THE PROCESS OF ETHNICITY: A FOCUS ON THE PEOPLE OF THE VIETNAMESE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

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Ever since a remote time long before the advent of history, human societies have existed in Southeast Asia, and the drama of change in the course of the centuries produced a rich variety of peoples and cultures. In many respects it has been like the constantly altering profusion of a luxuriant tropical garden with its old and new growths, its struggles and symbiosis, florescence and death. There have been small human groups that settled in ecological niches well suited to their needs, and they changed relatively little over the years. Other groups migrated often, adopting to varying physical environments so that they eventually fissioned, giving rise to many new and distinct societies. Other new societies resulted from groups coming together and fusing. Then there were those human groups that lost the struggle for survival and died out.

In time some societies for a variety of reasons experienced vast transformations, and attained that level of cultural evolution we call civilization. Great kingdoms rose and fell, and in the more recent period, national states were created. But despite the fact that some ethnic groups have advanced more rapidly
than others and have come to dominate these political states, the mosaic variety that has always characterized Southeast Asia has remained until our time.

This study is concerned broadly with the ethnohistory of those people who at some time in the past settled in what usually are referred to as the central highlands of Vietnam. Geographically this would be the southern portion of the mountain range we know in English as the Annam Cordillera or the Annamite Chain (the French call it the Chaine Annamitique while the Vietnamese know it as the Truong Son or "Long Mountains"). Scattered through the valleys, slopes, and plateaus of these green uplands are populations numbering an estimated 900,000 to one million that speak either languages of the Mon Khmer or Austronesian (Malayopolynesian) stocks. Physically they resemble other Southeast Asians who speak languages of these stocks (such as the Cambodians, Malays, and Indonesians).

Throughout this paper these mountain people will be referred to collectively as the "Highlanders," although this does not imply homogeneity of any kind nor does it represent a translation of any such designation they now have for themselves.
Ethnographically there is considerable variation among the Highlanders. Their relative levels of advancement range from the primitive Katu with their very small villages or isolated households, subsistence economy, and minimal leadership (and also human sacrifices) to the Chru with their sophisticated paddy cultivation and literate elite. Nonetheless all of the highland groups share many basic characteristics in their basic style of life. All of them are village-oriented people, and in their small communities there are close social relations, particularly among those in the same kin group, reflecting the importance of kinship. In all of the highland societies there is relatively little differentiation among their social, political, economic and religious systems; for example, leaders (many of whom attain their positions because of their being favored by the spirits) commonly perform rituals that have multiple social overtones as well as having the economic goal of bringing abundant harvests. All of the highland people have livelihoods based on agriculture with rice (upland dry

1 They employ the Indian script of the Cham, their advanced lowland neighbors who in the past had an advanced culture of the Indian great tradition.
rice or paddy) the staple crop, and they farm similar secondary crops. Fishing in nearby streams and hunting in the vast upland forests are ancillary economic activities. The division of labor is the same in all of the societies. Finally, until the advent of Christianity in the nineteenth century, all of the highland religious systems had similar pantheons of animistic spirits and equally similar rituals related to them.

Although the broad focus of this study is on the role of the Highlanders in the history of Indochina, the concept around which most of the data are organized is ethnicity. Talcott Parsons 1 observes that "It seems to be generally agreed that what we call ethnicity is a primary focus of group identity, that is, the organization of plural persons into distinctive groups, and second, of solidarity and loyalties of individual members to such groups. It is, however, an extraordinarily elusive concept and very difficult to define in any precise way."

The elusiveness of ethnicity derives from its being a very multidimensional concept that has been treated in widely varying ways by social scientists. In the present study I see ethnicity

as a process, a particular type of social change that produces ethnic identity and ethnic groups. It is a process affected by a number of different social, political, and economic factors, and it brings about a "we-they" differentiation; in other words at some point in time a group of people come to identify themselves (and are identified by others) as being members of an ethnic group. Fredrik Barth ¹ considers membership ascription as an essential characteristic of ethnic groups, which for him are "categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people." Barth is particularly interested in exploring the different process involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups, and his focus of investigation is the ethnic boundaries, which are explicitly social boundaries. For Barth the group is defined by the ethnic boundary, and he concludes that such boundaries are maintained by a "limited set of cultural features," adding that "the persistence of the unit then depends on the persistence of these cultural differentiae, ¹Barth, F., Introduction to Barth, F., (ed.), Ethnic Group and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1969, pp. 9-38.
while continuity can also be specified through the changes of the unit brought about by changes in the boundary-defining cultural differentiae. In other words, those cultural features important in maintaining ethnic boundaries are subject to change in the course of time.

In the present study, ethnicity and ethnic identity are discussed in relation to the highland people on two levels -- that of the individual ethnic group identity and that of an emerging identity of being Highlanders.

Identifying individual ethnic groups in a complex polyethnic situation such as exists in the highlands is exceedingly difficult, requiring years of study. Since the ethnographic research done for this study was essentially a survey, it did not lend itself to examination in depth of ethnic boundaries. Nonetheless, in the light of data gathered, including information on many cultural features and some views of highland informants concerning their own and other ethnic identities, it is possible to present my own differentiation (summarized on the map) and to comment on the ethnic picture found in the existing literature on the highlands.

