

## French Missionary Expansion in Colonial Upper Tonkin

Jean Michaud

*This article examines the circumstances and logic of French Catholic missionary expansion in Upper Tonkin. It explores how, over a few decades, the missionary push in the mountainous outskirts of the Red River Delta was conceived, how it unfolded, and how it came to a standstill in the 1920s before its decline towards the final exit of the French in the late 1940s.*

The age of the uncompromising antipathy between a number of academic anthropologists and missionaries is over. With many authors making a case for acknowledging the contribution of non-academic ethnographers to the discipline of anthropology, examination of missionaries' work as part of the wider category of non-professional ethnographers has become critical for the discipline.<sup>1</sup> Is it not true that historically anthropologists have made great use of missionary writings – though perhaps more privately than publicly? Peter Pels has noted, for instance, that 'before the advent of the professional fieldworker [in the first decade of the twentieth century], British anthropologists mainly used data collected by government officials and missionaries, while a segment of the missionary movement drew on ethnology as a tool in developing missionary methods'.<sup>2</sup> This observation emphasises even more the contested boundaries between the two worlds.

Colonial missionary ethnography was for the most part conducted by nonspecialists for whom this activity was accidental, performed in the course of their apostolic mission. In this sense, and along with military officers and colonial administrators, I call them

Jean Michaud is an Associate Researcher at the Université de Montréal in Montréal, Canada. His e-mail contact is [jean.michaud@umontreal.ca](mailto:jean.michaud@umontreal.ca)

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1 Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink, 'Introduction: Five theses on ethnography as colonial practice', *History and Anthropology*, 8, 1–4 (1994): 1–34; see also Claude E. Stipe, 'Anthropologists versus missionaries: The influence of presuppositions', *Current Anthropology*, 21, 2 (1980): 165–8.

2 Peter Pels, 'Anthropology and mission: Towards a historical analysis of professional identity', in *The ambiguity of rapprochement. Reflections of anthropologists on their controversial relationship with missionaries*, ed. R. Bonsen et al. (Nijmegen: Focaal, 1990), p. 82.

‘incidental ethnographers’.<sup>3</sup> This notion conveys the sense of those observers, otherwise busy with their regular duties, being accidentally dragged into this activity, a call of duty to which they responded with widely varying levels of commitment, competence and accuracy. To make sense of their writing, therefore, we need to consider these ‘incidental ethnographers’ and their work individually, along with their historical, cultural and political circumstances.

Strictly speaking, however, it is not the aim of this article to conduct a study of missionary ethnography in colonial Tonkin. Such an exercise would be premature, since it is the context of missionary expansion that needs to be examined and understood first before an interpretation of the missionaries’ texts can be conducted successfully. I wish to contribute to this foundation by setting the scene for missionary expansion in upland Tonkin and presenting the specific agency that caused missionaries to settle there in the first place. More precisely, the article will explore how, over a few decades, the French Catholic missionary system in the mountainous outskirts of the Red River (Rivière Rouge or Sông Hồng) Delta in northern Vietnam (then called *Haut-Tonkin*, Upper Tonkin) was established, how it expanded into the highlands, and how it came to a standstill before beginning an irreversible decline. This missionary system in turn created the conditions favouring the production by individual missionaries of ethnographic texts on the various and complex societies living in these uplands, today a population of roughly 5.5 million people.<sup>4</sup>

In the following pages we will meet some of the men whose agency contributed to the expansion of Catholic proselytism into the highlands of Tonkin, from the seminal influence of Bishop Paul-François Puginier (1835–92) starting in the 1860s to the end of the missionary presence in the upper region in the late 1940s. Practically all the authors used in this article are Catholic missionaries, and therefore male. Only on occasion will a voice from the colonial administration – men, again – be heard. This account does not attempt to cover the full range of the colonial politics of missionary expansion in Tonkin, which would require multiple voices to be inserted in the narrative.<sup>5</sup> It is chiefly the missionary side of the story. Also, a good deal of consideration will be paid to identifying individual missionaries, their itineraries and their exact postings. Such details are of importance for future research to be able to link the texts of these missionaries with those of other colonial agents and with specific local populations. In this regard, the article lays the foundations for further research on the ethnographic value of missionary writing in Upper Tonkin.

3 The choice of ‘incidental’ over the more neutral equivalent ‘accidental’ may appear to suggest that such ethnography could be of a lesser value, but such is not the case. In this context, of course, ‘incidental’ in inverted commas is meant as an irony pointing at the contempt in which institutionalised anthropology has for a long time held non-professional ethnographers and their texts. Nor should the term ‘obscure the degree to which many early missionaries depended on their practical ethnographic knowledge of “natives” simply to survive, let alone convert’, even if only a fraction of that knowledge was actually turned into ethnographic text (Oscar Salemink, personal communication).

4 Jean Michaud, ‘The montagnards in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975. A historical overview from exogenous sources’, *Ethnohistory*, 47, 2 (2000): 334.

5 See Nicole-Dominique Lê, *Les Missions-Étrangères et la pénétration française au Viet-Nam* (Paris: Mouton, 1975).

Before we embark on our journey, some historical background is needed. From the early 1600s onward, Catholic missionaries of various affiliations were present in Vietnam, though on a small scale and only in the lowlands. Near the end of that century, a papal intervention gave the evangelisation of the northeast portion of Tonkin – covering roughly one-third of the region – to Spanish Dominicans based in Manila, whilst the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) was given the remaining two-thirds.<sup>6</sup> Until the curtain fell on French Indochina in 1954, MEP was to remain the most important supplier of Catholic missionaries to Tonkin. Yet despite this early start to Catholic proselytising, the mountainous areas at the periphery of the Red River Delta remained untouched by European missionaries until the late 1800s. Conversion was initially confined to the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) population in the delta – with the possible exception of some among the ‘Muong’, then still a fuzzy category used mostly to designate an unspecified number of non-Kinh groups in the western part of the delta.<sup>7</sup>

Before the French military conquest began in 1858, reports were sent to France and Rome more or less regularly by a small number of missionaries who had succeeded in maintaining their presence in Tonkin, either openly or incognito, during waves of adversity from local authorities. With no outposts set up beyond the immediate periphery of the delta, these reports, personal correspondence and diaries could not incorporate ethnographic material concerning the groups dwelling in the highlands. During the French colonial implantation in the second half of the nineteenth century, the missionary presence expanded significantly in terms of both numbers and geographical dispersion. The MEP quickly found itself in charge of ever more numerous vicariates, each headed by a Vicar Apostolic; these were set up gradually wherever and whenever the number of mission outposts and potential converts justified it and the Pope saw fit. In Tonkin, the time sequence reflected the extension of the colonial grip.<sup>8</sup> The original Tonkin vicariate had officially been created in 1660 but was quickly divided in 1679 into Western and Eastern Tonkin under the MEP and Spanish Dominicans respectively. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Western Tonkin vicariate had become too large to be comfortably administered from Hanoi, and in 1846 was further sub-divided. The new Southern Tonkin vicariate was created, while a reduced Western Tonkin encompassed most of the delta including Hanoi and, in theory, all of the mountainous areas between Laos to the west and the right bank of the Sông Lô (Rivière Claire) to the east, which marked the boundary of the Dominican domain.

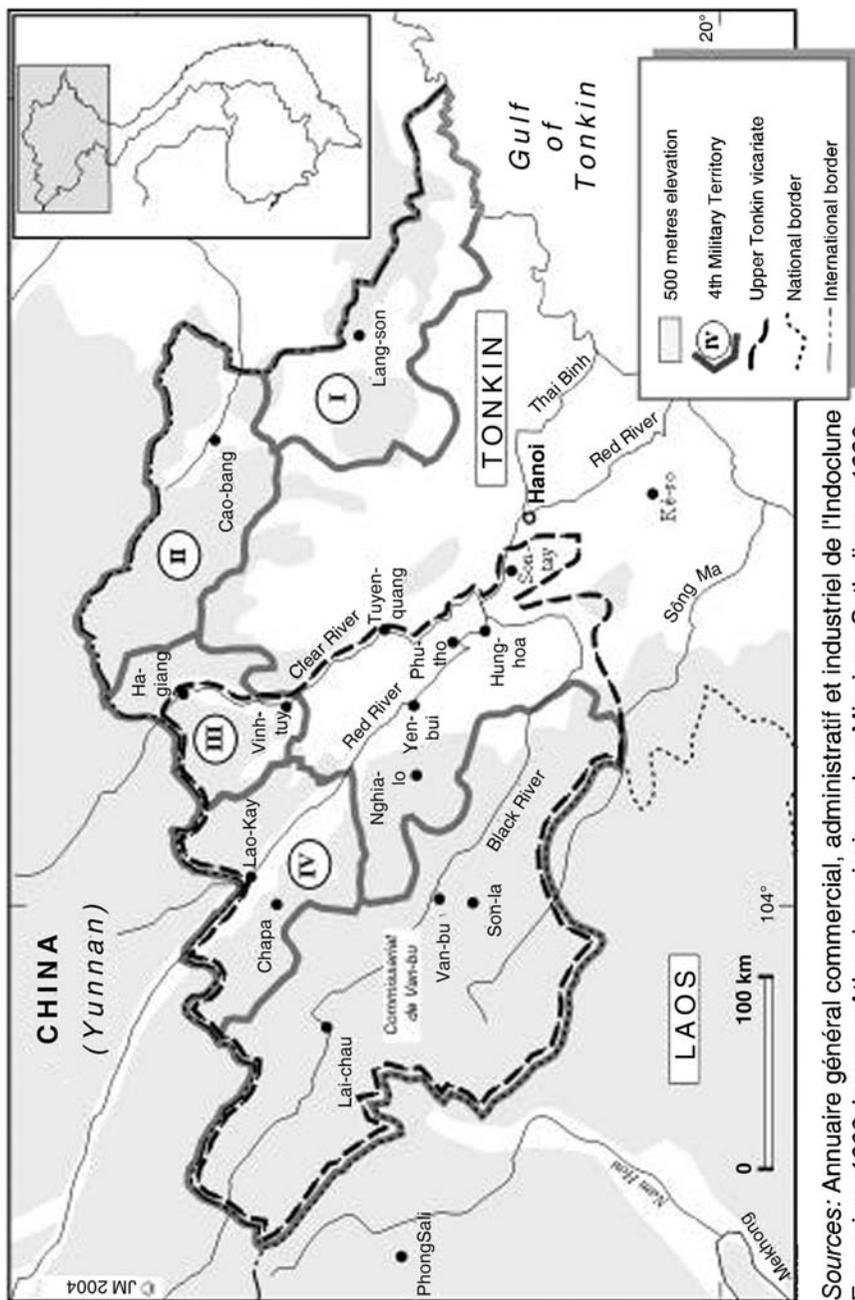
By 1880 the northern and north-western mountains were still a fairly unknown quantity that remained to be surveyed – except for reports filed by a few earlier explorers and merchants such as Francis Garnier or Jean Dupuis – and had yet to be subject to missionary activities. By the time the colonial pacification of Tonkin was over in the mid-1890s, the West Tonkin vicariate needed to be sub-divided once again, and two new entities were created: Upper Tonkin (1895), covering the upland region extending to the

