



## Missionary ethnographers in Upper-Tonkin: the early years, 1895–1920

Jean Michaud

To cite this article: Jean Michaud (2004) Missionary ethnographers in Upper#Tonkin: the early years, 1895–1920, Asian Ethnicity, 5:2, 179-194, DOI: [10.1080/1463136042000221876](https://doi.org/10.1080/1463136042000221876)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1463136042000221876>



Published online: 14 Oct 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 47



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Missionary Ethnographers in Upper-Tonkin: The Early Years, 1895–1920

JEAN MICHAUD

(Université de Montréal)

*Little is known of the contributions of French missionaries to early highland ethnography in the mountainous north of Vietnam (then Tonkin) at the time of colonial contact, a period defined here as 1895–1920. This paper investigates how a handful of men from the Catholic Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris contributed significant amounts of text from their postings in remote parts of the Upper-Tonkin (Haut-Tonkin) vicariate, and in some cases Southwest China. A selection of their prose is presented and its ethnographic value appraised, bringing to light the authors in their context as well as the texts themselves. It is assessed in conclusion that, despite their uneven importance as a source for ethnography, these texts nevertheless constitute a unique supply of information on the populations they describe.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ethnography, missionaries, Tonkin, Vietnam, minorities, Missions Étrangères de Paris*

Throughout colonial times, a few dozen French Catholic missionaries were first-hand witnesses and gatherers of information regarding the highland populations living beyond the Red River delta. Yet, while a handful of published missionary texts were later found to be of some use to academic anthropologists, linguists and historians, little is known of the contributions of such missionaries at the time of contact, a period I define here as lasting from 1895 to 1920. Their clerical prose within the missionary apparatus humbly collects dust in religious archives, most of their pieces that were published in missionary journals having gone largely unnoticed, while rather modest attention has been paid to the few essays that appeared in more established media. In this paper, I want to offer a glimpse into some of this neglected ethnographic literature. While it has been argued often that missionary writing is of disputable scientific interest, this partial literature nonetheless forms a body of direct observations that should not be shunned, in view of the paucity of ethnographic information available on such isolated ethnic groups at the time of European colonisation. I state that studies of Peninsular Southeast Asian highland ethnicity today cannot afford to ignore such rich, though disparate assortments of views from the past.

Since the early 1600s, Catholic missionaries of various denominations—all unmarried men—were present in Vietnam, though on a very small scale and only in the lowlands. Near the end of that century, a papal intervention gave the evangelising of the eastern portion of northern Vietnam—covering roughly one-third of what was later to be known as the French Protectorate of Tonkin—to Spanish Dominicans based in Manila, while the

*Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* (MEP) was given the exclusive right to missionise over the remaining two-thirds in the northwest.<sup>1</sup>

MEP was thus set to become the most important supplier of Catholic missionaries to French Tonkin. However, despite this early start to Catholic proselytising, the mountainous periphery of the Red River (*Sông Hồng*) delta remained untouched until the last years of the nineteenth century. Conversion was reserved for the Kinh population in the Red River delta, with the exception perhaps of the ‘Muong’,<sup>2</sup> then still a fuzzy category used most of the time to designate an unspecified number of non-Kinh populations on the western fringe of the delta.

Before the French military conquest of Indochina, reports were sent to France and Rome more or less regularly by the small number of missionaries who had succeeded in maintaining their presence in Tonkin, either overtly or incognito. With no outposts set up beyond the immediate periphery of the delta and of the main lowland cities, such reports contained no significant ethnographical material relating the mountain societies dwelling in the Tonkinese highlands.

Then, during the massive French colonial implantation in the second half of the nineteenth century, the missionary presence soared in terms of both numbers and geographical dispersion. The MEP quickly found itself in charge of *vicariats* (vicariates), each headed by a Vicar Apostolic appointed by the Pope. These were set up where and whenever the number of mission outposts and potential converts justified it. The time sequence of this deployment reflects the expansion of the colonial grip on Tonkin. The original Tonkin vicariate had officially been created in 1660 and was quickly divided in 1679 into *Tonkin Occidental* (West Tonkin) under MEP responsibility, and *Tonkin Oriental* (East Tonkin) attributed by Rome to the Spanish Dominicans, as already mentioned. With France’s colonial push in the mid-nineteenth century, *Tonkin Occidental* quickly became too large to be comfortably administered from Hanoi, and, as early as in 1846, was split from its southern portion. This became *Tonkin Méridional* (South Tonkin), while a diminished *Tonkin Occidental* nevertheless still encompassed most of the Red River delta including Hanoi and, at least on paper, all of the mountainous areas between Laos and the right bank of the Clear River (*Sông Lô*), where the Dominican domain started.

By 1880, the northern mountains were still a distant place which remained to be surveyed by the colonial authorities and had not yet started to be subject to missionary activities. By the time the colonial ‘pacification’ of Tonkin was over in the mid-1890s and the mountainous areas were fully occupied, the West Tonkin vicariate needed subdivision again. Thus, two new entities were created by a physical separation from their Hanoi-centred hub. These were *Haut-Tonkin* (Upper-Tonkin) in 1895, covering the high region upstream to the borders of China and Laos, and, in 1901, *Tonkin Maritime* which received the southern coastal part. In spite of this gradual breaking up of the hefty original seventeenth-century Tonkin vicariate, the decentralisation of missionary administration towards secondary centres did not significantly undermine the prevalence of its political core, based in Hanoi. This remained firmly rooted in the capital, the heart of northern Kinh society and colonial administration.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, we shall meet MEP missionaries who contributed to the early ethnography of the highlands in the Upper-Tonkin vicariate and in parts of Southwest China. I shall

1 See Adrien Launay, *Histoire générale de la Société des Missions-Etrangères* (Alcan, Paris, 1894); and Jean Guennou, *Missions étrangères de Paris* (Fayard, Paris, 1986).

2 Alain Forest, *Les missionnaires français au Tonkin et au Siam (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles). Analyse comparée d’un relatif succès et d’un échec total. Livre II-Histoires du Tonkin* (L’Harmattan, Paris, 1998), pp. 259–61.

3 For maps and further details on MEP’s expansion in Upper-Tonkin, see my paper ‘French Missionary Expansion in Colonial Upper-Tonkin’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2004), in press.

present a selection of their texts and appraise their ethnographic value. These texts were produced roughly within 25 years from the creation of the vicariate in 1895 and exemplify missionary publications in the early stages of proselytising there, when these frontrunners of the religious apparatus had virtually no one else to ask for help. After the 1910s, I argue, a second generation of missionaries took over from the path-breakers, a generation who could use its predecessors' experience and the language-learning tools they had left behind, and start the production of a more mature, better rooted form of ethnographic writing.