Generally speaking there is a good deal of disagreement in the literature on the Highlanders as to how they should be
differentiated into ethnic groups. Leach \(^1\) observes that such confusion arises from the erroneous notion that "in a 'normal' ethnographic situation one ordinarily finds distinct 'tribes' distributed about the map in orderly fashion with clear-cut boundaries between them." Noting that many ethnographic monographs suggest this is the case, he adds, "My own view is that the ethnographer has often only managed to discern the existence of 'a tribe' because he took it as axiomatic that his kind of cultural entity must exist. Many such tribes are, in a sense, ethnographic fictions." This has been true in some of the reporting on the highlands; several "ethnic groups" described in monographs were found subsequently not to exist.

Related to this is the curious case of the Katu, who appear to have attained an ethnic identity because it was ascribed to them by outsiders. In the early 1930's, some of the Highlanders in Quang Nam Province were conducting raids on lowland settlements, and after investigating the situation, a French official concluded that the raiders were of one ethnic group he.

\(^1\)Leach, E., Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure, with a Foreword by Raymond Firth and a New Introductory Note by the Author, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967, pp. 290-91.
chose to call the Katu. The name subsequently appeared in literature and on maps. When I visited the area in 1957, however, villagers claimed that they did not call themselves "Katu" but that they only identified themselves by the name of the village from which they came. Both the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese began to refer to the Katu in their censuses and other government documents, and then the researchers from the Summer School of Linguistics took up the study of the "Katu" language. In 1964 some refugees in Quang Nam called themselves "Katu" as did a young man from a Viet Cong controlled area. All of this suggests that the ethnic identity of being Katu is something that has been ascribed by outsiders to a population that previously did not have any common awareness of being members of a group with a group label. When both of these things occurred, the change produced the Katu ethnic group.

Leach also makes the pertinent observation that there all too often is an assumption by investigators that "a group which speaks a distinct language or dialect is, by definition,

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2 Leach, E., Political ..., pp. 290-91.
a separate tribe or tribal section," adding that "each such section is then treated as a distinct cultural and ethnographic entity with a distinct history and a separate continuity in time." This has been the tendency with some linguistic researchers in the highlands; they identify language groups which they then treat as ethnic groups in their literature and on maps.

The second level of discussion deals with the emerging identity of being a Highlander -- i.e., a person of the highlands as opposed to those who are not of the mountain region. This identity is deeply rooted in time but since the beginning of the twentieth century it has been spreading among more of the upland population as they have become conscious of their common identity. The most obvious expression of this phenomenon has been the appearance of the Highlander identity as the focal ideology in several sociopolitical movements organized by Highlanders of different ethnic groups in the past twenty years. For many of the highland people it is a new ethnic identity but it has not in any way replaced ascribed membership in any individual group. Rather, it exists in addition to it. It is comparable in many respects to the emergence in the post-Columbian period in the Americas of the ethnic identity of being "Indian," which also existed in addition to individual tribal identity.
One of the primary goals of this study has been to examine some of the factors that have been vital to the inception, continuation, and diffusion of the Highlander ethnic identity.

Contact and Changes in Leadership.

Contact among the Highlanders themselves and between them and people from beyond the mountains have been important both in individual ethnic group identity and the identity of being a Highlander. In the aforementioned case of the Katu, it would appear that contact with outsiders and among themselves gave rise to their identifying themselves as Katu. By the same token both types of contact have contributed to a growing awareness that they, the highland people in general are different from lowlanders and other outsiders, and as such they share a common identity.

Historical evidence indicates that by and large, contact both within and among highland ethnic groups was very localized prior to the twentieth century. Being village-oriented people, Highlanders did not stray far from home; trade was conducted in the locale and warfare appears to have been localized. Contact with the more advanced lowland societies therefore was very limited. Some elements of the Jarai, Rhade, Roglai,
Chru, and Sre had trade relations with the Cham, who until the fifteenth century had a thriving civilization on the coastal plain. The Cham also had tributary relations with some of the leaders in these ethnic groups, but Cham attempts at establishing a presence in the highlands met with hostility and were unsuccessful. Those Highlanders on the eastern fringe of the mountains subsequently had contact with the Vietnamese, who since the tenth century have been expanding southward from the Red River delta along the coastal plain. On the western side of the cordillera Highlanders had trade relations with the Khmer (Cambodians), Lao, and Chinese traders.

All of these lowland people have in their vocabularies generic designations for the highland dwellers, and most of these designations are pejorative, reflecting their view that those who live in the uplands are backward and barbaric.

Among the Highlanders, however, there never has been any common label by which they referred to themselves. The expression ana chu (or a cognate variation thereof) meaning "sons of the mountains," is found in the Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) languages spoken by the most populous of the highland groups (and it also is one of the Cham designations).
Among the Mon Khmer-speaking people there are several comparable terms, the most widespread of which are con cau or "sons of men" and con chru or "sons of highlanders."

