GOVERNMENT AND THE COUNTRYSIDE: POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION AND SOUTH VIETNAM'S COMMUNAL GROUPS

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In spite of the changes in some aspects of village society, the essential characteristics of the village way of life have persisted. The traditional values, practices, and rituals continue to be honored and observed, and they are being transmitted to the younger generation as they were in the past. The ordinary villager clings to the familiar. His primary concerns are his family and perhaps his farm, and in his war-weary world, his will is the will to survive.

from Village in Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

This essay begins, in a sense, where Gerald Hickey's left off, though it adds little to the information available about any particular village in Vietnam. Rather, it asks the question which Hickey's analysis begs about the

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relationship between government and the countryside. Given the persistence of the village way of life, often articulated through what are called here communal groups, what role might "villagism" and "communalism" -- concepts to be discussed shortly -- play in the conduct of the war and the future of government in South Vietnam?

I.

One of the most perplexing problems facing the modernizing polity is the problem of the relation of the village to the state.* The existence of diverse economies and traditional social structures, generally isolated by poor communication systems or arrested in development by internal conflicts, presents governments with both opportunities for material and political support as well as with the dangers inherent in organized opposition and pressure group politics. On the one hand, governments in the newer states tend to seek through political and military means a monopoly of power for their own preservation, and generally do so in the name of social and political order. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to bring traditionally autonomous areas of the countryside under complete government control. These communities, whose isolation the countryside and perhaps events enforce,

persist as tightly-knit, cohesive social and political structures, though they may never have been privy to or participants in government at the national level.

Practically speaking, the incumbent government can deal with such communities by denying them any form of political participation and self-government. Or, it can seek to balance the danger of opposition with the possibility of gaining support by permitting rural communities a degree of self-government and representation on some national legislative body. The community, for its part, can indeed become a center of rural opposition, or it can, through the development of bases for political accommodation, function as an important mediating unit in the processes of economic development, social mobilization, and political institutionalization.*

As a topic of research the human community is a complex phenomenon; its subtleties are more often discernible to the intensive study of the anthropologist than to the political scientist's penchant for generalization. The community itself represents an ongoing process of environmental adaptation, an articulated and often complex social structure characterized by a unique set of demands and expectations, and frequently forms an important political context in which a certain consensus or political activism is evident. This latter constitutes a manageable object of research through which political scientists can come to

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know much about the developing polity and its capabilities utilizing the anthropologist's patient insight into particular communities.

In Vietnam politics has been traditionally based upon "regionalism." A closer look at the components of regionalism indicates that ethnic and religious differences form the basis of such centrifugal tendencies. The survey portion of this article will characterize the nature of this pluralism which shows no signs of fading away and which current and past wars have in some measure preserved. Indeed, the resolution of the present war and future political developments will be determined, in part, by the role these ethnic and religious groups may come to play. And it is the belief here that pluralism does not necessarily bode ill for the Vietnamese polity. The interdependence that socio-political complexity involves may well promote cooperation similar in nature to the kind Durkheim postulated would arise from the diversity of modern industrial society.* In the case of Vietnam, the war has made such cooperation essential; the villager, for whatever motives, has become dependent upon government (be it the GVN or the NLF) and vice-versa. Increasingly, "accommodation" has come to characterize the relationship between the countryside and government in South Vietnam.**

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Throughout this analysis, frequent reference will be made to two related phenomena, "communalism" and "villagism." Conceptions of the term "group" usually begin with Tönnies' classic distinction between "communal" and "associative" groups or "gemeinschaft" and "gesellschaft." Such a dichotomy, however, may be misplaced:

...In the sense that although the societies at one pole of the distinction may be said in some cases to lack elements at the other pole of the distinction, the reverse has never been the case. Thus, although improbable, there might conceivably be gemeinschaft, mechanical, folk societies totally lacking in gesellschaft, organic, urban characteristics. But, there have never been, and never will be, any societies of the gesellschaft, organic, urban types totally lacking in gemeinschaft, mechanical, folk characteristics.*

Associative groups are, simply, not totally lacking in some form of communal heritage or tradition. By way of distinction, one can classify groups on the basis of residence or of kinship, or by the amount of voluntarism involved in membership. "A residential group exists ... where certain people live for economic reasons, for political reasons, for biological reasons, and perhaps still others,"** while the Lowie-Service conception of a sodality

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suggests "...a nonresidential association that has some corporate functions or purposes...."*

What empirically appears to be a residential group may be valued by its members for the ability to perform corporate functions. The war in Vietnam has made the performance of corporate functions such as accommodation to both the GVN and the Viet Cong essential, and the traditional village has, therefore, become more important rather than less important as a social and a political institution. Individual survival is closely linked with the survival of the village by war with its various economies of violence used by the insurgent and counter-insurgent alike, as well as by the growing emphasis on hamlet and village security. It is the village rather than the individual that accommodates to government and to the war.** The Hoa Hao of Vietnam, for example, are an aggregate of religion-oriented residential groups, but it has been the war and pacification that has made the "Hoa Hao village" a political entity.