## General Considerations on Missionary Texts in Upper-Tonkin

Initially, the very first missionaries arriving in the Upper-Tonkin vicariate around 1895 had no understanding of the variety, let alone the exact identity, of the populations dwelling within the boundaries of their new mission.<sup>4</sup> At best, some among the disembarking priests had perhaps laid their eyes on some texts published by their lay forerunners or contemporaries who had ventured into the mountains. Globally, however, at the end of the nineteenth century, no effort was deemed necessary for missionaries to learn more through such works. Reluctance to learn from non-religious observers has to be linked to the MEP superiors, who did not see fit to develop that side of the missionaries' curriculum. In true missionary tradition, learning about the 'natives' was to start only with the first encounter.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, the newcomers' cultural preparation to meet the 'savage' Other was, in plain terms, tantamount to nil.

Before 1895, missionaries had produced virtually no description of the peoples of Upper-Tonkin. This absence can be readily explained. With Vietnamese language as their only communication tool, the first missionaries to reach the non-Kinh populations in the high region quickly found themselves helpless, incapable of being understood except by their entourage and the occasional half-Vietnamised middle-person. Accordingly, the priority had to be put on learning vernacular languages. In those early days, before lexicons, grammars and dictionaries had ever been produced, learning scriptless languages such as Hmong or Khmu could be achieved only through a lengthy period of intense contact with the speakers, almost invariably *in situ*. This principle was learned from the earliest time of proselytising, in seventeenth-century *Nouvelle France* (Canada) for instance,<sup>6</sup> and French missionaries had long recognised that linguistic skills were a key to successfully conquering hearts and minds.

But learning so many of these languages in such difficult circumstances certainly appeared a daunting task. For many, managing to learn the Vietnamese language while in residence at the seminary in Ke-so, Hanoi or Hung-hoa had been taxing enough. The added predicament that more language was to be learned in the field, with considerably less

4 The term '*muong*', for instance, was repeatedly used in the early missionary accounts to encompass all the tribes in the mountains beyond the delta, while the proper ethnonym Muong (Cuisinier) should designate a specific group of linguistic relatives of the Kinh dwelling in the lower Black River (*Sông Đà*) region. At other times, the same term was used to refer *en bloc* to the Tai groups in the whole of the Black River basin (as by Vandaële), thus revealing a confusion with the Tai concept of *muang*, a rightful component of many toponyms in northwestern Vietnam (cf. Condominas). See Jeanne Cuisinier, *Les Mông. Géographie humaine et sociologie* (Institut d'Ethnologie, Paris, 1946). Georges Vandaële (Bishop), 'Mission de Hung Hoa Tonkin', in *Les Missions catholiques* (l'Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, Paris, 1936), p. 402; Georges Condominas, 'Essai sur l'évolution des systèmes politiques thaïes', *Ethnos*, vol. 41 (1976), pp. 7–67.

5 In fact, the young priests at the Seminary in Paris would be told of their assignment only a few weeks before leaving France. For a contemporaneous narration of that event, see Gustave Monteuiis, *L'âme d'un missionnaire. Vie du P. Nempon, missionnaire apostolique du Tonkin Occidental* (Victor Retaux et Fils, Paris, 1895).

6 A good example is father Gabriel Sagard's *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons Situé en l'Amérique vers la Mer Douce, es Derniers Confins de la Nouvelle France dite Canada avec un Dictionnaire de la Langue Huronne* (1632) (Librairie Tross, Paris, 1865), 2 vols.

support, meant that far from everyone was fit to stand the test. Only more daring missionaries could go on to live with the ‘natives’ for substantial periods of time, in full knowledge of what awaited them. As Bishop Ramond put it, ‘The beginnings shall be painful; there will be a need to learn their languages, quite different from *Annamite*, to get used to their mores and to the generally unhealthy climate. As everywhere, that will be the price to pay for the salvation of souls’ (*Comptes-rendus* 1899–1900).<sup>7</sup>

Within a decade, however, these pioneers who learned vernacular languages *in situ* could, in turn, teach their younger colleagues and, in time, learning tools were produced that were to help the next generations of missionaries there. Indeed, perhaps the most important contribution of missionaries to facilitate the ethnography of highland groups in Tonkin was the production of linguistic material, which would be an invaluable tool to whoever would need to communicate with the highland groups in the future, be they other missionaries, administrators or, later, anthropologists.

The prose of MEP missionaries shows a range of differences in style, content and intentions, particularly between the priests in contact with the populations under scrutiny, and their superiors in urban settings. Whilst Paul Puginier, Bishop of West Tonkin in Hanoi (1868–92), was obsessed with political issues and long-term strategies aimed at taming the Mandarins and promoting France, his successor Bishop Gendreau (1892–1935) had the uneasy job of finding a *modus vivendi* with very vocal European anticlerical critics of the missions, both in Indochina and in France. In addition, Bishop Ramond, the first vicar apostolic of Upper-Tonkin (1895–1938), was hard pressed to gain potential benefactors to the cause of missionising in an understaffed Upper-Tonkin. The missionary cohorts, on the other hand, were predominantly concerned with the practicalities of daily life in their mission and, for some among them, with the genuine wellbeing of their converts. Typically, in their reports to their bishop, they stressed the progress made in God’s name and asked for additional financial and human support to alleviate the suffering around them—and by the same token theirs too, one would assume. If Puginier personified the fighting political churchman,<sup>8</sup> the dedicated field practitioners embodied in contrast the ‘selfless’ apostles of God. Consequently, writing ethnography was obviously the ‘privilege’ of the rank and file of the missionary organisation in direct contact with the locals. There is no known equivalent within the MEP in Tonkin of civil society’s upper-class travellers who explored the region and wrote about the populations of whom they had a glimpse on their way.<sup>9</sup>

The production of ethnographic text by missionaries in the Upper-Tonkin vicariate started after the remote areas fell under the full control of the colonial military, around 1895. At the other end of the time scope chosen for this paper, by the 1910s, representatives of most remote groups had been met, their languages studied, appropriate dictionaries and language tools produced for teaching younger missionaries, and enough converts had been made among the *montagnards* to facilitate the interaction between the missionary apparatus and the ‘natives’. As Father Vandaële explained,<sup>10</sup> no further extension was to occur after the 1920s when the expansion phase of missionary work into the uplands of Upper-Tonkin ended. By then, in a purely bureaucratic understanding of ethnography, religious authorities considered that the study of the *indigènes* had been advanced enough so that the knowledge available was sufficient to support routine conversion in the existing missions. With further

7 My translation, as for all quotes in this article from French-language sources.

8 Cao Huy Thuan, *Les missionnaires et la politique coloniale française au Vietnam (1857–1914)* (Yale Southeast Asian Studies, Yale (Conn.), 1990). See Chapter 9, ‘Les notes et renseignements de Mgr Puginier’.

