

CHAPTER NINE

RIVALRY, AVOIDANCE, AND SCIENTIFIC LONGING

In his analysis of the work of Recollect missionary Chrestien Le Clercq who was active in the French colony of Canada in the late 17th century, Serge Trudel reflected on the topic of ethnographic discourse:

Narration is subject to two main functions: that of the speaker organizing his narrative (management function, *fonction de régie*) and that of the participant (testifying or attestation function, *fonction testimoniale ou d'attestation*), either by testifying on what he has himself seen or heard on location where the event or the anecdote he recalls occurred (testifying function), or by attesting, as reader, the reality of the documents he used to authenticate the event or the anecdote he has reported (attestation function).¹

Such understandings of ethnographic narration also applies to the missionary authors we have met in this book. There is little doubt that a more or less conscious form of participation was their dominant method of fieldwork. However, in organizing their narratives, writers from the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* posted in highland Southeast Asia took quite different paths from each other. I propose to categorise these paths on the basis of the intention of the authors and the type of vehicle through which they elected to disseminate their prose.

The first category brings together writers with no particular ethnological intention. Encompassing the vast majority of missionary authors in the field, a typical representative of this category is Léon-Marie Girod, whom we followed in Chapter 6, who wrote on his voyages through Upper Tonkin in the late 19th century. We saw that Girod was a path breaker in the upper region and the accounts of his journeys on the frontier were met with great popularity back in France. While his prose reached his audience through regular quotes in the yearly *Comptes-rendus* from his vicariate, it was mainly through popular missionary journals such as *Les Missions Catholiques* that he expressed himself. A mobile author rarely stationed in the same location for very long, Girod's stories

¹ Trudel, Serge. *Étude de genèse: le cas de Premier établissement de la foi dans la Nouvelle France (1691)*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Etudes françaises, Université de Montréal, 1997. Online version located at <http://www.pum.umontreal.ca/theses/pilote/trudel/these.html>.

took the shape of linear, uncritical narratives of his peregrinations. As such, they were above all light in content, lively, entertaining, and held comparatively little material of an ethnographic nature.

The second category bands together the writers who showed clear signs of harbouring at least some ethnological intentions, but who did not see fit to go much beyond what was actually useful to the better performance of their ministry. This group is significantly smaller than the previous one, this time encompassing missionaries who were in long and regular contact with local populations, who mastered the vernacular language(s), and for whom the best performance of their apostolic work depended on their knowledge of the prospective converts' culture(s). Typical representatives of this category are Antoine Bourlet in Laos, Aloys Schotter in Guizhou, and Paul Vial in Yunnan (see Chapter 7). All have openly stated in their publications that studying the 'natives' and their history, religion, and culture was an integral part of missionary work. This was one duty without which competent proselytising was not going to release all the fruit it had the potential to yield. Contrary to their more numerous colleagues in the first category, these authors had, deliberately or not, welcomed Father Wilhelm Schmidt's invitation to organise their observations in a structured way and make them available through publications to colleagues and other learned readers. In the cases of Bourlet, Vial, and Schotter, the outlets for their prose still included the *Comptes-rendus* and the usual popular missionary journals, but they strategically targeted more scholarly outlets such as *Anthropos* and the occasional book published by their mission's printing house.

To the third category belong writers with an open, explicit scientific intention underpinning their publication projects. Considerably much smaller than the two previous ones, this category is suitably represented in this book by two exceptional authors, Alfred Liétard in Yunnan and François Savina in Upper Tonkin, whose work we considered in Chapters 7 and 8. Both gave not more than a passing thought to the utilitarian dimension of their texts, that is, the fact that they should be of practical value to their colleagues in Christ; indeed, Savina in particular showed a total disinterest in such an objective, which led his critics to voice their dissatisfaction. Instead, both men openly claimed a methodical, non-utilitarian ideal aimed at better understanding the highlanders they worked with. To a degree, both shunned the *Comptes-rendus* and popular missionary journals and targeted instead publications aimed at scholarly audiences. The fact that Liétard's *Au Yun-nan* was published as a book by *Anthropos Bibliothek* constitutes in itself a level of

scientific approval that none of his contemporaries ever achieved.² For both men, scientific recompense and awards from the French scientific community also confirmed the value of their pursuits to the broader world. That their apostolic careers may have been jeopardized due to their intellectual focus going beyond the restrictive missionary horizon did not seem to bother them too much.