**Similarly, the village as a unit rather than just the people in it has been the target of both the GVN and the Viet Cong. The VC sought to win village loyalty through terrorizing influential individuals into organizing village support, while the GVN has attempted to "pacify" villages through offering a series of benefits, gained only by communal participation in an assortment of rural reconstruction programs. For a detailed discussion of the Viet Minh-Viet Cong approach to local institutions, see George Ginsburg, "Local Government and Administration in North Vietnam, 1945-54," *China Quarterly*, No. 9 (January-March 1962), p. 174ff.
To the communal expression of religion and religious duties within each village has been added the task of providing for their own survival -- a burden that both the SVN and the NLF have been unable to fully assume. The Hoa Hao, then, are a sodality, whose members express their corporateness communally. In this sense, the Hoa Hao constitute a communal group.* That is to say, such groups perceive their survival and corporateness through their villages and its activities. In this case, war and residence seem to have reinforced the associative character of religious movements and ethnic minorities. Ethnic and religious institutions alike conceive of the village as the primary organizational ingredient. Similarly, both the government in Saigon and the Viet Cong cite the village as their principal target in pacification programs. Indeed, the village has been extolled, alternately, as the key to pacification efforts,** the basis for conflict resolution,*** as a contributing element to the demise of Diem,**** as the key to social and economic reform.

* Of course, both the "style" and the degree of communal cohesiveness may differ substantially from one group to another.


programs,* and as the key to the success or failure of
the present Saigon government. **

Such an enumeration of the pivotal roles played by
the village in Vietnam suggests that the village performs
a number of functions that, in turn, preserve and heighten
the identification of groups and individuals within its
context. This process of reinforcement is what is meant
by villagism. Specifically, villagism involves the
following interrelated processes:

1. The maintenance of village traditions as corporate
expressions of religious or ethnic group identity;
2. The preservation of village security in the midst
of war and the consequent "diplomatic relations" (i.e.,
accommodations) required with the Viet Cong, the Saigon
Government, and the United States forces; and
3. The preservation of village autonomy in the face
of government pressures for centralization, socio-economic
reform, and loyalty.

The Vietnamese proverb that the Emperor's power stops at
the village gate (Phép Vua Thua le Làng) is a statement
about national government as much as it is about village
autonomy. Vietnamese governments have traditionally
organized their relations with the population as they

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*Cf. George C. Tanham, et al., War Without Guns
(New York, 1965).

**Rhetoric of this kind is evident in any of the
National Rural Construction Programs or Field Directives
as well as the Guidance Manuals for Revolutionary
Development cadre or American advisory teams.
resided in specific villages. Today, the present war and past political turmoil have served to reinforce the village's existence as a political entity.

Within particular villages, villagism is manifested by levels of organization and cohesion generally unknown at the national level. This political integration can be fostered by a number of interrelated elements. Kinship may function through the extended family to unite the residents of the village into a single productive unit. Integration may be promoted by the process of selection of village "notables" and the consequent obedience to the decisions of such personalities. Or, the identification of the inhabitants as members of a distinct minority group may cause them to "pull together" for the mutual livelihood and protection of all. The presence of an external threat to the village's existence may produce a similar reaction. The weakness of the state or any nominally higher political authority may heighten the villagers' sense of corporateness, and, in the absence of effective national government, the village may take on the character of a quasi-political and administrative entity. Finally, the demands placed upon the village as an entity responsible for loyalty or revenue may tend to encourage village-wide rather than individual or "entrepreneurial" responses.

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**I.e., even in Vietnam there is hardly the frequently feared "political vacuum."

***Rapid political or economic development may also have the same effect, i.e., the persistence of tradition.
The essence of the village's existence as a corporate entity lies in its significance to the villagers. Such integration and cohesion, of course, can decay as social mobility within the larger society increases, as economies and needs differentiate, as different interests emerge, as a governmental presence penetrates the "little world" of the village. In short, as some form of "modernization" occurs or gathers momentum, the significance of the village as a meaningful political, economic and social unit may decline. Such decay, however, is not evident today in Vietnam, and the pressures of war and political turmoil have not eroded villagism.

II

In terms of human and physical resources, communal groups occupy almost 80 per cent of South Vietnam's territory and constitute one-third to one-half of the country's total estimated population. The communal groups make up about one-half of the rural population. Table 1 indicates the estimated size of the communal groups and the areas of their principal geographical concentrations. These concentrations are depicted on the accompanying maps, which also indicate rural Buddhist and Viet Cong areas of concentration. A comparison of these various distributions suggests that in those areas where there is little Buddhist or communal group organization, the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong flourish. The highest Buddhist concentrations occur around urban centers: The Saigon-My Tho areas in the South, the coastal areas of northern II Corps,


TABLE 1
SOUTH VIETNAM'S COMMUNAL GROUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Estimated Membership</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
<th>Principal Provinces and Cities of Concentration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Religious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Cao Dai</td>
<td>1.6 million</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Tay Ninh Province (Holy See), Quan Long (Camau), Vinh Loi, Can Tho, My Tho-Dinh Tuong area, Capital Military District, Gia Dinh Province, Bing Duong-Phuoc Long border; and Cao Dai settlements exist in Ba Xuyen, Long Hu, Kien Hoa, Phong Dinh, Hau Nghia, Bien Hoa, and Vinh Binh Provinces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Hoa Hao</td>
<td>1.5 million</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Chau Doc, An Giang, Vinh Long, Kien Giang, Dinh Tuong, Chuong Thien, Phong Dinh, Bac Lieu, Kien Phong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Catholic</td>
<td>1.8 million</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Five autonomous cities, Vinh Binh, coastal areas of I Corps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Ethnic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Khmer</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>Chau Doc, Ba Xuyen, Kien Giang, and settlements around Vinh Loi (Bac Lieu), Rach Gia and Ha Tien in Kieng Giang Province, Phu Vinh, Can Tho, Tay Ninh, and Chau Doc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Montagnard</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Throughout the Chaine Annamitique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Chinese</td>
<td>1.5 million</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Saigon-Cholon, delta cities, and coastal I and II Corps cities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aEstimates place total South Vietnam population at 17 million.*
SOUTH VIETNAM ETHNIC GROUPS