9 Such as Marquis Hervey de St-Denis, ‘Ethnographie des Miao Tze’, *Compte-rendus du Congrès des Orientalistes*, vol. 1 (1875), pp. 354–63; or Prince Henri d’Orléans, *Autour du Tonkin* (Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1894).

10 Vandaële, *Mission de Hung Hoa*.

studies now deemed unnecessary, only the odd missionary was to carry on enquiries of an ethnographic nature, motivated by personal curiosity, and scholarship.

Missionaries in the field regularly wrote a personal diary and maintained a steady flow of correspondence with their families.<sup>11</sup> Such day-to-day descriptions of their life among the highlanders must have contained observations that would be of interest to anthropology today. However, such texts are lost through historical mishaps or unclear family inheritance channels. Fortunately, as the following section will illustrate, most individual missionaries also contributed to the vicariate's annual reports, and a small number occasionally published notes or short articles in religious journals or magazines, sometimes a book, in which they reported observations based on their experiences. Finally, one finds the occasional exceptional missionary who made a legitimate contribution to the ethnology of one group or community with a remarkable piece.

### 'Comptes-rendus'

From the birth of the Upper-Tonkin vicariate, individual missionaries were asked to send annual reports of their activities for their bishop. When such report was sent to the vicariate's See in Hung-hoa, it was expected to include factual information on the number of new converts in the mission, the number of confessions performed, the number and nature of the schools set up or details on how existing ones were doing, a general narration of the year's highlights, and an overall commentary. Upon receiving these reports from the men under his authority, one of the Bishop's responsibilities was to summarise them, quote segments that he judged could put the mission in a good light, and edit a new, condensed version. The final cut was sent to Rome and to the MEP board of directors in Paris.

From an anthropologist's point of view, as a source of first-hand ethnographic information, the original texts authored by the missionaries in the field would certainly be the most promising documents to scrutinise. Unfortunately, those among these contributions that were not disposed of immediately, were kept in the Bishop's See, and as a consequence, it appears they have not survived the vicissitudes of the Indochina Wars. Only the condensed versions, the reports sent to Europe, have reached us. In these, the original prose of the numerous contributors has been pruned, edited and sanitised. Only the occasional ethnographic description has been allowed to reach the final version, often as an illustration of the missionary's life and hardships on the frontiers.

Perhaps because of the bishop's editing, perhaps simply because the reports were put together in haste, the overall impression one gains from such ethnographic quotes in the yearly *comptes-rendus* is that of piecemeal observations on material life, customs, history or political matters written with no specific structure. Here is a good example:

The Man [a highland group today called Dao, Yao, or Mien] originate from China; tall, with a slim face, they dress up in half-Chinese and half-Annamite clothes and are most distinguishable by the huge turban circling their head. They live on the foothills where they establish their terraced rice-fields, and keep a distance with neighbouring tribes who wanted to enslave them; they remained independent to this day. One finds there a wholehearted hospitality often mixed with indiscreet curiosity; women do not exist in official life, rarely will they eat along with their husbands, their lords and masters, even on festive days; on the other hand women play a considerable part in the work life. Daughters are not recorded in the listing of children. Their religious practices consist in worshipping the spirit of the mountain where they live and asking him for peace, safeguard of health, and excellent harvest. In case of illness, one consults the wizard in order to identify the spirit causing the illness and select the animals that must be sacrificed to obtain relief. The Man do not cremate their dead: they put them to lie. After

11 Monteuuis, *L'âme d'un missionnaire*.

wrapping them up in a funeral cloth, they lay the corpses in coffins that are hermetically sealed and kept in their house for three days during which the sorcerer, dressed in an embroidered costume similar to the Annamite theatrical costume and assisted by two men dressed as women, recites prayers amidst dancing, towards the happiness of the deceased.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, by including in their annual reports to their bishop descriptions of peoples, their customs and their material culture, the missionaries reveal the nature of the methods they used to gather data. This point in itself is of some importance. On the objective side, these methods involved—though this is never spelled out explicitly—long-term stays on location, participant observation, and random conversations with locals in the vernacular language(s). As the interviewer was invariably a man, such discussion partners were chiefly, if not all, men. They were probably mature, perhaps of a certain status in their communities, and they were met in a variety of circumstances and venues. Information relating to material life and visible behaviour was arguably the easiest type of data to obtain. Second came details of daily life, as in the last quote.

Historical accounts obtained first-hand constitute valuable knowledge on the auto-history of a particular group, such as in the following quote from Léon Girod in a report following his first visit, in 1899, to the Nghia-lo region, 120 kilometres west of Yen-bai. In addition to historical data, Girod offers precious information on customary law, land tenure systems, and the political balance between groups before the arrival of the French as well as at the time of contact. The quote ends with ethnographic details that seem to have been cut from elsewhere and pasted here by a not exceedingly skilled editor:

Prior to the arrival of the Man and Meo [Hmong] tribes, several of whom have come recently, there were only the Thaï and the Muong sharing the country, in well defined divisions known to all. The newcomers agreed with the local chiefs who, in return for rewards, allowed them to cultivate the mountains while they reserved the plains and valleys for their own use. But the country was soon to be entirely disturbed by banditry and war, and conciliating the particular interests of the diverse races became a thorny issue. In some areas, the Man, who supported the Chinese, became the masters; in other locations, the Thaï, not anymore happy with their small rewards, forced the Man and the Meo into genuine slavery, requiring them to bear all the burden of public services and forcing them to take care of all the work in their masters' rice fields. Since these unfortunate souls did not obtain French protection against the Thaï, they turned to the Chinese and became their auxiliaries. Due to war, profound changes then occurred to the state of the country, modifications that in time became the new order.

The Meo have no religion; they however believe that spirits return from time to time to the villages; they bury their dead, the only expression allowed being to fire a few gunshots on their parents' grave; the funeral meal exists as everywhere.<sup>13</sup>

Another useful example comes from Pierre Granger in the *comptes-rendus* of 1902. Granger was also posted in Nghia-lo, the mountain hamlet first visited by Girod three years earlier. This sample supplies a wealth of interesting data on the political hierarchy between different groups, the politics of dealing with the colonial army, as well as the difficulties for the missionary to gain the trust of his hosts; it also includes ethnographic observations:

The Mèo, driven out of Yun-nan by the Chinese, were forced to disseminate in the mountains of Upper Tonkin, but there they found that the valleys and fertile plateaus were already occupied by the Thay and the Man. They were thus forced to look to make a living in the forests. The Mèo race is divided into four or five large families all speaking the same language, though distinct from one another in their customs and the colour of their clothes. They form around Thu-Lê, where they came to settle about 30 years ago, five important villages. At first, a few Chinese already inhabiting the region stepped forward to be recognized as their leaders, but soon their abuses triggered the most violent reactions of hatred, and they were all

12 D'Abriageon, posted among the Man northeast of Ha-giang town, in *Comptes-rendus* 1901.

13 Girod, in *Comptes-rendus* 1899–1900.

slaughtered on the same day by their subjects. Authority was then passed on to a Thay, nonetheless a tyrant like his predecessors, until the day when the French, to cut short additional difficulties, proclaimed the independence of the Mèo and appointed leaders from within their community. Then all hostilities stopped and their submission was sincere.

