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## THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE MOI TO THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF INDOCHINA

GEORGE DEVEREUX

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IN thinking about the claims to independence of the large civilized nations of south and Southeast Asia, we are prone to forget or to ignore the fact that these regions also contain more than eighty million tribal minorities. These large minorities are not negligible quantities in the ethics of democracy; not even a single individual is of such trifling importance as to be brushed aside with the classical adage *de minimis non curat praetor*. Professor Robert M. MacIver has emphasized that, just as the human being is unable to unfold his potentialities without the protection and care of society, so society cannot attain its maximum development without granting to every individual every opportunity for full self-realization and individualization. The same is true, I think, also of minority groups.

There is nothing to gain from a dead leveling of all differences, individual or cultural, regardless of how high this dead level may be. Cultural progress has always been a product of cultural cross-fertilization. In fact, most people will concede that the Dutch, in developing the Dutch way of life, or the Chinese, in developing the Chinese way of life, have made substantial contributions to the welfare of mankind as a whole. It is, on the other hand, less evident to some that any design for living has creative and leavening values for the benefit of mankind as a whole, regardless of how "primitive" that design may be. And yet, Margaret Mead has shown that we have a great deal to learn from primitives as regards wise methods of child training; and the social wisdom of each anthropologist has been enriched by his contacts with primitive tribes. In brief, I do not think it farfetched to assert that diversity is, in itself, creative. For this reason the rights of tribal groups to self-realization cannot be shrugged off with mutterings about "mere savages."

The mountain jungles of Annam and, to a certain extent, also those of Laos and of Cambodia, are inhabited by a relatively primitive group, whom their more civilized neighbors designate by terms signifying "savage" (Moi, Kha, Stieng, Pnong). Although the Moi must have interbred occasionally with some of their neighbors, and especially with the now

almost extinct but once highly civilized Cham, this sturdy and attractive people is physically rather homogeneous and seems to belong to the so-called proto-Indonesian group. The Moi speak Mon-Khmer languages, although Malayo-Polynesian words are by no means lacking in the vocabularies of tribes which formerly were in contact with the Cham; nor are Annamite, Laotian, and other loan-words entirely absent. Their inherent potentialities for cultural development are particularly stressed by those who, on the basis of reasonably good evidence, affirm that the ancient Khmers originally split off from the Moi tribes, and later on developed the high civilization which enabled them to build the marvelous structures of Angkor.

#### THE MOI HINTERLAND

The Moi hinterland is, politically, relatively loosely organized. The areas previously dominated by the Cham have a vague, semireligious, tribal organization, presided over by the pontiff (*sadet*) of the fire and the pontiff (*sadet*) of the water, misleadingly called "king" of the fire and "king" of the water. The largest political unit in the central and northern areas is, however, the village, although internal warfare within each dialectal area is almost unknown. As a result of this atomistic organization, and despite the warlike character of these tribes, their territories have been repeatedly, though only temporarily, invaded by their more powerful neighbors. Only the relatively long Cham sovereignty over the Darlac plateau, and a few adjacent regions, appears to have left any marked traces. For all practical purposes the Moi hinterland was, until the coming of the French, always more or less independent, partly because of the stubbornly independent character of the Moi, partly because of the forbidding character of much of the terrain, and partly because the relative poverty of this area had little or no appeal for the would-be exploiter.

It may be of some interest to compare the sovereignty claims of Laos and of Cambodia, as regards the Moi hinterland, with those of Annam. Cambodian dominance, always shadowy at best, had some basis in the linguistic and ethnic connections between the Cambodians and the Moi. Like a few Cambodians, some of the Laotians also settled in various small sections of the Moi territory, and the authority of the Cambodian and Laotian rulers was held to cover the entire area over which their real subjects were scattered. In theory this made the Moi subjects of these princes, though in fact no one attempted to give any tangible expression to this subjection. The Annamite situation is, however, very different. For

