

The Mnong of Ratanakiri Province (1863-1940): A review of Mathieu Guérin's "Paysans de la forêt à l'époque coloniale"

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Review by David W. Del Testa, Bucknell University of: Mathieu Guérin, *Paysans de la forêt à l'époque coloniale: La pacification des aborigènes des hautes terres du Cambodge (1863-1940)*. Series "Bibliothèque d'Histoire Rurale" vol. 10. Caen: Association d'Histoire des Sociétés Rurales/Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008. IV + 362 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 29.00€ (cl). ISBN 979-2-911-369-09-4.

Most contemporary studies of colonialism address either the powerful social, economic, or cultural changes wrought by the imposition of colonial control on a people or place or the powerful modernizing response to a colonial presence initiated by peoples resisting colonialism. By presenting in thorough detail an isolated corner of the French empire where local peoples—partially through their own volition and partially through coincidental environmental conditions—never submitted to colonial authority despite the deployment of a wide range of pacification techniques, Mathieu Guérin's *Paysans de la forêt à l'époque coloniale* addresses how and why a people fought successfully for a long time *not* to change their culture, society, and economy in the face of enormous pressures to do so. Through this story, Guérin offers important lessons about the effectiveness of the French civilizing mission and approaches to colonial administration.

Paysans de la forêt focuses on the interaction between, on the one hand, a forest-dwelling swidden agriculturalist people known as the Mnong who then lived primarily in an area of northeastern Cambodia known today as Ratanakiri province and, on the other, the French and Khmer (the majority ethnicity of Cambodia) officials who sought to bring them firmly under the control of the colonial and Royal Cambodian states. It is important to note that these peoples, like all ethnic minorities anywhere, did not necessarily respect frontiers and borders outsiders imposed on their world and that the boundaries of their world and their ethnicity overlapped into Laos and Vietnam (despite the book's title). It is also important to note that after the Cambodian King Norodom (1834-1904) invited the French to impose a colonial protectorate over his kingdom in 1863, the French preserved and to some degree helped modernize the traditional royal Cambodian administrative system, and that these two administrative forces acted in concert but often separately until the end of effective colonial control in the 1940s. In presenting the story of the Mnong of Ratanakiri Province, Guérin presents us with, simultaneously, an environmental history, an administrative history, and some ethnography of both French administrators and the indigenous peoples of the border region of northeastern Cambodia, all of which supplement weak literatures on these topics for the colonial period. The book is dense with fact and discussion, but written in an accessible way with ample illustration and useful maps. Its greatest fault is that it lacks a conclusion appropriate to the excellence of the rest of the text.

As scholarship, *Paysans de la forêt* rests firmly at the intersection of many different disciplines. As

ethnography, it contributes to the few critical studies of the highlands of what was French colonial Indochina that exist. [1] As an environmental history, it stands almost alone. One must consult the work of George Condominas to find much substantive work on the Mnong, and Condominas' work focused on Mnong to the west of the group with which Guérin concerns himself. [2] The lack of European success in northeastern Cambodia that *Paysans de la forêt* presents reinforces the points made in the canonical interpretive frameworks of the relationship of European science and technology to the success of colonialism found in Michael Adas' *Machines as the Measure of Men* or Daniel Headricks' *Tools of Empire*: endemic malaria to which the local peoples had developed some resistance and a lack of roads until the late 1930s proved the major barriers to the imposition of colonial control over this region of northeastern Cambodia and western Vietnam. [3] Guérin's story illustrates that in fact some peoples who fell within the ambit of European (or Japanese or United States) empires and without reflection sought to preserve their personal freedom, and succeeded, more or less without any of the hand-wringing introspection or opportunism suggested by Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank in their concept of 'contingent accommodation' or other discussions of collaboration, complicity, and resistance in the face of colonialism. [4]

