliesinger, Hill Tribes of Vietnam; and Van, *Ethnological and Religious Problems in Vietnam*.

16. For a community of "atrocity survivors" there is surprisingly little mention of any mental health problems among the refugee population. In contrast, pathological mental and social disorders have been widely studied and commented on in Hmong refugee communities—a similar group of southeast Asian "tribal" highland people who suffered atrocities for their alliance with the American war against communism in Indochina. See, e.g., Downing and Olney, eds., *The Hmong in the West*; Adler, "Ethnomedical Pathogenesis and Hmong Immigrants' Sudden Nocturnal Deaths," 23–59; McInnis, Petracchi, and Morgenbesser, *The Hmong in America*; and Westermeyer, Callies, and Neider, "Welfare Status and Psychosocial Adjustment," 300–306.

    Undoubtedly there is more "posttraumatic stress disorder" in the Dega community than people let on. Certainly the topic deserves further study, especially in light of the Christian conversion and group cohesion that marks the Dega history in contrast to that of the Hmong refugees.

    Many Dega tell me that they still have recurring nightmares about either their time in the prison camps or on the run in the jungle. Although it is rarely spoken of, a Dega man tried to take his own life several years ago and another man succeeded in 1999. "He was very depressed," people explained to me. "He missed his family." It is probably safe to conclude that there have been the same sort of posttraumatic stress disorders in the Dega refugee community as have been so widely reported and studied in the Hmong communities. So it is interesting that these sorts of disorders are rarely talked about, either by Dega or by Americans familiar with the group. There is no sense of dire social or psychological pathology like there is among people the Hmong. One woman, a nurse, who has been intimately involved with the community since 1986 recently told me: "If you're hallucinating, having problems, you can move from one household to another. People take care of you . . . There were marginal people in the jungle and there are the same marginal people here. People get depressed and they're either accepted or ignored, and then they get better."

    Neither Cecily Cook ("The Montagnard-Dega Community of North Carolina") nor Driscoll ("We Are The Dega") raise the issue of posttraumatic stress disorder in the only studies that have been conducted of the Dega refugee community. However, Rhonda Rosser-Hogan ("Making Counseling Culturally Appropriate," 443–445) uses the example of her counseling intervention with a Dega man in Greensboro to discuss more general problems of cross-cultural counseling. She situates her intervention within the social-scientific literature that chronicles posttraumatic stress disorders among the Southeast Asian refugee population as a whole. Although she makes no explicit evaluation of the incidence rates of these

pathologies in the Dega community, she clearly expects the pattern to be the same.

17. Some evidence exists for the existence in the highlands of this association between Christianity and Montagnard ethnic identity (if not explicit resistance to Vietnamese authority). Oscar Salemink writes that in the highlands, "Protestantism has a reputation of fierce anti-communism." Further he notes that although he has not "come across any Montagnard counterdiscourse relating Protestantism to political opposition. What Protestantism does provide . . . is an organizational and ideological autonomy which allows space for a separate Montagnard (Jarai Edé) ethnic identity in a context of increasing discipline, surveillance and governmentalization" ("The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands," 522–523).
18. CMA missionaries adopted standard CMA hymns by writing lyrics in the local languages. Apparently, during the years in the jungle, a new quality arose in the Montagnards' singing, for today they hardly sound like traditional Western church songs—although this difference is never commented upon by missionary chroniclers from the 1950s to the 1970s. The songs are sung slowly, often in harmony, but deep in the voice like a slow melodic chant. The songs retain their Western chord structure and (for the most part) the style of Western melody favored by mid-twentieth-century evangelicals. But the effect now is very different and difficult to describe. Dega choirs have been widely praised and celebrated in the community of North Carolinians involved in their resettlement—marking the group as mysteriously devout Christians of some sort of exotic pedigree. Dega Christian hymns, and their relationship to both CMA hymns and traditional highland musical forms, are deserving of much greater analysis than can be provided here. These much heralded hymns are the centerpiece of Dega worship services.
19. Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, Appendix B, *One Hundred Highland Leaders: Ethnic Affiliation, Approximate Birth Date, and Religion.*
20. Quoted in Driscoll, "We Are the Dega," 103.
21. This position surprised and frustrated many Montagnards who had imagined that if they made it to America they would be welcomed and supported by the Christian and Missionary Alliance.
22. It is the CMA missionaries and CMA trained Dega ministers who use this language of "revival" to describe what would seem to be religious *conversion*—Montagnards "deciding to accept God," not reviving a moribund Christian faith. Independent verification of this claim is difficult if not impossible to come by—as the government in Hanoi has severely restricted outside access to the highlands and there have been few academic studies of the Montagnards published since the end of the war based on new data. In one study that has been conducted, Oscar Salemink writes: "After 1975, Protestantism has become a success story of religious conversion." Oskar Weggel claims that its numbers rose from 200,000 in 1975 to 400,000 in 1987,

