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‘The Red Seedlings of the Central Highlands’: Social Relatedness and Political Integration of Select Ethnic Minority Groups in Post-War Vietnam

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Kon Tum City. Early morning in May 2012. Start of the rainy season. I was on my way to a Bahnar village located in the heart of the city. The road was wide and clean, lined with tall trees and modern buildings that house the People’s Committee and various local services — the very nerve centre of the provincial government. Flags and banners in red and gold fluttered in the wind, commemorating the centenary anniversary of the foundation of the province (1913–2013). Further down the road, I saw a dozen men, some squatting on the sidewalk, some standing idly by. Their weather-beaten faces were gloomy, their clothes shabby. These were indigenous Bahnar, not too young or too old, able-bodied males gathering daily at this makeshift ‘labour exchange’ (*chợ người*), hoping to sell their labour for a meagre wage at some construction sites or plantations in the region. The scene

was emblematic of the marginalisation of indigenous individuals in their own territory where their ancestors had settled for centuries, long before the arrival of the Kinh, the French, and the Americans.¹

In the context of Vietnam, nearly 12 million people, accounting for less than 15 per cent of the total population (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010), are classified as ethnic minorities, and, in 2010, they accounted for 47 per cent of the poor (World Bank 2012). Poverty has been decreasing among minority groups in Vietnam's Central Highlands as market-driven opportunities for off-farm labour continue to expand. However, indigenous groups such as the Bahnar, Jarai, and Sedang remain dogged by lower than average literacy and school enrolment rates, poor housing and sanitation, and over-representation in unskilled, poorly paid and unstable agricultural work (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2013). Despondent scenes such as the improvised Bahnar labour market in Kon Tum are set against a highlands landscape that has been reconfigured by explosive capitalistic resource extraction, the coffee frontier, mining and rubber. Vietnam's central highlanders have been marginalised by world capitalism with frontier characteristics in the wake of *đổi mới*, a process rewarding those with favourable social capital, knowledge of markets, political connections and ties to lowland markets (McElwee 2004).

One set of explanations for this situation points to factors negatively affecting minorities such as the lack of education, of proximity, of cultural familiarity with the dominant Kinh culture, of political capital, and of modern outlook and awareness that tend to deprive them of favourable positions within the state apparatus (Baulch et al. 2010; Rambo and Jamieson 2003). Empirical research in the northern uplands has revealed that the Mường ethnic group is often commended for its ease of assimilation into modern society given its many proximities — linguistic and cultural — with the Kinh ethnic majority (Wangsgard 2009). However, various authors have pointed to the popular discourses about backwardness, deficiency and superstition pertaining to mostly ethnic minorities who reside in the mountains of northern Vietnam and the Central Highlands of southern

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Vietnam (Ngô Thanh Tâm 2015; Turner et al. 2015; Nguyễn Thu Hương 2013; Salemink 2003). Such depictions lend weight to the view that the lowland majority group is upheld as the centre, cultural standard, and model for all ethnic groups (Taylor 2008). Not surprisingly, many upland groups tend to judge themselves by lowland standards and internalise their inferiority (Wangsgard 2009). Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that members of minorities are not passive subjects; they may not be keen to embrace the workings of the social structure of the dominant group, which have already had a great impact on every aspect of their daily lives.

For its part, the Vietnamese state has played a major role in structuring the avenues for social mobility and inclusion, cultural expression and political participation in the highlands. In general, the state places emphasis on control and assimilation and its equity rhetoric seems secondary to strategic considerations. This approach is reflected in its policy of promoting cultural diversity in Vietnam. In Decree No. 05/2011/NĐ-CP, issued on 14 January 2011, outlining its Action Program for Ethnic Minorities,² the government declared that all ethnic people (groups) have the responsibility to respect one another's customs and traditions, and to contribute to building the culture of Vietnam that is progressive and imbued with the nation's identity. It is understood that 'diversity should not compromise national unity' (Lavoie 2011:157), and national minorities have a right to maintain their traditions only as long as they do not pose a threat to the socialist progress of the country. Nevertheless, one may wonder what criteria will be used to determine which traditions and customs of each ethnic group are to be preserved. Along these lines, this chapter will explore how some ethnic groups might be included or excluded from state apparatus in Kon Tum Province because of their past activities during the 'American war'. It should be mentioned that during the *đổi mới* era,

2 Programs considered to be 'national targets' are part of the government budget which must be submitted to and approved by the National Assembly, whereas Action Programs are carried out according to availability of funds, proposed by the Finance Ministry and approved by the Prime Minister, mainly from local sources. Centrally directed, national target programs have to be presented to the National Assembly six months beforehand for consideration. The Action Program on Ethnic Minority Affairs somehow reflects the current level of attention the government attaches to ethnic minority issues. More urgent issues are handled under the high-priority National Target Programs which may include poverty alleviation schemes in ethnic minority areas.

the state has been seriously concerned about the spread of evangelical Christianity in the Central Highlands, seeing this as a threat to the country's security (Salemink 2003).