The arrival of the first French missionaries at Kontum in the mid-nineteenth century ushered in an era of ever-increasing contact among the highland ethnic groups and between them and the outside. First it was the Bahnar, Rengao, and Sedang who were affected by the presence of the priests but soon there were the French explorers and then the first military-administrative posts as the French brought under their control, either through cooperation of the local chiefs or through "pacification" (i.e., military conquest) parts of the ethnic territories of the Jarai, Rhade, Mpong, Maa, Sre, Lat, and Chru. The accounts of the missionaries, explorers, and early administrators display a marked concern with ethnic differences among the Highlanders; for example they would characterize the Sedang and Jarai as "warlike" while the Bahnar were "gentle" as were the Maa but the Rhade were "untrustworthy." The French also settled on a strategy of using the local chiefs as intermediaries between them and the local ethnic groups. This was particularly significant, not only in its reflection of French concern for ethnic
differentiation, which in turn may have had the effect of reinforcing ethnic boundaries among the various groups, it also initiated some changes in traditional highland leadership. This would have important consequences on the emergence of a Highlander ethnic identity.

History tells us more about leaders than about ordinary folk, and historical information on the highlands indicates that in the past there was nothing among the mountain people of any permanent supra-village political hierarchy that had authority over an entire ethnic group. Leadership by and large was localized, and it was determined in a variety of ways. Among many (further research might reveal that it is among most or all) highland groups there is a belief in a supernatural force similar to the Polynesian-Melanesian notion of mana. This force, bestowed by the spirits, is manifest in such things as physical strength, intelligence, courage, and general good fortune. It lends to those who possess it a charisma, and they are thought destined to be leaders. Among some groups there also is an element of consensus; one is looked to as a leader because he is old, experienced, and wise. Among those groups with unilineal descent (descent traced through either the male
or female line) there have tended to be some entrenched local elites. Such was the case with the Jarai, Rhade, Chru (all three of which trace descent through the female line) and the Maa (descent traced through the male line). Then in the nineteenth century there were some leaders who attained their roles because they functioned as go-betweens in the trade between Highlanders and lowland people.

The highland leaders mentioned most frequently in the Khmer, Vietnamese, and French pre-twentieth century accounts, reflecting their widespread reputations were two powerful shamans among the Jarai -- the Potao Apui (or Pui) and Potao Ea (or Ia). The word potao can be translated "king," "lord," or "master," while apui or pui is "fire" and ea or ia is "water." The preference here will be to call them the "King of Fire" and the "King of Water."

Tributary relations between the Kings of Fire and Water and the Khmer rulers are described in various documents, one of which dates from 1601, and these relations terminated when Norodom ascended the throne in 1859. They reflect the Indian pattern of mandala with its central place of power embodied in the person of the god-king surrounded by satellite states beyond
which are tributary chiefs in the more remote areas. Such chiefs were the Kings of Fire and Water, and in the exchange of gifts there was a ritual purification followed by a ceremonial reiteration of the superior role of the Khmer ruler -- the "uncle" -- to his "nephews," the Kings of Fire and Water, who were responsible for guarding the mountainous northeast approaches to the Khmer kingdom.

Tributary relations between the Kings of Fire and Water and the Vietnamese rulers were more in the Chinese pattern with envoys from the highland leaders carrying elephant tusks and other gifts accompanied by messages of homage to the emperor at the Court of Hue. The longevity of these relations remains a mystery but they reached their peak of formality during the reign of Minh Mang (1820-1840) with the establishment of elegant protocol for the presentation of gifts. The emperor bestowed mandarin titles on the envoys from the highlands who were expected to be garbed in the appropriate roles. Minh Mang also gave the Kings of Fire and Water honorific royal titles. Alexander Woodside\(^1\) sees these efforts by Minh Mang as an

attempt to aggrandize his role and emulate the emperor in Peking.

But Minh Mang's attempts to transform the Kings of Fire and Water into sinitic kinglets was not attained when he died in 1840, and it was not pursued by his successors.

It was these accounts in the annals of the Court of Hue concerning these tributary relations that provided in 1893 part of the French case for claiming control over the territory east of the Mekong River as protectors of the Vietnamese emperor's domain. But the interest of most French investigators in the highlands centered more on the Kings of Fire and Water as mysterious leaders with shamanistic powers. Much was written about the King of Fire's sacred sabre, about which there were many legends among the Highlanders. When French military columns appeared in their area, however, the Kings of Fire and Water organized unsuccessful opposition. After their defeat they lost their political power and were allowed by the colonial administration to exercise only their shamanistic functions.

But resistance to French rule was not widespread among the major ethnic groups, and French policy began to take a more definite shape during the governorship of Paul Doumer (1896-1902) who saw the possibilities of economic exploitation of the highlands.
This would necessitate a more effective "penetration" of the region, and the establishment of a permanent French presence. Soon, roads were cut through the dense humid forests and over the mountain passes, and the small administrative posts at Kontum, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat began to grow into trading settlements.

With these developments the general pattern of local leadership began to change. Headmen of villages under French control now had to deal with an alien administrative organization with a set of different expectations. For the more prominent chiefs, however, the change was more drastic as a result of the French strategy of using them as intermediaries between the administration and the village headmen. Their new responsibilities included collecting taxes and organizing corvees to provide labor for public works projects, particularly road construction. Some of the chiefs also became judges in the Highlander Law Courts organized by the French administration to deal with local litigation on the basis of indigenous laws and customs. This was in effect another reiteration of individual ethnic group identity.
In time many of these chiefs came to know one another as they were brought together on occasions such as meetings to receive instructions on administrative matters or gatherings for them to swear loyalty to France. Then in the early decades of the twentieth century there was another important innovation -- the launching in Kontum and Ban Me Thuot of a French primary school system. Children of the chiefs were among the first to benefit from these schools, and by the 1920's there had emerged a new type of highland leader -- one with a basic French education but with his roots still in the village. He would assume a role in the administration as a civil servant, teacher, or technician. He and others similarly trained formed a new elite in the French-controlled regions, and intermarriage among them began to take place.