despite repression by the Communist authorities. See Salemink, "The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands." Salemink's statistics site: Weggel, "Die Religionspolitik des RS Vietnam," 461–468.

23. Salemink, "The King of Fire," 522–523.

4 Conversion to Refugees

1. "New Lives Await 209 Montagnards," *New York Times*, November 26, 1986, section A, p. 28.
2. Arrington, "Montagnards remember troubled home," *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, NC), December 20, 1992, Section A, p. 1, 10.
3. There is a vast literature on the conversion of Paul, often serving theological agendas. Two more recent studies are by Gaventa (*From Darkness to Light*) and Segal (*Paul The Convert*).
4. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 117.
5. For analysis of this theological tradition, see, e.g., Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion*, 29–72; Gallagher, *Expectation and Experience*; and, most famously, Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion.* A careful focus on the *rhetoric*, or "textuality," of Christian conversion is provided in two studies by Karl F. Morrison: *Conversion and Text*; and *Understanding Conversion.*
6. Gallagher, *Expectation and Experience*, 55; emphasis in the original.
7. This position is forcefully argued most recently by Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion.*
8. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 211.
9. Ibid., 215.
10. The model of the passive convert was most influentially constructed by Lofland and Stark, "Becoming A World-Saver," 862–875. Sociological critiques of the "brainwashing" studies include: Bromley and Richardson, eds., *The Brainwashing/deprogramming Controversy*; Richards, "The Active vs. Passive Convert," 163–179; Snow and Machalek, "The Convert as a Social Type," 259–289; and Zablobki, "The Blacklisting of a Concept," 96–121.
11. The phrase "vernacular Christianity" appears in the title of a volume edited by James and Johnson, *Vernacular Christianity.* Other recent anthropological and historical studies preoccupied with the problem of agency in the colonial missionary encounter include: Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*; Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Resistance*; and Keane, *Christian Moderns.* Earlier anthropological and historical studies of conversion (mostly in Africa) include: Horton, "African Conversion," 85–108; and Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism.*
12. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile," 495–523.
13. Ibid., 497–503.
14. Malkki, *Speechless Emissaries*, 384–390.

