1 A Plural Mekong Delta under Stress

This book focuses on a region the Vietnamese call by a variety of names, including the Delta of the Nine Dragon River, the Mekong Delta, or simply "the West" (*miền Tây*). This region, defined by the Mekong River and its tributaries, is one of the great deltas of the world. In the period under discussion in this book, this region extended to the north to the outskirts of Saigon (today's Hồ Chí Minh City); to the west, it actually extended across the Cambodian-Vietnamese border; and it was bounded to the south and east by the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea (see Figure 1.1).

The Mekong Delta has only recently been fully integrated into Vietnam. Its contested and complex history has shaped it up to the present. Historically, the entire zone from Phnom Penh down to the lower Mekong Delta was a multiethnic zone of contact in which Khmer, Chinese, Malay, Cham, Vietnamese, and assorted others circulated. It was a periphery, far from the core of the Cambodian or Vietnamese polities, a place in between the port, coastal, and sea-oriented "water frontier" and "littoral society" discussed by Li Tana and Charles Wheeler and the plains-oriented "geo-body" discussed by Thongchai Winanchakul.[1] It was once a wet, lowlands version of the highlands "Zomia" discussed by Willem Van Schendel and popularized by James Scott.[2]

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[1] Li Tana, "The Water Frontier: An Introduction," in Li Tana and Nola Cooke, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750–1880* (Landover, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 1–20; Charles Wheeler, "Re-Thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37(1) (February 2006), 123–153; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

[2] Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," In P. Kratoska, R. Raben, and H. Nordholt, eds., *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005); James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009).

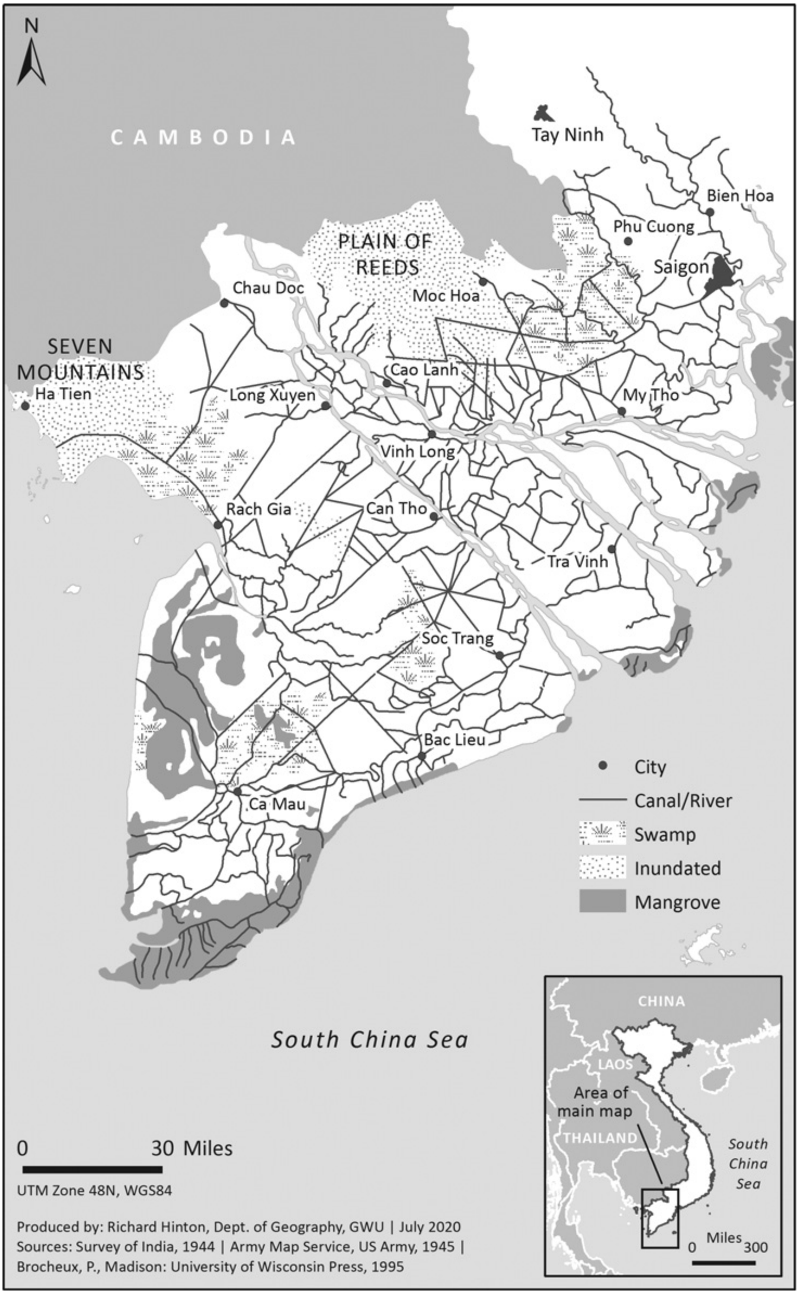
N
CAMBODIA
Tay Ninh
Bien Hoa
Phu Cuong
Saigon
PLAIN OF REEDS
Chau Doc
Moc Hoa
SEVEN MOUNTAINS
Ha Tien
Cao Lanh
Long Xuyen
My Tho
Vinh Long
Rach Gia
Can Tho
Tra Vinh
Soc Trang
Bac Lieu
Ca Mau
City
Canal/River
Swamp
Inundated
Mangrove
South China Sea
0
30 Miles
UTM Zone 48N, WGS84
Produced by: Richard Hinton, Dept. of Geography, GWU | July 2020
Sources: Survey of India, 1944 | Army Map Service, US Army, 1945 | Brocheux, P., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995
CHINA
LAOS
Area of main map
THAILAND
South China Sea
0
Miles
300