Language of ethnic groups is shown within parentheses

- Vietnamese (Annamese)
- Indonesians/Proto-Maylays
- Tribal groups (Mon-Khmer)
- Tribal groups (Malayo-Polynesian)
- Cham (Malayo-Polynesian)
- Cambodians (Khmer)
- JARAI Tribal name

Chinese and other foreigners are concentrated principally in larger cities

Fig. 1—Approximate concentrations of South Vietnam's communal groups
Fig. 2—Areas of concentration and control of the Buddhists versus the Viet Minh
Fig. 3—South Vietnam's administrative divisions
and around Hue in I Corps, while the rural areas are
divided between the communal groups and the Viet Cong.
This is not to say, however, that there are no Buddhists
in rural areas but, rather, that there is little Buddhist
organization in these areas. Since the number of pagodas
in a province is also a function of the population, in
some cases few pagodas may serve sparse populations rather
well. But what we are concerned with here is the lack of
organizational ties to a larger Buddhist community, and the
Buddhist experience in recent elections, coupled to the
generally urban composition of the various "struggle"
movements, seems to suggest that in the rural areas the
Buddhists cannot and do not match the corporate expression
of Vietnam's ethnic and religious minorities. The void of
organizational context is filled either by the communal
groups or the Viet Cong.*

*An approximate plotting of Viet Cong-initiated inci-
dents from 1967 to the present based on information avail-
able in the public media reveals that the following major
areas were the scene of the greatest number of VC attacks:
1. The Upper Mekong Delta -- Vinh Long, Dinh Tuong,
   and Long An Provinces;
2. The war zone areas north of Saigon -- Hau Nghia,
   Binh Duong, and Bien Hoa Provinces;
3. Phuoc Long Province -- Phouc Binh provincial capi-
tal;
4. Coastal II Corps;
5. Coastal I Corps.
Significantly, these areas are not characterized by perma-
nent communal group concentrations; those areas where com-
munal group concentration was high, on the other hand,
tended to have the fewest number of incidents. In addition,
the high incident areas had largely ethnic Buddhist concen-
trations with varying numbers of pagodas per province
(ranging from 150-300 -- see Map 2).
The following survey of Vietnam's communal groups is concerned with those that inhabit primarily rural areas and, thus, the Chinese are not included.* The aim of such a brief survey is to indicate the organizational style of these groups and to illustrate their relations with South Vietnamese governments. Much of the material presented is taken from field notes on visits to seventeen provinces in all of Vietnam's Corps areas. These notes were subsequently verified, where possible, with existing information available on Vietnam's communal groups. The uneveness of these surveys is a reflection both of the lack of available data, complexities that are not immediately understandable to the Western observer, and the diversity of politicization of the various communal groups.

THE CAO DAI

The Cao Dai religion was founded on 7 October 1926, when 28 leaders and 247 adherents applied to the then-Governor General of Cochin China for official recognition.

*The Binh Xuyen are not dealt with in the text of this paper either, since they are no longer extant. Until their demise in 1955, the group operated clandestinely and later openly in an area bounded by the Baria-Long Thanh highway, the Soi Rap river, and the Phuoc An-Phuoc Thanh-Long Thanh road network. The principal purpose of the Binh Xuyen was to control the Delta's and Saigon's economic resources, and it accomplished this by racketeering, organized vice and river banditry. There is some indication today that former members of the Binh Xuyen are now working with elements of the Viet Cong.
Their formal institution was solemnized with three days of ceremonies in November 1926, and, at the height of the Cao Dai movement, there were an estimated two million followers, including an army of between 15-20,000 troops located in the Mekong Delta area. During the wars of 1945-55, it is generally acknowledged that the Cao Dai had brought some measure of security and stability to those areas of the countryside under their influence. Officially known as "reformed Buddhist," Cao Daism represents a syncretic doctrine symbolized by the Third Amnesty of God (Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do), as concluded between God, Sun Yat Sen, Victor Hugo, and the Vietnamese poet-laureate Trang-Trinh. The religion blends the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity (with as many saints) and, through the principles of familial love, Cao Daism preaches that the family should be the basis for the organization of all human groups.

Today the Cao Dai faithful are estimated at 1.5 million, but it is almost impossible to determine the religion's vitality, since records indicate only the number of families loyal to the religion. Though one would expect that the number of young persons who embrace the religious discipline to decline, the familistic nature of Cao Daism argues against this position. The young are socialized into the faith at an early age and are required to attend its schools for religious and, often, secular education. There is little doubt after a visit to the Cao Dai areas of Vietnam that the religion is still influential. The Cao Dai are strong organizationally because they participate in the security and development of their province;
organizational cohesiveness, however, is demonstrated primarily by each village rather than at the national political level. Survival has not yet been linked to power or participation in an unwieldly and sometimes hostile national government, and, consequently, the Cao Dai survive as a set of independent villages.