15. Daniels, "The Forgotten Army" (on the Internet web page of "Save the Montagnard People, Inc.," http://www.gate.net/~cbell/gcmafa.html, January 29, 1999); emphasis added.
16. Dega accounts of the post–Vietnam War history of the FULRO guerilla army are a central focus of Cecily Cook's master's thesis, "The Montagnard-Dega Community of North Carolina." A thorough and apparently authoritative account is provided by a journalist Nate Thayer in "The Forgotten Army," 16–18.
17. See the account in chapter 13 of Daniels' *Coming to America*; and in Zucker and Zucker's *The Guarded Gate.*
18. North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 21–22. For the history of social work and its roots in the tradition of religious charity, see Hugen, "The Secularization of Social Work," 83–102; Wuthnow, Hodgkinson, and associates, eds., *Faith and Philanthropy in America*; Marty, "Social Service: Godly and Godless," 463–481; and Niebuhr, *The Contributions of Religion.*
19. LFS is part of a national network affiliated with the South Carolina Synod of the Lutheran Church providing a broad range of social services. CSS is a member of the national network of Catholic social service agencies affiliated with the National Council of Catholic Charities.
20. The breadth of this effort in refugee resettlement is indicated by a flyer printed by LFS outlining the specific structure for a refugee sponsorship team. It includes separate committees for housing, employment, education, food, clothing, furniture, medical care, transportation, business and finance, as well as a coordinator. "Organizing for Sponsorship."
21. Most Rev. William G. Curlin, bishop of Charlotte, in *Annual Report* (1997–1998), Catholic Social Services of the Diocese of Charlotte, NC, Inc.
22. Brochure distributed by Lutheran Family Services at a North Carolina refugee health conference, July 1997 (New York, Church World Service, Immigration and Refugee Program, no date).
23. *Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas (LFS) Refugee Resettlement Program—Raleigh, NC* (undated flyer). The oft-repeated goal of "self-sufficiency" would seem to be aimed at reassuring the wider community that refugees will not become or remain a burden to the state.
24. Asad, "Comments on Conversion." See also Keane, *Christian Moderns.* The historical formation of the peculiarly modern sense of the self has been analyzed by Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity*; and Taylor, *Sources of the Self.*
25. Lutheran Family Services, "Volunteer Handbook for Working with Vietnamese Families" (Raleigh, revised in 1992), 9.
26. See chapter three in this volume for further discussion of this important Dega community leader.

5 Sickness, Sin, and Animal Sacrifice

1. Smith, *The Blood Hunters*, 109.
2. [Laura] Smith, *Farther into the Night*, 7.
3. In contrast, as I discussed in chapter two, French and American anthropologists have described the broad social functions of the Montagnards' "animistic religion" (marking the agrarian calendar, consecrating kinship alliances, accompanying virtually all important human activities, and strictly enforcing prescribed behavior and social relations). And anthropologists have recorded a variety of healing techniques—some of which explicitly evoked the world of spirits and some of which did not. See, e.g., Condominas, *We Have Eaten the Forest*, 120–163.
4. [Laura] Smith, *Victory in Viet Nam*, 226–267; emphasis added. Dr. Haverson, in fact, wrote his own account of his mission to Vietnam. See Haverson, *Doctor in Vietnam.*
5. Ade, "Interrupted but Not Disrupted".
6. *Alliance Witness,* June 8, 1966, 19; emphasis added.
7. Irwin, "How God Brought the Chrus to Di-Linh," 11.
8. Bailey, *Bringing Back the King.* Bailey's review devotes a chapter to each "fold" of the Fourfold Gospel. These "doctrinal distinctives" of the CMA are fleshed out by a brief chapter outlining eleven articles establishing basic theological positions of the CMA on such topics as: the trinity and the unity of God; the divinity of Christ, born of a virgin, his "substitutionary sacrifice," and his imminent return; the inerrancy of the Old and New Testaments ("as originally given"); man's sinful nature and the atoning work of Christ; rebirth through sanctification by the Holy Spirit; and the healing of the "mortal body" through prayer and anointing of the sick (63–74). See also Niklaus, Sawin, and Stoesz, *All for Jesus.*
9. Helpful reviews of this historical period include Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age*; and Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture.*
10. Thompson, *A.B. Simpson: His Life and Work.*
11. Rev. Foster, "A Ministry of Healing."
12. Long, *To Vietnam with Love*, 63.
13. For historical analyses of this period, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture*; Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America*; and Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism.*
14. Sweet, *Health and Medicine.*
15. See chapter four in this volume.
16. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture.*
17. The "Protestant mainline" has commonly been said to include Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists, Northern Baptists, Episcopalians, the Disciples of Christ, and the more liberal synods of the Lutheran church.