Figure 1.1 The Mekong Delta in the mid-twentieth century

Before the French, if states desired to control this lightly populated "periphery," their ambition foundered on lack of adequate state capacity. This history, and the devastating economic and social dislocation of World War II, shaped this region's response to war.

Today, our cartographic imagination, conditioned by maps demarcating nation-states, places the Mekong Delta in "Vietnam." So it is; but such "mapping" is deceptive. The delta is not oriented northwards towards the rest of Vietnam: its rivers flow out of Cambodia along a northwest-southeast axis, emptying into the South China Sea. When the water level in the Mekong rises too high, excess water flows back into the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia, which acts as a giant catchment basin and moderates the extent of flooding downstream. Canals and streams crisscross this delta, wedged between Vietnam and Cambodia, straddling land and sea.

1.1 Ethnicity, Place, and Space in Historical Perspective

By the end of the seventeenth century, a new political actor entered the far south: the Vietnamese Nguyễn lords. They expanded southwards to Cambodian Prey Nokor (Saigon), and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries pushed further south and west into the Mekong Delta. Cambodian and Vietnamese kingdoms thus collided, mixing together Vietnamese newcomers, Siamese expansionists, remnants of a defeated Cham polity, Ming refugees from the Qing empire, Malay and possibly some Javanese, and longstanding populations of ethnic Khmer. The result was a complex ethnic, religious, linguistic, and political mosaic. Nguyễn rulers worked hard with limited means to consolidate control over this unruly Mekong Delta frontier. They asserted their power over the preexisting populations of Chinese in Mỹ Tho, Sóc Trăng, and Hà Tiên (some of the main areas of settlement), and Cham in Châu Đốc and Tây Ninh. They also moved into lands traditionally claimed by the Cambodian monarchy that were lightly populated by Khmer.

This legacy of contestation would shape the later unraveling of French Indochina during the First Indochina War. For this reason, this chapter pays special attention to the Khmer, who long predated the Vietnamese in the delta. Modern Vietnamese accounts minimize the significance of Khmer sovereignty claims and routinely emphasize that in 1757, Cambodia supposedly ceded their rights to this territory. As one work states, "from 1757 onwards, the entire region from Đồng Nai to Hà Tiên was completely part of Vietnam's national territory and [this] was recorded clearly on our administrative maps. The border between our country and Cambodia [Chenla] had been demarcated clearly."[3] Such is the dominant interpretation in Vietnam.

In fact, the historical record of Cambodian "cession" of territory is quite contested. The term "cession" implies a formal agreement, but none has come to light. In 1904, Étienne Aymonier argued that the cession of Preah Trapeang (Trà Vinh) and Basak (Sóc Trăng) in the mid-eighteenth century, carried out by a contender to the Cambodian throne during an internal Cambodian struggle for power, was virtually forced upon the Cambodians: "the term *cession* poorly characterizes these incessant [Vietnamese] encroachments, which did not ratify any formal act." Aymonier prefers the term "usurpation" to describe this process.[4] It is perhaps most accurate to state that in 1757, a Cambodian contender to the Cambodian throne traded away rights to govern peripheral territories and peoples that he did not control, and that the Vietnamese had barely settled, so that he could gain Vietnamese support and seize power at the center of his future realm. Aymonier further argues that immediately after 1758, while most Khmer of the lower Mekong Delta were theoretically subject to Vietnamese rule, "the Khmer still occupied the interior of these vast territories, apparently retained their national leaders, recognized the authority of their own kings, but did not have to submit any less to the influence and power of the Annamite mandarins."[5]

This "cession" was not accepted by many Khmer of the delta. Tạ Chí Đại Trường notes that at the end of the eighteenth century, Nguyễn Ánh, who went on to defeat the Tay Son "rebels" and unite Vietnam, allowed the Khmer of Bassak to rule themselves.[6] Choi Byung Wook concludes that in the late eighteenth century, "the basic policy of the Gia Định regime [i.e. the Vietnamese rulers over the area surrounding Saigon] toward the Khmer people guaranteed the Khmer self-government and co-existence."[7] Indeed, from the Tây Sơn uprising and rule (1771–1802) through the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion (1833–35), many southerners escaped the tight control of any monarch.