Organizationally, the religion is administered from the Holy See in Tay Ninh City where three cardinals divide responsibility for the administration of Cao Daism into nine quasi-governmental ministries -- finance, supply, public works, education, health, agriculture, interior, ritual, and justice. Paralleling and supporting this structure are a set of provincial committees that bring the directives and resources of the Holy See down to the village level. Local faithful, in turn, are represented by a Popular Council consisting of one delegate for every 500 followers, which makes plans for the good of the order.

As a political organization, the Cao Dai enter national politics when their religious freedom or administrative autonomy is threatened. At different times, Cao Dai leaders supported the Japanese, the French, the Viet Minh, and Diem when such support served their interests. In each case, the Cao Dai reached an accommodation with the government in order to protect their organization or solidify its position. When in 1941 the French closed the temples, forbade meetings, arrested prominent leaders and exiled the Pope, Cao Dai officials met secretly with the Japanese, who promised assistance, and by 1945 Cao Dai troops were instrumental in the Japanese "pacification" effort in the Delta. Though proponents of independence, the Cao Dai returned to alliance with the French in 1946,
due to their distrust of and conflict with the Viet Minh. In return, the French agreed to the establishment of Cao Dai Tactical areas of Responsibility (TAORs) or semi-autonomous zones, returned the Pope from his exile on Madagascar, and appointed a prominent Cao Dai leader President of the French-backed regime in Cochin China. The Convention of Cooperation of January 1947 made the Cao Dai responsible for eliminating the Viet Minh in their zones and provided for French military advisors and arms for the Cao Dai army. The defeat of the French in 1954 and their withdrawal from Vietnam led the Cao Dai to support Diem, and four Cao Dai leaders participated in Diem's first cabinet. Again, the objective was to preserve Cao Daism's administrative and territorial autonomy. By 1955, however, it became apparent that Diem was determined to crush the military forces of the Delta sects, and the Cao Dai joined with the Hoa Hao, and the Binh Xuyen in an anti-Diem front, which collapsed due to factional strife and Diem's diplomatic duplicity, which provided the time to consolidate his National army. In January 1956 the Holy See was occupied by government forces, and the Cao Dai army disbanded. Until Diem's downfall, the Cao Dai leaders remained firm in their demands for a liberalization of the government, though hampered by the lack of a military arm and formally outlawed under the "Law for Protection of Morality" of 24 May 1962, which forbade "spiritism" and "occultism" and, by implication, the Cao Dai religion.

Cao Dai relations with post-Diem governments have been generally accommodative -- i.e., they supported subsequent governments in return for "amnesty," and its leaders participated in a number of cabinets. Prior to Nguyen Cao Ky's
bid for the Presidency, he returned to the Holy See those lands confiscated by Diem in an effort to win Cao Dai support. Today, the province of Tay Ninh is administered by an army colonel who was formerly a Cao Dai officer, and, despite the considerable threat posed by North Vietnamese divisions in the mountains just a few kilometers north and west of Tay Ninh city, the province is defended entirely by Popular and Rural paramilitary forces who are Cao Dai faithful.

THE HOA HAO

Together with the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao claim nearly one-half of the six million people living in the ricelands south of Saigon, and are especially concentrated in the region between the Mekong and the Song Hua Giang Rivers. The religion was founded in 1939 by the mystic Huyen Phu So in what is now Chau Doc province. By 1940 So's rather militant nationalism had alarmed the French authorities, who sought to curtail Hoa Hao activities and exiled So from his home to the My Tho area. So, in turn, sought Japanese assistance and arms for the protection of the religion and its followers. After Japanese withdrawal, the Hoa Hao fought with the Viet Minh against the French until So was murdered, presumably by the Viet Minh in 1947. This act of duplicity turned the Hoa Hao permanently against the Viet Minh and later the Viet Cong movements. Like the Cao Dai, in return for French weapons and official recognition the Hoa Hao pledged themselves to the destruction of Viet Minh infrastructure and brought considerable security to their zones. When the French withdrew, the
Hoa Hao gradually turned against Diem, though for a time they participated in the 1953 Nationalist Congress and in the cabinet of 1954, hoping for the development of some form of mutually acceptable coexistence. But Diem sought to crush the sect and by June 1955 had defeated and disarmed the 8-10,000 Hoa Hao troops. Again like the Cao Dai, the previously noted Law for Protection of Morality of 1962 outlawed the practice of Hoa Hao Buddhism. The fall of Diem brought a change in government policy, and all governments since Diem have sought political and military support of the sect in return for their paramilitary activities against the Viet Cong. Both the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao have sought to preserve their influence over their areas of the Delta and secure autonomy from both the VC and Saigon governments.

As a religion, the Hoa Hao have fashioned themselves the champion of the peasants, preaching a simplified version of Buddhism. The religion's founder institutionalized ancestor worship, an aspect of the animism of the Vietnamese farmer, and preached: "It is better to pray with a pure heart before the family altar than to perform gaudy ceremonies in a pagoda." It is the family and the agricultural way of life that forms the cornerstone of the religion, which prescribes that one should practice Buddhism in the fields while growing rice. And, indeed, the Hoa Hao organized communities into production units, which the hierarchy administered and its troops alternately defended and extorted. In addition, the Hoa Hao organization controlled a portion of the ferry systems and river traffic in the Delta.

