

**The forgotten people: recent explorations
of the past in the Borderlands (Northeast Cambodia,
South Lao PDR and Highlands of Viêt Nam)**

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I have spent extensive periods in Cambodia from 1994 up to 2011. After doing studies on societies, cosmology and nature, I became interested on the history occurring in the northeastern part of the country (Ratanakiri province), which had been a place nearly exclusively inhabited by hill peoples.

Very quickly, it appeared that highlanders, being oral societies, were perceived by outsiders for having a very limited history made out by repeated and cycling movements. It was very poor, in all aspects (religious, knowledge, social organization, etc.), in comparison to the neighboring civilizations.

After preliminary surveys, my intention was to challenge this assumption, in the same way it has already been challenged in other geographical contexts (De Heusch, 1972; Fauvelle-Aymar, Bon & Karim, 2007). Today, I would like to show how is it possible to collect elements liable to contribute to the forgotten history of the minority groups.

I will divide my presentation into three parts with empirical examples taken from my personal research in Ratanakiri province in Cambodia:

- ◆ First, I will present some testimonies from the past as described by explorers, precursors and scientists in the region under scrutiny;
- ◆ Second, I will describe a potential contribution that can be initiated by other ethno-historical investigations.
- ◆ As a result, the third section argues that the exploration of the past with these new tools, mostly through the contribution of ethno-history, will shed new light on oral societies in which their history had been so far neglected, if not denied.

1. Past and present interferences

What are called borderlands are recent State creations. Political boundaries in Cambodia have been shaped, and ratified, under French colonial regimes and they are still the purpose of highly sensitive disputes like with Thailand. For the pre-colonial period, in the absence of any written records and lack of oral memorizations, we are not so far able to

show with accuracy how and under which circumstances hill peoples settled in that hinterland located between the two Sésan and Srépok Rivers and in the uplands trapped by the two neighboring eastern countries.

This hilly territory was caught between three kingdoms ruled in the south and the west by a powerful Khmer monarchy (till the fifteen century), in the eastern part by the Cam and then with the Kinh in the actual Viêt Nam, and in north by one of the Lao dynasties from Champassak who became for a while, in the nineteen century, a Siamese emperor's vassal.

Contrary to what has been registered in neighboring countries like China, Burma and Thailand, royal records and more recent administrative archives remain generally silent on hill peoples and their territory. Only a few isolated notes are to be found. So far, any attempt to go a bit farther in the past, before the twentieth century, failed. We just have in hand some documents written by explorers (Henri Maître in 1912, Louis de Carné in 2000, Pierre Cupet in 1998, and Henri Mouhot in 2000), military and local administrators whose testimonies, with the noticeable exception of Albert Maurice (1933), Adhémard Leclère (1908) and Etienne Aymonier (1900), reflect geopolitical expansionist views sustained by their own ideological assignments rather than objective attempts to know about the roots and the destiny of the hill peoples.

Apart from a very few ethnohistorical investigations undertaken in Cambodia with Mathieu Guérin (2008) with, to a lesser extent by myself (1997 & 1998) and in the next-door highlands of Viêt Nam studiously investigated by Jean Boulbet (1967), Gerald Hickey (1982) and Oscar Salemink (2000 & 2003), very little is known with regards to the socio-cultural configuration in the past, at least in Cambodia.

There have been alternative attempts, spurred by scientific curiosity, to describe minority groups who were still called Proto-Indochinese populations. We must thank scientific precursors and missionaries like Emile Kemlin (lately printed in 1998), and more recently anthropologists like Georges Condominas who studied the Mnong Gar in 1948-1949 (1957 & 1977) and Jacques Dournes who spend most of his time with the Jarai from the fifties (1955 & 1972). All of them transformed the conventional ethnocentric way, by adopting a long term ethnographic diligent approach. But the common trend in the nineteen and twentieth centuries remained nevertheless to schematically depict hill peoples by insisting on their superstitions and backwardness as a justification to pacify them as the historian Mathieu Guérin said (2008).

That is all, I would dare to say. It does not mean the "early hours" raw materials are not worth to look into. Even explorers accounts, in spite of the futility of their conclusion, the incoherence of their methodology which, after all, was not dedicated to promote any scientific knowledge but to explore the feasibility of the French hegemony in Indochina, deserves attention since they are the first recorded testimonies. But it requires a critical close scrutiny and they do not give us any clue to the legacy of the past in this confined territory.

Nor did any archeological, historical and linguistic overviews of the close territories in the neighboring countries can propose for sure any analogical guarantee. Because of this imposed historical myopia, we just can infer, presume, launch hypotheses or propose insightful theories.