6 Jean Guennou, *Missions Étrangères de Paris* (Paris: Fayard, 1986); see also Henri Chappoulié, *Rome et les missions d'Indochine au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1943).

7 Alain Forest, *Les missionnaires français au Tonkin et au Siam (XVII<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles). Analyse comparée d'un relatif succès et d'un échec total*, vol. II (*Histoires du Tonkin*) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), pp. 259–61. ‘Kinh’ is used here as a convenient shortcut to designate the lowland Vietnamese, also called ‘Viet’. No further ethnic distinction amongst the lowland population will be made in this article.

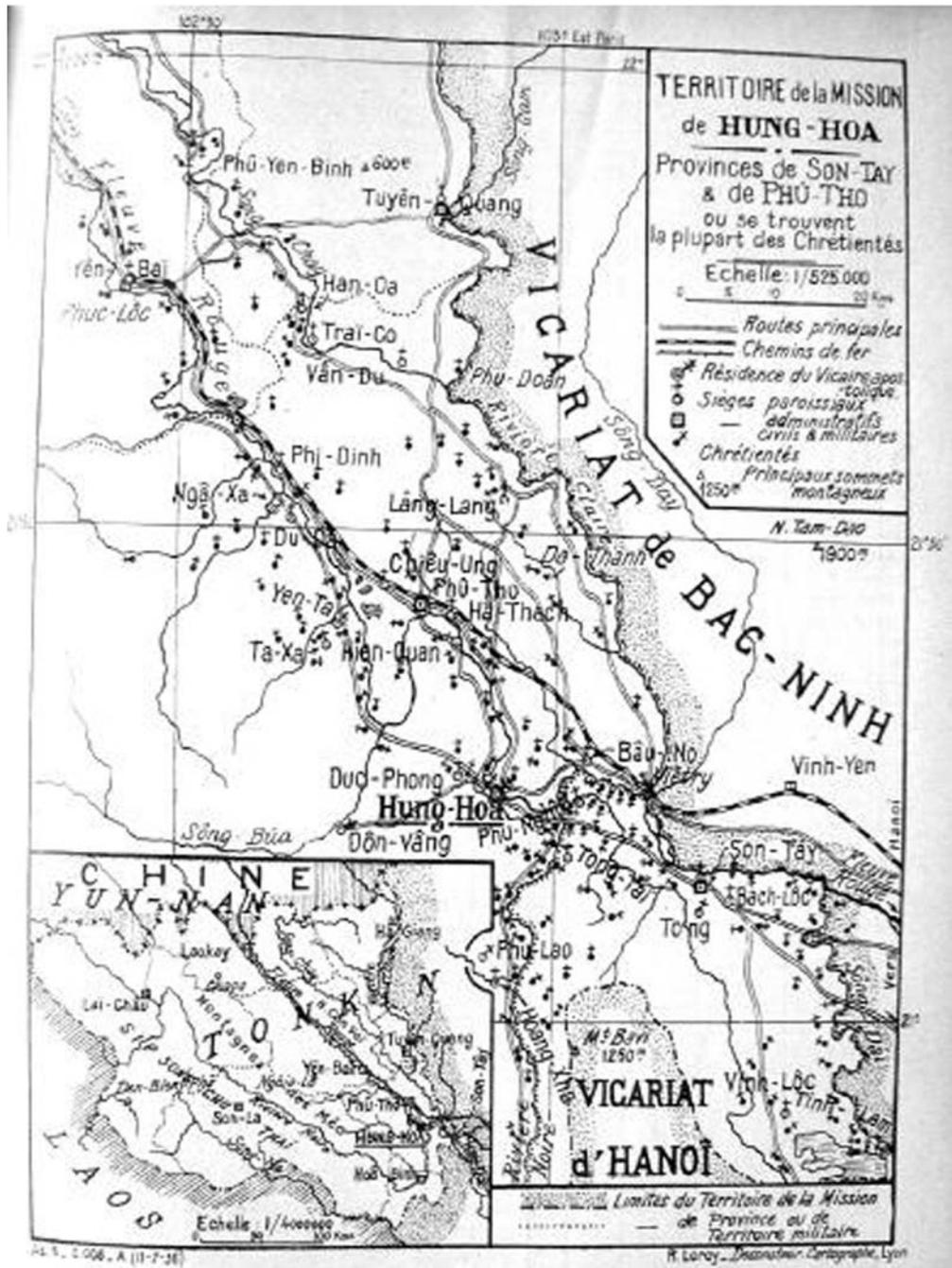
8 This brief history of the establishment of vicariates in Tonkin is a synthesis of information found in various MEP archives, notably several yearly *Comptes-rendus*.

Map 1 - Military Territories (as in 1903), and Upper-Tonkin Vicariate



Sources: Annuaire général commercial, administratif et industriel de l'Indochine Française, 1903; Launay, Atlas des missions; Les Missions Catholiques, 1936.

Map 2 - Upper-Tonkin (Hung-hoa) vicariate in 1936



Source: Les Missions Catholiques, 1936.

borders of China and Laos, and Coastal Tonkin (1901), which incorporated the southern coast. In spite of this gradual fragmentation of the large original seventeenth-century Tonkin vicariate, the decentralisation of missionary administration did not significantly undermine the authority of its political core in Hanoi, which was the heart of Kinh society and the See of both the Catholic and colonial administrations as well. Indeed, the Vicar Apostolic of an increasingly smaller West Tonkin vicariate always remained the ‘first among equals’ in the protectorate’s ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the narrative that is about to unfold, we will first meet the dominant figure of missionary Tonkin at the end of the nineteenth century, Bishop Puginier, and consider his seminal influence in the establishment and the expansion of the Upper Tonkin vicariate, a phase that lasted from 1895 to around 1920. Then, we will see that a lull in missionary activity there preceded a slow decline, leading to the final termination of most such activity at the start of the First Indochina War.

### Missions and the colonial project in Tonkin

Many authors have observed that throughout the world European colonial expansion went hand in hand with the Christianisation of the subjugated peoples, or at least of a significant segment of their society. The highland populations in French Indochina were no exception to this rule and recent research such as Oscar Salemink’s *The ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders* has further confirmed this opinion.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging the importance of contextualising missionary expansion within the political expansion of a colonial power, we need to outline the political foundations of missionary deployment in the upper region of Tonkin. Historian Cao Huy Thuân has discussed the successive stages of missionary collaboration in the colonial takeover, showing how they even contributed to guiding it, using it as leverage to implant their missions in Tonkin during the first decades of the French presence.<sup>10</sup> One character stands out in this process as the most central and most powerful cleric that colonial Tonkin – and perhaps French Indochina – ever saw. This was Paul-François Puginier, Bishop *in partibus* of Mauricastre, and Vicar Apostolic of West Tonkin and of Hanoi from 1868–92, a key figure in the establishment and expansion of French rule in Vietnam. Puginier has received a good deal of attention from various writers – starting with a pious and hefty hagiography by Father Eugène Louvet as early as 1894.<sup>11</sup> To avoid

9 Oscar Salemink, *The ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders. A historical contextualization 1850–1990* (London: RoutledgeCurzon Press, 2002); Vo Duc Hanh, *La place du catholicisme dans les relations entre la France et le Viêt Nam de 1851 à 1871* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

10 Cao Huy Thuan, *Les missionnaires et la politique coloniale française au Vietnam (1857–1914)* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, 1990).