The rule of Emperor Minh Mệnh (also referred to as Ming Mạng) (1820–41), however, marked a turning point in Vietnamese-Khmer relations, as Minh Mệnh pursued a far more aggressive policy towards Cambodia proper. He forced all Khmer in the lower Mekong Delta to adopt the Vietnamese family names Thạch, Sơn, Kim, Lâm, or Danh.[8] Nguyễn actions provoked Khmer animosity and resistance. As Minh Mệnh complained, perhaps about the situation in Cambodia proper:

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[3] Phan Đại Doãn et al., *Một số vấn đề về quan chế triều Nguyễn* (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 1998), 70.

[4] Aymonier, Étienne. *Le Cambodge. Le groupe d'Angkor et l'histoire* (Paris: Leroux, 1904), 787,788.

[5] Ibid., 788.

[6] Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Lịch sử nội chiến ở Việt Nam từ 1771 đến 1802* ([Saigon]: Văn Sử Học, 1973), 241.

[7] Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng: Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, 2004), 33.

> The Thổ people [Cambodians] are incontrollable: at times they submit; at times they rebel, they are unpredictable. Last year, they endured several sackings and massacres by Siamese troops. Their land was bare. [I] look after them; the court dispatched an army to repel the enemy, saved them from despair and issued them blankets. Why then did they become hostile and turn into enemies of the Kinh [Vietnamese], and carry out massacres?[9]

From the 1820s onwards, the Nguyễn monarchy pushed the Khmer to become loyal subjects by adopting the names, language, clothing, and civilizational practices of the Vietnamese. To Vietnamese rulers, the different customs and beliefs of the Khmer were not an essential barrier to eventual assimilation.[10] To borrow David Howell's formulation for Tokugawa attempts to make the Ainu Japanese, the Nguyễn rulers "were more concerned with exteriority – the visible compliance with norms – than with the internalization of the principles behind these norms."[11] The Nguyễn dynasty, however, did not stop at "assimilation lite." Emperor Minh Mệnh occupied eastern Cambodia from 1835 to 1841. As one Vietnamese source stated, "Now that our country is changing things [in Cambodia] in a significant way and registering [Khmer] households, the day of transforming old [Khmer] customs into *Hoa* [Vietnamese] has come!"[12]

Cambodians deeply resented this occupation. In late 1840, faced with a threat to their continuing existence as a country, they rose up in widespread revolt. French missionary M. Miche wrote that in that year:

> From letters that I have just received from Bangkok, Tonkin is in full revolt, civil war is ravaging Cochinchina, and Annamite Cambodia is in flames. Here is what has given rise to the troubles that have bathed Cambodia in blood. The king of Cochinchina, motivated by who knows what sense of vertigo, has gotten into his mind that everyone in the realm has to wear the same kind of dress. Hearing this, people were vexed, to the point that a general uprising took place throughout Annamite Cambodia. Cambodians, who constituted a majority of the population

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[8] Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, 129.

[9] Emperor Minh Mệnh, quoted in Vũ Đức Liêm, "Vietnam at the Khmer Frontier: Boundary Politics, 1802–1847," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 5 (2) (November 2016), 553.

[10] See "'Trấn Tây phong thổ ký': The Customs of Cambodia" [1838], translated by Li Tana, in *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 1 (2007), chl-old.anu.edu.au/publications/csds/csds2007/Tran_Tay.pdf (accessed July 18, 2020).

[11] David Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 16.

[12] "Trấn Tây phong thổ ký," 156. In this context, "Hoa" refers to Vietnamese.

> in most areas, pillaged the Cochinchinese, massacred the mandarins and those who put up resistance.[13]

Vietnamese annals record an armed force of 2,000 coming down from the Thất Sơn mountains, straddling today's Cambodia-Vietnam border, to attack Kiên Giang province, where Vietnamese mandarins and inhabitants "fled in fear."[14] The Vietnamese mandarin Nguyễn Công Trứ wrote to the court that "now the Cambodian [*Thổ*] rebels are rising up all over" in the lower Mekong Delta.[15] Khmer living in Hà Tiên, An Giang, Kiên Giang, Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh, and Vĩnh Long all participated in this revolt, which dragged on into 1843.[16]

To resolve the dissension, Siam and Vietnam signed a treaty in 1846 that put the Cambodian king Ang Duong back on his throne. The Nguyễn dynasty, overextended and pressured by Siam, finally withdrew from Cambodia. But the damage had been done. Anne Hansen cites a searingly evocative Cambodian memoir from 1848 on the situation:

> The country was shattered. In every village, [people] struggled to find sources of income but could not. None of the rice farms or garden crops had been planted because everyone had been too afraid of Vietnamese and Siamese soldiers coming into the rice fields... Entire villages were devastated, abandoned, deathly quiet. It was sorrowful and heart wrenching beyond description seeing the misery of widows with tiny children, their heads resting in their laps, whom they were powerless to feed.[17]

If Vietnam "lost" its protectorate in eastern Cambodia, it retrenched in order to consolidate its hold on the lower Mekong Delta.