Another set of factors impinging on the experiences of minority peoples in the highlands are the prejudices, attitudes of mistrust, and subtle exclusion strategies of some Kinh people themselves. In other words, minority peoples may be excluded from sociocultural development opportunities through the agency of Kinh people, who may act assertively according to their perceptions and interests in a way that is not in accord with the letter of state policy. For example, undertaking research on the impact of education policies on inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic inequalities in school, Trương Huyền Chi (2011) observes that Kinh teachers' lack of knowledge of their pupils' cultural traditions are due to selective preservation of patterns by the state as well as their own modernist thinking. Teachers in the upland areas often claim that Kinh pupils have a better ability to learn than their minority counterparts (World Bank 2009). Furthermore, the lowland teachers seem to generally attribute the poor performance of ethnic minority pupils to the lack of support from their parents and their inherent poverty (Trương Huyền Chi 2011). Likewise, in state health care service programs in ethnic minority areas, a lack of cultural sensitivity and language barriers among health care workers contribute to misunderstanding and a poor ability to communicate health issues (Bonnin 2013). The historically complex and not always smooth relations between upland ethnic minorities and the majority Kinh contrast with optimistic official framings of these encounters as imbued with sibling-like sentiments of solidarity (McElwee 2008). Arising in a context of internal colonialism, which involves one group dominating another within a single nation state (Evans 1992), majority group attitudes may have the capacity to significantly shape the ways that minority groups apprehend opportunities for social advancement.

A different explanation, and one that I aim to explore in this chapter, is that uplanders might adopt agentive strategies to minimise their involvement in state structures. Here, I am inspired by James Scott's bold reconceptualisation of the politics of minority ethnicity in the entire Southeast Asian massif (Scott 2009). Scott argues that the social structure, livelihood strategies and identifications adopted by highlands actors in the vast region he refers to as 'Zomia' were shaped historically around the desire to avoid being totally and

irrevocably absorbed within the lowland state's project. Such an approach has been observed among religiously organised Khmer and Cham communities in the deltaic swamplands of southern Vietnam, whose members often deliberately avoid taking part in activities in the morally profane state and market spheres lest they be negatively judged by their consociates (Taylor 2007, 2014). During wartime, the indigenous ethno-nationalist Barajaka movement among the Central Highlanders was formed in the context of state development policies of forced assimilation, inter-ethnic frictions and social inequities in the highlands (Hickey 2002). Looking at the period after 1975, Salemink (2003) regards the mass conversion to Christianity among Central Highlanders as an attempt to create autonomous space and an attempt to recapture agency. This religious resistance strategy, much like that taken up by the Hmong in uppermost northern Vietnam (Ngô Thanh Tâm 2015), allows marginalised upland actors to determine their immediate living environment at the local and private levels — in particular within the village and within the family.

Accordingly, this chapter shifts the usual focus on uplands–lowlands relations to explore practices of tactical or selective (dis)engagement by the Bahnar people as a modality of agency that differs from those that already have been described in the Central Highlands. Of particular concern is how experiences dating to the 'Vietnam War' of the 1960s and 1970s continue to impact the daily interactions between ethnic groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The chapter examines how the level of participation of some minority groups in social and political activities of the state — mainly run by the Kinh — is related to their wartime experiences. An examination of the relationship between wartime and peacetime experiences offers interesting insights into the complexities in the relations between the minority and majority groups. Related to this, the marginalisation of minority groups can be traced to persisting prejudices and continuing contradictions in majority–minority relations — culturally and historically. By deconstructing these continuing contradictions this chapter engages recent debates surrounding recognition of uplanders' agency (Salemink 2015; Friederichsen 2012; Michaud 2012; Taylor 2008). In particular, it focuses on the agency of these minority groups who, in the face of the overwhelming influence of the majority's culture and state interventionist policies, engage in subtle practices of selective participation. Their practices of tactical withdrawal from positions of

responsibility are both historically contingent and gendered, adding further layers to our understanding of the patterning of state power and participation of ethnic minorities in the state project.

In order to elucidate these issues, the chapter is made up of three parts. The first part is based on an ethnographic study of the practices of members of minority groups in accessing education and job opportunities, and on how family relations and other acquaintances affect these practices. The implication explored is that without these relations, access to education and jobs will be extremely difficult. The second part discusses social discourses about differences between the majority Kinh people and minority ethnic groups regarding the lack of representation of members of ethnic minority groups in leadership and management positions in public administration. This is, in part, due to the lack of education opportunity in upland areas, resulting in few minority people being qualified for the jobs available. However, even minority people with revolutionary credentials and good education can still find themselves marginalised if they fail to adapt to the work culture of the dominant group, namely the Kinh. The third part stresses the fact that minority ethnic people are not subservient, passive and inept in making personal choices, as they are so often perceived in Kinh-dominated social discourses. In contrast, they show a high degree of agency in turning these negative discourses to serve their own interests. In particular, by attending to the intricately gendered dynamics of minority self-representation in official governance arenas, it is possible to add sociological texture to the strategic non-participation thesis that has come to engage scholars of state-minority relations in Southeast Asian contexts.

Background

This chapter draws on empirical data collected during three months of fieldwork in Kon Tum Province in 2012. Located in the north of the Central Highlands, Kon Tum consists of one provincial municipality, eight districts and 97 administrative communes/wards. Kon Tum had a population of 432,865 in mid-2009 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2009). Over 50 per cent of the population is composed of ethnic minority groups. Of the 25 ethnic groups in Kon Tum, six minority groups are considered as indigenous, including Sedang

(mainly inhabiting the districts of Tu Mơ Rông, Đăk Tô, and Kon Plông), Bahnar (mostly living in the city of Kon Tum, and districts of Kon Rẫy and Đăk Hà), and Giẻ-Triêng (concentrated in two districts of Đăk Glei and Ngọc Hồi). The Jarai are based primarily in the district of Sa Thầy, and are also found scattered in some communes of Kon Tum City. Additionally, there are two very small ethnic groups: B'rau in Đăk Mế village of Ngọc Hồi District, and Rơ Măm in Le village of Sa Thầy District. Other ethnic groups settled in Kon Tum under several different migration programs at different periods (Hardy 2003). For the purposes of this study I conducted three months of fieldwork in six selected villages of Bahnar ethnic people in Kon Tum City, and six villages of Jarai ethnic people located along the Vietnam–Cambodia border in Sa Thầy District.