Outwardly, Hoa Hao Buddhism seeks simplification and,
in their view, modernization of the religion. Its doctrines teach honor to parents and love of country but forbid the building of new pagodas, the use of astrologers, or expensive rituals and funerary rites. Instead, the doctrine teaches that money normally devoted to the "pomp and circumstance" of Buddhism should be set aside for social welfare projects. Each Hoa Hao hamlet and village has an elected Board of Managers, and each province is governed by a similar Central Council. Beginning with the hamlet-level popular election, each successive board or council is elected by the members of the preceding echelon. These boards and councils are charged with the administration of religious discipline as well as the social welfare activities. As such, they function to express the peasant's desires, while the strength of the religion is fostered by its correspondence to and emphasis upon the family systems of the Delta.

THE CATHOLICS

Catholicism has long played a role in Vietnam's historical and political development, but the position of Catholicism in a predominantly Buddhist country has been ambiguous. Since the arrival of the Jesuit Father Alexandre de Rhodes in South Vietnam in January 1625, Catholicism has had an uncertain tenure in Vietnamese politics. At times, Priests and Bishops were the confidants of the Vietnamese emperor; at other times, they were exiled or massacred. The United States' first involvement in Vietnam was, ironically, a request for help from an imprisoned Bishop in 1845, which brought U.S.
Marines from the U.S.S. Constitution then cruising in the South China Sea.

If Catholics have been at times politically insecure, the cohesiveness of their communal organization has insulated them from the hard times of disfavor and VC attacks. By virtue of a highly developed education system and their favored position during Diem's days, Catholics dominate the officer corps, the higher echelons of the civil service, and the professions. While initially in favor of a Viet Minh government as a vehicle for Vietnamese independence, Catholic support waned as the Northern regime tightened its control over religions and demanded greater portions of village resources for military support. Taking advantage of the Geneva Accords in 1954, between 700,000 and 900,000 Catholics became refugees to the South, where they joined families or were resettled in parts of the central highlands and the Delta. What is significant about this movement is that entire villages led by their priests, made the difficult and often perilous journey south and then resettled as whole communities. Not infrequently, too, the priests (who later became archbishops) organized small armies that formed the nucleus for present-day South Vietnamese divisions. It is also not uncommon today to hear some priests addressed as "General." In cases where such in toto resettlement was not possible,

*See Truong Buu Lam, Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention (Yale: Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph #11 (1967), p. 4ff. Part of the irony of this situation is that the United States' first involvement, like the current one, was in support of a minority group.
smaller groups of Catholic families moved to largely urban or provincial cities and, while maintaining cordial relations with the population, still preserved their identity and close, in-group feeling. The cohesion of the Catholics is particularly evident in the rural areas, where they have been instrumental in successful pacification efforts as well as in local and national elections.

THE KHMER

The Khmer ethnic minority has not figured prominently in Vietnam's politics or during the turmoil of the 1945-54 period, though the existence of a Khmer Serei (Free Khmer) movement along the Cambodian border has vexed Vietnamese relations with both Cambodia and Thailand. Nor have the Khmer living in South Vietnam been extremely militant defenders of their cultural identity. Depending upon the immediacy of the threat to their settlements, Khmer were recruited into the French and the Cao Dai armies as district units and continue to serve today with Rural and Popular Forces in defense of their territory against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese regular forces. Generally, the Khmer have sought to avoid any military or political confrontation with the Saigon authorities or their Hoa Hao and Cao Dai neighbors, though in the recent elections for the Constituent and National Assemblies Khmer politicians stated that their goal was to get the Assemblies to assure by law a guaranteed number of seats in universities for Khmer students. This is not to say, however, that the Khmer have little sense of villagism, only that they are less elaborate about it than some of their neighboring communal groups. Indeed, the Khmer provide a rather
dramatic illustration of villagism in operation.

The population of Vinh Binh Province in the Delta is about one-quarter ethnic Khmer. One observer of the pacification program in 1964 stated that the Viet Cong had made substantial inroads in the province and that the bulk of the rural population remained "disinterested and neutral. They cooperate with the group that maintains the military preponderance in their area. The exception is the ethnic-Cambodians who resist the Viet Cong and generally cooperate with the government whenever possible."

The report also noted that the Viet Cong had won control over Tieu Can District, an ethnic-Cambodian and Catholic settlement. Twenty-six months later, the same observer noted the following:

The most significant accomplishment in Vinh Binh is the authentic improvement in Tieu Can District. This was accomplished by capitalizing on the ethnic-Cambodian and Catholic antipathies toward the Viet Cong in Tieu Can. Since December 1965 Tieu Can has outstripped its pacification goals by organizing and arming the local population. The local population has supported these efforts as demonstrated by their effective resistance in six effective resistance in six attacks against them, including one attack purported to exceed a battalion in size.... In contrast, two years ago the main Tieu Can road was relatively insecure and the district [security] was deteriorating....

Tieu Can's success was attributed to an energetic and honest district chief who won the support of the Khmer and Catholic groups in the district and the fact that "....these groups needed only organization and arms to mobilize a social movement toward the GVN."

* Quotations taken from personal notes on a conversation with the provincial advisor.
THE MONTAGNARDS

The aboriginal peoples who inhabit most of Vietnam's mountain areas constitute less than 5 percent of the total population of the country, but occupy approximately 60 percent of the total land area. Generally referred to as montagnards (though Vietnamese often use the word moi, i.e., savage), these people represent the Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian linguistic stocks, and their migration and settlement in Vietnam's highland areas reflect the vagaries of extinct empires and the Indochina war. For purposes of analysis, they are usually divided into the northern mountain region, where all groups speak some form of Mon-Khmer, and into the southern mountain region, where both linguistic stocks are present. In all, there are believed to be between thirty and forty distinct linguistic groupings of montagnards.