11 Louis Eugène Louvet, *Vie de Mgr Puginier, Évêque de Mauricastre, Vicaire Apostolique du Tonkin Occidental* (Hanoi: Schneider, 1894). Following a strategy made necessary after many historical setbacks throughout the world, the Office of Propagation of Faith in Rome (often called the Propaganda Office) nominated bishops abroad as Vicars Apostolic, heading new missionary territories where no formal ecclesiastical organisation had been erected before and where local authorities were reluctant to let such an installation occur. These ‘floating’ bishops held symbolic titles *in partibus*, which bore the names of ancient vicariates (such as Mauricastre) that had been abandoned and were in places that were no longer Christian. The appointment of a Vicar Apostolic in a newly evangelised territory was seen as the first step in the founding of a local Christian community and was done in the hope that future developments would eventually allow the establishment of a full-fledged vicariate headed by a proper bishop. In this text ‘bishop’ and ‘Vicar Apostolic’ are used interchangeably.

unnecessary repetition here, we will focus on those of his texts that highlight his influence on the expansion of missionary agency into the highlands of Tonkin.

In the 1880s in the Red River Delta and its lower mountainous periphery, the advance of the French conquest caused many mandarins faithful to the Emperor in Hue – and concerned with maintaining their privileged position – to support resistance. In response, the conquering French military machine launched its *mission de pacification*, an unforgiving campaign that was to last a full decade. These were troubled times, and France's Residents and Governors-General in Hue and Hanoi rarely remained in their posting for more than a year: 15 came and went in less than 15 years between the nomination of Jules Harmand in 1883 and the arrival of Paul Doumer in 1897. Their administration was short-sighted and sometimes brutal. Only a few visionaries among these administrators could foresee the potential of the new protectorate; among them was Governor-General Antoine de Lanessan, who held the post from 1891–1894.

In a study published two years before taking up his governorship, the strongly anti-clerical Lanessan had declared (referring directly to Bishop Puginier) that 'our representatives have allowed themselves to be more or less consciously dragged towards the missionaries' policy, based on suppressing mandarins and scholars, with the consequence of conquering Annam and Tonkin with all the human and financial costs this imposes'.<sup>12</sup> The fact is that in the years following the 1884 Patenôtre Treaty establishing the definitive French protectorate over the Vietnamese Empire, a policy of domination and assimilation was applied to the Vietnamese people, chiefly in response to the missionary leadership headed by Paul Puginier.

Puginier was in those years the most seasoned Frenchman in Tonkin, where he had developed an extensive network of informers among Europeans and Vietnamese alike. He had time to shape his vision for the new protectorate and he intended to make the highest authority aware of it. From the elimination of Regent Tôn Thất Thuyết, a leader of the anti-French resistance, in 1885 to the progressive crushing of all significant resistance in the north (completed by 1896), French military operations were stimulated by Puginier's policies and actively benefited from strategic information on the movements of the Vietnamese 'rebels' provided through the missionary network – information often obtained in the confessional.<sup>13</sup> Armed resistance was significantly undermined by the acquisition to the French cause of thousands of new Catholic converts every year in the delta and its immediate periphery.

Puginier, who first set foot in Indochina in 1858, was made Vicar Apostolic of West Tonkin in 1868 at the young age of 33, following the death of his predecessor Joseph Theurel; he retained this position until he passed away in 1892. He knew the the country, its language and its inhabitants like no other Frenchman at the time thanks to many years of missionising in his vicariate and was a strong believer in his motherland's civilising duty towards the Vietnamese. Puginier was a mediator between local authorities and Jean Dupuis and Francis Garnier during their 1873 *coup de force* in Hanoi and played a

12 Jean-Marie-Antoine de Lanessan, *L'Indochine française, étude politique et administrative* (Paris: Alcan, 1889), p. 711; all translations are mine. In 1906–7, back in Paris, Lanessan tried in vain to have anti-clerical laws applied to the colonial system; Patrick Tuck, *French Catholic missionaries and the politics of imperialism in Vietnam, 1857–1914: A documentary survey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987), p. 338.

13 Cao Huy Thuan, *Missionnaires et la politique coloniale*, p. 282.

decisive role in the installation and maintenance of the French Concession on the banks of the Red River, the initial French foothold in Tonkin in the 1870s. In 1878, he sent the first – unsuccessful – Catholic mission to Laos, a prelude to its annexation to French Indochina 15 years later. In the early 1880s, stimulated by the expansionist policy of Jules Ferry in France with the support of Bishop Charles Freppel, Puginier made use of his diplomatic skills and his contacts high up in the Vietnamese circles to help open the way for a permanent French presence in Hanoi in 1883 and for the subsequent conquest of Tonkin.

In 1884, at the request of the commander of French forces in Indochina, Puginier moved from the mission's headquarters in Kê Sở (near Kiện Khê in present-day Hà Nam province) to take up residence in Hanoi and assist the colonial authorities in the pacification of Tonkin. Between that date and his death, which occurred at the peak of his influence, Puginier firmly implanted a dominant Catholic presence in Hanoi, symbolised by the erection of the Saint-Joseph Cathedral in 1886. Lanessan considered that Puginier's influence after 1883 was so important that most of the actions of French authorities were directly inspired by his ideas.<sup>14</sup> The long-term impact of his influence on the authorities both in Tonkin and in France, and his conceptualisation and management of the opening up of Tonkin to missionaries' work, played a decisive role in shaping the political background and the working conditions for all the French missionaries who subsequently penetrated Tonkin and its highlands.

### Puginier's Notes

Puginier maintained a regular stream of correspondence with colonial political authorities in Hanoi, but also in France, where he had powerful allies both in political and ecclesiastical circles. In Tonkin, he sent his famous '*Notes et renseignements*' to the colonial authorities on a regular basis, sometimes weekly.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, from the moment the pro-Tonkin Ferry administration in France was ousted in March 1885 until the beginning of the Doumer governorship in Hanoi in 1897, France's attitude towards its Indochina colony remained lukewarm. After the questionable colonial endeavours of the July Monarchy (1830–48) and the failures of the Second Empire (1852–70), France grew to dislike the colonial expansionism that also characterised the young Third Republic (1870–1940). During the last years of Puginier's life, then, France's commitment to maintaining its presence in Tonkin was in fact less than assured. In an effort to fight the growing ambivalence among the colonial and metropolitan elites, the Bishop saw it as his duty to contribute his experience to keeping the government and its successive representatives informed on religious, political, security and military issues. In fact, Puginier's letters to the authorities constituted a veritable colonisation programme; as a prologue to missionary expansion into Upper Tonkin, they deserve attention.<sup>16</sup>

14 De Lanessan, *Indochine française*, p. 715; Puginier's relocation is mentioned in Charles-Edouard Hocquart, 'Trente mois au Tonkin', *Tour du Monde*, 1st semester, 1890: 117.

15 The recipients included the Governor-General, the Commander-in-Chief, the Resident Superior in Tonkin, and various Ministers in France; Gustave Monteuis, *L'âme d'un missionnaire. Vie du P. Nempou, missionnaire apostolique du Tonkin Occidental* (Paris: Victor Retaux et Fils, 1895), p. 232 note 2. There are around 100 such letters kept in the MEP archives in Paris (vol. 816).

16 Cao Huy Thuan, *Missionnaires et la politique coloniale*, p. 276.

Concerned not to undermine his position in front of the Vietnamese authorities, Puginier would often start or conclude his Notes to the colonial authorities by stating that the information they contained should be treated as confidential. 'The reflections I just shared with you are based on reliable information. As I wrote them down for my personal use, I see it as my duty to communicate them in confidence and in secret to those who should know about their content, begging to conceal the name of he who gives this information.' Confident that his knowledge of Tonkin and the Vietnamese vastly exceeded that of any of the short-term Residents and Governors who were appointed to administer Indochina during his time – a fact of which he did not hesitate to remind his correspondent – he would take the stance of a statesman in advising the Governor on the preferable course of action: 'Be wary of the explanations that the Government of China will give concerning their concentration of troops on the Tonkin border. There is no reason that could justify maintaining such a concentration. In case these troops should be disbanded or dismissed, it would be wise to know the direction they will take.'<sup>17</sup>

As was common practice among his predecessors in West Tonkin – Bishops Pierre Retord (1840–58), Charles Jeantet (1858–66) and Joseph Theurel (1866–8) in particular – who lived and suffered through the strong opposition of Vietnamese authorities, Puginier's Notes showed a vigorous dislike for the local mandarins and the educated elite or *lettrés*, whose politics he despised. He used the harshest words to describe them: 'tortuous, hidden, hypocritical, sweet, pretending to appear weak in order to succeed'.<sup>18</sup> In the same vein Puginier, influenced by the common practice of asking for financial compensation from the alleged perpetrators for human losses during a conflict, could also indulge in strange arithmetic. When addressing the colonial authorities following the destruction of Kinh Christian villages by Chinese 'rebels', he put figures on the human cost of the 'massacres': '7 missionaries (70,000 francs); 1 native priest (5,000 F); 66 catechists (198,000 F); 303 Christians (303,000 F)'.<sup>19</sup> The honourable man's valuation of human life in each category was thus respectively 10,000, 5,000, 3,000 and 1000 francs, revealing a level of political pragmatism that stood in contrast with his evangelical commitment.