The Bahnar — the largest Mon-Khmer-speaking ethnic group in the Central Highlands — account for about 13 per cent of the overall population in Kon Tum Province. The Bahnar are divided into what are usually regarded as four subgroups: Kon Tum, Rôngao, Jơlông and Gờlar. The Bahnar Jơlông group is found mainly in the city of Kon Tum, and in three communes of Kon Rẫy District; the Bahnar Rôngao are found scattered in 29 villages of five communes of Kon Tum City, as well in two communes of Đăk Hà District, and Pô Cô commune of Đăk Tô District; the Bahnar Kon Tum concentrate in four administrative wards and nine communes of Kon Tum City, while the Bahnar Gờlar live mainly in Gia Lai Province. The majority of the Bahnar population in Kon Tum Province is Catholic, a religion first introduced to the Bahnar community in 1848.³

The Malayo Polynesian-speaking Jarai are the largest of the upland ethnic groups in the Central Highlands with a population of 411,275 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010). Like their Bahnar counterparts, the Jarai are divided into subgroups known as Chor, Hờdrong, Chuti, M'thur, Aráp, and Thuấn. Whereas the Jarai live primarily in Gia Lai Province, a small proportion of the Jarai Arap group can be found in the border district of Sa Thầy of Kon Tum

3 Charles Keith records that in the 1930s, Kon Tum was created as a separate mission of the French MEP missionary organisation, with its own seminary and bishop. By 1938, Kon Tum was home to 80 Vietnamese Catholic priests (Keith 2012:116–117). There are no available statistics on the present-day Bahnar Catholic population.

Province, and in two communes of Kon Tum City. By 2009, the Jarai population of 20,606 accounted for about 5 per cent of the overall population in the province.

Being quite recent settlers of Kon Tum, the lowland Kinh made up nearly 46 per cent of the overall population of the province in 2009 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010). This figure reflects the general situation in the Central Highlands as a result of various major immigration movements, both as part of official resettlement programs and as independent migrants over different historical eras. As Andrew Hardy notes, the Central Highlands was long perceived as an 'empty' frontier area, destined to absorb population surpluses from the northern provinces (Hardy 2003). This immigration stream accounts for the majority of the region's population increase from 1 million in 1975 to nearly 5.3 million by 2011 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2011). Research has shown that the rapid population growth has placed excessive pressure on an already degraded environment (Rambo and Jamieson 2003) and the process of consolidation of ethnic minority lands into state farms have left ethnic minority farmers with insufficient land resources (USAID 2008). The competition for resources and administrative bias towards ethnic Kinh leave indigenous ethnic minorities in the highlands to search for livelihoods in more marginal areas, where they are more exposed to climatic variations and poorer soils (Rambo and Jamieson 2003). Statistics show that ethnic minority households represent 54 per cent of households below the poverty line in Kon Tum (USAID 2008), a province with the highest poverty incidence rate in the Central Highlands region (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010).

From a cultural and social perspective, different intensities of migration are associated with different modes of adaptation to the conditions of the Central Highlands. As Andrew Hardy (2003) observes, in the past, people who settled as individuals or families in the highlands of Vietnam tended to adapt to local customs and habits of the majority populations there. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, new economic zone settlers arrived in large groups. 'They did not have to adapt, and their presence there was intended to bring progress to the highlands to encourage adaptation on the part of the highlanders' (Hardy 2003:229). This approach, together with massive changes in land tenure and population density, are likely to have been contributing factors to widely publicised episodes of unrest in the

Central Highlands in 2001 and 2004 (World Bank 2009:16). A decade later, while doing fieldwork in Kon Tum, I noticed the presence of special military units stationed near communes with high ethnic minority populations that were considered to be 'problematic'.⁴ Also the practice of *chào cờ* (flag saluting) on Monday mornings was obligatory for ethnic minority residents. These measures were seen as government efforts to exert social and political control over ethnic groups at the commune level. How these groups react to these measures will be discussed at the end of this chapter. In the following part, I shall discuss the participation of ethnic minorities in the state sector.

Ethnic Minority Participation in the State Sector

In Kon Tum Province, it was reported that in December 2011 the percentage of ethnic minority *cán bộ* (cadres) and *công chức* (civil servants) was approximately 7 per cent, whereas the percentage of ethnic minority *viên chức* (public employees) was about 11 per cent.⁵ These quantitative data indicate that representation of ethnic minorities in the state sector is extremely low. Their representation gradually falls at lower administrative levels.

It is worth noting that in a recent survey by UNDP and Vietnam Fatherland Front for the Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) among 30 selected provinces, Kon Tum scored substantially lower than the other 29 provinces (Acuña-Alfaro et al. 2013). The same survey also indicated that Kon Tum performed much lower than other provinces with similar economic status (i.e. Điện Biên, Cao Bằng, Hà Tĩnh). The PAPI survey is based on the experiences and feedback of citizens from various provinces on the performance of governance and public administration. Thus the findings for Kon Tum seem to reflect citizens' negative attitude toward public administration performance. This becomes more evident when we examine the level of ethnic minority

4 From information received via locally conducted interviews, the degree of 'problematic' was based on the number of individuals previously known to be involved in incidents occurring in 2001 and 2004.