To help the reader understand how and why the French and their Khmer allies could not impose colonial control in northeastern Cambodia, Guérin presents a chronological narrative of the settlement of Bu La-Bu Gler from the 1840s through the 1940s, which existed in several places in the center of what is now Cambodia's Ratanakiri Province. Its populace moved the village several times, depending on agricultural and political needs. Guérin uses the reports of various French administrators, official market reports, and personal journals culled from many archives in France, Cambodia, and the United States to present his story, and he supplements the archival evidence with oral histories and interviews of local people and former French administrators. In two parts, the first consisting of four chapters and the second of five chapters, Guérin addresses, respectively, the story of the peoples of northeastern Cambodia and their encounter with colonialism and then the story of the colonial authorities seeking to impose control over those same peoples. In this way, as much as is possible, Guérin allows the reader to understand the process from several perspectives (that of the Mnong, local French administrators, the French colonial government in Phnom Penh and Hanoi, Cambodian authorities, etc.) as well as explore the personalities and dissensions within these groups.

Part One, entitled "Bu La-Bu Gler: Une communauté Mnong aux marches du royaume khmer," Guérin examines the intrusion of French and Cambodian authority from the perspective of the Mnong peoples who had lived at Bu La-Bu Gler for a long time before the arrival of the French in the 1880s. They had had regular if occasional contact with pre-colonial Cambodians, whom they associated with imperial control, but that contact did not extend much beyond simple trade in salt and forest products for manufactured goods (metal knives, pots, and so on). They existed in a world bounded by many other peoples, with some of whom they were allied and with some of whom, such as the much wider-ranging Rhadé, they feared. By the 1890s, all of these forest and highland peoples began to feel demographic and economic pressure as new settlers from the more densely settled plains moved into the forests and highlands of Ratanakiri and as the colonial state and its Cambodian allies began demanding the control of justice and the payment of new taxes.

Throughout Part One, Guérin illustrates in appropriate detail the waxing and waning efforts of the French colonial and Cambodian states to exert control over the peoples of Bu La-Bu Gler and the responses of the Mnong to these efforts or the periods of calm between them. In 1891 and 1897, the leadership of the region submitted to French and Cambodian authority, who in theory could collect cash and labor taxes in return for the promise of protection but who in fact rarely entered the highlands. The murder of a dynamic French administrator named Henry Maître in 1910 and his successor Truffot touched off a long period of low-level but murderous conflict. Between 1912 and

1918, the Mnong raided settlements of or attacked columns of French and Khmer settlers and soldiers, and administrators and their highlander allies, which resulted in 200 deaths. In response, the French encircled the Bu La-Bu Gler region with fortified and garrisoned villages. The development of rubber plantations, missions, and administrative posts along this perimeter strengthened it, which gave the Mnong the isolation that they desired but weakened their ability to trade openly. The isolation ended in 1929, when a new French administrator, Gatille, arrived at Snoul, a fortified town near Bu La-Bu Gler, to secure the region for the construction of a new 'imperial corridor', *Route coloniale 14*, into the region.[5] In response to the opening of construction sites, Gatille was murdered in 1931. In retaliation, the Mnong suffered aerial bombardment and the attacks of well-armed soldiers. In 1935, Pa Trang Loeung, a leader of the Mnong, was betrayed and arrested, and the resulting loss of indigenous leadership, along with the installation of attractive new schools in population centers quite close to Bu La-Bu Gler and the invasions of hundreds of Khmers and scores of French plantation owners and workers and prospectors into the region, undermined for the final time local autonomy if not local culture. As Guérin points out, in photographs from the late nineteenth century, the Mnong appear bare-chested but by the mid-1930s, they are photographed wearing vests and, sometimes, Khmer scarves.