18. Hutchison, *Errand to the World*; Carpenter and Shenk, eds., *Earthen Vessels*; Beaver, ed., *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective*.
19. Hutchinson suggests as much in *Errand to the World*.
20. Lindsell, *Missionary Principles and Practices*; and Cook, *Missionary Life and Work*, 199. For an historical account of Bible school curriculum in this period, see Pierce, "The American Protestant Theological Seminary," 75–88; and Shenk, "North American Evangelical Missions Since 1945." My argument also relies on an interview on July 20, 1998 and a short correspondence with Dr. Norman E. Allison (professor of missions, Toccoa Falls College, Toccoa Falls, Georgia), and an interview with Dr. John Ellenberger (professor of missions, Alliance Theological Seminary, Nyack, NY) on May 23, 1997.
21. Cook, *Missionary Life and Work*, 199.
22. Ibid., 285.
23. Lindsell, *Missionary Principles and Practices,* 46.
24. Ibid., 237.
25. Ibid., 21.
26. Cook, *Missionary Life and Work*, 288.
27. [Laura] Smith, *Farther into the Night*, 79.
28. Betty Mitchell, quoted in Hales and Reibold, *Living in Exile*; italics approximate her annunciation in the interview.
29. Rev. Fleming, "An Acceptable Sacrifice," 13.
30. Smith, *Blood Hunters*, 104–105; emphasis added.
31. Ibid., 105.
32. [Laura] Smith, *Farther into the Night*, 117.
33. Compare the substantial documentation of traditional healing practices surviving among Hmong refugees who like the Dega also arrived from the highlands of Southeast Asia: Downing and Olney, eds., *The Hmong in the West*; and Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.
34. Long, *To Vietnam with Love*, 159.
35. Ibid., 153.
36. Ibid., 161.
37. Ibid., 162.

6 Hearts and Minds

1. Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*; See also Tanham et al., *War Without Guns*; Metzner, *More than a Soldier's War*. See as well Hunt, *Pacification*; and Anderson, *Vietnam: The Other War*.
2. Smith, R.N., *Lighting Candles*, 34–35.
3. Ibid., 40.
4. See, e.g., the opening chapters of Klassen, *Jimshoes in Vietnam*.
5. Rosenberger, *Harmless as Doves*, 7.
6. Smith, *Lighting Candles*, 57.

7. Williams, *Key Words.*
8. See, e.g., Arthur Niehoff, "Promoting Change in the Village," and "How Changes Occur in Human Behavior; The Effects of Group Process; and the Leadership Role of an Advisor," apparently excerpted from a study by Dr. Laurie Keyes, described as the chief, Health Education Unit, Heart Disease Control Program. Both are stored now in the USASOC Archives, Vietnam Collection, Box #21, Special Forces History and Archives, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.
9. Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, 25.
10. Smith, *Lighting Candles*, 44.
11. Ibid., 94–96, 106.
12. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches.* This position was also promoted by Robert Speer. See, e.g., Speer, *Missionary Principles and Practices*; and *Christianity and the Nations.* Nevius and Speer were two of the most prominent evangelical missionary spokesmen at the turn of the century when the American missionary movement was beginning to question its project.
13. The bibliography of the Vietnam War is immense. A good general introduction is by Karnow, *Vietnam: A History.* See also Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*; and Burns and Leitenberg, *The Wars in Vietnam.*
14. Important sources on Vietnam War era counterinsurgency theory include Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*; Cable, *Conflict of Myths*; Beckett and Pimlott, *Armed Forces and Modern Counter-Insurgency*; and Beaumont, *Special Operations and Elite Units.* Contemporaneous works include Pustay, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*; Greene, ed., *The Guerilla.*
15. Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth.* Rostow gave his thesis a brief and succinct statement in a 1961 speech at the Special Forces training base in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. See "Guerilla Warfare in Underdeveloped Areas."
16. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 10–12.
17. Although it is a fascinating topic, it is beyond the scope of this book to analyze Viet Cong tactics or their own representations of the proselytizing contest. One very accessible book that offers a fine introduction to the conduct of the war by the Viet Cong is that by FitzGerald (*Fire in the Lake*).
18. Freeman, "Hearts and Minds (Phrase)," 194–195.
19. A good recent analysis of the military and CIA's "other war" is Metzner, *More than a Soldier's War.* See as well Hunt, *Pacification*; and Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*. Anderson's *Vietnam: The Other War* offers a first-hand account spiced with many characters and dialogue. Interesting historically contemporary analysis include: Tanham, *War without Guns*; and Dow, *Nation Building in Southeast Asia*; Bronson P. Clark has published a personal memoir, *Not by Might.*