5 Provincial personnel data provided to the author by Kon Tum Department of Home Affairs, May 2012.

participation in local authorities at commune level. Take the case of Blang ward, for example. Even in a ward where the Bahnar predominate overwhelmingly, in Blang — with a population of 9,723 — the number of minority people in state administrative units is quite low: seven out of 22, or just 30 per cent. This finding is consistent with research elsewhere, which finds that the representation of ethnic minority cadres in the government workforce in the uplands is low (Rambo and Jamieson 2003). This situation would appear to exacerbate existing tensions among local residents, as evident in the comments made by one Bahnar official in the city:

The ward chairman is a Kinh, cadres in various local services are 90 per cent Kinh. There are just two cadres from ethnic people ... I feel a bit sad. Maybe they think ethnic people cannot do the job, they let the Kinh do it ... They already picked their people. No use talking about it, it makes no sense. We want to take in someone, but they said it's not OK; to get our children in there is difficult, they think we are not qualified.

It is worth noting that most respondents in the research site expressed the wish to get a job in the state sector, since opportunities to get work in the town are very limited. As one research participant commented to the author:

This village is part of the city. It has little land, young people hire out their labour mainly as porters. Ready anytime. If they could get work [in the rubber plantations or planting trees in the forests] then they could earn money. Here there's nothing.

Moreover, ethnic minority locals often perceive jobs in the state sector as superior 'mandarin jobs' (*làm quan*), for, compared with lowly agricultural work in the fields, a state sector job provides health insurance and a pension after retirement. These jobs are secure, permanent and much sought after. Trương Huyền Chi (2010) notes that work in the public administration sector is high on the job preference list of the Mnong in Đắk Nông. The desire to have a 'mandarin job' is also prevalent among ethnic minority groups in mountainous areas of Northern Vietnam (Nguyễn Thu Hương and Nguyễn Trường Giang 2011). David Wangsgard (2009) similarly contends that the Nùng Fan Slinh in the northeast of Vietnam tend to believe that the means to achieving popular Vietnamese notions of modernity and development are through wage employment, or other

cash-generating activities, becoming Party members or otherwise participating in local governance, and expanding one's social network to include the influential Kinh ethnic majority. From statistical data as well as via conversations with local residents, I found that the number of ethnic minority people who are qualified to apply for state positions are few and far between.

'It is in the Genes [*Gien*']

On the first day of my visit to a village in the city of Kon Tum, through the introduction of the official in charge of cultural affairs of Kon Tum, I met a lady in her 50s named Moan⁶ who the official referred to as a 'main correspondent'. She provided me with a list of villagers working in the public sector and arranged for me to meet them later. It turned out that these persons were all related to her and her family. Miss Moan's daughter-in-law laughed and explained to me that those who worked as state employees in the village 'are all related, as if it is in the genes'. The same pattern occurred in other villages that we visited later. How do we explain this phenomenon and what is meant by 'genes'? On the one hand, family education background serves as a motivation for ethnic minority youth to pursue their studies, as some respondents explained their desire to follow in their parents' footsteps, and to be on the same level, if not do better than them. But we also met state employees of a wholly peasant background who were keen on reaping the benefits of education to improve their social position and the well-being of their families. Another 'gene' no less important is the sociopolitical connectedness enjoyed by a number of local residents owing to their contributions, or those of their families, to the war efforts of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This particular factor plays an important role in getting access to education and job opportunities.

From a policy perspective, targets for recruiting local cadres in the 'National project on promoting human resources in ethnic minority and mountainous areas towards 2020' have not been met owing to a lack of students (CEMA 2011:4). Of particular relevance here is the

6 Except for the names of administrative units appearing in official documents, all names of persons and locations (under the district level) are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of participants taking part in this research project.

proposed selection policy (*cử tuyển*),⁷ whereby the local authority can nominate qualified ethnic minority students to universities, colleges and professional schools without having to pass an entrance exam. These nominees are expected to return to their home districts to work in the public service for a number of years. This is how ethnic minority cadres working at various levels have been trained (Nguyễn Thị Thu Phương and Baulch 2007:24–25). However, it is reported that provinces have rarely met the recruiting target for the proposed selection policy. For instance, provinces reached only 77 per cent of the annual target in 2009 (CEMA 2011).

Findings from this current study reveal that local ethnic communities were rarely informed in a timely manner of the official announcements pertaining to the nomination policy. I was told that it was not unusual for the minorities to receive a call for applications only one day before the official deadline. In such situations, those interested (and qualified) were unable to prepare the required paperwork for their application.

Only a few people working at the offices in the commune or district know about the information. They keep it for their children or relatives. If these fail to meet the criteria, they don't bother to circulate it; they keep it in the drawer or just throw it away.

Information of this kind is often passed around via social networks and not through official channels:

A friend of my brother in Kon Tum City told me it's time to apply. I brought the forms to the commune's committee to be certified, they asked me how did I know about it.

Current evidence indicates that some provinces nominate a small number of Kinh students, while others limit the number of students from relatively well-off groups (such as the Thái, Tày, Mường, and Nùng) who can receive nominations (Nguyễn Thị Thu Phương and Baulch 2007). This practice seems to exist in Kon Tum as in the words of a state cadre:

7 The two key legal documents governing the nomination policy are Joint Circular 04 in 2001 (Ministry of Education and Training, Ministry of Home Affairs and National Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs) and Decree 134 in 2006 (Government of Vietnam).

In recent years some people — children of Kinh big shots [*các ông Kinh*] — have changed their names and their officially registered addresses [*hộ khẩu*]. They come to these places and take the jobs available. Because the number of children of ethnic people who qualify for these jobs are few, the Kinh children just fill the slots to meet [recruiting] targets.