His Note of March 1887, a 20-page summary of the political situation as he saw it at the time, provides a consummate example of his vision for the region and its populations. Puginier states that this particular text, written 'with the objective of shedding some light for those wanting to know the truth', was intended for a select readership who wanted to be informed (most likely members of the higher colonial hierarchy) and for 'friends dedicated to Tonkin's cause and to France's true interests'. Three questions are explicitly addressed by Puginier in these notes: 'Does Tonkin deserve French attention? Is the neighbourhood of China as fearsome as has often been said and repeated? What should be done?'<sup>20</sup>

To the first question, the Bishop's answer is unequivocally 'yes' for both the lowlands and highlands. He supports his position by quoting from his own 'Notes sur la question du Tonking' written in 1884:

17 Note, 14 Aug. 1888; Puginier's Notes, cited here as 'Note', are held in the MEP Archives.

18 Note, 26 June 1886.

19 Note, 20 Aug. 1886.

20 Note, Mar. 1887.

But what rewards can France find in Tonkin that would pay her back for the sacrifices she imposes on herself there? Some are real and to my mind considerable. Tonkin is a rich country with a soil capable of producing a high variety of produce; while the plains favour the production of rice, maize, sugar cane, mulberry tree, cotton, indigo, etc., the numerous plateaux yield in turn many products just as precious: several varieties of wood, lacquer, *faux-gambier*, lacquer gum, camphor, hemp, ramie, bark for making China paper, several types of oils with some bearing the desiccative property of linseed oil, etc. Not to mention the coal, gold and tin mines.

Pursuing on the trade front, Puginier further argues that:

Tonkin, with its rivers, opens to France easy ways for her merchandise to penetrate Laos and the southwest of China, Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, half of the province of Sichuan, and allows her to extract from these immense countries products that would make a lucrative trading branch. Among other things one can think of copper, pewter, zinc, mercury, excellent varieties of tea consumed locally and unknown in Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Puginier also stresses that missionary zeal has contributed to building a strong base of Christian friends among the local population, one that must not be wasted. These friends were of crucial help in implementing the colonial project by warning against forthcoming perils, and were prepared to be further involved if necessary. He declares that 'it is very encouraging for France to know that she has in Tonkin an important and friendly element which, if she knows how to use it, will mightily facilitate the pacification of the country, the establishment of her influence, and will help to gradually gain the whole population to her cause'.<sup>22</sup>

Puginier proceeds to emphasise what he believes to be the necessary strategic plan to strengthen France's grip over Tonkin:

*A military campaign of course, a wise, careful administration based on a knowledge of the local minds and situation, combined with energy and the execution of a good plan steadily implemented, will gradually lead to a satisfactory solution which will compensate France for its immense sacrifice in Tonkin . . . One should not lose sight of the fact that from the moment France exited Tonkin, another strong nation would immediately come to replace her.*

On the second question, regarding the possibly troublesome neighbour China, Puginier believes that if colonial authorities can give priority to gaining the support of the Vietnamese population to France's cause – as opposed to working with the elites only – there should be no reason to fear China in times of peace. In addition, should a war break out with another European power in the region, things could be kept under control provided that France could use 'a few warships to guard the coasts, serious posts to protect the borders, good supply networks, [and] friendly elements inside the country to support

21 Ibid. Historians Cao Huy Thuan and Philippe Papin quote directly from this 1884 document, copies of which they found at the MEP archives or at the Vietnamese National Archives in Hanoi; see Cao Huy Thuan, *Missionnaires et la politique coloniale*, pp. 289–90 and Philippe Papin, *Histoire de Hanoi* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), p. 218. Puginier judged his earlier text to be of the utmost importance, which surely explains why he was still quoting it three years later, and he sent it to various authorities.

22 Note, Mar. 1887.

French troops'.<sup>23</sup> However, it is Puginier's answer to the third question, 'What should be done?', that constitutes a literal blueprint for understanding French missionary policy in Tonkin, particularly in Upper Tonkin. This blueprint is all the more significant because it comes from the most experienced and influential missionary in Tonkin. The eight recommendations he puts forward as his action plan form the bulk of his letter, 13 of the 20 pages.

Among these recommendations, some highlight Puginier's economic preoccupations: a French company should be set up on the model of the ancient East India Company (*Compagnie des Indes*), and a pilot farm should be created to demonstrate modern agricultural techniques. Others focus on his conviction that in order to succeed, the French administration must earn the esteem and the affection of the population. Finally, we see his obsession with the idea that the Vietnamese elite must not be trusted and that their inequitable justice system must be rectified. On this political front, Puginier recommended that the Chinese ideograms be progressively replaced by the Romanised script of Vietnamese language (*quốc ngữ*) – as was already being done in Cochin China – and that French be gradually made compulsory for everyone in the civil service over the next 20 to 25 years. The Bishop argued that this would constitute the best way to sever the historical lifeline with China while the power of the Vietnamese mandarins hostile to France would thus also be irrevocably undermined.

It is interesting to note that the first of his eight recommendations alone fills five pages. Puginier's directive here is clear-cut and leaves no room for doubt: 'Christianise the country' (*christianiser le pays*). He asserts that 'to unite men and peoples, there is no tie stronger than the unity of belief, and once a Catholic State has succeeded in rooting its religion in its colonies, it can be at rest . . . We will never see a Catholic colony abandon its motherland and ally with pagan neighbours to fight her'. The Bishop is confident that 'from the moment Tonkin becomes Christian, it will also become the Little France of the Far East, absolutely, to the same extent that the Philippines are a Little Spain'. Consequently, he spells out his religious agenda and insists that missionaries will be pivotal in this strategy:

It is certainly the missionaries who constitute the greatest moral force in a colony. It is they who make the motherland known and loved in its reality. The greater their influence, the more secure the civil society . . . I will put it bluntly, France has no better friends than the missionaries and the Christians, and she has no more dedicated and selfless servants. While working on providing the glory of God and the salvation of the souls, missionaries, let me repeat, make it their duty to make their motherland known and loved. By preaching to Christians respect and dedication for their government, they turn them into true friends of France.

Puginier prophesies that if proselytising is performed steadily but at a careful pace in order to avoid clashing head-on with Vietnamese tradition and stirring disgruntlement among the population, 'there are good reasons to hope that within thirty years, virtually all of Tonkin will be Christian, that is to say, French'.<sup>24</sup>

23 Ibid.; emphasis in the original.

24 All quotations from *ibid.*

Regarding the specific case of upland Tonkin, our focus in this article, the Bishop expresses strong views on the importance of taking firm control over the border areas, using political rather than spiritual arguments to convince his readership. His third recommendation spells out the need to ‘establish on the Annam [i.e., Vietnam] frontier adjacent to China friendly populations with an interest in remaining loyal to France’. Puginier falls short of explaining exactly how this is to be done, however, nor is the objective of Christianising the mountain populations explicitly mentioned as a means to achieve such a result. Unlike his main suggestion regarding the bulk of the Kinh population – ‘Christianise!’ – the fact that he refrains from mentioning proselytising as one of the ways to win over these highland populations suggests that he has different aims for them. He actually declares:

There is another very useful and practical solution; namely to definitively draw to us the different peoples in the mountain districts called Chau and Muong [terms used for geographical and political units in highland areas]. By endearing ourselves to them, we will thus avoid having them opposed to us and they won’t give shelter or support to the Chinese troops who might want to pillage Tonkin . . . All that is needed is to lavishly grant them honorific distinctions and, whenever necessary, give them monetary rewards.<sup>25</sup>

Could the failure to explicitly mention Christianisation as a way to win over the *montagnards* to colonial rule be simply accidental?<sup>26</sup> In fact, everything else in Puginier’s strategy suggests that missionary expansion in the mountains would have provided a useful vehicle for the penetration of France’s influence beyond the deltaic lowlands. However, this omission may also be neither accidental nor strategic; it may simply highlight the lack of interest that Puginier – and more generally the upper-level missionary administration in Tonkin – showed toward the non-Kinh populations, the ‘*demi-sauvages*’ whose share in the regional balance of power was small, and whose promise as economic and political partners appeared meagre. In an earlier note sent to Paul Bert, Resident-General for Annam and Tonkin, Puginier had already expressed this idea of using ‘easy and practical ways’ to earn the loyalty of the highland populations.<sup>27</sup> He understood how Hue’s mandarins had managed to use upland semi-independent tribes and wandering troops from China to fight the French and harass the settlements that had been Christianised on the outskirts of the delta. He thus wanted to convince the colonial authorities of the urgent need to stop these disruptive and deadly incursions, hence his policy of extending colonial control over the mountain populations. Puginier had been actively promoting the development of permanent military outposts in the highlands as the best way to prevent collusion between Kinh leaders, Chinese bandits, and local highlanders. However, while he was probably aware that the total and permanent control

25 Ibid. It is remarkable that less than two years after Puginier spelled out this tactic, Auguste Pavie and Colonel Théophile Pennequin were coming to terms with the Tai opposition in the north-west, led by the Deo family in the Sip Song Chau Tai, taming their armed struggle against France by granting Deo Van Tri a number of honorific privileges, including the hereditary title of ‘Lord of Lai Châu’.

26 In accordance with French colonial archives and publications, the French term ‘*montagnards*’ – with lower-case ‘m’ – is meant here to include all the highland populations in Tonkin as well as in the rest of French Indochina. In this text, I use it interchangeably with other equivalents such as ‘highland populations’, ‘upland groups’, ‘mountain minorities’, etc.