In my opinion, the military have slightly overestimated the Mèo race. Officers surrounded by soldiers found a warm welcome everywhere. Such is not the case for the individual visitor who has to gain their sympathy with countless gifts. The Mèo are very hospitable among themselves, visit one another often, eat, drink, smoke in each other's house, and depart without greetings; such is their politeness. Grandparents, children and grandchildren normally live together in harmony in the same house. Arguments are rare, though quite serious when they occur. Quarrellers speak only of severing heads and throwing their enemies' corpses to the river, and sometimes translate their threats into action. They are very superstitious and see spirits everywhere. At the slightest sign of illness, the sorcerer, an important man in the tribe, is summoned. He blindfolds his eyes, hits a drum while tossing around until the spirit enters him; he then lies on the ground to listen to the request. If the illness is benign, he falls on the ground after only a few minutes, and the spirit is happy with the sacrifice of a rooster; if the illness is severe, a buffalo could sometimes be required. The sacrifice is conducted at once, all gather, eat and drink, and the spirit has to be satisfied.

The Mèo believe that after death something remains that does not die, but they do not know what that may be nor where that entity goes; they do not even ask themselves such questions.<sup>14</sup>

In this quote, the last sentence seems to suggest that either the author or the person who edited his original text chose to focus on a matter bearing possible connections with the Christian faith, just stopping short of calling 'something that remains after death' a soul. Arguably, such a suggestion could harbour a hope to use such similarities to prop open a door for conversion by the resident missionary.

These three selected examples typically show that the ethnographic nature of the missionaries' observations, made on location, is patent. Dispersed throughout the vast body of literature which constitutes the yearly *comptes-rendus*, these observations yield information on a variety of subjects, the political relationships between groups, their oral histories, the internal balance of power between families and gender, their economies, rituals, beliefs, etc. As such, this information on the state of highland societies a century ago, even if fragmentary and partial, constitutes a contribution to the study of these societies.

Overall, the data contained in the *comptes-rendus* are often rough, sometimes distorted through the proselytising prism, and show signs of the evolutionist prejudice towards the 'savages' which was a widespread moral position in those days. Yet, these texts also bear the mark of men who, without much educational background, could be sensible enough to understand the importance of coming to terms with cultural issues in the hope that their efforts at the salvation of souls would some day bear fruits. On the downside, the clear drawback of these ethnographic segments is their disjointedness, their lack of contextualisation and their brevity. These all reflect the peripheral interest that a number of missionaries had in matters outside the specific needs of survival, administration and conversion, but they reflect also the editorial insensitivity of the bishop to such matters when putting together the final version of the yearly accounts. Had the original letters from each missionary been salvaged, we could probably tell a significantly different story today.

## Religious Publications

From time to time, accounts of life in the mission found a way into the public domain through one of the religious publications put together by the Church for the devotees back

---

<sup>14</sup> Granger, in *Comptes-rendus* 1902.



in France. The most prominent ones were *Les Annales de la propagation de la foi*, *Annales de la Société des Missions Etrangères*, *Les Missions catholiques*, and *Missionnaire d'Asie*. Inversely proportional to the vast number of short pieces authored by missionaries in Upper-Tonkin published in these journals is their scientific value. The broader the audience, it seems, the weaker the pieces, with a clear priority put on the anecdotal. Therefore, I shall not devote much space here to that category of text.

Among the works published in these media that offer some interest, a typical example is Léon Girod's *Dix ans de Haut-Tonkin* (Ten Years in Upper-Tonkin) (1899), a personal account of his work presented as a narrative of his movements, discoveries, 'adventures' and reflections between 1886 and 1897. Initially published by sections in *Les Missions catholiques*, the complete manuscript was later put together as a book in response to keen readers' wishing to promote Girod's work and with it, the missionary effort in Tonkin. Halfway between travelogue and day-to-day depiction of the feats inherent to missionary life in the outback, *Dix ans de Haut-Tonkin* is one of the earliest missionary accounts on the region. As a narrative, it closely follows the gradual colonial take-over of Upper-Tonkin. As a grassroots level testimony on the expansion of the colonial state into the northern mountains, Girod's text is a valuable source of information. The style exemplifies the usual format, ambience, moral posturing and populist discourse of the pieces published in religious journals, for which edifying and entertaining the readership in France was the first concern. The format is that of storytelling in the first person, unfolding in a linear fashion through time as in a diary. As ethnography, however, sadly, it is a minor contribution as it touches only occasionally on the populations living in that space. Descriptions of material culture, costumes or architecture in highland societies are brief and limited to the picturesque, stressing for instance a similarity with a feature well known in French culture—an Alsatian apron, a famous Provence landscape—or pointing at especially surprising, even comical peculiarities such as the use of live glow-worms as head-dress decoration.

Girod's contribution exemplifies that as sources of ethnographic information, texts published in missionary journals are above all of contextual value as they circle around the subject rather than address it. They inform about the authors' lives, their whereabouts, and the conditions under which they worked. On the local populations, they provide the odd detail on who was living where and at what time, which is of value only when the identification of 'who' was made accurately. Very little transpires about the actual daily life of local populations whose existence and conversion had triggered the production of such texts. Critical analysis is lacking totally, as are detailed descriptions that were considered too tedious or perhaps even shocking for the average reader. But in quite the opposite manner, difficulties of missionary life are depicted boldly, especially ones relating to the material conditions of missionary work, but never to the political situation. In fact, here, politics are totally absent, as the religious establishment considered it unsavoury to mix the spreading of the word of God with the exactions of the secular leaders, particularly when unsympathetic to the missionary project.

The key themes addressed in the texts coming from mountainous northern Vietnam evolved over time. They started with accounts of path-breaking journeys through unknown territories, examples of which include another of Girod's contributions, an account of his journey to the northwest of Lao-kay,<sup>15</sup> as well as Martin's account of his travels to Laos.<sup>16</sup>

15 Léon Girod, 'Une tournée dans la région située au N.-O. de Lao-Kay', in *Les Missions catholiques* (1902), pp. 472–5, 481–90, 497–500, 510–5, 526–8 and 533–7.

16 Jean-Marie Martin, 'Relation sur le Laos', in *Les Missions catholiques*, no. 1560 ss. (1899); Jean-Marie Martin, 'Au Laos, Song Ma, Song Dhiel', in *Les Missions catholiques*, no. 1582–6 (1901).