Phenomena such as red tape, power abuse, and administrative harassment can be readily observed among the ranks of public servants (United Nations 2004:18). The relationship between civil servants and citizens is not really the relationship between those who serve and those being served, but rather like the kind of 'beg and give' relationship of the old pre-revolutionary days. The situation seems to be worse when it comes to ethnic minorities in mountainous areas. As Terry Rambo and Neil Jamieson observe:

Many of them [cadres in the uplands] are lowland Kinh assigned against their wishes to remote areas, people who have little motivation to do their jobs well. Not surprisingly problems of corruption and bureaucratic inertia are widely evident. (Rambo and Jamieson 2003:159)

Local people generally concentrate their efforts to get jobs in the fields of education and health care since this is where job opportunities exist due to government policy focused on provision of education and health services to meet the essential needs of local people. Since the livelihood of local people is dependent on agricultural production and related activities, few have the financial means or social connections to branch out to other fields in terms of learning and job prospects. Thus, education and health care are two fields of work that can offer them state jobs. Few parents or young people dream of subjects such as engineering, information sciences, or banking. Only a few students have been selected to follow courses in development economics. For most people, following 'advanced education' outside the province is a far-fetched dream, as one interlocutor observed:

If we send them to the district or provincial town to study, it's still cheaper than sending them to the big cities. If you want to study economics or banking you have to travel far. There's nothing in the province. And where do you find the money for tuition, room, food? And when you finish you don't know anybody in the banking business to ask for a job.

This apparently negative attitude is rooted in the realistic assessment of the economic situation of the household and the lack of extra-local social connections among local residents. It only reinforces the popular discourse that minority people are only fit for jobs in the health or education sectors — all local jobs — implying that they are not suited for jobs that ‘require greater intelligence’ or are more competitive. The success of efforts aimed at developing human resources among ethnic minority groups will thus be closely related to the existing social capital of specific communities, groups or individuals in such communities.

Access to local training and work opportunities is constrained by limited social capital, a phenomenon common to some uplands societies in Vietnam. Due to this scarcity of social capital, state efforts to decentralise resource management by returning control over assets into the hands of local communities may be ineffective (Rambo and Jamieson 2003:161–162). From our findings on the ground, most local women currently engaged in the public sector more or less owe their jobs to family or kin relations. More specifically, they are related to local cadres or families who ‘have contributed to the revolution’: those who supported the war efforts of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam against the United States and their Republic of Vietnam allies. These two factors — social and political capital — play an important role in enabling access to training and job opportunities available for local ethnic peoples. This preliminary study shows that the social capital related to education and training for ethnic groups is quite limited, and the few opportunities available are reserved for the families of those who served on the side of the northern forces during the war against the Americans. This limited social capital is tied up with intricate interpersonal and inter-ethnic relations between the majority Kinh and the minority groups concerned.

Against the multi-ethnic background of the Central Highlands, inter-ethnic relations have been strongly influenced by geo-political and historical factors. Looking at the population distribution of ethnic groups in Kon Tum Province, one can see that the Jarai — most of whom live in Gia Lai Province — are concentrated in the southern-most district of Sa Thầy, while the Bahnar reside mainly around Đăk Bla River in the city of Kon Tum. In line with social discourses about the relative advantages of ‘urban’ versus ‘remote’ residence, one may think the ‘urban’ Bahnar of the city of Kon Tum would fare better

in terms of opportunities for social advancement than the 'rural' Jarai in remote Sa Thầy District. But the realities on the ground are quite different. In the case of the Bahnar community in Kon Tum City, they attribute their inferior access to state jobs to their wartime experiences. This explanation implies that those who do not enjoy privileged relationships to power-holders have little chance to benefit from present-day job opportunities. But how have these relationships been shaped? Again, these experiences date back to the time of the 'Vietnam War' when members of some ethnic minorities were allied to the forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Now they and their children enjoy the fruits of this collaboration. By contrast, members of the Bahnar group living in the city of Kon Tum, where the United States and Republic of Vietnam forces were stationed before 1975, were treated with suspicion by the state after reunification. And, since many of them are Roman Catholic, with their own autonomous history of organisation and education and links to co-religionists abroad, they are not trusted by the state apparatus. As a Bahnar female doctor told us: 'Since they know about my past they deny my [professional] endeavours.'

Similar to observations made by Anne Leshkovich (2008) on the experiences of small traders in Hồ Chí Minh City, past relations still have a bearing on the current life of Bahnar individuals. This reflects what Jayne Werner (2006) has identified as a genealogy of current tensions. Local people told me that in mountainous areas such as Sa Thầy, most people (mainly Jarai) supported the revolutionary cause during the war, whereas the people living in the city of Kon Tum near American and Republic of Vietnam military camps had 'few experiences of support for the revolution'. The general trend is that people currently deployed in leadership positions in the province are from the Sedang, the Jarai, the Giẻ Triêng, and the small Bahnar group from mountainous districts, leaving out members of the larger population of Bahnar people living around the city of Kon Tum.