Where, then, was the border between Cambodia and Vietnam? As Vũ Đức Liêm comments, earlier borders on maps had played multiple functions – as defensive frontiers, administrative limits, state borders, and boundaries of Vietnameseness. "Over the nearly one hundred years since five Khmer prefectures were annexed to Hà Tiên in 1755, Vietnamese political boundaries moved westward. Frequent rhetorical shifts between civilizational frontier and state boundary characterized the Nguyễn intervention in Cambodia. Each time the language changed, so did the imagined geography."[18] By 1847, Vietnam had defined for itself an unambiguous state border. Labussière, writing in 1880, stated that it was "barely forty years ago [i.e. around 1840] that the Annamese court finally succeeded in substituting its authority for that of the Cambodian king."[19] Adhémard Leclère has written that after the 1846 treaty, "Cambodians began to flee the provinces that now form part of Cochinchina and that the *Yuon* [Vietnamese] had annexed in the past. The plots of lands they abandoned were subsequently occupied by Annamite farmers."[20] Bitter struggles broke out. Khmer retaliated against dispossession using arson, even murder; the Vietnamese judges, in turn, fined entire villages of Khmer for such acts. In the end, more Khmer fled for Cambodia.[21] Today, we might refer to Nguyễn dynasty actions as "ethnic cleansing."

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[13] *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, Vol. 14 (Lyon: Chez L'Éditeur des Annales, 1842), 148–149.

[14] Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Quốc Triều Chính Biên Toát Yếu* (Hue: Thuận Hóa, 1998), 315.

[15] Ibid., 315. [16] Ibid., 312–336.

[17] *Rýan Padam Ta Mas* [1908?], in Anne Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 45. For two moving Khmer poems on the impact of Vietnamese warmaking and subjugation on the Khmer, see Khin Sok, translator, *L'annexation du Cambodge par les Vietnamiens aux XIXè siècle d'après les deux poèmes du Vénérable Bâtum Baramey Pich* (Paris: Éditions You Feng, 2002).

The French invasion of Vietnam in 1858 catalyzed "long-simmering" tensions. In 1859, Cham and Khmer communities in the An Giang province border region rose up in rebellion; "by the end of that year it was spreading out of control."[22] In 1860, Cambodia invaded An Giang and Hà Tiên.[23] Under relentless pressure, the Nguyễn court formally ceded three provinces of southern Vietnam to France in 1862, followed by the three westernmost ones in 1867. This complicated history should drive home the simple point that the Khmer, whether in Cambodia or in the lower Mekong Delta, were still contesting Vietnamese claims to the delta in the 1860s.

The arrival of the French radically transformed the contest between Cambodians and Vietnamese. The French declared Cochinchina a directly ruled colony, and after a series of agreements, the Nguyễn dynasty signed a treaty ceding this region to France. All Vietnamese sovereignty claims over the area were rendered null and void. In contrast, the French made Cambodia a protectorate in 1863. Over twenty years later, as I have stated elsewhere:

> the creation of a new "superspace" of French Indochina (1887–1945) pre-empted conflicts over sovereignty and territory from breaking out. This large entity of

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[18] Vũ Đức Liêm, "Vietnam at the Khmer Frontier," 96.

[19] M. Labussière. "Étude sur la propriété foncière rurale en Cochinchine et, particulièrement, dans l'inspection de Soctrang," *Excursions et Reconnaissances* 3 (1880), 333.

[20] Adhémard Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge depuis le 1er siecle de notre ère, d'après les inscriptions lapidaires, les annales chinoises et annamites et les documents européens des six derniers siècles* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1914), 434.

[21] Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge*, 434.

[22] Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 151.

[23] Quốc Sử, *Quán Triều*, 423.

> French Indochina, joining all five *pays* or countries of Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Laos, and Cambodia, was a *non-national* space with ambiguous internal borders. It offered some protection for Khmer, in the sense that French rule prevented Vietnamese from encroaching on Cambodian sovereignty. In this superspace, a wide variety of imagined and actual communities could co-exist without entering into conflict over actual territorial spaces.[24]

In theory, if not in fact, France accepted the Cambodian monarchy's claim to sovereignty over Cambodia proper. *Left unsettled until 1949 was the resolution of Cambodian sovereignty claims over parts of the lower Mekong Delta.*

Under French rule, the population of Cambodia and the Mekong Delta underwent transformation. Vietnamese migration to Cambodia and to the lower Mekong Delta shot up. Vietnamese, not Khmer, came to staff much of the French colonial apparatus in Cambodia.[25] By 1945, roughly 300,000 Vietnamese made Cambodia their home.[26] The situation in the lower Mekong Delta sharply differed. Chinese emigration to Cochinchina, including the Mekong Delta, surged from the late nineteenth century.[27] Vietnamese in-migration to the lower Mekong Delta upended the ethnic balance. If the Khmer probably formed the majority of the delta in the very early nineteenth century, by 1944 they had turned into a small minority in a Vietnamese sea.