Through the 1920-1940 period the French sought to consolidate their control although there was strong resistance from groups such as the Mnong and Stieng. Economic exploitation continued as wild forests gave way to coffee, tea, and rubber estates. The towns of Kontum, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat expanded, and French entrepreneurs arrived in the highlands as did some Chinese and Vietnamese traders, although both were severely restricted.
Then came World War II and a somewhat quiescent period that ended abruptly in 1945 with the Japanese surrender and the "August Revolution," when the Viet Minh took over the administration throughout Vietnam, including the highlands. Most of the Highlanders who were part of the new leadership, particularly the civil servants and teachers, joined the Viet Minh, marking for the first time that any of them participated in a nationalist movement. It also was a graphic manifestation of their discontent with the French. While some stayed with the Viet Minh (five Highlanders were in the National Assembly in Hanoi), when the French reentered the highlands between December 1945 and June 1946, most of the Highlanders returned to their former positions in the administration. But French rule in the highlands would never again be the same.

During the Indochina War the Highlanders fought both with the French and the Viet Minh. In their efforts to win more support among the highland people, the French expanded secondary school education in Ban Me Thuot and Kontum, granting scholarships to the sons and daughters of the elite that had emerged among the various ethnic groups that had been under French rule since early in the century. Regardless of their
ethnic affiliation, these young educated Highlanders learned to speak Bahnar and/or Rhade, which since that time has been a lingua franca for their ever-expanding sociopolitical network, a network reinforced by links of blood and marriage.

Also, in 1950 the French created the Royal Delegation for the Crown Lands of the Highlands of the South, which in effect put the central highlands under Emperor Bao Dai, and the following year he signed a decree outlining a "special status" for the Highlanders. It foresaw a greater role for the Highlanders in the administration of the region, a continuation and expansion of the Highlander Law Courts, a reaffirmation of their right to own land, some improved medical programs, and the use of highland troops only for the defense of their own territory.

Nationalist Sentiments and Highlander Identity.

The post-colonial period, which other nations in Southeast Asia experienced following World War II, did not come to Indochina until after the Geneva Accords of 1954, and with this new era the Highlanders found themselves with a new status -- that of being ethnic minorities in the two Vietnams. Highlanders were among the Viet Minh cadre that went to the newly founded Democratic
Republic of Vietnam, better known as North Vietnam. Some began training at the Ethnic Minorities Normal Center near Hanoi while others, like Nay Der, a former Jarai teacher from Cheo Reo, assumed roles as representatives of the southern highland minorities in the new government.

At a celebration in January 1955 marking the return of the Viet Minh to Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh announced a policy of national autonomy "within the bloc of solidarity with Vietnam" for the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. He stated that autonomy had been granted to the northwestern portion of the country and would be applied progressively to other areas.

At the same time, the central highlands became part of the newly proclaimed Republic of Vietnam, usually known as South Vietnam. But for those ruling in Saigon the southern highland minority was marginal. Racially, linguistically, and culturally they were different from the Vietnamese, who traditionally regarded them as moi ("savages"). Furthermore, until 1954 the highlands had been the administrative responsibility of the French, and their influence continued to be strong.
During this era of newly independent states throughout the world there was a prevalent notion that in order to attain a well-integrated state, the attachments to ethnic groups, particularly to minority groups must be replaced by loyalty to the state. In the case of such minorities this could be achieved through a policy of cultural assimilation. As the smaller entities are enveloped culturally by the larger, their ethnic boundaries will disappear. This assumption was (and still is) held not only by many of the new leaders but also by many social scientists as well. Walker Conner¹ points out that there is a tendency among scholars concerned with "nation-building" theories either to ignore ethnic diversity or to treat ethnic identity "as merely one of a number of minor impediments to effective state-integration." He adds that "to the degree that ethnic identity is given recognition, it is apt to be a somewhat unimportant and ephemeral nuisance that will unquestionably give way to a common identity uniting all inhabitants of the state, regardless of ethnic heritage, as modern communication and transportation networks link the state's various parts more closely." Then noting that if this process of "modernization" were effective, "the number of states troubled by ethnic disharmony would be on the decrease."

¹ Conner, W., "Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?", World Politics, 1968.
Conner points out that a global survey indicates that this is not so, and he cites the ethnic minority political movements among the Basques, Catalans, Bretons, Scots, Welsh, and South Tyroleans in the well-established European states.

In the same vein, Barth writes that culture contact and change are becoming more widespread "as dependence on the products and institutions of industrial societies spreads in all parts of the world," but that "the important thing to recognize is that a drastic reduction of cultural differences between ethnic groups does not correlate in any sample with a reduction in the organizational relevance of ethnic identities, or a breakdown of boundary-maintaining processes." Also, more recently in his study of Indians in the highlands of southeastern Mexico, George Collier notes that "emerging national integration contributes to the rise -- rather than the demise -- of ethnicity by feeding upon and contributing to the sense of identity that ethnic groups display."