As missionary installation unfolded, this theme gave way to pieces by sedentary missionaries in their postings, aiming at describing for the first time an ‘unknown’ population, such as Brisson’s description of the Lac-thô region.<sup>17</sup> Then, with the accretion of knowledge, more specific issues could eventually be examined, such as a portrait of a highland revolt leader by Figuet.<sup>18</sup> Finally, with the end of the explorations in the high region and the completion of the catalogue of tribes dwelling in the Upper-Tonkin vicariate, the dominant mode turned to blander and chiefly entertaining storytelling, exemplified by D’Abrigeon’s light description of a Meo feast in *Les Missions catholiques*,<sup>19</sup> a contribution to a series of ‘postcards’ labelled *Scènes de la vie Tonkinoise*.

### The Special Case of *Anthropos*

In this third section can be found the most qualified contributions to highland ethnography published by early MEP missionaries, and these texts deserve closer scrutiny than the ones we have come across so far. Launched in 1906 by Austrian priest Wilhelm Schmidt of the Catholic Society of the Divine Word, the academic journal *Anthropos*—an ‘International Review of Ethnology and Linguistics’—all at once offered a credible tribune to missionaries who harboured a more specialised interest in learning and communicating about the cultures and languages of the peoples they had been assigned to convert. By contrast with the mainstream religious journals we have just seen, thanks to *Anthropos*, the missionaries’ prose could reach beyond the limited readership of their superiors, family and fellow Christians back home. Instead, the target reader became anyone on a spectrum ranging from keen amateurs to professional anthropologists and a number of adjacent academic disciplines, with area specialisation going beyond Asia.

By today’s academic standards, articles published in the early issues of *Anthropos* were sometimes of unsure scientific worth. The editor in principle gave priority to publishing texts written by missionaries in the field around the globe. The new outlet appealed to the well organised and more intellectually prepared of the self-taught ethnographers within the missionary crowd, despite the fact that a vast majority of them had never been professionally acquainted with ethnology, linguistics or history. All the same, the scientific quality of the pieces printed in the early issues was noticeably higher than what appeared in the MEP *comptes-rendus* or in the missionary journals during the same period. From the launch of *Anthropos*, a few capable priests from the MEP sent their texts to this new channel of scholarly diffusion. In fact, within the first seven years of the journal’s existence, three MEP members stationed in the uplands of Indochina and Southwest China, namely Antoine Bourlet, Aloys Schotter and Alfred Liétard, published a combined total of nine papers in this journal, which we will now examine.

The inaugural issue of *Anthropos*, in early 1906, includes a contribution by MEP missionary Antoine Bourlet. First posted in Hanoi for his training, he had been moved to the southern part of the Vicariate in 1901, in the same year that it was detached and became the autonomous Maritime Tonkin Vicariate. Bourlet found himself in Tai-speaking country, in the remote hamlet of Hoi-xuan on the Ma River.<sup>20</sup> Although his actual position was

17 Théodule Brisson, ‘Le Lac-thô, étude’, *Annales de la Société des Missions étrangères*, nos 28, 29 (1902).  
Théodule Brisson ‘La propriété chez les peuplades du Lac thô’, *Revue Indo-Chinoise*, no. 7 (1904).

18 Paul-Pierre-Marie Figuet, ‘Un extraordinaire chef de révoltés’, *Annales de la Société des Missions étrangères*, no. 28 (Juillet–août 1902).

19 Pierre D’Abrigeon, ‘Un bal chez les Méo’, in *Les Missions catholiques* (1919), pp. 378–9.

20 A reflection of the imprecision on the frontier zones at the time, as well as of the overlapping jurisdictions between the customary, colonial, and religious territories, Hoi-xuan was attended by a missionary from Maritime Tonkin even if on paper, the region was part of the Laos vicariate. In fact, in all his writings, Bourlet

outside the limits of the Upper-Tonkin vicariate, Bourlet was nevertheless missionising among the same highland groups as his northern colleagues. The geographical situation of Hoi-xuan would suggest that the Tai speakers he lived with were *Thai Daeng*, or Red Tai, although the missionary never used that name. The following year, Bourlet was to publish three more pieces in *Anthropos* plus another in 1913, a total of five articles, making him one of the most regular contributors to the journal at the time. Let us for a moment consider his prose, its structure and its methods.

In these articles, Bourlet addresses the Tai culture he encountered during his posting, which he calls ‘Thay’. His earliest piece,<sup>21</sup> published five years after his arrival, had already risen above the simpler standards of missionary discourse by explicitly presenting such specialised features as the ‘Thay’ political organisation, the land tenure system, and the agricultural economy. The term the author chose to describe the ‘Thay’ social system as a whole is ‘socialism’, though no precise reference was made to the origin of that notion. His next three contributions,<sup>22</sup> form one coherent piece of ethnography of the ‘Thay’, spread over three successive issues of the journal. They total 58 pages and are adorned with 27 photographs, presumably taken by the author himself. The scope of Bourlet’s project is wide. At the start, he describes its structure as being ‘as simple as it is natural’.<sup>23</sup> So simple and natural, in fact, that he felt no need to look into the works of others for a model or a justification, or if he did, he declined to let his readers know about such contribution.

His ‘natural’ structure touched on:

1. ‘Intimate life’ which here meant family life, by far the largest section with details on architecture, gendered roles, education, childbirth, marriage and divorce;
2. ‘Public life’ or relations with the chiefs, with details on power hierarchy, prerogatives of the chiefs, corvées and taxation;
3. ‘Religious life’, or relations to the supernatural, with explanations on the cults of spirits and the dead, induced illness, divination and cure, ritual calendar, dreams;
4. ‘Origins according to myths and legends’ presenting an emic understanding of the origins as it has been embedded in the indigenous cosmogony.

The 1907 pieces also include a brief consideration of the ‘Thay’ language and script, in which distinctions are made between the script as observed by the author and the script of the Lao Tai. However, instead of listing comparative vocabulary between these two languages, which would have been in tune with the widespread practice at the time, Bourlet shows evidence of a more systematic mind by presenting the complete Tai and Lao alphabets. He includes a column detailing the tones in a *quốc ngữ* transcription—the romanised Vietnamese script—thus showing a good command of those three alphabets. Based on linguistic deductions, Bourlet concludes that these ‘Thay’ are a sub-group of the Lao, though he notes many similarities between ‘Thay’ and Siamese languages unknown in the Lao language,<sup>24</sup> providing interesting clues with which to analyse migratory trajectories.

In 1913, Bourlet followed up with a few pages to complete his ethnography of the

*footnote continued*

situates his field location and the populations he studies within the Tai *muang* of *Hua Phan Thang Hoc*, a vast mountainous domain today split between the provinces of Hua Phan in Laos and Thanh Hoa - derived from Thang Hoc - in Vietnam. It was a highland zone newly opened to missionizing which, in the Launay map of ‘*Tonkin Occidental*’ published in 1889, still bore the bleak mention ‘*tribus sauvages*’ (savage tribes).