27 ‘Nécessité d’entrer en relation avec les tribus demi-sauvages habitant les montagnes du Tonkin et de l’Annam’, 11 June 1886, MEP, vol. 816, no. 58.

of these remote populations could not be easily achieved without active military and missionary penetration, it appears as if he chose to leave the task of organising and conducting the expansion of missionising beyond the delta to his successors.

In sum, Puginier's role was that of a statesman dedicated to the expansion and competitiveness of his motherland. His role had little in common with the more humble motivation of conversion and soul-saving best embodied by the individual missionaries arriving to work in the field – and, by the same token, to produce 'ethnographic' texts. His Notes were generally well received by the authorities. According to one contemporary source,

officers and Governors, Paul Bert as well as Courbet, consulted [Puginier] with equal deference; most of the time, they followed his advice, and when they neglected to do so, Tonkin and France suffered the consequences . . . The Ministry [of Colonies in Paris] itself was pleased to know the truth about Tonkin thanks to the Bishop's *Notes*.<sup>28</sup>

Others had serious reservations, such as de Lanessan (quoted above). Whatever the individual views, however, Puginier was lauded for his dedication and relentless action in promoting France's *grandeur*. Annam's Resident Superior Brière declared at the Bishop's state funeral in April 1892 that 'Mgr Puginier's death is a cruel loss for the Church, but also, and chiefly, for France and for Tonkin which the illustrious Bishop has so wisely helped to make a French land.' Tonkin Resident Chevassieux declared on the same occasion that Puginier had been 'France's most authoritative representative in Tonkin'.<sup>29</sup> An important avenue in Hanoi was given his name (today's Điện Biên Phủ Avenue) as well as a prominent square facing the Governor-General's residence (now the celebrated Ba Đình Square), both landmarks of colonial and later socialist Hanoi. A grateful colonial government lavishly rewarded the MEP with 13 hectares of land in Hanoi to expand its mission in the vicinity of the Cathedral, making the missionaries the most important private landlords in the capital at the time. In France, Puginier – considered the man who had done the most for the success of the French takeover in Tonkin – was made *Chevalier*, then *Officier* in the Legion of Honour.<sup>30</sup>

MEP's further penetration of the Tonkinese highlands was soon to unfold as part of the master plan conceived during Puginier's tenure, though perhaps on a scale larger than what the venerable Frenchman had originally foreseen or called for.

### **Establishment of the Upper Tonkin vicariate**

Shortly after Puginier's death in 1892, Pierre Gendreau, Bishop of Chrysopolis *in partibus*, was appointed Vicar Apostolic of West Tonkin. Of even longer apostolic longevity than his predecessor, Gendreau was to remain at his post until 1935; he pursued many of Puginier's visions and projects and ensured that his elder's spirit would endure. One such project, colonial expansion in the highlands, resulted in the detachment from West Tonkin in 1895 of the new Upper Tonkin vicariate. As mentioned earlier, the new

28 Monteuis, *Âme d'un missionnaire*, p. 231.

29 Ibid., p. 233; Brière's remarks are quoted in Antoine Brebion, *Dictionnaire de bio-bibliographie générale, ancienne et moderne, de l'Indochine française* (Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1935), p. 315.

30 Cao Huy Thuan, *Missionnaires et la politique coloniale*, p. 302; on the cathedral, see Papin, *Histoire de Hanoi*, p. 241.

entity consisted of all the former's northern and western mountainous frontier, a substantial chunk of land of around 60,000 km<sup>2</sup>, nearly one-fifth of present-day Vietnam. This entity was also known as the Hưng Hoá vicariate after the name of the town where the new Vicar Apostolic's See was installed. This town was located close to the delta, near the confluence of the three main rivers draining the northern mountains, a location perceived at the time to be at the demographic centre of the vicariate (Map 2).

In the 1860s, Bishop Theurel had asked for the creation of an Upper Tonkin vicariate, but the times were not ripe and support for the initiative did not materialise. It is only fitting that this formalisation of a missionary administration over an otherwise remote borderland occurred concurrently with the end of the 'pacification' period and the start of the French takeover of Laos, and at the precise moment when the China–Tonkin border was officially settled between Chinese and French representatives. Once established, how was the new vicariate to be delineated given that no missionary exploration had ever been undertaken beyond its lower portion? 'The immense space unfolding between Tuyen Quang, Lao Kay [Lào Cai] and the Chinese border has not heard the Gospel yet. . . . It is difficult to define where is the border to the West. There lies an immense and still little known territory which has never seen a missionary.'<sup>31</sup>

Geographically, West Tonkin had long encompassed three distinct regions: a deltaic plain inhabited by Kinh rice growers; a portion of low-altitude rolling hills comprising the Phú Thọ and Hưng Hoá sectors with the lower parts of the Đà (Rivière Noire) and Lô River valleys, inhabited chiefly by various Tai-speaking montagnard groups; and a high region culminating at 3,200 metres with a maze of high valleys and schist plateaux, inhabited by an array of little-known groups. This latter region formed a large portion of Tonkin's territory which, in spite of the recent establishment of direct colonial military rule in 1891, was only nominally included in the missionary domain.

The first Vicar Apostolic of the Upper Tonkin vicariate was Paul-Marie Ramond (b. 1855), who arrived in Tonkin in 1881. As a simple missionary, Ramond was first assigned to the district of Nam Xang 50 kilometres south of Hanoi, then moved to Hưng Hoá, when he was made Bishop of Linoë *in partibus* and put in charge of the new vicariate in October 1895. Like his colleague Bishop Gendreau in Hanoi, Ramond enjoyed a long tenure, remaining in his post for 43 years, nearly the entire length of the vicariate's existence. He was thus arguably the best-informed observer of missionary work in Tonkin. At the moment however, all that can be learned from Ramond comes from his public writings in the *comptes-rendus*, accounts sent yearly to the MEP Board of Directors in France. The *comptes-rendus* were a composite of field reports from individual missionaries in their local assignment, meant to illustrate the hardships of pastoral work to religious authorities back in Paris and contribute to the edification of selected devout readers. These field reports were edited and merged together by the Bishop, and supplemented by his own reporting on the progress of the mission, which stressed its most pressing needs in terms of material and human resources. As such, the *comptes-rendus* are understandably of a rather formal nature and reflect little of the missionaries' or the Bishop's personal opinions. Yet they also date events precisely and give details about the dispatching of individual missionaries to specific locations, with brief yearly reports

31 *Comptes-rendus*, 1895, p. 185; this source mentions Theurel's request as well. *Comptes-rendus* are held in the MEP Archives.

on each one's activities. This alone is of huge value in helping to date and locate the expansion of missionary activity across the vicariate's territory.<sup>32</sup>

In his earliest *comptes-rendus* from Hưng Hoá, those for 1895–6, Ramond first sets the scene by telling his readers about the loss of three consecutive harvests due to a drought that caused a severe famine. To make things worse, a major cholera epidemic broke out, killing 10 per cent of the vicariate's population. After this grim prologue, the Bishop then proceeds to introduce his new domain. This tour is most useful for assessing the exact state of the missionary advance in the mountains at a time when the Upper Tonkin vicariate comprised the (then) provinces of Sơn Tây, Hưng Hoá and Tuyên Quang, as well as the western part of the Third and all of the Fourth Military Territories (Map 1). (As already mentioned, in 1891 the colonial administration of the upper region along the Chinese border was given to the military, and the area was divided into Military Territories instead of regular provinces. Their shape and boundaries varied greatly over the years while their total number never exceeded five, spreading from Mon Cáy to the east to Phongsaly in Laos to the west).<sup>33</sup> The vicariate bordered Yunnan to the north, the right bank of the Lô and (downstream from the junction of the two) Red Rivers to the east, the western limit of the Đà River basin to the west, and Hanoi province to the south. Its population at the time was roughly estimated at 2.5 million, although no one had really any idea of the exact figure.<sup>34</sup> In other words, most of the mountainous areas of Tonkin and their populations were part of this vicariate except for the gradually sloping ranges east of the Lô which, as already noted, belonged to the Spanish Dominican mission and were under French administration as the First, Second and eastern part of the Third Military Territories.

To expand this portrait first painted by Ramond, we know from various other sources that virtually all of the Christian hamlets in what was known in Vietnamese as the Xứ Đoài upland district (see below) – also nicknamed the 'Tonkinese Switzerland' by missionaries – were transferred to the new Upper Tonkin vicariate.<sup>35</sup> These hamlets belonged to ten established parishes all located in the provinces of Sơn Tây and Phú Thọ on the outskirts of the delta, situated mainly in the lowlands and inhabited by Kinh. Only

32 Ramond's late death in 1944 is the reason why his personal correspondence has not yet been made available for research; the rule at the MEP archives is that a delay of at least 60 years after the death of an author is necessary before his private correspondence and diaries can be consulted. Besides reports, administrative documents such as correspondence between Bishops and the Holy See and published and unpublished manuscripts by missionaries, MEP archivists have kept the missionaries' personal letters to their families and superiors. There is also a substantial bank of original photographs and postcards. See <http://archivesmep.mepasie.org>, where some of the documents cited in this article are available online.