The South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem elected to pursue a policy of integrating the ethnic minorities --

1Barth, F., Ethnic Groups ... pp. 32-33.
the Highlanders, Cham, Khmer, and Chinese -- into the national framework through a process of cultural assimilation. In the case of the Highlanders it would "civilize" them so they could contribute something to the cultural and economic life of South Vietnam and it also would diminish French influence in the highlands. Implementation was attempted through a variety of means. Legislation transformed the highland provincial structures so they would conform to those in the lowlands, and such things as the Highlander Law Courts were eliminated. Vietnamese civil servants in large numbers were sent to the mountains to take over the administration while Highlanders in the administration were relegated to lower level positions than they had held under the French. The education system was Vietnamized, and instruction in highland languages was abolished. A program of relocating Highlanders' villages to places more accessible to Vietnamese influence was begun, and Highlander land claims were ignored when in 1957 the government launched a program of resettling Vietnamese in the uplands.

The policy and practices of the Diem government induced a strong reaction among a number of young, relatively well educated highland leaders. Barth\(^1\) observes that in such a

\(^1\) Barth, F., Ethnic Groups ..., pp. 32-33.
situation the leaders -- the elite -- have open to them several options, one of which is that "they may choose to emphasize ethnic identity, using it to develop new positions and patterns to organize activities in those sectors formerly not found in their society...", and he adds that such a strategy "generates many of the interesting movements that can be observed today, from nativism to new states." The course of the highland leaders was to launch a nativistic movement, reaffirming their Highlander ethnic identity.

In 1957 they formed a dissident movement named Bajaraka, a combination of the key letters of the Bahnar, Jarai, and Rhade ethnic groups and Koho linguistic group from which the members came. They sought to have the rights that the Highlanders had been promised under the Crown Domain restored, and they adopted a Highlander flag of red, symbolizing the "red soil of the highlands" and "the blood shed by the highland people in their struggle for survival," and green representing the "green highland forests." This represented the first organized expression of a Highlander ethnic identity and the first articulation of Highlander rights.
The emergence of the Bajaraka Movement changed the lives of these organizers; whereas they previously had been low-ranking civil servants and military personnel, they now became leaders, providing the ideology of the movement, mapping strategy, and recruiting new members. The hierarchy began to become formalized with a Rhade civil servant named Y Bham Enuol as president and others assuming structured roles, and new cadres began forming even at the level of villages in the Ban Me Thuot and Kontum areas. But in 1958, President Diem suppressed the Bajaraka Movement, jailing the leaders and dispersing throughout the lowlands all Highlanders in the civil service and military. The movement itself was rendered ineffective but the ideology survived, and the awareness of being Highlanders deepened and spread. In effect, their ethnic identity was being reinforced rather than diminishing in the face of the government policy of political integration and cultural assimilation.

In December 1960, the formation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) was announced, although Viet Minh political and armed cadre had remained in the south (they were called Viet Cong by the South Vietnamese government) and had
been active in places like the highlands since 1955. On May 19, 1961, a congress of twenty-three Highlanders formed the Highland Autonomy Movement within the NLF with Y Bih Aleo, a Rhade teacher who had joined the NLF in 1961, elected Chairman. He also was appointed a Vice-Chairman of the NLF Central Committee Presidium. Ream Briu, a Jarai teacher was named Secretary-General of the Highland Autonomy Movement.

At this time around 120 Highlander graduates of the Central Normal School for Ethnic Minorities near Hanoi were being sent south to perform various activities in the movement.

In late 1961 the U.S. Special Forces began to operate in the central highlands as part of the "counterinsurgency" effort, and their program of recruiting local militia attracted many of the former Bajaraka members. Then following the overthrow of the Diem government in November 1963, the succeeding Minh and Khanh regimes released the Bajaraka leaders as part of their efforts at making some accommodation with the Highlanders in the hope of winning their support. Events, however, took an unexpected turn when a new dissident movement called the Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées ("The United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races"), known by its French acronym
FULRO made its appearance with a revolt in five highland Special Forces camps. Among its organizers were some former Bajarakas leaders as well as representatives of the Struggle Front of the Khmer of Lower Cambodia, a dissident movement among the Khmer Krom, i.e., Khmer living in the Mekong River delta of Vietnam, and members of a similar movement among the Cham called the Front for the Liberation of Champa. The most important element in Fulro, however, was a group of Royal Khmer Army officers, some of whom claimed credit for having launched the movement and the revolt.

On the first day of the revolt, Y Bham Enuol, the former president of the Bajarakas Movement joined Fulro and soon became its president. In spite of its being a loose coalition with the Cham and Khmer, Fulro rapidly became identified as a Highlander movement. Initially, Y Bham called for complete independence for the highlands but this modified to demands for greater participation by highland leaders in local and national political activities. A call for recognition of a Highlander ethnic identity was reiterated in a demand for a separate flag. By early 1965, Fulro began to take on a military cast with its own army and most of its leaders commissioned as officers.
(Y Bham was a four-star general). Many Highlanders were favorably impressed with the strong stand taken by Fulro leaders, and Y Bham in his jungle headquarters in neighboring Cambodia developed a definite mystique. Membership in the movement grew, particularly among young teachers, students, and those in the military and paramilitary forces.