21 Antoine Bourlet, ‘Socialisme dans les *hua phan* (Laos, Indo-Chine)’, *Anthropos*, vol. 1 (1906), pp. 87–95.

22 Antoine Bourlet, ‘Les Thay [I. Vie intime du Thay, sa famille]’, *Anthropos*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1907), pp. 355–73. Antoine Bourlet, ‘Les Thay [II. Vie publique du Thay, les rapports avec les chefs, III. Vie religieuse du Thay]’, *Anthropos*, vol. 2, no. 4–5 (1907), pp. 613–32. Antoine Bourlet, ‘Les Thay [IV. Origine des Thay d’après les mythes et légendes]’, *Anthropos*, vol. 2, no. 6 (1907), pp. 921–32.

23 Bourlet, ‘Les Thay [I. Vie intime du Thay, sa famille]’, p. 355.

24 Bourlet, ‘Les Thay [IV. Origine des Thay d’après les mythes et légendes]’, p. 931.

'Thay', including observations on funerary rites that had been left aside.<sup>25</sup> I am of the opinion that this later text was actually written at the same time as the earlier ones, as its fashion is similar and it shows no sign of additional intellectual maturation, nor any significant change in the substance and style of the discourse compared with the 1906 and 1907 pieces.

Antoine Bourlet was possibly the most competent MEP highland missionary ethnographer in Tonkin at the time. Unfortunately, however, virtually nothing is available about his life that would help to assess his social and educational background, and thus assist in weighing up the value of his ethnographic writings. Nothing filters out about himself in his articles, except perhaps the hint of a possible middle-class background. This is revealed by a charming and at times poetic hand combined with clarity in the discourse, which makes his manuscript concise, pleasant to read and devoid of superfluous missionary references and intrusions. Arguably, these qualities bring Bourlet's text closer to contemporary ethnological academic standards. Yet, Bourlet is a self-taught ethnographer who learned the basics of ethnology in the field as a means of proselytising more effectively. Though well constructed, his ethnography remains descriptive, with no significant attempts at discussing practices or analysing behaviours. References to other authors are absent. Presumably destined early on to the conversion of Tai speakers on the fringes of the mission, he may have been introduced to Tai language—most likely Siamese, several of his MEP colleagues then being active in Siam—either in Bangkok on his way to Indochina or at the seminary in Hanoi. Amid the normal and expected performance of his predication, Bourlet must somehow have found the drive to justify devoting time and energy to conducting and publishing ethnographic research on the people with whom he was in touch. Was this curiosity? Was it boredom? Or could he have been prompted by early associates of *Anthropos*? Whatever the case, there was little the MEP establishment could do to stop him from pursuing this interest since, as mentioned earlier, he was not bound by the vow of obedience to his superiors.

Second on the list of MEP contributors to *Anthropos* comes Aloys Schotter. A French Alsatian who spoke French and German equally well, he was posted in the district of Hin-y-fou in the southwestern Chinese province of Guizhou. In the MEP's hands, the *vicariate du Kouy-tcheou* was managed from the China Sea and had no direct administrative connection with Indochina. But even if it was situated at a substantial distance from Tonkin, many of the same ethnic groups as those dwelling in the Tonkinese segment of the Southeast Asian massif could be found there. Schotter's methods resolutely resemble those of his Upper-Tonkin colleagues, and they usefully inform us.

Schotter is a minor historical character, with little available on his life prior to joining the MEP. We know nothing of his social and educational background, and his life and whereabouts in Asia seem to have gone largely unrecorded. Yet, one can appreciate from his text that he must have had a solid intellectual background that made him confident he could embark on ethnological surveys, produce reasonably well-built texts, and have them accepted for publication in more serious outlets than the easygoing missionary journal. In 1908, 1909 and 1911, Schotter published three related ethnographic articles on the Miao, one of the main highland groups of Guizhou. His total contribution amounts to 89 pages that include a few photographs. This trilogy was meant to be the first part of a sum that was planned to be significantly longer as it would later have included a survey of two other groups, the Y-jen (a Tai-speaking group) and the 'Old Chinese' (*Vieux-Chinois*) who had come to settle in Guizhou long before the more recent

---

25 Antoine Bourlet, 'Funérailles chez les Thay', *Anthropos*, vol. VIII (1913), pp. 40–46.

waves of Han migrants. For unknown reasons, the full project did not materialise beyond the Miao trilogy.

These three articles on the Miao bear the same title, 'Notes Ethnographiques sur les Tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine)'. They start by depicting briefly the ethnic diversity of that rugged Chinese hinterland. Schotter bravely proposes his personal classification of the peoples of Guizhou, one he states that he discussed with his colleague Paul Vial, who 'liked it'.<sup>26</sup> It was a daring effort under the circumstances, and a classification not exempt from bias, as the following extract indicates:

The Miao, like the bushes, cover everywhere the rocks of Kouy-tcheou. The Y-jen, such as a mighty trunk, shoot the ramifications of their crowded villages into the fertile plains. The Chinese, like parasite mistletoe, sneak in everywhere, suck, and exploit the aboriginal populations, pretending to govern.<sup>27</sup>

Schotter then proceeds to offer a detailed description of the Miao. He first pictures their society in general, then presents several subgroups such as the 'Yao-jen', the 'Hong-miao', 'Pë-miao', 'Hë-miao', and various affiliated groups, as well as a number of others with, he believes, a disputable affiliation to the Miao family. The structure of the text is without surprise, with sections on geographical location, origins, customary law, script and language, as well as character, costume, houses and marriage, together with funerals, economy, political regime and religion. Categories and subheadings are, however, inconsistent from one subgroup to the next, a flaw that could be the symptom of a lack of rigour in Schotter's methodology when conducting fieldwork inquiries. It also denotes an attempt to make the most of perhaps somewhat meagre field notes, at the cost of introducing inconsistencies in the comparative treatment.

In his rendering of Miao myths (the Miao as a whole,<sup>28</sup> the Hë Miao<sup>29</sup>), instead of giving verbatim the myths he recorded (the Creation and the Great Flood), Schotter summarises the stories and adds a commentary interspersed with short quotes. In this role, Schotter shows a fine capacity for scrutinising the oral text beyond its apparent meaning, but his attempts at deconstructing it are tainted by blatant ethnocentric assumptions. Another drawback of this process is that his contribution to the early ethnography of Miao mythology loses significance, since the original oral text of the myths is lost.

Schotter's next section, on the feudal system of the Yao-jen,<sup>30</sup> shows ethnographic qualities with a detailed and enlightening list, for each month of the year, of the corvées and payments due to the local Landlord. This constitutes an undeniable contribution to the economic history of that group.