A Need for Kinh-ness

The study also indicates a primary reason for the absence of members of minority groups in the higher echelons of management positions. Due to the lack of education and training opportunities in uplands

areas, few ethnic minority individuals can meet the requirements for those jobs. Their marginalisation is further aggravated by pervasive discourses about sociocultural differences between the majority group (Kinh) and minority groups. It is as though they have internalised a sense of inferiority by persistently measuring themselves, and failing, against 'lowlands' standards. However, even those people who have access to these jobs due to family connections (having made a contribution to the revolution) must still adapt themselves to 'how things work' in the Kinh-dominated bureaucracy and patronage system if they wish to advance their careers. To illustrate this point further, I relate the case of a Bahnar man who I call Mr X. In my fieldwork, I met and talked at length with Mr X, who belonged to the Bahnar group (from a mountainous district), had joined the revolution, and had held various management positions in the public sector:

At that time it's not that I was awakened to the revolution, I belong to a family participating in the revolution; we hid and nurtured revolutionary partisans. When I was a child, I was an informer ... the revolution chose me. When I got some information I would pass it on to the local cadre [in the occupied zone], I just hung around the village ... I was a member of the secret youth team. The party, the people, the revolution sent the best children, those of families who contributed to the revolution, to the north to be educated, I was one of them. There were 19 of us. It took nine months for us to reach Vĩnh Linh. We kept walking across the Trường Sơn range. The others led the way, I was behind. We were forbidden to break branches, or make the least noise for fear of being discovered. I studied at the Central School for ethnic people. At the beginning I couldn't speak the Kinh language ... At that time there were more than 2,000 people, from Bình Thuận and other provinces, the Khmer, the Mường, the Tày.

For this Bahnar boy, participation in the revolution began by doing liaison work for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam side. This was a turning point in his turbulent life:

I was fortunate to have been picked by the party and the revolution to have an education ... Before my hair was very long, no one was allowed to cut it. I had to tie it like a chignon. When orders came down for me to cut my hair, we had to offer a pig [to God]. According to local customs to keep one's hair is to preserve the human soul, if you cut it, you're nothing. If you want to cut it you have to sacrifice a cock or a pig and ask for the permission of God [Yang].

Mr X's account echoes the notion of the modern benefits of communism (Goscha 2004) that Vietnamese cadres actively promoted in western Indo-China to win over local support during the war against the French (1945–1954):

Cadres taught locals how to purify water, cook meat, procure salt, use modern agricultural tools, sew and develop local handicraft industries, even to build their houses differently. The Vietnamese opened up literacy campaigns to transmit the benefits of this new revolutionary civilisation. The Vietnamese taught upland people the importance of hygiene, washing themselves, taking care of their animals and moving them away from their houses. (Goscha 2004:156–157)

All of these methods indicate Vietnamese cadres' discourse of modernity (Goscha 2004) which aimed to bring modernity to these backward peoples by changing their habits and customs in favour of what they saw as superior ones. Mr X continued his narrative about what happened in the post-war years:

I came and lived here [the city of Kon Tum] since 1994. I was appointed vice director of the boarding school for ethnic people. [Former Prime Minister] Võ Văn Kiệt wanted me to take the director's job but I refused, only wanted to be vice director ... He said none of the boarding schools for ethnic peoples has a director belonging to an ethnic [minority] group. At that time I was studying economics at Đà Nẵng, they just put my name up for the director's position. But I said this is a sensitive issue, the local people [ethnic minority people] don't want to get involved, I want to do my best for the country, there should be no distinction between Kinh and ethnic people. The ethnic people don't care much about material things. If the Kinh invite them out to eat or drink, they just go without an afterthought. The Kinh people are calculating, the ethnic people are not like that, they work for the common good.

Other respondents shared similar feelings about the differences in behaviours and attitudes between the Kinh and members of ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands. Most of them expressed concern regarding the ways that they have to deal with colleagues and superiors — mainly Kinh — noting that, 'if you are straightforward and honest, you cannot move up the career ladder'. How some members of minority groups render the Kinh as 'other' can be discerned in the following remarks made by another former government official:

Local people like us do not want to get involved in competition ... [we are] straightforward, we do not want to misuse privilege. The Kinh are different. They calculate every move. The school principal and the treasurer divide [the financial resources] between them ... I myself don't care, I just want to do my job properly. Before I was head of the education service [of the district], there were Kinh people there too. When I came to this school, there were more Kinh people ... To avoid this problem, I declined the position of school principal [offered to me].

This interview excerpt further illustrates that relations between Kinh migrants and indigenous locals are fraught with prejudice, tension and inequality (McElwee 2008). Far from erasing ethnic prejudices, often such interactions accentuate mistrust of others, as long-term residents see the newcomers as stingy and deceptive, while newcomers view the locals as simple-minded and ignorant (cf. Taylor 2008:12). This othering of Kinh migrants as 'calculating' and self-serving seems to give rise to an unflattering view of the Kinh-run local government. A Bahnar female doctor explained:

Formerly the cadres often appropriated land from [local] people. Since they were important officials, people were scared of them. However people haven't changed their opinion. Once you are a cadre you are bound to engage in corrupt activity, they think. Around 1982 some local [ethnic minority] people served as government cadres. Some cadres like the hamlet head appropriated [public] land as much as they pleased. They argued that it was public land but they made it their own anyway. After that [the government] appoints no more cadres from local [ethnic minority] people.

In the eyes of local residents those ethnic minority individuals taking part in the government apparatus seem to be 'polluted' by the 'strange' practices of the Kinh people, and the local government representing the Kinh-dominated central government is often negatively regarded, considered to be highly bureaucratic and inefficient as indicated in the PAPI survey (Acuña-Alfaro et al. 2013) mentioned earlier. It is no surprise that government jobs are not keenly sought after by some ethnic minority people in this study.

Furthermore, meeting the criteria of 'having made a contribution to the revolution' (or being related to someone who did) as well as being suitably qualified, does not guarantee a smooth ride for ethnic

minority individuals. They also have to show their capacity for 'cultural adaptation' (*thích ứng văn hóa*). As a Kinh administrator who has spent a long time in Kon Tum remarked:

In the present system you need patronage. If you have no sponsor, there is little chance of moving upwards. Since local people do not join a clique, they are dropped from the system. However, there are those whose [political] background and qualifications are not up to the mark yet still they know how to go along with the system and find a support base to move up the bureaucracy. Once they have secured a solid position, they would bring in family members and friends. Generally speaking, through contacts with the Kinh, they become wiser, they learn the ways the Kinh operate and develop from then on.