While promoting Vietnamese in-migration to the delta, the French reversed the Nguyễn dynasty's attempt to assimilate the Khmer to Vietnamese norms and civilization. The French were contradictory: even as they saw themselves as "protecting" the Khmer, they packed the ranks of the Cambodian and Cochinchinese administrations disproportionately with French and Vietnamese, and shunted the Khmer into lower-level positions. The French encouraged Cambodians and Vietnamese to stay apart. Writing in 1907, Judge Edgar Mathieu observed "how rare are the marriages between Annamites and Cambodians" in Cochinchina, adding that relations between the two groups were "unfriendly."[28] Little had changed forty years later: one

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[24] Shawn McHale, "Ethnicity, Violence, and Khmer-Vietnamese Relations: The Significance of the Lower Mekong Delta, 1757–1954," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72 (May 2013), 367–368.

[25] Lê Hương, *Việt kiều ở Kampuchea* (Saigon: Trí Đăng, 1971), 82.

[26] This is a common estimate, and a reasonable extrapolation from the 1930 census. See NAC. RSC. Dossier 3061. "Tableau récapitulatif de la population non-blanche. Année 1930."

[27] See Tracy Barrett, *The Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 22.

[28] Edgar Mathieu, "Le type du Cambodgien de Cochinchine," *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 15(1) (1907), 596.

1948 report suggested that one in ten Khmer marriages in the Mekong Delta were with Vietnamese.[29] The same low rate of Khmer-Vietnamese intermarriage was found on the Cambodian side of the border. Separation between ethnic groups was encouraged by the educational system. In addition to allowing temple schools, the French set up a limited number of Franco-Khmer schools to complement the Franco-Vietnamese ones.

Under the French, the Khmer of the Mekong Delta (the Khmer Krom) strengthened their religious ties to Cambodia. From the 1920s onwards, the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh reached out to the Khmer Krom in Cochinchina, trained their monks, and supplied the populace with printed Khmer materials.[30] In 1944, the French placed the *Mekhon* (heads of the Khmer Buddhist sangha in Cochinchina) under "the spiritual authority of the Leaders of the Sects in Cambodia."[31] These developments encouraged more Khmer Krom to travel: "a new spirit has arisen which makes them more willing to return to their country of origin [*sic*]. They maintain rather close relations with the Mother Country, and monks in particular regularly take their leave there to improve themselves spiritually, and students travel to Phnom Penh to continue their studies."[32]

I close this section with a captivating fragment of the *Bangsavatar Basak* [Chronicle of Bassac], one unlike the usual Vietnamese narratives. Chandler calls this work "a popular history collected in the 1940s in a Cambodian-speaking area of southern Vietnam":

> In former times there was little dry land here, and people would go everywhere in boats but never farther than the sounds of dogs barking in their village could be heard. There were no canals then, and no paths; there were only forests with tigers, and elephants, and wild buffaloes; no people dared to leave their villages.
>
> For this reason, hardly anyone went to the royal city [*krung sdach*]. If anyone ever reached it, by poling his canoe, the others would ask him about it. 'What is the king's appearance like? Is he like an ordinary man?' And the traveler, seeing all these frightened ignorant people, asking questions, would say: the king has an elegant beautiful appearance, unstained by dust, or sweat, and he has no scars. He's neither short nor tall, neither too young nor too old.' Now dishonest travelers would tell lies about the king, and would exaggerate. . .

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[29] Charles Vavasseur, "Étude sur les minorités khmères en Cochinchine." Saigon, October 30, 1948, in VNA-II, *Phủ thủ hiến Nam Việt* [hereafter PTHNV] F.1–48.

[30] Penny Edwards, "Making a Religion of the Nation and Its Language: The French Protectorate (1863–1954) and the Dhammakay." In *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 75–78.

[31] Vavasseur, "Étude." [32] Ibid.

> People would ask what the realm was like, the older people would say that being there meant there was always plenty to eat – soup, rice, and meat, and that everyone was happy.[33]

Reading these lines, it is clear that the Khmer of the delta once lived far outside the control of the Nguyễn court in remote, even wild, areas. They