The Fulro revolt produced a shock in Saigon, and it prompted the government to launch new efforts at a rapprochement with the highland leaders. One result as the Pleiku Conference of October 1964, which drew civil servants and military personnel from many different ethnic groups and some former Bajaraka leaders as well. Essentially the wants and desires expressed by the highland delegates did not differ from the modified demands being articulated by the Fulro leaders at that time. On its part the government announced the formation of a Directorate for Ethnic Minorities in Saigon with Colonel Touprong Ya Ba, a Chru, as director. Premier Nguyen Khanh promised at the gathering to resolve land claims, reestablish the Highlander Law Courts, and implement programs for improving the social and economic standards of the highland population.
The formation of the Directorate for Highland Affairs in Saigon had the effect of crystalizing a faction of non-Fulro leaders, all of whom had been delegates at the Pleiku conference. As they assumed roles in the Directorate both in Saigon and in the highlands, they used the administration as a means of maintaining contact with one another and also as a channel for communicating to the government the goals that had been outlined at the conference. But this faction did not constitute an anti-Fulro movement. Their goals were very similar, they kept in touch with one another, and a number of the leaders in both groups were related through blood or marriage.

By this time the continuing pattern of increasing contact and intermarriage was leading to more intermarriage among the elite both within and between ethnic groups. This already had resulted in a vast inter-ethnic network of kin ties that extended over a large geographic area and included leaders among the Sedang, Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade, Maa, Sre, Lat, and Chru. Among them were high-ranking members of Fulro as well as leaders in the government (such as Colonel Ya Ba) and some of those in the NLF (such as Nay Der and Rcom Briu). Some of the other leaders in this network will be indicated below.
In August 1965 the government opened formal negotiations with Fulro, and a delegation of the dissidents led by Y Dhe Adrong, a Rhade leader (who is in the kin network) took up residence in Ban Me Thuot. But conflict between the government and Fulro burst forth in December 1965 and negotiations broke off until May 1966. Also at this time Fulro was experiencing internal conflict between the moderate older leaders and younger militants.

The continued existence of a dissident Highlander movement bothered the Vietnamese and American officials in Saigon and Washington, and this resulted in concerted efforts to satisfy the needs and desires expressed by highland leaders. Early in 1966 the Directorate of Highland Affairs became a Special Commission for Highland Affairs with Paul Nur, a Bahnar and former Bajarak leader (also in the kin network) as commissioner. The Nguyen Cao Ky administration also reestablished the Highlander Law Courts and appointed more Highlanders to provincial and district level posts. Some efforts were made to improve education, and it was agreed to allow indigenous highland languages to be taught during the first years of primary education. The U.S. AID Program named a special liaison for the new directorate to coordinate special projects for the highlands.
The War as a Compounding Factor.

As the war began to intensify and spread, the highlands assumed a greater strategic importance; this region occupies almost two-thirds of the South Vietnamese land mass, and it was through the mountains that the troops and arms from North Vietnam were entering the south. The increased Vietnamese and American military presence and the fighting that ensued (most of the large battles of the Vietnam War were fought in the highlands) swept away what isolation highland villagers were thus far enjoying as young men were recruited and large portions of the population became refugees. Then too there was a strange gossamer web of modernity that the war brought to the highlands; the societies were not modernized by the vast alien presence of the more advanced Vietnamese and Americans but it was not unusual to see young Highlanders wearing loincloths flying by on Hondas or Highlander soldiers with Japanese transistor radios pressed to their ears. The war itself proved to be a major factor in increasing contact among the Highlanders themselves and with the outside, and it made them more conscious of their identity.
During the 1966-1968 period there were continuing negotiations between the Saigon government and Fulro, although the movement was experiencing some internal conflict between moderate leaders like Y Bham and Y Dhe and younger militants favoring a strategy of drastic actions. At the same time the government was increasing Highlander representation in Saigon and drawing more of them into government programs in the upland areas. Six highland delegates (two of whom were active Fulro members) were seated in the 1966 Constitutional Assembly, and seven Highlanders were elected to the 1967 National Assembly. They included Senator Ksor Rot, a Jarai who is in the kin network, and six representatives, two of whom are in the kin network. That same year the Ministry for Ethnic Minorities' Development was created with Paul Nur as minister, and like him, all of those named to high positions are in the kin network.

There also were at this time efforts to rally more support of the Saigon government among the Highlanders through a series of cadre programs financed by the American mission. First there was the paramilitary Truong Son Cadre program, and later this became the Son Thon Cadre, modeled on the Revolutionary Development Program organized among the
Vietnamese. At the Son Thon Cadre Training Center in Pleiku, men from most of the highland ethnic groups were brought together for political indoctrination, orientation in "civil affairs," and some brief training in a metier.