One could be tempted to argue that Paul Vial, with a solid ethnographic contribution such as *Les Lolos*, was also a candidate for the third category.³ But, it is a fact that beyond this particular and important piece, Vial harboured no open scientific intent, and certainly not one of a kind that could jeopardise his pastoral mission. Vial's perception of his own work remained that of a missionary in the field. His grammars, catechisms, and schoolbooks are there to remind us precisely of that. In addition, the rest of his prose was most regularly, and for the longest period, published in *Annales de la Société des Missions-Étrangères* and *Les Missions Catholiques*, both decidedly popular outlets. While I acknowledge that in some aspects Vial stands with one foot in both categories, I feel it is in the second that he fits more genuinely.

We can then appreciate that for each of these three categories, the authors' modes of writing also matched their intentions. For those belonging to the first category, the style is above all engaging. The whole of their production—think of Léon Girod's *Souvenirs franco-tonkinois*—is based on first-hand observations woven into an attractive, engaging narrative built around the readership's expectations of adventure, curios, and encounters with exotic peoples. In the second category, the style is functional. Here, authors focus on what is of practical use to themselves, to their colleagues, and to their converts, with language and education coming high on the agenda. Countless language dictionaries as well as Vial's textbooks, again, are a fine example of this style. For the third category, the style is studious. The texts are detached from the missionary society's needs and expectations; one could hardly find a practical religious use for them. Indeed, Savina and Liétard produced their scholarly pieces clearly besides performing their apostolic duty, or, in Savina's case, in its place.⁴

² Liétard, Alfred. *Au Yun-nan: Les Lo-lo p'ò. Une tribu des aborigènes de la Chine méridionale*. Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Anthropos Bibliothek, 280p. 1913a.

³ Vial, Paul. *Les Lolos. Histoire, religion, mœurs, langue, écriture*. Études Sino-Orientales, part A. Shanghai: Imprimerie de la mission catholique, 1898.

⁴ Girod, Léon. *Souvenirs franco-tonkinois 1879–1886*. Paris: Desclée, de Brouwer &

Let us focus for a moment on the third category, the one which interests this book most. Our authors in the highlands examining the ‘natives’ and writing in a studious style are characterised by what I am inclined to call scientific longing. In the French colonial tradition as we saw in Chapter 3, predecessors such as Gabriel Sagard (c. 1600–1650), Joseph-François Lafitau (1681–1746) and Pierre de Charlevoix (1682–1761) were early messengers of Catholicism to the New World whose works—along with other dominant figures like Dominican Bartolomeo de Las Casas (1484–1566), Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún (1500–1590), or French Protestant Jean de Léry (1534–1613)—became instrumental in conferring a degree of credibility to religious ethnographic accounts and to early anthropology. Not content with the mere descriptive listing of elements pertaining to material culture or with enticing depictions of the ‘savages,’ their appearance in France’s first stretch of colonial expansion (16th c. to 1763) also meant that they belonged to an altogether different intellectual and missionary tradition. The early Jesuit ethnographers such as Lafitau and Charlevoix had aristocratic backgrounds and their education was well-rounded; in many ways, they were erudite and were strongly influenced by Jesuit ethics.⁵ Before its temporary dissolution in 1773, the Society of Jesus was a hierarchical organization with advanced education, strict discipline, and broad knowledge of the natural and human world nurtured by an international missionary network. Due to their particular history and principles, the Jesuits became a customary home to sharp minds capable of standing next to powers-that-be wherever they missionized. ‘Convert Princes first, the people will follow’ was their motto. The Society arguably had become an important international scientific community of the early modern era.

What was left of this elitism in the education of regular religious recruits in France in the late 19th century could not compare. In most cases, including the MEP, the counterparts to the religious scholars of previous centuries were made of less distinguished fabric. They came into the picture at a time when France had started mining its coun-

Cie, 1900; for instance Vial, Paul. *Calcul: les quatre règles expliquées aux enfants*. Hongkong: Imprimerie de Nazareth, 29 p. 1913.

⁵ Cf. Blackburn, Carole. *Harvest of Souls. The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America 1632–1650*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000; Li, Shenwen. *Stratégies missionnaires des jésuites français en Nouvelle France et en Chine au XVII^e siècle*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003.

tryside to mass-produce, as it were, missionaries for its fast expanding colonial domain. Of course, a number among the humbler crowd did, in spite of less prestigious backgrounds and formation, yield a scholarly production of sorts for their followers to admire, a production most of the time limited to the field of language learning tools, which were the compulsory figures for the active missionary intellect. In the second half of the 19th century and a few decades into the 20th, keen recruits with a sharp brain wishing to engage in intellectual ventures had to look elsewhere to find models to emulate, or else search earlier in the history of Western missions.