20. *A.I.D. and the American Voluntary Agencies* (brochure, no publication details given) (USASOC Archives, Vietnam Collection, Box #17, Special Forces History and Archives, Fort Bragg, North Carolina).
21. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World.*
22. Hostetter, "An Insider's Story," interview by NCLA, 10–11.
23. Webb Keane's recent book titled *Christian Moderns* offers a fascinating analysis of the construction of the modern subject through a rhetoric of "sincerity" in the missionary encounter.
24. Smith, *The Blood Hunters*, 106–107.
25. Dournes, *God in Vietnam*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, 71, 74, 99–100.
26. Ibid., 72.
27. Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, 89.
28. Damewood, "The Nuts and Bolts of US SF Civic Action in I Corps" (unpublished manuscript), 15.
29. Ibid., 15–18.
30. Ibid., 18.
31. Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, 26.
32. Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, 160–161.
33. Mitchell, "Tribesmen Freed by Viet Congs," 11. This citation is just one of innumerable examples of articles describing evangelical activities that make careful note of the numbers of "new Christians" to demonstrate progress. An explicit defense of this concern with counting conversions is offered by Stoesz, "Is God Interested in Numbers?" 5.
34. Damewood, "The Nuts and Bolts of US SF Civic Action in I Corps," 15.
35. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 464–465. Clarke quotes Gerald Hickey in CORDS "Field Evaluation Rpt, Pacification Studies Group, 12, May 71."

7 The Conversion of the Special Forces

1. Quoted by Halberstadt, *Green Berets: Unconventional Warriors*, 17.
2. Histories of the Special Forces include Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*; Thompson, *US Special Forces*; Simpson, *Inside the Green Beret*; Halberstadt, *Green Berets: Unconventional Warriors*; and Bank, *From OSS to Green Berets.*
3. Simpson, *Inside the Green Beret*, 21.
4. SP4 David D. Bellantonio 1st SFG (ABN) IO, "The Green Beret: A Symbol of Esprit de Corps," 15.
5. Ibid. *The Green Beret* magazine was published by the Information Office, 5th Special Forces Group, in the Republic of Vietnam from 1966 to 1970.
6. Oscar Salemink's *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlands* is the acknowledged authority on colonial and military use of