In 1968 when Y Bham sought to make an accommodation with the government, a group of young Fulro militants, backed by units of the Royal Khmer Army captured the Fulro headquarters, taking Y Bham to Phnom Penh as a prisoner. This marked the beginning in a decline of the movement, and in 1969, with the encouragement of the Saigon government, some of the lesser Fulro leaders formed a new highland political party called the Movement for Southern Highlands Minorities Solidarity, which had as its goal the organization of the Highlanders into an anti-communist bloc. But this new effort was doomed to failure. It lacked the enthusiastic spirit of the earlier Bajaraka and Fulro movements, and its leaders made the mistake of becoming involved in Nguyen Van Thieu's unsuccessful attempt at forming a new political front. Villagers resented being charged party dues, and the new movement faltered when it became known that large amounts of money "disappeared." By 1972 the movement was defunct.
Little is known about the activities of the Highland Autonomy Movement in the NLF during this period. From time to time leaders like Rcom Briu were reported to appear at village celebrations, and there were intermittent accounts of Highlander NLF troops being involved in military operations. But the activities of the NLF were vastly overshadowed by the ever-increasing presence of the North Vietnamese army, which dominated the communist military operations in the highlands. A prime example of this was the 1968 battle of Khe Sanh, which pitted the North Vietnamese Army against the U.S. Marines in the Bru country close to the Demilitarized Zone. This battle also illustrated the high cost of the war for the Highlanders. In 1967 it was estimated that the Bru numbered around 25,000, and when the fighting at Khe Sanh subsided not one Bru village remained, and only 4,000 of the population could be accounted for. Another example of the predominance of the North Vietnamese in the highlands was the Tet Offensive of 1968, when their forces attacked the cities of Kontum, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat in addition to some smaller district towns.
Early in 1970, a military junta led by Royal Khmer Army general Lon Nol deposed Norodom Sihanouk and seized power in Phnom Penh, an incident that deeply affected Fulro. Some officers close to the junta had actively supported Fulro since 1964, and they now had the possibility of rallying Fulro to support the new government in its struggle with the Khmer Rouge. Some of the young Fulro leaders in Phnom Penh, such as Ksor Kok (in the kin network) were given commissions in the Khmer Army but Y Bham remained under house arrest. Although some of the Khmer officers declared that their strategy was for the benefit of "their little brothers," i.e., the Highlanders, it only had the effect of removing these Fulro leaders from the events taking place in Vietnam.

In 1970, the Council for Ethnic Minorities, provided for in the 1967 Vietnamese constitution finally began to function. In addition to increasing Highlander representation in Saigon and functioning as a forum for colloquia between highland leaders and the Viet President (initially Nguyen Cao Ky and then Tran Van Huong), it also served as a vehicle for spreading and reinforcing Highlander ethnic identity in bringing leaders from all of the groups together. It also was the first time
that some of the leaders from remote ethnic groups such as the Bru, Katu, Cua, Hre, and Stieng were brought into contact with those in the mainstream of highland political activities. One immediate result of this was that a young Bru leader married into the kin network of highland leaders which continued to expand.

The early 1970's also brought some sweeping changes to the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities' Development. In the first years of its existence, the ministry represented little more than a token of ethnic minority representation in the capital. As a government agency it lacked definition, its functions were unclear, and its prerogatives were vague. There continued to be a shortage of well-trained highland civil servants to handle the lower levels of the ministry and provincial services. At the higher levels, considerable power had fallen into the hands of several crafty Vietnamese, whose influence was baleful in that it caused divisions among the highland leaders.

The situation changed considerably in June 1971, when President Thieu named Nay Luett, a Jarai leader (also in the kin network) as minister. He had been active in the Bajaraka Movement, had been jailed for five years and he had gained a
widespread reputation as a leader dedicated to the "Highlander cause." In addition he had considerable experience working with the Vietnamese as well as with the Americans, and he knew the Saigon milieu better than most highland leaders. Soon after assuming office Nay Luett brought into the ministry a small group of friends (all of whom were in the kin network) with whom he had been meeting informally for several years to discuss strategies for attaining the goals that previously had been articulated by the Bajaraka and Fulro movements. Some of those in the group represented a new type of highland leader -- one who had received higher education and had accumulated a good deal of sophistication about the world beyond the mountains. One of these was Touneh Han Tho, a Chru who was named Secretary General. He was the first Highlander to receive a degree at the National Institute of Administration in Saigon, he had studied in the Philippines and had visited Malaysia. Pierre K'briu, a Sre, who became Director General, had received a degree in education at the University of Southern Illinois.
There was a sweeping reorganization of the ministry with the Vietnamese replaced by former Bajara and Fulro members both in Saigon and in the provincial services. A special course was organized at the National Institute of Administration to train Highlanders for middle-level positions in the ministry. Better working relations with the leaders of the Cham, Khmer, and northern highland (refugees in 1955) ethnic groups were established. Closer contact with highland leaders in the National Assembly and the Council for Ethnic Minorities was attained.

Nay Luett and his group then began to implement a series of programs that were designed to protect the Highlanders' ethnic identity and improve their standard of living. Dislocation of villagers and fragmentation of their societies became a primary concern for the ministry, and they put priority on the refugee problem. Nay Luett also had a plan to regroup as many scattered Highlanders in four of the upland provinces as a means of preserving their way of life. Although the Saigon government did not agree with this idea, the ministry nonetheless undertook a resettlement of some 4,000 Bru from Thua Thien province to Darlac province in the Rhade country.
The ministry in effect became a new movement with Highlander ethnic identity as a central theme in its ideology, an ideology that Nay Luett reiterated often, even at cabinet meetings in the Independence Palace. Also, the ministry functioned as a forum for the highland leaders to gather and exchange ideas about programs and the future. One of the subjects discussed was a common designation for all of the highland people, but their attention was diverted to more pressing problems, and nothing was concluded.