It is rare and well worth noting that a missionary in those days, who was not trained

26 Paul Vial's case is in itself fascinating and has been aptly addressed by Margaret Byrne Swain, 'Père Vial and the Gni-p'a: Orientalist Scholarship and the Christian Project', in Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1995), pp. 140–85. This is in part why I opted for excluding him from this review. Vial was based in Yunnan where he wrote several semi-scholarly pieces, all published between 1888 and 1917 in *Les Missions catholiques*. Vial also produced two language dictionaries, and a fully fledged ethnography of the 'Lolos': 'Les Lolos. Histoire, religion, mœurs, langue, écriture', *Etudes Sino-Orientales*, part A (Imprimerie de la mission Catholique, Shanghai, 1898). Despite the fact that he belongs to the same generation of MEP priests as those studied here, I believe his intellectual position is more reminiscent of the next generation of better-equipped missionary ethnographers, along with his colleague François-Marie Savina.

27 Aloys Schotter, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [Introduction]', *Anthropos*, vol. 3 (1908), p. 403.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 419–25.

29 Aloys Schotter, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [IIème partie: Les différentes tribus des Miao, Chs 5–9 et Récapitulation]', *Anthropos*, vol. 4 (1911), pp. 24–8.

30 Aloys Schotter, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [IIème partie: Les différentes tribus des Miao, Chaps 1–4]', *Anthropos*, vol. 4 (1909), pp. 329–31.

in producing scientific or other scholarly writing, would care to include a section on his sources.<sup>31</sup> In the initial pages of his first article, Schotter provides details of the published material he used to support his views. This material is dominated by Chinese historical accounts and provincial annals translated into French offering an exogenous point of view on the highlanders, mostly a derogatory one, since as Schotter put it, ‘the Chinese mandarin’s scornful dislike cannot but influence his judgment when discussing these non-Chinese barbarians in our province’, pushing that mandarin’s writing into the realm of ‘unfortunate wild imaginings’.<sup>32</sup> Schotter’s other main documentary source is the writings of his fellow MEP missionaries. He uses accounts based on their observations in the field as well as their translations and interpretations of Chinese texts. In total, Schotter mentions no less than 30 different authors by name, sometimes with a short quotation but not once with full referencing. His selection shows a clear leaning towards religious sources, with only a few additional ones by French, English or German lay scholars. Owing to his relative geographical isolation, to a lack of access to English-language sources or perhaps because of an atavistic reluctance to quote non-Catholic missionaries, Schotter failed to include the relevant works then available on the Miao in Southwest China, published by authors such as Bridgman,<sup>33</sup> Lockhart,<sup>34</sup> Deka,<sup>35</sup> Edkins<sup>36</sup> and Crawford<sup>37</sup> to cite a few. Adding to Schotter’s discredit is the absence of French authors such as Hervey de St-Denis<sup>38</sup> and Gabriel Devéria,<sup>39</sup> who had also published on the Miao in China. His pre-emptive reply to his critics: ‘The work I begin here is but an imperfect draft. What could earn me the readers’ indulgence is to think that the missionary is more often on the abrupt and savage paths of Kouy-tcheou than in consultation with the learned and scholarly volumes published by ethnographers and philologists’.<sup>40</sup> He also referred explicitly to conversations, either face to face or through correspondence, with his colleagues who had spent a long time in Asia, in particular Paul Vial. Schotter adds that he had thoroughly questioned the neophytes from the ‘tribes’ he wished to study. Because these neophytes were students in a French mission, it is possible that Schotter conducted his interviews at home and in his native tongue. It would be fair to say that Schotter also provides proof in his text that he has effectively paid many visits to Miao villages and stayed on several occasions in Miao houses, where he could develop a more genuine sense of what was Miao life.

The part of Schotter’s text revealing most about why he chose to push his ethnography beyond what his religious leaders expected from him, and by the same token helping to understand his method, comes from the general introduction to his trilogy.<sup>41</sup> There, the priest explains that he intends to contribute to the ethnography of *Kouy-tcheou* because that province presents exceptional ethnic diversity. He also gives a hint about his monogenist mindset and, to express all this, he carves a metaphor:

31 Schotter, ‘Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [Introduction]’, pp. 403–4.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 404, 412.

33 E.C. Bridgman, ‘Sketches of the Miao-tsze’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, North China Branch*, vol. 3 (1859), pp. 257–86.

34 William Lockhart, ‘On the Miao-tze or aborigines of China’, *L’Année géographique*, vol. 1 (1863), pp. 297–306.

35 W. Deka, ‘Spoken language of the Miao-tsze and other aborigines’, *Notes and Queries on China and Japan*, vol. 1 (1867), pp. 131–2.

36 J. Edkins, ‘The Miao-tsi, Their History’, *China Recorder*, vol. 2 (1871).

37 T.P. Crawford, ‘The Miao-tsz or Aborigines of China’, *China Recorder*, vol. 10, no. 5 (1879), pp. 385–7.

38 Marquis Hervey de St-Denis, ‘Ethnographie des Miao Tze’, *Compte-rendus du Congrès des Orientalistes*, vol. 1 (1875), pp. 354–63.

39 Gabriel Devéria, ‘Les Lolo et les Miao-Tze. A propos d’une brochure de M.P. Vial, missionnaire apostolique au Yun-nan’, *Journal asiatique*, 8ème série, vol. 18 (1891), pp. 356–69.

40 Schotter, ‘Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [Introduction]’, p. 398.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 397–404.

For the ethnographer and the philologist, Kouy-tcheou is a true El Dorado. Nowhere else, I believe, can one find in such a relatively small space such a variety of races. [...] Kouy-tcheou is like a *Jardin des Plantes* [a Botanic Garden], an ethnological museum. Its abrupt mountains and deep valleys form grandiose boxes where, classed and catalogued, grow multiple samples of tribes. These are the survivors of aborigine races that constituted China's original population before they were pushed back by the Han Chinese invaders. These are the children of the Pre-Chinese; and our Kouy-tcheou is the Pre-Chinese province *par excellence*.<sup>42</sup>

Another metaphor is then proposed to describe the religious incentives also at work:

A peasant does not fear that he is wasting his time in studying the composition of the land he wants to clear and plough. [...] The study of inhabitants is what most interests the missionary. Ethnological knowledge and the study of the dialects spoken by these tribes prepare their evangelization. Isn't that motley population truly the portion of vine attributed by God to the missionary? It is the close material onto which he must exercise his zeal; it is the land to clear. Properly learned, local dialects will be the instrument of predication needed to transform these pagan populations into Christians. Alone, this consideration should suffice for the missionary to devote his spare time getting to know better these multiple races. With this small work on the peoples of Kouy-tcheou, I want to resort to lively information and make it into an ethnological bouquet, a fresh one that I want to offer to the reader.<sup>43</sup>

These quotes and others suggest a heartfelt engagement of Schotter with the peoples he proselytised. In fact his text—save a few exceptions—is remarkably exempt of the rampant ethnocentric commentary often associated with missionary prose.