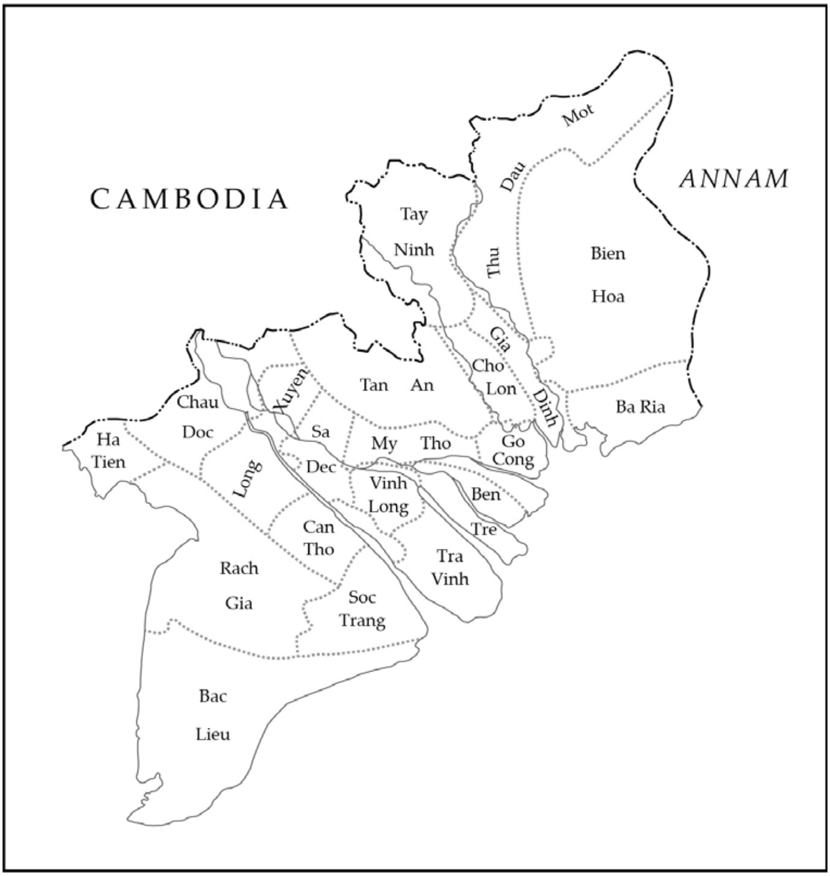
CAMBODIA
ANNAM
Thu Dau Mot
Tay Ninh
Bien Hoa
Gia Dinh
Cho Lon
Ba Ria
Tan An
Long Xuyen
Chau Doc
Ha Tien
Sa Dec
My Tho
Go Cong
Vinh Long
Ben Tre
Can Tho
Tra Vinh
Rach Gia
Soc Trang
Bac Lieu

Figure 1.2 Provinces of southern Vietnam, 1945
Source: Chris Robinson, 2020. Based on Pierre Gourou, "La population rurale de la Cochinchine," *Annales de géographie* 51(285) (1942), 11.

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[33] Quoted in David Chandler, "Going Through the Motions: Ritual Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia (1848–1860)," in David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), 17.

were only tenuously connected to the Cambodian monarchy. This autonomy and isolation was destroyed as new migrants – Chinese, Vietnamese, then French – refashioned the delta. The long transformation of the Mekong delta would set the stage for the violence of the post-1945 years. But the creation of the superspace of French Indochina, in which no Vietnamese ruled over the Mekong Delta or Cambodia, blocked the final Vietnamese attempt to claim the lower Mekong Delta for an emerging Vietnamese nation. It allowed the Khmer to keep alive their claim to the delta while strengthening ties to Cambodia. The final struggle between Khmer and Vietnamese for the lower Mekong delta, in other words, was put on hold from 1862 to 1945. It would have to be resolved from 1945 onwards.

1.2 The Mottled Delta in 1945

The Mekong Delta is one of the great rice deltas of the world. It features marshes and forests, plantations and rice fields, mangrove forests and seacoast. While dominated by flat expanses, the region also includes hills, sand dunes, limestone karsts, and small mountains. Some authors divide the delta into coastal, riverine, and mountainous zones. Philip Taylor goes further, dividing the Khmer-settled parts of the Mekong Delta, plus Tây Ninh province, into eight different environmental subregions.[34] These eight zones cover the area at the core of this book.

Not all of the delta was easily accessible. It was unevenly settled, with densely populated areas mixed with sparsely inhabited ones. The heart of the western Mekong Delta, the "rice basket" centered around the Mekong River and its tributaries, was packed with people: it had a population density of 162 persons per square kilometer in 1942. In contrast, Hà Tiên province was thinly settled, with a population density of only three persons per square kilometer. It was hard to traverse large zones, such as the U Minh Forest/Point of Cà Mau or the Plain of Reeds, with respective densities of only 11 and 6.6 persons per square kilometer.[35] Those fighting against the French would exploit them as zones of refuge during the war. The U Minh Forest was then a giant tropical wetlands forest, edged with mangroves, bordering the Gulf of Thailand; the densely vegetated Plain of Reeds (with large expanses of tall reeds) was flooded for much of the year. Besides these zones, other areas, such as the tropical forests of Tây Ninh province or the mountains along the Cambodia-Cochinchina border, also offered sanctuary.

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[34] Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology, and Sovereignty* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 11–13.

[35] Pierre Gourou, "La population rurale de l'Indochine," *Annales de Géographie* 51(285) (1942), 12, 13, 11.

Historically, the Khmer had settled the Mekong Delta early, followed by Chinese, Cham, Malays, and others. The Vietnamese had arrived relatively late. By 1945, the Mekong Delta, although approximately 90 percent Vietnamese, was mottled: ethnically, linguistically, politically, religiously, and in terms of place of origin. Traces of earlier settlement patterns remained. While the 350,000 Khmer formed only 6 percent of Cochinchina's population, they concentrated in the provinces of Trà Vinh (85,000), Rạch Gía (65,000), Sóc Trăng (80,000), and Châu Đốc (45,000).[36] (Trà Vinh province alone counted 108 Khmer temples in 1948, with 520 resident monks.[37]) Lesser numbers scattered in Bạc Liêu provinces Cẩn Thơ, Rạch Gía, Châu Đốc, and Tây Ninh provinces. Most areas of Khmer settlement were close to branches of the Mekong or canals. This pattern of Khmer concentration would shape the war.