Montagnards and governments have never gotten along well, and such relations have been characterized by bitterness and distrust. Little effort has been made to effectively integrate the mountain peoples into Vietnamese life in any meaningful way by South Vietnamese government, * and what relations there were with governments since 1945 represented, to the montagnards, threats of extermination and loss of any possibility for the autonomy they enjoyed under the French. On the government side, relations with the mountain peoples have been characterized by much bad

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faith, and, as a result, the montagnards have responded positively to the promises and offers of independence and autonomy made by the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong. Given the kind of war now being waged in South Vietnam, the present government can ill afford continuing a policy of duplicity, as McAllister's study of the role of the montagnards in the Indochina war comprehensively demonstrates.*

In the highland areas, the village is the largest unit of political organization. Each village is governed by a headman or chief with the assistance of an elected council of village elders.** Each village is generally independent and often hostile to any neighboring settlements, though in time of emergency villages have been known to work in concert. By and large, the mountain peoples tend to avoid whenever possible any political confrontation with the South Vietnamese government or the Viet Cong. Unfortunately, montagnard villages are often close to or astride VC supply lines, and both the Communists and the government have sought to win montagnard support. The present war in the highlands, direct United States military assistance to the montagnards, and the record of past dealings with Saigon governments have stimulated a certain amount of political awareness.

Under the French, the mountain areas were dealt

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**For a description of the operation of these village councils, see Arthur S. Abbott, compiler, Research Notes on the Vietnamese Village Council (Washington, American University’s Special Operations Research Office, 1965), pp. 41-43.
with separately from the rest of Vietnam as the "PMS" -- Pays Montagnard du Sud -- and the colonials were interested in utilizing the mountain country for plantation agriculture. The routine affairs of the territory generally came to be administered by a group of French-trained Rhadé,* and, on the whole, such an arrangement proved a cordial one, though there were revolts against the French from 1931-33 and 1936-38. After 1954 the Southern government sought to incorporate the highland regions into the central governmental administration and, thus, destroy montagnard autonomy. Ethnic Vietnamese were resettled from the overpopulated coastal areas to the highlands, and montagnards were forcibly settled close to the vicinity of the Vietnamese villages for both protection from Viet Minh guerrillas as well as for the purpose of fostering some cultural contact and, possibly integration. Needless to say, the program created hostilities on both sides, since the Vietnamese did not like the "moi" and the montagnards did not like the forcible resettlement. Often, too, the Viet Minh were able to penetrate the weak defensive perimeter. In all, the effort exacerbated montagnard-Vietnamese relations. A short-lived uprising occurred in 1958, and its leaders were immediately imprisoned. Two of the leaders, Paul Nur (now the government's Special Commissioner for Montagnards Affairs) and Y Bham (a Rhadé, and current leader of the montagnard independence movement), remained in prison until after the 1963 coup.

Another uprising occurred in 1964 with more profound effects. On 1 August Y Bham announced the formation of the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races, or FULRO (Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées) and charged that the Vietnamese government had been following a policy of systematic suppression of the minority

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*Cf. L. Sabatier, Recueil des coutumes Rhadées due Darlac (Hanoi, 1940), pp. 53-56.
peoples. The declared purpose of FULRO was to work for
the liberation of minority peoples from the "Vietnamese
yoke." On 15 May the Vietnamese Joint General Staff
ordered all the American Special Forces-trained montagnard
units integrated into the command of the regular Vietnamese
Army. As military instructors, U.S. Special Forces had
been working with the montagnards since 1961 and had gained
their confidence, partly by insulating the militiamen and
self-defense units from the Vietnamese army and the
government. With this order, as Fall noted,

The effects were not long in coming.
Montagnard units deserted en masse
in many places, sometimes after
murdering lowland Vietnamese cadres,
and often taking along their high-
powered American weapons. Some camps
were betrayed from within by dis-
affected tribal units; others were
attacked by VC units backed by tribal
deserters.*

By late September, a full-scale revolt was on, led by the
Rhadé. On 20 September the radio station at Ban Me Thuot
was seized, and the leaders demanded the establishment of
an autonomous tribal state. At this point, the U.S. Army
intervened and arranged a meeting between the montagnard
leaders and the Saigon government. At this meeting,
important concessions were made to the montagnards -- titles
were promised for village lands, tribal courts were to be
restored, educational opportunities in South Vietnamese
high schools and military academies were guaranteed, and
tribal languages were to be taught in the primary schools.
Approximately a year later, none of the concessions had
been implemented, and another revolt ensued in September
and December 1965. Promises again were made, and by mid-
1967 the government's record had improved: law courts were

*"The Montagnards," in Vietnam Witness (New York,
in operation, indigenous language instruction had begun in the primary schools, and the Special Commission for Montagnard Affairs had been staffed. During the midst of the presidential election campaign, Thieu and Ky signed a law providing for land titles as well as a version of the Statut Particulier, a montagnard bill of rights.