From this one can infer that local ethnic people must adapt to the ways things are run by the majority group or be left outside of the power structure. This is similar to the case of Malay Muslims in southern Thailand who do not meet the informally understood criteria for full Thai citizenship (McCargo 2011). As Duncan McCargo argues, being Thai involves a willingness to subsume your ethnicity, language and religious identity to a dominant discourse and mindset of Thai-ness. Malay Muslims fail to pass this basic test, and thus are 'not Thai', despite the fact that they are born in Thailand, hold Thai citizenship, and increasingly speak Thai as a first language (McCargo 2011:14). When identity is linked to demands for political authority and power, ethnicity becomes even more problematic.

In line with McCargo's analysis of the situation in Thailand, Vietnamese citizenship accorded to members of ethnic minorities seems to preclude full social and political participation if they do not embrace major tenets of the Kinh culture. However, the story of Mr X and comments by local residents about cultural differences can also be seen as a form of resistance to the overwhelming influence of the Kinh by way of a method of strategic non-integration. The Kinh, for their part, look at such choices as signs of weakness, or a 'lack of competitive spirit' on the part of ethnic minorities. This finding is consistent with recent studies (Friederichsen 2012; Friederichsen and Neef 2010; Taylor 2008) on the contested interplay between the state and upland peoples in the ongoing processes of marginalisation and integration in Vietnam. This research indicates that while some ethnic minority groups are likely to be excluded from the modern, civilised nation, some of them would like to participate in it. However, the study

evidence seems to suggest that ‘non-integration can be a reflection of local agency, choice and strategising’ (Friederichsen 2012:59). To illustrate the complexity of this process, the following section focuses on the case of women’s participation in public activities in selected ethnic minority communes in Kon Tum.

An Interplay of Gender, Ethnicity and Local Politics

During my field trip in Kon Tum, I observed that those attending the weekly community meeting on Mondays under the guise of the flag-raising ceremony were mostly women representing their families. Local cadres used these meetings to propagate government policies on law, education, health, and production. But the high number of women at these meetings does not necessarily correspond to the role or position of these women in the family. Kinh officials explained to me that this active participation reflected the cultural aspects of matrilineal and matriarchal systems among the Jarai, or the bilineal system among the Bahnar. But when I asked these women why their husbands did not attend these meetings, they said the men just did not want to go. The flag-raising ceremony taking place among ethnic minority communities in Kon Tum Province is considered as a good occasion to get women involved in local affairs. However, on looking more closely, we learned that the rather active participation of women in community activities does not necessarily signal an improvement in gender equality. This observation is also made in the World Bank’s country report on gender conditions in Vietnam (World Bank 2011). The question is what makes the men stay away from these meetings and how may this be related to notions of masculinity and femininity, of honour, and of power relations among the local community? A villager explained further:

Only women attend these flag raising meetings. The men don’t bother to go. In the ethnic minority villages, the flag raising ceremony is not considered as important, so the women go there. They go home and tell their husbands what happens. They [the men] don’t want to hear reports of children’s quarrels among the poor households. These things do not concern them. If something concerns their own interests, then they go.

The fact that it is almost exclusively women who attend these meetings reflects a clear gender differentiation in household participation in community activities. Our findings about women's participation in flag-raising ceremonies differ slightly from those concerning women's attendance of meetings organised by the Women's Union or concerning population and family planning as discussed in the World Bank's gender assessment (World Bank 2011). The subjects discussed at these flag-raising meetings not only cover 'women's concerns', such as population control or family planning, but also social, economic and religious issues affecting the whole community. From what we heard from local residents, the near-exclusive presence of women at these civic functions can be traced to an intricate web of social, cultural and economic relations that go beyond the household and the community. These meetings 'bring them nothing' in the sense that they attain no material benefit by attending. From a gender perspective, it is significant that these activities that do not create 'benefit' (material gain), in which women predominantly take part, are considered as 'not important' activities. Men, on the other hand, are understood to engage in matters that are 'important' or 'vital', depending on local perceptions and standards. This has to do with income-generating activities that sustain the household; men have to deal with the outside world and must speak the Kinh language in their daily dealings. It should be noted that subjects relating to the domestic sphere, such as child care and household concerns, occupy a considerable part of the agenda of these meetings, which are conducted in the local language. This language factor is crucial in facilitating the attendance of women at these meetings, where they can communicate readily and feel relatively at ease. As pointed out elsewhere, the main reason preventing ethnic minority women from taking part in activities outside the home is their lack of confidence in interpersonal relations (World Bank 2011).

These meetings are occasions for local officials to reprimand residents or their children — calling them by name — for acts of public disorder such as drunkenness or fighting, school absenteeism, tax evasion, etc. Men consider these public 'denouncements' as humiliating and prefer to stay at home, letting women bear the brunt of official scolding. Some point out that children of local officials who are guilty of similar offences are never reprimanded publicly. I witnessed in another setting this attitude of avoiding 'difficult' or 'awkward' situations on the part

of men in some situations and the role played by women. During the last days of our field research, a fight broke out in the village which involved the son of the family who provided us with temporary lodgings. The local police had to intervene and took those involved to the station for questioning. Of course the lady of the house, our 'landlady', had to go to the station to ask for his release and we offered to come along to give her 'moral support'. But she turned down our offer, saying: 'You teachers look like rich people; that won't do. I am dressed like a poor woman, it will work.' And she was right, her son was allowed to go home soon after. It was explained to me later:

In the village when you have to go to the ward office when something goes wrong, only women go there. Men don't go. They say women do this better, the ward people pity them, and will drop the matter. If you look poor, if you are dressed shabbily, it's better. Men usually drink, they easily lose their temper. If they go there it will cause more problems.