Significant numbers of Chinese (as well as Sino-Khmer and Sino-Vietnamese) lived in the Mekong delta. But who, exactly, were the Chinese? Some delta inhabitants were creole in culture, mixing Chinese, Khmer, and Vietnamese practices. *Minh Hương* had Sino-Vietnamese ancestry and kept their ties to Chinese culture. Many belonged to Chinese congregations. While most Chinese lived in the main city of Cholon, significant clusters of Chinese lived in the western Mekong Delta provinces of Cần Thơ, Rạch Giá, Sóc Trăng, and Bạc Liêu. Some Chinese, such as those in Mỹ Tho and Hà Tiên, could trace their ancestry back several hundred years to Ming loyalists who fled China with the rise of the Qing dynasty. Chinese aside, other populations existed in much smaller numbers. Small pockets of Cham were found in Tây Ninh and Châu Đốc provinces. Malays were found in and around Châu Đốc.

Ethnic and political diversity aside, the dominant Vietnamese were themselves split on religious lines. Catholic congregations had been established in the delta since the late sixteenth century.[38] Cao Đài temples were scattered across the region. The Cao Đài embraced a new religion, founded in 1926, drawing on Western spiritism, Chinese secret societies, and Vietnamese practices, and incorporating a broad range of Western, Vietnamese, and East Asian spirits into its pantheon. Perhaps one in five persons in the delta belonged to this religious group by 1945.[39] The Hòa

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[36] Vavasseur, "Etude." [37] Ibid.

[38] Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 25.

[39] Hoskins suggests that one-fourth or one-fifth of Cochinchina in 1940 followed the Cao Đài. See Janet Hoskins, *"God's Chosen People": Race, Religion, and the Anti-Colonial Struggle in French Indochina*. Asia Research Institute Working paper 189 (September 2012), 4.

Hảo was a heterodox branch of Buddhism dating from 1939 with a charismatic leader, Huỳnh Phú Sổ. They comprised somewhere between 200,000 to one million followers.[40] While often portrayed as an exotic sect, the Hòa Hảo actually combined beliefs particular to the western Mekong Delta with a peasant householder orientation found from the earliest days of Buddhism, as well as teachings from the broad salvationist Pure Land tradition that has been one of the major poles of East Asian Buddhism. Added to these religious streams were many other teachings, from Protestantism to Pure Land Householder [*Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ*] and Strange Scent of the Precious Mountains [*Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*]. The delta, in other words, was a religiously dynamic and complex region in 1945. The link between religious allegiances and politics, however, was up for negotiation.

1.3 Economic and Social Uncertainty in the Delta

At the core of the upheaval in the Mekong Delta was its particular economic structure, which was susceptible to exogenous shocks. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the French colonial state "developed" the delta, digging canals, draining marshland, and expanding the area that could be planted with rice and other agricultural commodities. The delta would come to depend on strong export markets in rice to sustain its growing population. In areas settled by Vietnamese the longest, such as those close to the city of Saigon, landholdings were smaller. Even so, a large number of farmers still rented the land they tilled. Areas that had come under recent exploitation, such as the core of the western Mekong Delta today, boasted more large landowners and plantations. Here, plantation owners and other landowners took a higher cut of the harvest from tenants,[41] and thus exploited landless renters more. In prosperous times, a large "floating population" of landless laborers could find work, sometimes on the large French, Vietnamese, even Chinese estates; but in downtimes they faced difficulties.[42]

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[40] As Pascal Bourdeaux shows, statistics on the size of the Hòa Hảo vary widely, from 200,000 on up. Basing himself on a 1949 study, Bourdeaux suggests that there were 600,000 to 700,000 in 1950. Huỳnh Phú Sổ himself claimed over a million adepts. See Bourdeaux, "Approches statistiques, de la communauté du bouddhisme Hòa Hảo," in Goscha and de Tréglodé, eds., *Naissance d'un État-Parti*, 293–299.

[41] J. Decaudin, "*Un essai d'économie dirigée: le marché du paddy et le marché du riz en Cochinchine 1941–1944*" (special issue of the *Bulletin de l'Économie Indochinois*, 1944, Fascicules III and IV), 10.

[42] David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2010), 148.

On the eve of World War II, Cochinchina's economy had recovered from the Great Depression of 1929–30. It was producing, on average, about 3,100,000 tons of rice and exporting half (1,500,000), making it one of the top three rice exporters in the world.[43] World War II, however, would be transformative. The Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia in 1941 and 1942 broke some of the economic bonds that linked the region. Rice-rich Burma, Thailand, and southern Vietnam had once exported to India, Malaya, and central and northern Vietnam. Interregional transportation dropped, and finally came to a halt, when the Americans began air raids on shipping routes and railways after 1943. When war severed these economic links, Bengal and north-central Vietnam suffered major famines, and Malaya endured acute food shortages.[44]

As the economy crumbled, economic infrastructure did as well. In September 1945, the journalist André Blanchet noted that "plantations, from which the Japanese had expelled the French on March 9, were abandoned, rubber trees untended, and rail equipment rusted."[45] Transportation routes had broken down. Railroads had deteriorated. Blanchet observed that "wherever you go in Indochina, whether it be Cochinchina, Phnom Penh, Pakse or Hanoi, [one finds] vast graveyards of cars and trucks."[46] Few individuals had access to working motorized transport. From 1945 onwards, canals and rivers became the transportation routes of choice in the delta.