In summary, Schotter relied first on his personal observations, second on those of other Catholic missionaries who were part of his network, then on a few Catholic authors and, finally, on Chinese texts. In intellectual terms, like many of his time, he used history and linguistics as his main analytical fields. His historical appreciation included oral history collected on location, while his linguistic analysis stands in small sections of vocabulary lists scattered throughout the text.<sup>44</sup> He devotes the rest of his text to descriptive ethnography. Curiously, later scholars of the Miao and the Hmong—a major branch of the Miao—who were surely the most likely users of early ethnography on these groups, have rarely cited Schotter. This includes scholars writing in French. It comes as an even bigger surprise given the broad readership and wide availability of the medium in which he published.

To close our examination of the three earliest MEP contributors to *Anthropos*, let us now consider briefly the case of Alfred Liétard, who was based in Yunnan from 1905 to 1908. Like Schotter, he was attached to the China branch of the MEP and, during his posting, he observed a nearby population he called the 'Min-kia', about whom he wrote a 28-page article.<sup>45</sup>

The central question addressed by Liétard is: to which other 'ethnic groups'—interestingly, he does not use the term 'tribes'—are the Min-kia related? Searching for an answer to this question, Liétard divides his article evenly between ethnography and language analysis. In the first section, he supplies details about Min-kia history and geographical location. The brevity of his notes on their economy, costume and religion, suggests a lack of familiarity with the daily life of these people, a hypothesis that the absence of details on data-collection methods compounds further. Liétard devotes the other half of the paper to Min-kia vocabulary and lexical examples, comparing these with French, Chinese, 'La-ma-

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 397–8.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 398, 404.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 418–9. Schotter, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [IIème partie: Les différentes tribus des Miao, chap. 1–4]', pp. 322–4, 346–7, 349, 353. Schotter, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine) [IIème partie: Les différentes tribus des Miao, Chaps 5–9 et Récapitulation]', pp. 328–9.

45 Alfred Liétard, 'Au Yun-nan, Min-kia et La-ma jen', *Anthropos*, vol. 7 (1912), pp. 677–705.

jen', 'Mo-so', 'Li-sou' and 'Lo-lo' languages. His method, to underpin this tentative classification of the language spoken by the Min-kia, is to use Chinese data contained in numerous French language sources ranging from Marco Polo (!) to Francis Garnier<sup>46</sup> and MEP colleague Paul Vial.<sup>47</sup> Winding up his analysis, Liétard concludes that he has not successfully achieved his goal of positively classifying the Min-kia.

Uncharacteristically, in his sources Liétard puts no special emphasis on religious and missionary texts. Even more remarkable when compared with his colleagues, including those who, like him, were published in *Anthropos*, is the proper referencing he makes of his sources and the intellectual honesty he displays in using their works and ideas. Liétard explicitly quotes letters from colleagues he consulted and acknowledges their contribution very exactly. In this sense, although not contributing a weighty ethnographic piece, Liétard's short article appears to herald the end of an era and prefigure the next generation of missionaries-cum-ethnographers. Those of the new generation could build upon the intellectual refinement and experience gained on location by their elders. This generation better accepted the need—or was better prepared—to organise ethnographic observation and writing more systematically.

## Conclusion

One of the most fertile conclusions that came out of the meeting between anthropology and post-modernism in the 1980s was that the objectivity of the ethnographer had to be questioned, that is, that all ethnographic texts were and are constructed.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the personality of the ethnographer, his/her past, education, career, intentions and emotions cannot be brushed aside when assessing the value of the ethnographic text s/he committed. In our case, the need to explore missionary ethnographers' biographies is compounded by the fact that these missionaries did not belong to the academic field and therefore lacked its standardised intellectual formation about which a number of relatively safe assumptions can be made when undertaking the task to interpret their texts correctly. Instead, the missionary ethnographers' lives were distinctive, their intellectual preparation showed a high degree of diversity, and their paths in Asia took many directions. That diversity left its mark on their texts, from even before the earliest contact with the 'natives', to the official editing of the last version of their prose, a mark that gives a unique signature to each offering. The accumulation of such elements, when taken into consideration and put in context, reveals a unique intellectual stamp for any given author. If deciphered correctly, it would help to deconstruct the texts along the intellectual grounds, preferences, biases and obsessions typical of each priest.

As Petersen rightly put it, 'we all rely upon [the missionaries'] documents; we are all familiar with and lament the changes they have had a hand in; and we are all acquainted with one or another of wise and humane men and women who serve in the missions there today. Fools and charlatans are there as well, but most of my colleagues manage to discriminate among them.'<sup>49</sup> Missionary ethnography, then, is a legitimate object. Nevertheless, of itself, exposing missionary ethnographers in upland Tonkin constitutes only an indirect contribution to the study of ethnicity in Southeast Asia and Southwest China. Its more direct contribution is to point at neglected sources for such study, bringing to light the

46 Francis Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine, tome II* (Librarie Hachette, Paris, 1873).

47 Vial, 'Les Lolos'.

48 James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986).

49 Glenn T. Petersen, 'Comments on Stipe', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1980), p. 173.



authors in their context as well as the texts themselves, even if only briefly.<sup>50</sup> The task to mine these sources systematically for their full anthropological potential is left open.<sup>51</sup> Particularly promising are the unpublished reports by missionaries in the field—even their diaries if they can be traced—which represent an unknown quantity, and possibly an extremely rich one, of missionary ethnography. Furthermore, if we add the missionary ethnographic observations from Upper-Tonkin that followed the liminal ones presented here, a global analysis of this missionary *oeuvre* could be conducted. One thinks in particular of that dedicated ethnographer of the Hmong/Miao, François-Marie Savina,<sup>52</sup> whose contribution alone amounts to thousands of pages published in the form of dictionaries, lexicons, reports and ethnographies, a sum that alone would deserve a full paper.

---

50 For a good example see Georges Condominas, 'Deux grands ethnologues pratiquement inconnus de la profession: les pères François Callet et Léopold Cadière', in B. Rupp-Eisenreich (ed.), *Histoire de l'anthropologie XVI-XIXe siècles* (Klinscksieck, Paris, 1984).

51 See for instance a study of missionary Albert Kruyt by Albert Schrauwers, *Colonial 'Reformation' in the Highlands of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, 1892-1995* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2000).

52 François-Marie Savina, *Histoire des Miao* (Imprimerie de la Société des Missions-Etrangères, Hong Kong, 1924).