Part Two of Guérin's book, subtitled "Le Nord-est Cambodgien: Mandarins, Résidents, et Phong," examines Bu La-Bu Gler from the outside from an administrative perspective. From the perspective of the royal Cambodian authorities, the Mnong people were problematic; they allied themselves from time-to-time with the organized resistance movements of the Jarai peoples, they took slaves from or became the slaves of the Lao and others, and they struck out against the Vietnamese. Despite their recalcitrance, the Mnong paid occasional tribute to the Khmer king, engaged in useful trade, and became the objects of the attention of the priests of the Catholic Missions étrangères de Paris, who contacted the Mnong beginning in 1750 and maintained, at great difficulty, permanent missions after 1849. In 1885, the imposition of direct French colonial authority in the region began clumsily and violently, which gained the Mnong the sympathy of their neighbors. Only the arrival in 1890 of Adhémar Leclère (1853-1917), an able administrator and scholar, returned the region to peace until his departure in 1898; Guérin also credits the insertion of honest Cambodian judges into the region as important to the maintenance of this peace as well. An important aspect of administration at this time was the relative lack of a physical French presence but the enforcement of popular laws; French authorities conducted administrative tours of the region only every other year but they ensured that the taking of slaves among the Mnong ended after 1897.

In the 1910s, the presence of more activist and aggressive administrators such as Maître and Truffot as well as the authorization and opening of enormous rubber plantations on the western edges of the Mnong territory disrupted the relative balance between local Mnong self-government and near autarky and limited French and Cambodian control and economic extraction. The violent campaign carried out by the Mnong between 1912 and 1918 struck fear into the Khmer and Vietnamese who wanted to exploit the resources of the region of Bu La-Bu Gler. The pattern repeated itself after the murder of the administrator Gatille in 1929; throughout the 1920s, outsiders had once again begun to push into the lands of Mnong, and they fought back against the perceived threat of outside control of their resources and government. At this time, endemic malaria prevented retaliation against the attacks of the Mnong. Repeatedly, the French sent in columns of French, Khmer, and Vietnamese troops only to lose the majority of them to malaria. Only attractive schools, medical treatments, and the gradual incorporation of Mnong elites and school educated Mnong into local and provincial government in the late 1930s created the kind of peace and stability that French and Khmer authorities had sought in the region since the 1880s.

Such a richly documented and interesting work whose multiple levels of description and analysis influence one another across the text goes a long way in augmenting a relatively thin literature on

ethnic minorities during the colonial era and serves as a model for future multi-layered scholarship on the contact zones created by colonialism. Indeed, this work covers just a small region of French colonial Indochina, and hundreds of such zones of interaction existed, each with its own particularities and exchanges. However, such an effort needs a suitable conclusion. Because his argument about the effective power of a cultural pacification needs at least some discussion of consequence to prove its point, Guérin's text cannot simply abandon the reader at 1940 with some short mention of post-World War II era. The successful post-1955 programs of the Khmer government to include the non-Khmer people in the Cambodian nation as Khmer Leou, or "highland Khmer;" the successes of evangelical Christian organizations in attracting converts among the Mnong; the resistance of the Mnong to the presence of the communist Vietnamese in the 1960s; and their fate under the Khmer Rouge all need brief but systematic review in a more extensive conclusion.

One additional note: an obvious lesson, whether Guérin intended to teach it or not, is that counterinsurgency proceeds best from a humanitarian approach. No matter what level of military force the French applied, the Mnong successfully resisted, and the Mnong used their environment as their best ally. However, when pacification included attractive educational opportunities, effective and inexpensive medical treatment, respectable justice, light tax demands, and fair trade, the Mnong lived in relatively peaceful coexistence with French colonial authorities and their Khmer allies. Indeed, by the late 1930s, pacification and inclusion relentlessly co-opted the Mnong into the colonial system that they had resisted for the previous fifty years.

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P.S.

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* This review may be found on the H-France website at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol10reviews/vol10no110deltesta.pdf>.

Footnotes

[1] See Gerald C. Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982) and idem, *Kingdom in the Morning Mist: Mayreana in the Highlands of Vietnam*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

[2] Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam* (New York: Kodansha America, 1994).

[3] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); Daniel R. Headrick. *The tools of empire: technology and European imperialism in the nineteenth century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[4] Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), p 174.