Economic degradation during the war hurt rural dwellers. By 1945, Mekong Delta peasants were wearing tattered clothes. They had to scramble to find basic commodities, like salt or lamp oil. To travel long distances, they often walked, as many cars, buses, and trains had broken down, been destroyed, or lacked fuel. Roads and waterways were often in pitiful shape. One Mekong delta farmer complained of the lack of fuel and noted that "no one could buy new clothes, and our old clothes were worn and torn after two or three years. Mosquito nets were used to make outfits for women while men just wore shorts. We also washed sacks to wear as a shirt without sleeves."[47] Vương Liêm, a boy during World War II from Tập Rèn, Sóc Trăng province, stated that "daily life was essentially one of hardship, there was not enough work to feed oneself, and so one could not get enough clothing, mosquito nets and blankets, pillows, and other things… Soap was seen as a luxury, even though the famous 'Cô Ba' soap was sold everywhere."[48] A communist party history of Tiền Giang province noted that even landlords and administrators had become poor and their clothes were threadbare [*xơ xác*]. The French Vichy regime fretted about these issues: in February 1942, for example, it censored articles on the difficulty of finding potatoes and on the poor rice harvest in Gò Công province.[49] "Goods were critically short and prices soared," but the purchasing power of inhabitants was weak: "daily life for people, once difficult, became worse."[50]

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[43] Decaudin, *Essai d'économie dirigée*, 5.

[44] On such economic and food disruptions, see, for example, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Soldiers: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), especially 327–335.

[45] André Blanchet, *Au pays des ballila jaunes: relation d'un correspondant de guerre en Indochine* (St. Étienne: Dorian, 1947), 24.

[46] Ibid., 149.

[47] Bẩy Long, interviewed in David A. Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 116.

In the long run, the decade from 1944 onwards would devastate the export-oriented Mekong Delta far more than the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Depression, lasting from 1931 to 1934 in the South,[51] led to social, economic, and political upheavals, with many peasants losing their land and being thrown out of work. Rice exports dropped 46 percent from a peak in 1928 to their nadir in 1931.[52] The period from 1944 to 1954 would be even more calamitous, leading to even more severe contraction of land under cultivation, more joblessness, more depopulation of parts of the delta, far higher levels of migration, and – of course – more violence and more dead. The downturn began at the end of World War II. By 1944, exports from the Mekong Delta, once one of the world's major rice baskets, had plunged to their lowest level since 1912.[53] By 1945, with American air attacks, overall exports from Indochina – including rice – had plunged even further, to 1.4 percent of 1940 levels.[54] In the western Mekong Delta in particular, provincial rice cultivation dropped, depending on the province, between 20 and 85 percent in 1945.[55]

By 1945, then, delta inhabitants had to cope with dramatic economic shocks. Problems cascaded: with little rice slated for export, less was planted; with less planted, landowners had less need for harvest labor, thereby throwing many landless laborers out of work; in response, some of them turned to banditry, others to politics. The Chinese rice millers had no rice to mill; landowners could not pay off their creditors; moneylenders acquired land they did not want and became cash-poor. This unfolding economic disaster primed rural inhabitants for the political upheavals that followed. Plantations were breeding grounds of discontent, as the landless workers in places such as the LaBatsche plantation (Sóc Trăng province) were pulled into ethnic and political violence.

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[48] Vương Liêm, *Đồng quê Nam Bộ (thập niên 40)* (Ho Chi Minh City: Văn Nghệ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2003), 89.

[49] Vietnam National Archives-II [hereafter VNA-II]. Thông Đốc Nam Kỳ. II.A 45 file 243(12), "Censure de la presse française du 1er janvier au 31 mars 1942."

[50] Ban Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử Đảng, *Lịch sử Đảng Bộ tỉnh Tiền Giang* (s.l., Tiền Giang, 1985), 139–40.

[51] Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960* (Madison, Wisconsin: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), 153.

[52] Brocheux, *Mekong Delta*; percentages calculated from statistics on p. 164.

[53] Decaudin, *Un essai d'économie dirigée*, 128.

[54] Jean Delvert, "Quelques problèmes indochinois en 1947," *L'information géographique* 12, 2 (1948), 51–2.

[55] Quoted in Pascal Bourdeaux, "Approches statistiques," 287.

1.4 Conclusion

By the summer of 1945, the Mekong Delta was under enormous stress. Rice production had plummeted. Thousands of laborers were out of work. Migrants were flowing in and out of the delta, and from the countryside to the cities of the delta. By September, France was sending troops back to the South, promising to retake the colony of Cochinchina that it had lost. The delta was being primed for a massive level of violence. To this priming, and its eventual release, we now turn to understand the fractious August General Uprising of 1945, the spark for the war that followed.