2. New readings in the history of the people

2.1 Reshaping history

Let us examine the first categories of admitted “discoveries” through anthropological accounts. First, hill peoples have not always been natives from the hills. Migrations regularly occurred and the intricacy of spatial movements make new comers converging, living together or being separated. Such displacements are rarely documented, with the exception of annual encounters with the King of Cambodia and the emissaries of the three Jarai *sadets*). But for other migrations, nobody is clear how and why it happened. But they did occur for sure. Vernacular mythologies and oral literatures in Ratanakiri, having the advantage to be easily manipulated and transformed, continue to sustain a common origin shared by all ethnic groups. A similar pool appears even among those having totally different language affiliations like the Malayo-Polynesian and the Austronesian groups. Either right or wrong, it shows a collective will of the people of the hills to “recreate” a common history, a “past shared identity”.

Second, no social unit has been isolated and totally separated from the others and not a single group ever tried, at least till the present days, to claim this. To the contrary: many legends explain a common biological origin of the various local ethnic groups with the Khmers and the reasons why they had to be separated and, retroactively, how hill peoples have to be differentiated in new social units. **The underlying motivation is fascinating because it explains that if human beings cannot avoid sharing values and references in common, at the same time it is hazardous for all to remain together.** Separation is less an act of resistance of being together than an expression in favour of strengthening emerging identities through division, without being rivals, as if social and geographical dispersions were considered as one of the main survival conditions. Till recently, the spatial socio-political configuration reflects this fragmentation: neither territory confederation nor ethnic federations existed. Before the administration of the province via the district authorities, there was no highest social and political unit above the hamlet or the village.

Third, it can be steadily proved that each social unit who moved to the hills, either by force or by constraint, took another name and incorporated other languages (most of them, at least men, are polyglots). **A concrete example is with the Krüng**, a recent ethnic designation. Three generations ago they were called Brao in Cambodia and some of them became resolute, for some historical and circumstantial reasons that cannot be depicted here, to be recognized as Krüng. Today more than 5000 people claim to be identified as Krüng. Nonetheless, the new name is not only an emblem, a symbolic marker, if we refer to Fredrick Barth’s theories. It bears in addition a creative impulse, enhanced by some people, associated with the motivation to put together specific

knowledge, practices and representations which became, in the course of time, a specific cultural pattern they do not share anymore with the people who remain Brao. Of course, this cultural pattern is socially constructed by some actors at a very particular historical moment, but it reflects at the same time an incorporation process, in the sense given by Michel Foucault, a profound reality giving existence to the essence of what is called culture: a production and a collection of thousands of small details, accounts and local histories that make people living together.

Fourth, interethnic relations have been prevailing since immemorial times and works have been done in that respect. Interethnic contact is not only a dialectical relation between the peoples of the plains and the peoples of the hills, but among the peoples of the hills themselves. Such a phenomenon is increasing nowadays and provide, as we can see in the present days, new possibilities, even beyond boundaries, to adjust and create “ways of being together”. Finally, various identities have definitively being transformed, enriched and are still changing, but more quickly nowadays, and I agree with James Scott (2009), after having observed on the long run interethnic relations in Ratanakiri province that **ethnic identities are more a matter of performance than of genealogy**. For most people living in that hilly region nowadays, it is a “positional” strategy and it is also a way to remember who they are, by giving a meaning to their life.

This is not a paradox to think that identity can be defined as a constructive difference as well. If a Tampuan claims to be called a Tampuan but not a Khmer, it means the name carries essential values that cannot be neglected. Some anthropologists on the other hand criticize the ethnonym terminologies as something given from outside. **Narrowing the question with the concept of ethnofiction goes against the people’s efforts to identify themselves with something which is not an abstraction, a vacuum**. In fact, the so-called fiction (except the ethnonyms imposed by the States) becomes reality and when you ask a Krüng if his ancestors were Brao (and there were), he will strongly deny this assertion because such revelation would go against what he has been patiently recently re-constructed.

2.2 Escaping from the tyranny of the state?

On the other hand, there are conjunctures. Where do the different ethnics groups come from? We do not have scientific proofs but we have some elements that tend to go in some directions. First, it is difficult to admit that over the last centuries in Cambodia, people were either within the state in the valleys (oppressed) or without it in the mountains (free). This is James Scott’s theory in his fascinating book “the art of not been governed” (2009). Maybe they belong to former literate civilizations and probably they lost the written language, as it is effectively mentioned in the oral literature among most of the ethnic groups (like the Kachok, Jarai and the Tampuan) but, perhaps, it was a constraint, a consequence of their life conditions: i.e. that has not been deliberate.

In that respect one can assume that the maintenance of oral tradition was an original act of freedom, but it can be also more a consequence of the division than an underlying reason for the separation.