33 Eugène Teston and Maurice Percheron, *L'Indochine moderne: Encyclopédie administrative, touristique, artistique et économique* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1931), p. 254. For Ramond's report, see 'Rapport annuel de la mission du Haut Tonkin pour l'année 1895–1896', *Comptes-rendus*, 1896, no. 711–15, 'Vicariat Apostolique du Haut-Tonkin'.

34 That is a very rough estimate; 40 years later, a better-informed source gives a figure of 1.3 million for the same territory; Georges Vandaële, 'Mission de Hung Hoa (Tonkin)', *Les Missions Catholiques* (1936): 398. The borders of the vicariate are from Léon Girod, *Dix ans de Haut-Tonkin* (Paris: A. Mame et Fils, 1899), p. 54. Later, in the administrative divisions of the early 1930s, it included seven provinces: Phú Thọ, Sơn Tây, Hoà Bình, Sơn La, Yên Bái, Lào Cai, and part of Tuyên Quang; and two military territories: Lai Châu and part of Hà Giang (Vandaële, p. 398).

35 Léon Girod, *Souvenirs franco-tonkinois, 1879–1886* (Paris: Desclée, de Brouwer & Cie, 1900) mentions the term 'Tonkinese Switzerland' (p. 271).

two settlements were set up outside this Red River corridor, constituting the south-west limit of missionary activity, west of the Đà River. To the north, the limit of activity was Yên Bái on the Red River. To the east, between the arms of the lower Lô and Red Rivers east of Hưng Hoá town, one parish centred around the vicariate's seminary was active, while the furthest existing mission up the Lô was in Tuyên Quang. There were also five garrison towns – Sơn Tây, Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang, Lào Cai and Hà Giang – each with an 'ambulance' which, accompanied by a priest, would transport wounded soldiers.

### Missionaries in the highlands

As mentioned in the introduction, a consideration of individual missionaries and their circumstances is the first step in assessing the scale and importance of missionary agency – in other words finding out who did what, where, when and with whom. As the mountainous section of the Upper Tonkin vicariate was being opened to missionising, individual missionaries penetrated these previously little-known regions – little-known from a European point of view, that is – and made contact with their populations. Let us now trace the movements of these pioneers.

Prior to the French arrival in Tonkin, the provinces of Sơn Tây and Phú Thọ had already been officially incorporated into the Vietnamese imperial domain. The latter province had seen missionary activity over the nineteenth century that involved three of the most celebrated figures of MEP's martyrology: Jean-Charles Cornay (in Vietnam 1831–7), Augustin Schoeffler (1847–51) and Pierre Néron (1848–60), all publicly executed in the provincial capital of Sơn Tây. Generally speaking, by 1895 only a few missionaries had seen the mountainous areas at all, and when they did, it was primarily to provide religious services to the colonial troops on the march. Consequently, little if any missionary attention had been paid to the highland inhabitants. In fact, on maps drawn in the 1880s by MEP historian Adrien Launay, most highlanders within the limits of the MEP jurisdiction were still generically branded '*tribus sauvages*' without further distinction.<sup>36</sup>

In the early 1880s Father Léon Girod [1879] had been the first missionary sent up the Red River valley, reaching a point higher than any of his known predecessors. Girod recorded his observations, which were published in several issues of the missionary journal *Les Missions Catholiques* and later grouped into a book published in 1899.<sup>37</sup> In 1886, a decade before the creation of the Upper Tonkin vicariate and five years before the establishment of the military administration along the border, he and Father Ambroise Robert [1883] were sent to take charge of the little-known part of the mountainous segment of the then West Tonkin vicariate – the Xứ Đoài. Xứ Đoài comprised the (then) provinces of Hưng Hoá and Tuyên Quang and included the very recently established military stations of Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang and Lào Cai. The two priests probably settled in Phú Thọ and, from there, could spread out to these garrison towns.

It is difficult to calculate the exact number of missionaries sent into the mountains at the time of the creation of the Upper Tonkin vicariate. We know from the *comptes-rendus*

36 Adrien Launay, *Atlas des missions de la Société des Missions-Étrangères* (Lille: Desclée, de Brouwer & Cie, 1890). On earlier, short-lived attempts to establish a so-called '*Mission des sauvages*' in 1854 and 1881–83, see correspondence in MEP, vol. 709 (nos. 90, 99, 100, 103, 112–14) and vol. 710 (nos. 2, 3, 4, 11, 21).

37 Girod, *Dix ans*. Square brackets will be used to indicate the year of the missionary's arrival in Tonkin.

that in 1895 out of a total of 56 MEP priests active in West Tonkin, the seven who were already working in the Xứ Đoài district were transferred to the new vicariate.<sup>38</sup> These seven missionaries were Jean Robert [1882], attached to the Sơn Tây garrison; Emile Duhamel [1890], in charge of the parish of Bách Lộc; on the Lô River, Julien Chotard [1893] with the troops in Tuyên Quang and Mathurin Pichaud [1889] in the upstream parish of Bau-no; on the lower Đà River, Eugène Brossier [1891] in Đức Phong; and on the Red River, Pierre D'Abrigeon [1892] in charge of the three parishes of Yên Tập, Dư Ba and Song-chay, with Léon Girod further upstream in Yên Bái. Within a year of the creation of the Upper Tonkin vicariate, five additional missionaries were re-assigned from elsewhere to support this expansion. These were Ambroise Robert, who became superior of the vicariate's seminary near Hưng Hoá until his death in 1896; Amans Bessière [1883], who succeeded him; Louis Méchet [1883]; Pierre Chatellier [1891]; and Pierre Granger [1894]. This inaugural team also included 12 Vietnamese priests whose names are not known to us.

Every missionary posted in the upland region had a combined assignment. Chotard wrote, 'Here, I have three sorts of ministry. First, my legionnaires, who are for me like my sons . . . My second ministry puts me in touch with the French colonists established here . . . Finally, I have laid the foundations of a Christian community among the pagans.'<sup>39</sup> Indeed, several missionaries in Upper Tonkin mentioned early on in their reports that ministering to the troops and the European settlers took all their time, leaving little or no opportunity for proselytising the natives, let alone investigating their customs and languages.

Within a few years of the creation of the new vicariate, missionary activity expanded. Yên Bái, since the mid-1880s an important colonial military outpost visited by surrounding populations as a market town, was seen by the military commanders as one of several promising locations where some Christian Kinh could be persuaded to resettle and contribute to building a strong outpost on the outer edge of the delta. To attract such migrants to a region where traditionally lowlanders had been reluctant to settle, Colonel Pennequin, the chief 'pacifier' of Tonkin, decided to increase the religious presence there and helped to set up a formal Catholic mission in 1893. Girod, the most experienced missionary in the upper region, was immediately assigned to it and in 1894 he visited for the first time the military and customs post of Lào Cai further north, where the headquarters of the Fourth Military Territory had recently been established with one company of legionnaires. Lào Cai now needed a missionary to serve its European population and in September 1897 Girod became the first resident missionary there.<sup>40</sup> Father Méchet replaced him in Yên Bái, where the garrison and the growing number of migrants required a priest in residence. In 1900 Jean Gauja [1896] was the resident priest for Tuyên Quang, another highland town experiencing a similar pace of development.

38 Actually, this figure is valid for the year 1893, when the total number of native and non-native priests in the West Tonkin vicariate was 163, including these 56 Frenchmen (*Comptes-rendus*, 1893).

39 *Comptes-rendus*, 1895.

40 Swift to stamp a visible Catholic presence on the Sino-Tonkinese border, he had a church erected within a few months. It comes as an amusing quirk of fate that the stones used to build that first church came from a former foe's stronghold, the Black Flag leader Liu Yongfu's recently dismantled citadel located nearby on the right bank of the Red River. On the Black Flags in Lào Cai see Henry McAleavy, *Black flags in Vietnam. The story of a Chinese intervention* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968).

During the Doumer governorship (1897–1902), new missions were opened in the mountains outside the main river valleys and garrison towns. The first was in July 1899 when Edouard Karrer [1897] was sent with Father D’Abrigeon among the Man (Yao or Dao) north-west of Hà Giang town close to the Chinese border. Concurrently, Auguste Blondel [1898] had just been visiting the tribes in the mountains between Yên Bái and Tuyên Quang in order to assess the possibility of setting up a mission there. Fathers Alexandre de Cooman [1895] – future bishop of Thanh Hoá further south – and Joseph Laisi [1895] were sent among the Muong of the lower Đà River in 1900, with a view to expanding their operations further upstream in the direction of the Tai domain of the Sip Song Chau Tai to the north-west. In 1901, Father Granger and newcomers François Jordan [1898] and Antoine Antonini [1899] were sent to Nghĩa Lộ between the Red and Đà Rivers, which was considered a remote district with ‘different tribes from an heterogeneous population: Tho, Muong, Meo, Man, Xa. The Tho and the Muong dwell in the valleys in houses on stilts, while the Meo, the Xa and the Man attach their houses to mountain slopes and hillsides surrounding the plain.’<sup>41</sup>

In a significant departure from the priority given to serving Europeans and making brief visits to upland villages from a nearby garrison town, these latter three missionaries appear to have been the first who elected to actually live among the montagnards – Granger with the Meo (Hmong), Jordan and Antonini with the Tho (Tày) – in order to study vernacular languages, an activity that quickly became their main occupation. Following the same trend, up the Lô River, François-Marie Savina [1901] opened a new mission in 1906 at Vĩnh Tuy among the Tho and the Man, roughly mid-way between the garrison towns of Tuyên Quang and Hà Giang. Of interest to us in our search for early ethnographies of the montagnards in Upper Tonkin, these initiatives by Granger, Jordan, Antonini and Savina represent the point when MEP missionaries at last came into steady contact with the montagnards, thus marking the start of the production of missionary texts and ethnographic studies on Tonkin’s highland societies.