From the record of the past few years, a number of trends are evident. The mountain people are beginning to develop supra-village identification and organization. Generated out of distrust for the government, this development reflects the inroads that the Rhadé-led FULRO movement is making in the highlands. The uprising in December 1965, for example, occurred simultaneously in five provinces, despite the fact that none of the montagnards have traditionally organized or communicated beyond the village level. Another important contributing factor is the training and communication networks provided by American Special Forces, which, together with Rhadé leadership, were probably instrumental in mobilizing the December revolt. Distrust of the government, too, has led to the development of supra-village identification of all montagnards as a minority people whose rights might best be secured by some form of concerted action. During the 1967 Presidential campaign the candidates' appearance in the highlands was the best-attended of all such campaign meetings. The war and the Viet Cong's brutal attacks against the montagnards have also served to stimulate the anti-VC feelings and discourage the notion that each village is an entity unto itself, since the VC have destroyed and attacked without regard for village differences. The development of the montagnards' corporate group identity is, of course, still in its formative stages. As such, it provides an opportunity for the Saigon government to be genuinely helpful, while the electoral season of 1966-67 may serve to institutionalize some of the montagnard hostility to the government through the legislative
assemblies. However, an era of Vietnamese-montagnard "good feelings" has yet to emerge in South Vietnam's politics.

III

The record of the communal groups' relations with Vietnamese governments and their organizational and village cohesiveness in times of crisis suggests a number of important lessons for government in Vietnam's countryside. Two decades of war and the vagaries of politics have stimulated the communal groups' sense of identity and will to survive as distinct cultural and political groups. This sense of identity does not exhibit signs of decay, nor is it particularly likely to in the future. In discussing the persistence of ethnicity in American cities, Parenti suggests that this phenomenon may actually be the result of the political system itself:

Rather than being a purely dependent variable, the political system, i.e., party, precinct workers, candidates, elections, patronage, etc., continues to rely upon ethnic strategies....

Indeed, even in communities characterized by strong pressures and opportunities for assimilation, Parenti found that cultural belief systems and ethnic group values persist independently of objective and material factors, that such plural and parallel structures of activities and values are remarkably vital, and that the psychological perception of minority identity tends to become internalized**

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** Ibid., pp. 722-24.
and, presumably, passed on to successive generations.

Ethnic strategies and pluralism are quite evident in Vietnam today and promise similarly to persist. Religious sects and ethnic groups have created and preserved parallel, quasi-governmental structures* to deal with the government, the Viet Cong, and the war. Additionally, the communal groups have also demonstrated their ability to mobilize popular support in the recent elections for the Constituent and National Assemblies, where Catholics and Hoa Hao were consistently successful in their bids for election in comparison to proportionately fewer Buddhist successes outside the urban areas. And, ironically, the communal groups tend to form the backbone of government support, while the Buddhists tend to constitute the alienated opposition. To be sure, communal group support for the government was as much a product of Thieu and Ky's ethnic political strategy as it was a product of group cohesion and the desire to avoid any confrontation with the national government. During the 1967 elections for the Upper and Lower Houses, conversations with ethnic and religious leaders throughout South Vietnam demonstrated the tension between a desire to remain involved in politics (and, hence, less vulnerable) on the one hand, and making sure that particular groups would not be isolated from the political and financial benefits of public office, on the other hand. At first, communal group leaders posed only as individuals running for office rather than as leaders of any ethnic or religious group. Subsequent conversations with various Vietnamese politicians, however, invariably brought the remark that if the National Assemblies proved effective, "it would be in the interest of the group to be represented. In Vietnam, politics is like the smallpox; in order to be immunized, you have to be exposed."

*Structures, needless to say, that may well be as authoritarian as either the SVN or the VC.
In the survey of Vietnam's communal groups, one aspect of their organization has been left out: factionalism. The reputation of the communal groups for factional strife is well known; precise details, however, are not well documented, save for official and semi-official reports, which are not always available for or appropriate in scholarly research. But factionalism may also have contributed to expanding the political spectrum in Vietnam. In the 1967 hamlet and village council elections, for example, candidate-to-position ratios were generally higher in those provinces where communal groups were more factionalized when compared to those areas where factional strife was less prevalent. A larger number of candidates enables the local electorate to exercise considerable choice between competing blocs and interest groups. Of course, too much factionalism within a particular organization may paralyze its effectiveness, and Saigon governments could follow an ethnic strategy that would seek to divide and then immobilize the potential of the communal groups as the French had done with the montagnards during the Indochina war.* Clearly, such a policy may have disastrous results and may, instead, foster the erosion of what appears to be the government's only effective base in the countryside.** It would appear that the wiser course

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*Cf. McAllister, op. cit.

**For example, Diem attempted to destroy the communal groups in order to eliminate opposition and consolidate his control over the countryside; yet, as this strategy unfolded Diem also lost the basis of rural security. By 1958, an operative casually remarked that Viet Cong strength was increasing in the Delta. "These areas had been non-Communist because of the Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao. With the destruction of these groups by the government, there is no strong force to withstand the Communists who have been collecting support among the various discontented people."
suggests that government increase its accommodation to the communal groups, encouraging them to consolidate their leadership.* The more the communal group participates and is called upon to participate in a national political life, the closer it may identify national interests with its own.**

In Vietnam, the communal groups have sought to accommodate themselves to both the Saigon government and the Viet Cong. In other Southeast Asian nations, by way of contrast, ethnic and religious minorities often are a source of opposition to the government. In South Vietnam today, the situation is just the reverse: the communal groups tend to support the government, which itself represents a socio-political minority, while the urban and rural Buddhists constitute the alienated opposition. The record of communal group-government relations suggests that particularly since 1945, the following process has led to political accommodation: a consciousness of communal group identity is heightened by internal conflict; as the conflict proceeds, the groups become involved in confrontations with the government in which they tend to be unsuccessful and subsequently withdraw their support from a particular government; finally, an accommodation is reached with usually a "new" central government. Increasingly, the war made accommodation the key to survival. A similar pattern of accommodation is evident when relations with the Viet Cong are necessary. A few years ago, sojourners to Vietnam found it relatively easy to "get in touch" with