Also, it is hazardous to be sure whether being settled in the hills was a way to escape from the tyranny of the padi-state run by neighbouring valley kingdoms. The limited compiled materials we come across do not allow either to presume or to reject this possibility. And even if it has been the case, they just jumped out of the frying pan into the fire because they had to face another kind of tyranny in the mountain village¹ which - as far as it is beyond the exotic appearance - is not at all egalitarian and acephalous insofar as an internal hierarchy was prevailing between different lineages or clans, among men and women and in the presence of an influential religious leadership.

2.3 Ethnographic contributions taken from oral sources

Flexible identities have always existed. First steps of what can be called a micro-globalization, resulting from local and far-distant encounters are not new and they had already going on for long.

Take the case of the Tampuan living in the middle plateau of Ratanakiri. When Lao peasants settled on the bank of the River Sésan, they took Tampuan and Brao ladies, the most valuable gift, and in return provided some techniques to the Brao and initiated wet rice cultivation for their Tampuan's in-laws. In compensation, Tampuan people transmitted myths, songs and specific know-how to other groups coming from the valleys, but also to the Jarai and to some Lao farmers. At the same time, they still were exchanging buffaloes and domesticated elephants against series of gongs and iron product fabricated in the actual Viêt Nam. They started cultivating in their garden (*miir*) some vegetables whose seeds had been provided by travelers and itinerary merchants. *Kru Khmer* (traditional Khmer healers) were going on the plateau in the quest of medicinal plants and taught local people Buddhist rituals and were giving them amulets from the valley.

More recently, they store various products collected in the forest in order to get typical Khmer new clothes and modern materials like transistors, mobile phones and even television which allow them to be in touch with the outside world. The bamboo craft industry is making a comeback with the growing number of tourists while Buddhists rituals are sometimes added during wedding ceremonies. In fact, if they are still Tampuan, incessant additional components providing a new cultural configuration coming from other social and geographical horizons **have been incorporated**.

A similar micro-history dealing with social interactions tends to show that a similar but a more accelerated process is taking place in the present days. Since Independence in the forties, changes occurring in the north eastern province of Ratanakiri illustrate the way some so-called minority groups, who in fact still represent the majority of the

¹ And there is not end because they should have run away from the village

provincial population in 2010, cannot be considered anymore as ‘closed’ collective entities sharing patterns of life, priorities, strategies and interests (Bourdier, 2008).

First Khmer colonization organized under Sihanouk in the early sixties, recent interferences with the outside world with Vietnamese, Lao, Chinese and Khmer migrants, with national civil servants, investors and developers have led some of the hill peoples to take advantage of this socio-economic and cultural confrontation while, on the other extreme, others are far left behind.

Such heterogeneous interactions and selective connections with the outsiders have implications in terms of village life conditions and the **romantic notion of community is seriously put in question in most of the villages**. Some strategies has been taken over by some peoples, other have not done that. Interestingly, there are vernacular expressions stipulating that “villages have burnt”, which means they have lost their social cohesion.

Conclusions : what to be done?

Every social groups needs to change relentlessly in order to survive. Change is the condition of permanence and in that respect one of the further research imperatives should be to restore to the social its intrinsic dimension of creation and innovation. For instance, we study traditions and rules, but we cannot neglect the actors’ strategies. All western societies have been built through borrowing, exchange, conflicts and imagination and there is no reason that such process does not take place among minor hill societies.

Based on these poorly investigated assumptions, an ambition of further research investigations should be to discover assorted mechanisms connected with the maintenance of cultural vivacity and creativity in a context of intensified exchanges in the borderlands. **Borderlands can be a privileged place because the present intensity of flux acts as a revelator as well as a testimony of transformation**. The new situation is that all these societies are more and more interconnected with the Global World. Nobody wants, or can, run away in the forest to escape, as it was certainly possible before. They know they cannot make anymore one step backward and most of them are willing and ready to receive some benefits from this globalization. At the local level, this globalization - we should rather say “*glocalisation*” - mostly starts with an internationalization of the socio-economic and cultural interactions in the borderlands.

Whatever the outcome, both internal and borderland dynamics allowing the re-production of a society need to be anthropologically deciphered for understanding the conditions in which a given culture maintains its peculiarities by borrowing, adopting or refusing options from others, by incorporating information they receive from outside. Of course, there can be some points of rupture when a given society, or a part of it, is absorbed by a dominant culture: this is what we start to observe in some hamlets, within some families bearing the syndromes of Icarus towards the Khmer invasion.

But more generally, ongoing scenarios in the borderlands, specifically the former remote areas, deserve more attention than ever, insofar what was schematically called the periphery turns to be the center of attraction in terms of social combinations and upheavals, economic exchanges, political decisions and cultural interactions giving birth to new forms of identities.

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