some obscure reason the Annamite does not seem inclined to live in the mountains, and the Annamite push was directed at first at the rapidly crumbling Cham empire, caught in a vise between Annam and Cambodia, and, later on, against Cambodia, caught between the rapidly expanding Annamites and Siamese. Intent upon destroying Champa and Cambodia, the Annamites never seem to have penetrated the Moi hinterland. When, during the nineteenth century, a Siamese military expedition penetrated rather deeply into the Moi territory, it was halted only by a French counterexpedition. The French laid claim to the overlordship of the Moi regions as protectors of Annam, this claim being based on the fiction that, historically speaking, the Annamite empire had fallen heir to the territories formerly held by Champa. This claim disregarded the fact that the Cham domination was limited to the Darlac plateau and to certain adjacent areas, and was more in the nature of a shadowy suzerainty, resembling the ripuarian "alliances" of Rome and China with bordering barbarians, than in the nature of a true dominance.

The fictitious character of Siamese, Annamite, Laotian, and Cambodian claims of historical sovereignty over the Moi hinterland can be proved in a rather telling, though indirect manner, by contrasting the prevalence of venereal diseases in these civilized countries with their almost total absence in the Moi regions. Any real occupation of the Moi mountains would have been accompanied by a rapid spread of venereal diseases.

In fact, the fictitiousness of Annamite claims to the Moi regions has been indirectly recognized by the French who, in the face of protests from the court of Annam, have prohibited Annamite immigration to the Moi regions, which would have led swiftly to a pauperization of the Moi, without appreciably relieving the population pressure of the Annamite territories. The only peoples to pacify the Moi hinterland were the French, whose rule was, on the whole, neither harsh nor exploitive. Several of my Moi friends rather wryly acknowledged that since the coming of the French the cost of imports had greatly decreased, and that the loss of profit from slave raids was compensated for by a new security of life and property.

#### THE SEDANG

Limitations of space compel me to limit my discussion of Moi culture to a sketch of Sedang customs, with which I am personally familiar. The level of cultural development of the Sedang of the Dakto sector of Kontum province, Annam, is approximately that of the Pagans of the Philippines,

or the Dayaks of Borneo. They live in fortified villages, containing several longhouses and a bachelors' clubhouse, as well as some granaries. Treasure-stores, on the other hand, are generally hidden in the jungle. At present the villages have a dual government. The real chief of the village is chosen by lot, and his function is partly ceremonial and partly military. The precise amount of influence and prestige of this chief is determined by his personality. The official head of the village, as far as the French are concerned, is, generally speaking, a relatively unimportant man who has responsibility without real authority, and who must serve as a buffer between the French and the village. Each longhouse is presided over by a woman chief, whose functions are purely ritualistic. The real authority within the village is the assembly of adults; and within the assembly, the aggressive and persuasive individuals, who, generally speaking, constitute the wealthier segment of the population, are the most influential.

Descent is, strictly speaking, neither patrilineal nor matrilineal. Special conditions and strength of character determine whether the man moves into the woman's house, or vice versa. This tribe has no clans, moieties, phratries, or secret societies. The village is a unit in opposing outside claims, though one house may quarrel with another house, the upper half of the house with the lower half, one extended family with another extended family, and husband with wife. Their legal system is quite complex; and whereas there is seldom any doubt as to who is in the right, the actual outcome in settling differences is determined by the eloquence and persuasiveness of one's go-between, and, to an even larger extent, by the number and determination of one's supporters. Some lawsuits may go on for generations, and an aggressive individual may succeed in collecting damages for injustices to a grandfather who has been dead for decades.

The Sedang are an agricultural tribe, who plant rice, lachryma job, and millet in their burnt-over mountain fields, and who also cultivate in their gardens various vegetables and a textile plant (ramie or China grass) and tobacco. Maize plantations and irrigated rice fields in the valleys are "lay" fields, and are owned by individuals, whereas mountain dry-rice and other dry cereal fields are "sacred," and are owned by the houses. The Sedang raise buffaloes, principally for sacrifice and for trade, as well as pigs, dogs, and chickens. They mine, smelt and forge iron, work brass, and make beautiful textiles and basketry.