*As has been argued by Gerald Hickey in his Accommodation in South Vietnam: the Key to Sociopolitical Solidarity, The RAND Corporation, P-3707, October 1967, and other American consultants.

the Viet Cong: one merely had to leave behind a personal belonging at a morning ceremony marking the opening of a "pacified hamlet" and return for it alone in the evening. Usually, the Viet Cong officer in charge of the dusk-to-dawn roadblock would gladly serve as escort to the hamlet, and there at evening, traveler and Viet Cong alike would receive the same hospitality accorded the government representatives in the morning. The war of the "good old days" was considerably more relaxed and less intense than it is today. But the accommodations existing a few years ago have not, by and large, ceased to function; they are rather more subtle. The Viet Cong may have faded into the jungle, but the process of accommodation as a way of life has not. Now, simply, no one goes to the pacified hamlet at night.

As the war has expanded, so also has local accommodation and, hence, the bases for accommodation.** The villager of a few years ago is now involved with the RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) or the Viet Cong, but the substance of accommodation has remained the same: it is still a function of the dominant force in the area, inventives, past experiences, leadership, and the perception of individual survival as intimately tied to a particular residential unit. As one observer suggested, "American officials are reconciled to the fact that in many villages, the local ARVN outpost coexists with the Viet Cong officials who control the villagers." The villagers cooperate because they want to survive, the ARVN soldiers because they do not want to die in the night, and the Viet Cong survive because the GVN has given the villagers few if any incentives to turn VC in. And the provision of incentives is crucial to winning the countryside. By now, it is clear that what has been called

*See, for example, Samuel P. Huntington, "The Bases of Accommodation," Foreign Affairs, 46 (July 1968), pp. 642-56, where he suggests that internal village security proceeds from communal organization rather than vice versa.
"pacification" depended primarily upon the provision of adequate security, and villagers would participate in pacification to the extent that they felt sure (i.e., secure) the Viet Cong could not harm them. Indeed, in one of the pacification program's success stories, Long Huu village (Long An province), the villagers requested that the village be "occupied" by a battalion (instead of the scheduled company). The village of Long Huu had been Viet Cong for over three years and in the spring of 1967, it "defected-in-place." Yet what had to be made clear to other nearby Viet Cong was that the "pacification" was only the result of being saturated by massive numbers of the "enemy." By the end of the summer, Long Huu was still billed as a success story, but the battalion had been replaced by a Popular Forces Company, and visitors reached Long Huu via helicopter which maneuvered above the landing zone, reduced engine power, and by auto-rotation rapidly descended a thousand feet in order to "minimize the risk of small-arms fire." If incentives to be "pacified" are not provided, internal security will develop from existing communal organizations, or villagism. Given the lack of adequate security coupled with the failure of the government to relate to the countryside, villagers will continue to find security in established patterns of accommodation rather than through participation in national governments.

Conversely, for the Saigon government the dangers involved in self-help support of, and local autonomy for, these groups now appear minimal in return for their support of pacification and rural construction programs in the countryside.* Indeed, the only lasting successes

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* Those who currently suggest that if the GVN armed the minorities in self-defense groups they would then fight the GVN may well misread the lesson of the Diem era. The
of the pacification program to date, i.e., the ability of the area to remain "secured" after Revolutionary Development cadres and regular military forces move on, occurred in those areas; pacification has succeeded by combining the organizational resources of the communal groups with the sensitivity and creativity of a dynamic district or province chief. Lasting security is a product of group identity and a government presence which stimulates villagers to defend themselves, rather than the imposition of external and temporary authority or reforms.

In addition to political support, the government may also win a measure of legitimacy by aiding the preservation of traditional communal groups. Rousseau cited the institution of urban as well as rural tribes by Servius as the element which contributed most to the preservation and growth of the Roman empire.* Indeed, traditional social structures and values may not conflict with and may even reinforce or legitimate modernization efforts and programs, as experience with the prijaji in Indonesia or with the role of caste in Indian politics suggests.** In his examination of the implications of modernity and tradition, Gusfield found that

The role of traditional values in the form of segmental loyalties and principles of legitimate authority are of great importance in understanding the

minorities fought Diem because he sought to control them by curtailing their religious freedom. Indeed, the history of GVN-communal group relations suggests that the groups fought for administrative and religious autonomy and fought only when their freedom was seriously threatened.


possibilities for the occurrence of unified and stable polities at a national level. The contemporary Indian political process utilizes caste, village, and religious community as basic segmental groups through which the individual and the family are drawn into modern political institutions.*

In South Vietnam, similarly, communal groups and villagism could function as institutions of unification and nationalization as well as of accommodation. The elected government of South Vietnam now has an opportunity to disperse decision-making and support these groups considerably more than governments in the past have done, and with considerably less risk of strife and opposition. It is vital, therefore, that the government in South Vietnam and those who advise it, place high on their agenda a survey of the bases of accommodation. In the case of Vietnam, it would appear that it is government that must now accommodate to the countryside.