The already dire situation in the highlands due to the disruptions of the war was worsened by the communist offensive that began on March 30, 1972. North of Kontum the fighting and bombing by the B-52's drove large numbers of Sedang, Jeh, Halang, Bahnar, and Jarai villagers southward while further south in Phuoc Long Province the battles turned most of the Stieng into refugees. With at least 120,000 Highlanders jammed into the refugee camps, the staff at the ministry was strained, and they also expressed some anger at the lack of assistance lent by the government, particularly the Ministry of Social Welfare.
Then in July 1972, soon after he gained special new wartime powers, President Thieu rescinded the minority status of the Highlanders without consulting either the ministry or the Ethnic Minorities Council. This sent a wave of resentment through the ranks of the highland leaders because there had developed a certain vested interest in having minority status. To begin with it was an official recognition that the Highlanders constituted an identifiable population bloc in South Vietnam. Also, as a minority their young men were not subject to the draft (although they flocked to join the American-sponsored Special Forces program), and they received special consideration in entering secondary schools. Then, too, the U.S. Aid Mission had a liaison with the ministry to fund special programs for the minorities.

By mid-1972 the situation in the highland had deteriorated badly, and the leaders at the ministry formulated a plan (similar to that proposed by Fulro in 1964) for a 50,000 man Highlander army. "The Vietnamese," they stated, "will never defend the highlands." Neither the government nor the American Mission, however, were willing to consider it. Suddenly, early in 1974 there was a curious resurgence of Fulro, led by Kpa Koi, a
Jarai who had not been part of the active leadership in the past. The reappearance of Fulro was related to a rising discontent among the villagers in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot as a result of Vietnamese landgrabbing, some of it in collusion with local Highlander officials. Vietnamese landgrabbing had been a problem since the mid-1950's, but it suddenly increased, and many of the offenders were officers from the 23rd Division Headquarters in Ban Me Thuot who saw the possibility of reaping great profits from the cultivation of coffee, a valuable crop commanding high prices in the Saigon market. In November 1974, Nay Luett was summoned to Ban Me Thuot in an attempt to begin negotiations with Fulro but nothing resulted.

In Saigon, the initial enthusiasm that marked the new era at the ministry was waning as the government lost interest in highland programs. The U.S. military presence in the highlands had ended, and now the Aid Mission abolished its liaison with the ministry. Touneh Han Tho departed for study in Belgium, and a pall of discouragement settled on everyone. There was talk among the leaders at the ministry about complete independence for the highland people -- a state of their own.
On March 10, 1975, the North Vietnamese Army attacked Ban Me Thuot, and a day later the town fell, precipitating a sequence of events that led to the collapse of the Thieu government and the communist conquest of South Vietnam by May 1. Some reports implicated Fulro in the Ban Me Thuot attack, but the recently published account of North Vietnamese General Van Tien Dung describing the fall of Ban Me Thuot does not mention Fulro.

Only a small group of Highlanders were able to join the exodus from Saigon before the city fell. Leaders from the ministry and from the Ethnic Minorities Council and their families, numbering in all two hundred, had expressed a desire to leave Vietnam but they were not included in the evacuation. Among those who did manage to leave were Touneh Han Tho, a leader from the ministry, and Y Bling Buon Krong Pang, a Fulro leader. Several sources claim that Nay Luett and the other leaders were sent to re-education centers in the highlands, and several unconfirmed reports indicate that Senator Ksor Rot and several other leaders in the Ban Me Thuot area were

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executed. Numerous sources, including the new South Vietnamese regime, report a resistance in the highlands against the communists.

Speculation on the Future.

The leadership that had played an important role in articulating Highlander ethnic identity since the 1950's has in effect been shattered by the collapse of the Saigon government, but this does not mean that the process of ethnicity that has been described will be disrupted or halted. This process had been started long before this leadership appeared, and historical contact between the Highlanders and outsiders was a primary factor in its inception. As contact increased during the French period, Highlander ethnic identity spread, and then as educated highland leaders emerged, it was they who began to express this identity in more formal terms. In response to the Diem government's attempts at cultural assimilation, this leadership assumed a new role explicitly related to Highlander ethnic identity, which became an ideological theme in their various movements. The Vietnam War with all of its disruptions increased contact among Highlanders and between them and outsiders as did the establishment of the Ministry for Ethnic

What the policy of the new government towards the Highlanders will be remains to be seen. From time to time the communists, particularly Ho Chi Minh, reiterated the polyethnic character of Vietnamese society but there are initial signs that his successors may favor a policy that has some features reminiscent of the Diem era. In January 1976, the autonomous zones in North Vietnam were abolished, and official news releases from Saigon describe some Rhade villagers being relocated so as to "end their nomadic way of life," a theme constantly expressed by the Diem government, and already there is implementation of a new program to resettle lowland Vietnamese in highland "economic zones."

But in many respects it matters little what the policy of the new government turns out to be, because the process of ethnicity among the highland people will continue, and the ethnic identity of being Highlanders will persist.