### Upper Tonkin vicariate: Lull and decline

In spite of this active expansion, proselytising in Upper Tonkin did not yield the results the missionary establishment was hoping for, as Father Laisi reported to his Bishop in regard to the lower Đà River region:

The almighty authority of the quan-lang [local leaders] is the main obstacle to conversion. Undisputed masters, they are wary of the missionary whom they wrongly fear will diminish their prestige. They make use of all means to keep enslaved those who might want to free themselves. . . . Polygamy and the excesses it entails, opium, iniquities, do not allow much hope of converting these rulers.<sup>42</sup>

41 *Comptes-rendus*, 1901. Regarding ethnonyms, a number of imprecise and erroneous assumptions were routinely made in naming highland groups in Indochina during colonial times, a problem further complicated by the fact that unanimity has yet to be reached on this issue today – if, indeed, it is even possible. There is also the added difficulty of some names having since been reallocated to different groups – such as Tho (Thỏ), which the French used to refer to the group now known as Tày but which now refers to a completely different ethnic group. The current official list of ethnonyms in Vietnam comprises 54 entries; see Đặng Nghiêm Vạn *et al.*, *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2000).

42 *Comptes-rendus*, 1901.

In fact, a large proportion of the baptisms recorded each year throughout the vicariate were of candidates on their deathbed: 'The posts recently set up in wholly pagan regions have only yielded a few baptisms *in articulo mortis*.' In those days, this half-success was acceptable though not entirely encouraging, and in the absence of better yields it was even rather morbidly sought after: 'An epidemic of smallpox promised a substantial harvest of souls', wrote Ramond in 1902 when summing up that year's figures for the Board of Directors in Paris. In fact, so slow was the progress in converting the montagnards that even three decades later Bishop Georges Vandaële still observed that due to resistance, the ruggedness of the terrain and the unhealthy conditions in the mountains, 'conversion will be very laborious for a long time to come'.<sup>43</sup>

The portrait of the Kinh in the lower reaches of the vicariate along the main river valleys was more encouraging. By 1910, after 15 years of activity, the Upper Tonkin vicariate included a total of 115 Christian settlements, nearly all located along the main rivers and land routes. A significant factor which increased the number of Catholics in the vicariate was a specific historical circumstance. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the construction of the Haiphong–Yunnan (Yunnan–Tonkin) railway had brought to the upper Red River valley an important transient population of railway workers from various lowland origins which for several years formed the largest portion of the increase in numbers of Christians in Upper Tonkin. This success was only temporary, however, and the completion of the railway in 1909 meant that most of these labourers returned home, creating a lull in the local economy and leaving towns like Yên Bái and Lào Cai with a sudden and substantial population decrease. On the other hand, the fast new railway channel for internal colonisation in the high region started to appeal to migrants from the lowlands who could select these same towns as their preferred area of relocation. Even so, this population flux upstream remained meagre.

According to Launay, by 1912 Upper Tonkin had a Catholic population of 28,350, with one bishop, 26 French missionaries, 25 indigenous priests and 114 catechists, with two seminaries lodging 84 students. By 1920, a total 41 French missionaries had been assigned to work in the Upper Tonkin vicariate while the number of active priests there, inclusive of administrative and educational duties, was 50, of whom 24 were French and 26 Vietnamese.<sup>44</sup> In total, 23 parishes comprised 271 Christian settlements. By 1920, however, the missionary expansion in the highlands had virtually stalled due to a number of adverse factors. Unlike the Central Highlands, colonial support for additional proselytising in Upper Tonkin had irrevocably slipped in the face of more urgent needs – a testimony to the low priority that evangelism in these highlands held for the colonial state once the initial push to the Chinese border and the 'pacification' campaign had ended. With the rise of Vietnamese radicalism, the threat to the colony appeared to come

43 Vandaële, 'Mission de Hung Hoa', p. 403; the quotation on deathbed baptisms is from *Comptes-rendus*, 1902.

44 Anonymous, 'Mission du Haut-Tonkin. Aperçu historique', *Bulletin de la Société des Missions Étrangères*, (1922): 551. The figures for 1912 are from Adrien Launay, *Mémorial de la Société des Missions Étrangères* (Paris: MEP, 1916). Citing the MEP *Comptes-rendus*, Tuck gives for that same year the figures of 24,160 Catholics, 27 French priests, 20 native priests and 97 native catechists; Tuck, *French Catholic missionaries*, pp. 316–21.

more and more from within the Kinh population itself rather than from beyond the borders of Indochina.<sup>45</sup>

The need to penetrate highland societies for strategic purposes had thus subsided and the policy of military administration of the territories along the border with China was gradually abandoned in favour of the establishment of a regular civilian administration. In Hanoi, the item at the top of the colonial agenda was *mise en valeur*, the 'realisation' of the colony's economic potential. At the same time, recruitment of new missionaries in France had become less successful, due in particular to the fact that the First World War had taken the lives of many young men who would have been potential priests, while those remaining were needed at home and in industry. In addition to the war, the Great Depression was to cause the financial misfortune of many long-time donors to the MEP in both France and Indochina, thus undermining its capacity to recruit, train and send new missionaries, in addition to the maintenance of the existing infrastructure and staff, native students and catechists in Indochina and elsewhere. Consequently, the conditions for further missionary expansion had vanished and the mere survival of existing operations was now at the top of the missionary agenda. As a result, at the fullest extension of the missionary effort in Upper Tonkin, a great many highland hamlets in remote valleys or distant ranges remained untouched.

By the mid-1930s evangelism in the mountains had swollen into an enormous burden carried out only by a few ageing priests. Taking stock of the situation, Father Vandaële, in an 18-page account published in *Les Missions catholiques* in 1936, produced a low-key and realistic appraisal of the situation reflecting the *fin de règne* atmosphere in Tonkin linked to the aged and now feeble bishops heading both the Upper and Western Tonkin vicariates – Ramond and Gendreau. Vandaële declared that 'in the other provinces of the mission [outside Sơn Tây and Phú Thọ on the Red River], there are still only a few Christians and the lack of personnel has not yet allowed the evangelising of the numerous tribes in the Upper Region'. At that time the total population in the upland region, as stated in the 1932 yearbook for the colony, was a relatively low figure of 409,000 for the seven mountainous provinces plus two remaining Military Territories, compared with 558,000 persons for the two lowland provinces of Sơn Tây and Phú Thọ.<sup>46</sup> More precisely, outside these two lower provinces, missionary work in the part of Tuyên Quang province situated within Upper Tonkin – that is, the right bank of the Lô – was focused on the Kinh valley settlers who moved there in search of economic opportunities as labourers in coal and zinc mines. In the town of Yên Bái, the immigration of Kinh from the delta had been steady. These migrants, along with the European population stationed on location, formed in 1936 the bulk of the targets for the missionaries' ministry.

45 See Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the origins of the Vietnamese revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Salemink shows that by contrast, during the 1930s and 1940s missionaries in the Central Highlands were actively supported by the colonial State as part of a divide-and-rule strategy aimed at separating the highland population from the lowland Kinh; Salemink, *Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*.

46 Vandaële, 'Mission de Hung Hoa', p. 410, citing the *Annuaire officiel* for 1932; the quotation is from p. 407. The figures are as follows: Sơn Tây, 256,000; Phú Thọ, 303,000; Yên Bái, 62,000; Lào Cai, 38,000; Hoà Bình, 53,000; Tuyên Quang, 40,000; Sơn La, 86,000; and the military territories of Hà Giang (70,000) and Lai Châu (60,000).

A further indication that in the mountains missionising had receded to the point that no progress towards converting the montagnards appeared to have been made was a permanent mission in Yên Bái town that was still, in Vandaële's words, limited to providing 'a means to visit the military posts in the Upper Region and bring spiritual succour to the brave troops'. Indeed, in the whole of his account, the only mention of non-Kinh populations occurs when talking about the market town of Nghĩã Lô, the domain of Father Doussoux and one of the first missions set up among the montagnards:

Since 1900 there have been in that region missionaries who try, amidst great difficulties and at the cost of their own health, to penetrate the aboriginal tribes. Alas! Results do not match expectations. The two colleagues now in that region of fevers are in charge of 700 Christians, all Vietnamese who came from the delta as traders or labourers hoping to enrich themselves. Tentative evangelisation has been done among the mountain tribes, notably among the 'Meo' on mountain tops; may God bless them and yield positive results.<sup>47</sup>

In Lào Cai province on the Chinese border, Christian settlements were scattered along the railway line and only the mission's rest house, up in the Sapa hill station, reported some evangelism work among the Meo. Vandaële recorded 30 converts among them by 1934, when Father Doussoux had to step in as a temporary replacement after the departure of his colleague Savina. Doussoux and Savina shared the distinction of having converted the only mountain populations in the whole vicariate: 'Among the aboriginal populations: Tho, Man, Mèo . . . the latter only have been successfully evangelised in two locations within the Mission.' In the provinces of Hoà Bình and Sơn La and the Military Territory of Lai Châu, all located in the Đà River basin along the western edge of Upper Tonkin, missionary activity was still virtually non-existent four decades after the setting up of the vicariate. In that region, where the Tai had been firmly attached to the French cause since 1869, when diplomat Auguste Pavie signed an alliance treaty with White Tai leader Deo Van Tri, from the start the colonial authorities had considered missionising as less politically urgent than elsewhere. It could even have been seen as potentially damaging to the crucial alliance established with these groups.<sup>48</sup> This may well be a case where avoiding the use of the missionary spearhead to penetrate a remote population was considered preferable as a colonial strategy.