In addition to being gifted in the decorative arts, the Sedang are passionately devoted to music. Their instrumental music, quite unlike that

of China or of Java, has a ready appeal for the Western ear. Extraordinarily beautiful tunes are played on gongs, wind instruments, and even on a water-driven musical scarecrow. The Sedang also are extraordinarily gifted in the realm of mechanics. Moreover, they are enthusiastic and enterprising traders, though their trade is more a battle of wits and of prestige and aggressiveness than an economically fruitful enterprise, and serves to fill treasure-houses with blankets, gongs, and Chinese jars rather than to raise the standard of living in essentials.

Their intellectual capacities, even in the realm of abstract thought, are quite amazing. Several persons assured me independently that the number of integers and of fractions is infinite, i.e., that one can go on counting or dividing without ever stopping. Even a seventeen year old girl understood, without elaborate explanations, the Copernican system, including the phases of the moon, when I demonstrated it to her by means of a candle. Furthermore, although the mythology of the Sedang is by no means remarkable as an aesthetic or philosophical production, the Rhade legend of Damsan (translated by Sabatier)<sup>1</sup> is an epic of great loveliness. The illiterate Moi are, in general, quite aware of the powers of literacy. They both admire and envy those among them who have been taught the three R's by the French. They would be eager for schooling, since one of their legends records how, in ancient times, the Moi lost their chance of learning how to write.

Last of all, the Moi are stubborn and courageous fighters, and, in Kipling's words "true to their salt." It is alleged that the occupying Japanese feared only the Moi regiments in French uniform, while they were rather contemptuous of other native regiments.

The Sedang is deeply imbued with a tragic sense of life and faces a hostile universe with defiance and independence. The culturally creative aspects of the tragic sense of life have been fully and plausibly analyzed by Erich Fromm.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately this defiant attitude also pervades human relations; on the whole, the Moi tends to be quarrelsome, litigious, and ready to take advantage of anyone weaker than himself. Yet, like all human beings, the Moi wishes to be loved and to love; he considers violent and oppressive behavior not as something desirable or good, but rather as something unfortunate and unavoidable. "How can you expect us to be good when both our gods and our ancestors are evil?" they replied,

<sup>1</sup> *La chanson de Damson*, translated and edited by Leopold Sabatier (Paris: Leland & Trautman, 1928), preface by Roland Dorgelès.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941).

when I tried to admonish them to be kind to each other. Noncompetitive individuals are liked; but, since they are generally poor, they are taken advantage of and are slightly ridiculed. On the other hand, when the individual is as "rich" and "powerful," as the visiting anthropologist seems to be in terms of native standards, they react differently. "At first we thought you were a fool, because, though rich, you never took advantage of anyone. It frightened us. Now we think that perhaps it is possible to be both rich and good to people."

Summing up, the Sedang can make genuine contributions to the cultural landscape of Indochina. His legalistic mind would qualify him for responsible administrative functions, and he is eager to learn. His courage and loyalty to the uniform qualify him to enforce law and order in the Moi hinterland. His talent for decorative weaving and basketry could serve as a basis for a productive home industry; and his mechanical talents, combined with his passion for trading expeditions, could, when properly guided, make the Moi jungles a major lumbering center. His extraordinary musical gifts need only proper guidance to produce works of real significance for the musical world as a whole. His defiant attitude, coupled with a tragic sense of life, could be diverted from aggression against his fellow humans to that struggle against the destructive forces of nature which many fine psychologists view as a constructive outlet for aggressive impulses.

Sedang culture contains the necessary prerequisites for a creative development in terms of its own basic values and meanings, and its obliteration would impoverish the cultural landscape of Indochina. The necessary initial guidance could perhaps be provided by the racially and linguistically related Cambodians, whose culture, like that of the Moi, is basically different from the rest of Indochinese cultures. A Cambodian-Moi cultural unit, in which the somewhat effete, though delightful, Cambodian civilization would be rejuvenated by Moi vigor, could contribute a rich and leavening element to the creative and dynamic cultural balance of the Indochinese Union.