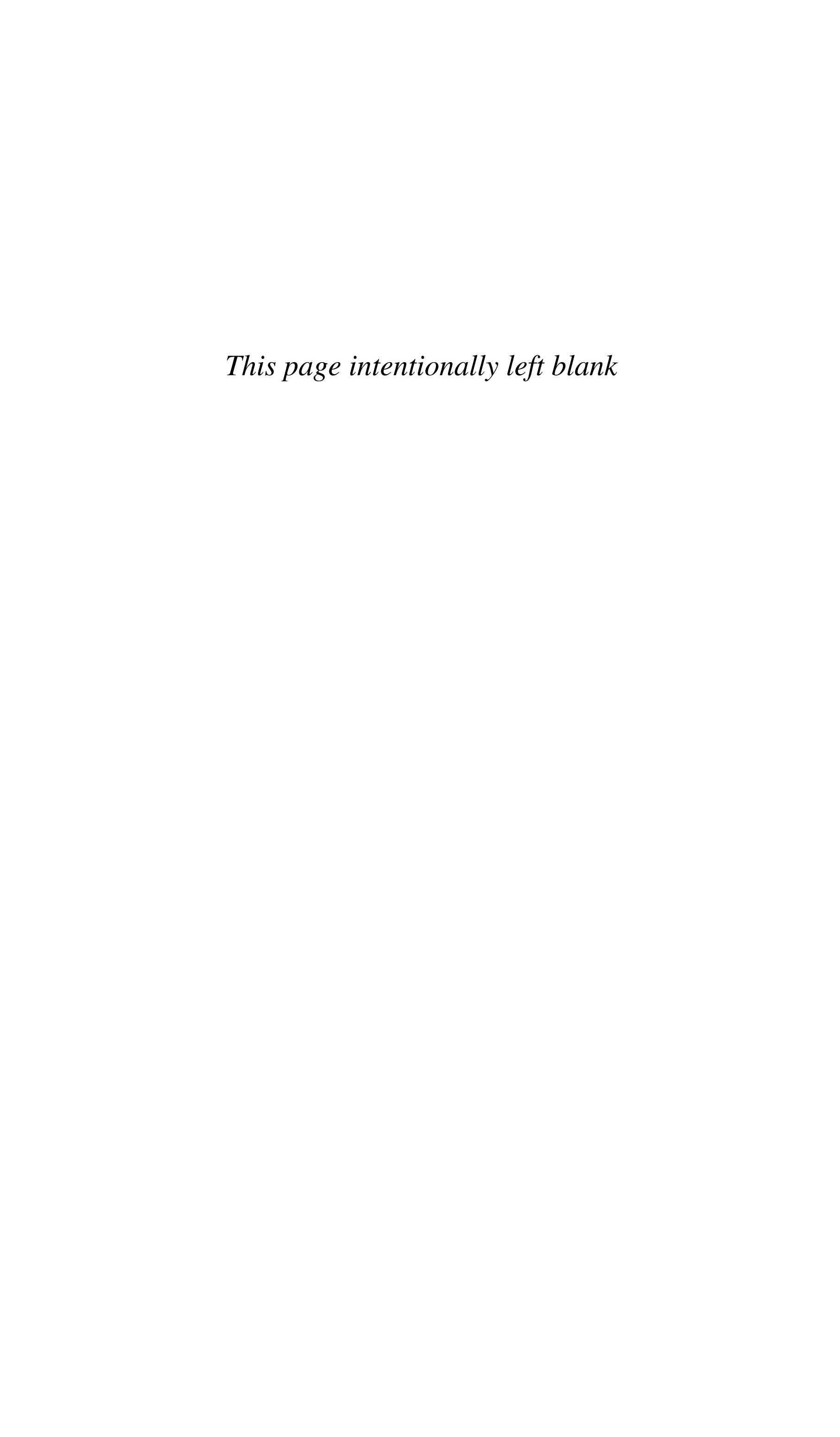
ethnography in the highlands. Published primary sources include: Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of South Viet-Nam*; Mole, *The Montagnards of South Vietnam*; and Shackleton, *Village Defense.*

The Special Forces Library and Special Forces Office of History and Archives (at Fort Bragg, North Carolina) have copies of several manuals that circulated in training programs during the war. These include Smith, *Area Handbook for South Vietnam*; Damewood "The Nuts and Bolts of Airborne US SF Civic Action in I Corps"; Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "Guide for Subsector Advisors"; Michigan State University Advisory Group, "Preliminary Research Report on the High Plateau"; Agency for International Development, "History of the Mountain People of Southern Indochina up to 1945"; "Health, Culture and Community in the Highland Region of Vietnam" (unpublished manuscript, USASOC Archives, Vietnam Collection, Box #13, Special Forces History and Archives, Fort Bragg, North Carolina); and Knoernschild (USOM Provincial Operations) and Szadek (International Voluntary Services), "Progress Report: Montagnard Training Center, Lam Dong Province, 1964." The bibliographies of these studies and manuals include numerous French ethnographic citations. But they also frequently reference recent interviews with either American soldiers and missionaries.