By the end of the 1930s, the missionising task for the MEP in the areas beyond the Tonkinese lowlands and the valley floors was daunting, and both human and financial resources were scarce. Faced with a shortage of able bodies and about to succeed Bishop Ramond and oversee a decrease in missionary activity, Vandaële found some comfort in the hope that 'Trappists or others will come, cut down the bush, cultivate this immense forested region and install their monasteries amongst an important population; in Upper Tonkin, huge spaces of solitude await to be transformed with work and prayer into Christian fields of progress.' The suggestion of breaking up the long MEP monopoly on missionary activity in Upper Tonkin appealed to the future Bishop, who knew after more

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>48</sup> See Michaud, 'Montagnards in Northern Vietnam'. In the west only one mission had been established – in the provincial capital of Sơn La in 1938. The quotation is from *Comptes-rendus*, 1940, p. 83. The ethnic groups known to the French as 'Tai' are today called 'Thái' in Vietnamese.

than three decades that he was facing a very difficult situation. At that point, in desperation perhaps, he even came to suggest that MEP should completely hand over the vicariate to another missionary society:

What a considerable area and how many people would be needed to start and maintain evangelising there! Would perhaps another missionary society accept to take charge of it in the future? At the moment, considering the small number of apostolic workers in the vicariate and the advanced age of most of them, it would be difficult to hope for any results.<sup>49</sup>

Vandaële was not given the opportunity to go further along that road, however, as the Second World War broke out in 1939, and many aspects of French life in the colony came to a standstill. Evangelism among the highlanders ceased for virtually all European missionaries in Upper Tonkin, though it continued among the Kinh in French-controlled parts of the delta. The successive blows of the Japanese coup in March 1945, the declaration of independence in September 1945, the Republican Chinese occupation through early 1946 and the outbreak of a long and deadly war of independence the following December all sealed the fate of French missions in upland northern Indochina; missionaries and their superiors had to fall back to Hanoi.<sup>50</sup> In June 1947, the abandoned Episcopal See in Hưng Hoá was destroyed preventively by the French air force. Only missionaries drafted and attached to the troops would occasionally return to the highlands during the military operations of the First Indochina War, such as Father Jean Idiar-Alhor who returned to Sapa with the occupation troops in 1947, staying there until his assassination one year later. The others served in lowland urban parishes, hospitals and garrisons until the Geneva agreements of July 1954 definitively forced them out of the young Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

### Conclusion

As a missionary venture the Upper Tonkin vicariate, over the course of its 50-odd years of existence, was at best a moderate success. Results in the lowlands dramatically outshone those in the highlands; and though this discrepancy was deplored by the vicariate's last Bishop (Vandaële), it was clearly not a major concern to the religious establishment as a whole. From the very start – recall Puginier's rather reserved interest in sending his 'troops' into the mountains of Tonkin – missionising among the dispersed highland populations was not a priority, and history has shown that it never truly became one. Rather, it was in direct connection with the military takeover and the administration of the mountain periphery that sending trustworthy emissaries was necessary. Who was better suited to this task than the Catholic priest? The colonial authorities knew well that 'missionaries are always admirably informed, they have always foreseen the movements and incursions of Chinese bands, the infiltrations of rebels, famines, in a word any event that plagued Tonkin'.<sup>51</sup> A solitary man obstinately dedicated to his cause until his last breath, the Catholic missionary was the perfect scout, the ears and the eyes of the system

49 Vandaële, 'Mission de Hung Hoa', p. 409.

50 *Comptes-rendus*, 1941–7, p. 67.

51 Monteuis, *Âme d'un missionnaire*, p. 232, note 2, quoting an article entitled 'Les missionnaires de M. de Lanessan' from the newspaper *L'Indépendance Tonkinoise*.

on the margins of the empire where the colonial machine could reach only with appreciable difficulty. He was one of the state's cheapest, most effective and efficient assistants, informers, and political spearheads. As an 'incidental ethnographer', he was remarkably qualified with vernacular languages and placed in an advantageous position to produce distinctive and exceptional observation pieces – biased though they were – that are today the only glimpses left into the past of many minority cultures which have substantially changed since then, or have even been wiped off the cultural mosaic of the Southeast Asian peninsula.

In the case of Upper Tonkin, with this article we have set the stage on which dozens of missionaries came in contact with the local populations, some of them with upland groups on the mountainous fringes of the Red River Delta. Of those who had the opportunity to write about the montagnards, a few left a significant amount of text bearing ethnographic value.<sup>52</sup> Concluding this historical panorama with a glimpse at what remains to be done, let us devote a few lines to such authors. As a rule, the French missionaries sent to Asia were not specifically trained to conduct ethnography. In French Indochina in the late 1800s, these agents predated by more than half a century the time when specific higher educational training in ethnography was even conceived of and made available in France – a development which only occurred after the 1920s.<sup>53</sup> Not only that, these representatives of the colonial state and the church, lacking any academic background beyond their religious and humanities training, did not partake in the common intellectual assumptions shared by academics of their time. Above all, they were embedded in conservative, highly hierarchical institutions that had the last word on their work, their postings and, one could argue, their mindset. However, as alluded to in the preceding paragraph, one hard fact is difficult to rule out: although imbued with the authors' own prejudices and misconceptions, missionary writing constitutes a mass of ethnographic information that would otherwise have been permanently lost; as such, it is invaluable.

Accordingly, Christian missionaries have increasingly become a focus of attention for anthropologists.<sup>54</sup> Case studies by authors such as Peter Forster have put missionary texts in perspective by emphasising that these should be seen as a specific form of ethnography undertaken in a unique context which constitutes a repository of distinctive

52 In addition to individuals such as Léon Girod, Pierre d'Abrigeon, Théodule Brisson, Antoine Bourlet, and François-Marie Savina in Upper Tonkin, the names of Paul Vial, Aloys Schotter, Jean-Marie Martin, and Alfred Liétard also spring to mind when including the Mainland Southeast Asian Massif around Tonkin, where related montagnard groups also lived. In addition to the usual missionary and religious outlets such as *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* and *Les Missions Catholiques* to which these men contributed on a regular basis, several of them published in the journals *Anthropos* and *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*. Some produced heftier monographs or dictionaries, the most prolific being Savina with close to 5,000 pages of published material. In fact, Vial's *Les Lolos. Histoire, religion, mœurs, langue, écriture* (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1898) and Savina's *Histoire des Miao* (Hong Kong: Imprimerie de la Société des Missions-Etrangères, 1924) are now well-known studies regularly cited by scholars in various disciplines.

53 Patrick Menget, 'Histoire de l'anthropologie', in *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie*, ed. Pierre Bonte and Michel Izard (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), p. 331. For a contemporary missionary account, see Girod, *Souvenirs franco-tonkinois*.

54 Frank A. Salamone, 'Anthropologists and missionaries: Competition or reciprocity?', *Human Organisation*, 36, 4 (1977): 407–12; Claude E. Stipe, 'Anthropologists versus missionaries'; and Bonsen et al. ed., *Ambiguity of rapprochement*.

information, though one in need of decoding.<sup>55</sup> This new relativism has contributed to leaving behind the all-pervasive and one-sided image held by the first generations of trained anthropologists of the near-wicked clergymen in the colonial field. This hostile vision continuously focused on the contradictions inherent to missionary work in the colonial setting, and on the cultural damage caused to host societies by extreme missionary ideology in practice, deleting in the process any other valuable outcomes.<sup>56</sup>

In contributing to this renewed interest within anthropology for missionary ethnography, the hypothesis supporting this article is that before we can hope to correctly understand these texts, the political and ideological context of their production has to be explored. Without this step, we cannot fruitfully assess those works for what they actually meant or what they actually were. This contextual positioning complete, the next series of questions become evident: What was missionary ethnography? Who performed it? In what mindframe? What methods did these 'incidental ethnographers' use? How did all these questions materialise in colonial Upper Tonkin? To address these interrogations, a close scrutiny of actual missionary biographies and texts is needed, which will be the subject of future research.

55 Peter Forster, 'Politics, ethnography, and the "invention of tradition": The case of T. Cullen Young of Livingstonia Mission, Malawi', *History and Anthropology*, 8, 1-4 (1994): 299-320; *Colonial situations. Essays on the conceptualisation of ethnographic knowledge*, ed. George W. Stocking Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); and *Colonial subjects: Essays on the practical history of anthropology*, ed. Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

56 Mary T. Huber, *The Bishops' progress, A historical ethnography of Catholic missionary experience on the Sepik frontier* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988); Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South-Africa*, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).