Participation by women in activities outside the home in certain areas of the Central Highlands is not adequately explained by simplistic culturalist interpretations that view such trends as conforming to traditional matrilineal or bilinear family structures. As I have earlier remarked on gender relations among ethnic minority groups in northern Vietnam (cf. Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2012),⁸ the participation of men in activities outside the home and their decisions in these matters can be seen as women 'ceding their rights' (*nhường quyền*) to men, out of common sense, to overcome barriers that women face such as language, means of transport and social skills. In the social and cultural context of the Central Highlands, particularly in the case of the Jarai and Bahnar, such acts of 'ceding rights' — in this case men ceding their rights to women — to get out of difficult situations or gain temporary advantages can be seen as a clever way of exploiting existing discourses on ethnic minorities by playing the underdog (being poor, ignorant, unkempt). However, these extra tasks beyond the usual household chores put the additional burden on women of living up to their presumably important and traditional roles in matrilineal and bilinear societies.

⁸ I was involved as research adviser in the project on gender-related issues among ethnic minority groups in Bắc Kạn in 2011 for the Hà Nội-based Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment.

From an inter-ethnic relations perspective, these examples are emblematic of the agency displayed by ethnic minority people in the sense that they are not subservient, passive, or lacking in logical thinking as often perceived by the majority Kinh. And even if they may have internalised a sense of inferiority in the face of dominant Kinh culture/civilisation as discussed earlier, they somehow manage to turn negative images about them around to serve their own interests. This sample of Bahnar resistance is consistent with research evidence elsewhere that ethnic minorities have responded to discriminatory policies in numerous — often covert — ways (Michaud 2012:14). For instance, Jean Michaud observes that Hmong individuals in rural communities of Lào Cai province view themselves neither as resisting nor as the submissive victims of domination. Rather, they respond to the official policy of 'selective cultural preservation' with their own strategy of selective acceptance of modernity (Michaud 2009:32), suggesting a certain reservation towards standardisation and a globalising process (Michaud 2012). A study on recent Protestant conversion among Hmong groups in Lào Cai describes the ways in which many Hmong individuals embrace a 'resistant spirit' and resent Kinh contempt for Hmong traditional practices of polygamy and early marriage (Ngô Thanh Tâm 2015). The resilience of Hmong in Vietnam is credited to centuries of neighbourly relations, quarrels, political and economic exploitation, rebellions, invasions, wars, genocides, and flight (Turner et al. 2015). Taylor (2007) notes that Cham Muslim strategies for evading parochial incorporation by the state involve flexible diversification, evident in their ever-shifting household economy mix, discerning local and extra-local mobility, and pluralist ethnic, linguistic, and religious identifications.

By Way of Conclusion

The opening image of a group of Bahnar men — descendants of one of the earliest settlers of Kon Tum — selling their labour in the heart of Kon Tum City can be seen as emblematic of a wider picture of marginality for ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Popular assumptions (held by the majority group) contend that ethnic minorities are less adept at learning. They are also provided with far fewer and narrower higher education and training opportunities. Taken together, this results in ethnic minorities being confined to lower-paid and

lower-status local jobs, rather than jobs of a more competitive and rewarding nature. All of this occurs against a backdrop of rapid economic, social, and cultural transformation that has drastically reduced the traditional habitat of minority groups due to massive immigration of Kinh people and utilisation of the forest for production of commodities to serve the global market. A quarter of a century after *đổi mới* was launched, there is little evidence of the inclusive social and cultural growth for the multi-ethnic nation that was meant to be promoted by state policy. This preliminary study shows that the social capital required for education, training, and job placement for ethnic minority groups is limited, and the few available opportunities for public sector work are reserved for families of those who served on the side of the northern forces during the war against the Americans. It would seem that those who lack access to these privileged relationships have little chance of gaining access to these valued job opportunities. This is evident in explanations by Bahnar people of their current inferior position, with regard to job opportunities and participation in the state sector, which is still strongly shaped by war experiences more than 40 years ago. Particularly with regard to the social and political integration of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, entrenched inequalities between the majority group and other minorities have become even wider and the few individuals from minority groups who have somehow climbed out of their own ethnic niches to succeed socially and economically are those who chose to adopt aspects of Kinh-ness.

From the individual accounts in this study, uplanders' non-integration into the mainstream society at times can be perceived as an expression of their rational agency. In fact, members of some ethnic groups might prefer to withdraw or separate from and minimise their involvement in state structures, in order to preserve their sense of honour or masculinity, or perhaps to avoid being shunned by their own peers for seeming too grasping and calculating. This points to a strategy of selective non-participation, which might be explained by a history of mistreatment by and mistrust towards national governments. Some people wish to avoid contamination by the morally profane state and market spheres, and the risk of being negatively evaluated by their consociates for becoming too involved in such activities. They actively try to resist becoming Kinh. Such findings align broadly with what James Scott has termed 'the art of not being governed'

(Scott 2009), while at the same time illuminating the intricately gendered and historically contingent dimensions of such political practices. However, contemporary tactics of selective disengagement also need to be understood as a mode by which minorities actively engage the state, considering that the very categories of difference through which they shape their resistance come to them through a history of state-making and subjectification. These ambivalent and complex dimensions of state-uplander relations have implications for the argument put forward here that the national integration of Vietnam's uplands has been a contested process with deep historical roots. In other words, past experiences of relatedness seem to explain current instances of intentional disconnectedness by some ethnic minority individuals.

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