7. United States Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of South Viet-Nam.*
8. Ibid., 102.
9. Ibid., 102, 135.
10. Shackleton, *Village Defense*, 113.
11. Ibid., 124.
12. These periodicals have since been collected and reissued in a two-volume set: *The Greet Beret Magazine.*
13. See Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, 45–145; and Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, 82–123.
14. Sprague, "No Greater Loyalty," 45.
15. Condominas, *We Have Eaten the Forest*, 18.
16. The distinction in this account between American "hostages" and Vietnamese "prisoners" is telling. The Vietnamese were the Montagnards' enemy; the Americans were their potential allies, accomplices, or at least their helpfully placed interlocutors and negotiators.
17. Sochurek, "American Special Forces in Action in Viet-Nam," 43.
18. Ibid., 49, 51.
19. Ibid., 51–52.
20. Ibid., 48.
21. Condominas, *We Have Eaten the Forest*, 28, 242, 134, 138, 145–146, 409.
22. Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups*, 98.
23. George Hoffman, "Mountain People," http://www.vietvet.org/mountain.htm, August 7, 2008.

24. Ibid.
25. Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders.*
26. Hoffman, "Mountain People."
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid. Compare this paragraph to the earlier quoted Special Forces training manual warning that the Montagnards are "anamist [*sic*] in their religion…they will decide one morning that a certain trail or path is taboo. This would be hard to keep up with even if you could understand the language" (Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups*, 98).
29. Hoffman, "Mountain People."
30. "The Montagnard Bracelet," http://www.montagnards.org/bracele...rs_and_the_term_Montagnard216.html, January 29, 1999.
31. Hoffman, "Mountain People."
32. Interview with Richard Bishop, quoted in, "The 'Duke' and the Montagnards," appended by RADIX press to Seth Gitell's *Broken Promise*, 89.
33. Letter from John Wayne to Captain Richard Bishop, reproduced in ibid., 89.
34. "The Jackson-Vanik Amendment," on the web page of *Save the Montagnard People, Inc.*, http://www.gate.net/~cbell/jvam.html, January 29, 1999.
35. Open letter from Thomas M. Daniels III to Honorable Stanley O. Roth (assistant secretary of state, East Asia & Pacific), dated December 13, 1998, posted on the web page of *Save the Montagnard People, Inc.*

    This is Annex C-1 to the letter. Titled "US ODP/INS and SRV discrimination against The Forgotten Army & other Allies." Unsigned, but presumably written by Tommy Daniels.
36. Tommy Daniels, "The Forgotten Army," on the web page of *Save the Montagnard People, Inc.*
37. "The Montagnard Bracelet," *Save the People, Inc.,* http://www.montagnards.org/Bracele...rs_and_the_term_Montagnard216.html, January 29, 1999. Elsewhere on their evolving web page this quote is reworked to read: "This will be the only such facility in the world dedicated to recording and perpetuating the history of a truly remarkable people whose unique culture is being extinguished." See "The Longhouse Project," on the web page of *Save the People, Inc.*
38. GCMA, "They were there for us…now, we're here for them" (Brevard, NC, no date).
39. "The Longhouse Project," *Save the Montagnard People, Inc.*
40. Jim Morris, "Betrayal As Usual," appendix to Seth Adam Gitell, *Broken Promise,* 93–95. Jim Morris' brief essay is one of several amending the publication of Gitell's Honor's Thesis, in order to counter what Radix Press's Steve Sherman (himself a retired Special Forces soldier) felt were the distortions or inadequacies of his argument. (Conversation with Steve Sherman, June 8, 1997.)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