Another important difference between the earlier colonial missionaries and their followers was the fantastic development of modern science that occurred in the intervening time. Products of the Enlightenment, rationalism and scientific doubt had permeated practically every corner of Western thinking. Exposed from the mid-18th century onwards to this new paradigm and its specific discourse, for the first time religious thinkers could use an innovative form of logic to question the rationale of their ministry and attempt to find scientific bases to their actions that would complement their moral foundation. This, however, was a demanding task in the face of a conservative institution, an innovation the Church was not that keen to see become popular amongst its recruits. For the religious establishment, this was a time when the performance of missionary work in the colonies was pressing, and forming competent recruits to that end was the dominant strategy. In the field, faith had to remain sheltered from the wanderings of Science as much as possible and for the 'natives' civilisation was to come first as a result of Christianisation. For the priests in turn, it was expected that moral fulfilment had to be achieved primarily through the competent and dedicated spreading of the divine Word to the pagans. Any other pursuit was futile, unnecessary, possibly costly, and certainly vain if not outright narcissistic. Publishing one's works for the entire world to see amounted to a selfish misuse of critically needed energy, far more appropriately used tilling and harvesting the fields of the Lord.⁶

⁶ Compartmentalisation within missionary societies such as the *Missions Étrangères de Paris* meant also that exceptions could be made. The farther a missionary was from the apostolic field, the more academic endeavours would be judged leniently. Such was the case of prolific and celebrated MEP historian Adrien-Charles Launay (1853–1927) who had been sent back to France for health reasons after only five years in Cochinchina. He was then authorised to devote the rest of his life with the Society to archival work and historical studies, yielding over 40 books totalling in excess of 20,000 pages.

In other words, intellectualism, ingenuousness, and initiative, which had been prerequisites, political duties, and a strategic necessity for Lafitau, Charlevoix, or Las Casas, had been spun into sins of egotism by the time Alfred Liétard, Paul Vial and François Savina had reached their missions. As a semi-reprehensible project, persisting in studiously penning research papers and getting them into print had turned, if I may say, into a mission. Who can blame these sharp but bridled minds, then, if they sometimes longed for the kind of recognition and appreciation their forefathers had received with their antique ethnographies of the ‘savages’? They felt, it seems, an urge for their individual voices to be heard from a field they had expertly negotiated, sometimes with appreciable difficulty. How could they accept to remain humbly silent when, around them, opportunistic Europeans hurriedly roving ‘their’ mountains were publishing sketchy monographs bringing them fame? Paul Vial, for one, was far too polite to publicly voice what he thought of Archibald Colquhoun’s two books following his short journey through Yunnan in the early 1880s, after, let us recall, Vial had assisted the great explorer and guided him back to safety in Burma.⁷ On the other hand, Alfred Liétard and François Savina did allow themselves to be a little less restrained in their critique of earlier authors on the Lolo and the Miao. But only just. I personally believe that their predicament mirrors that of today’s anthropologists faced with the proliferation of touristy and journalistic exoticized accounts of the human groups they specialise on, that tend to become the truth for the masses of little informed readers. The choice is to remain silent and stubbornly carry on one’s academic work, or somehow try to speak-up. ‘Studious’ MEP missionary ethnographers in Indochina perhaps spoke-up in their own particular way.

A small minority among the MEP authors were thus longing for a scientific label and probably for a share of scholarly fame. They most likely knew little of the potential risks of their hunt. Publishing their findings in the highly visible *Anthropos*, as opposed to the benign *Les Missions Catholiques* or the humdrum *comptes-rendus*, amounted to stretching their heads over the parapet and risking being examined by a broader audience in a much longer timeframe, as this book attests. It shouted out

⁷ Colquhoun, Archibald R. *Across Chryse. A Journey of Exploration through the South China Border Lands from Canton to Mandalay*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 2 volumes, 1883.

to a secular readership their desire to be recognised for their competence in the field, but also for their scientism and intellectual rigour. They were not 'just' missionaries after all, they succeeded, in the middle of the daily hardships inherent to their remote tropical postings, in writing one, even several books and getting them published.

LACKING KNOWLEDGE AND FAILING MEMORY

Let us address the critical problem of sources, which seems to have affected our religious authors across the board. First, as far as the production of the texts goes, in all the Asian cases presented in this book references to earlier published French missionary ethnographers posted outside Asia are entirely absent. Second, all our MEP authors barely touched on sources, religious or otherwise, published in European languages other than French. What is particularly puzzling in the case of Upper Tonkin is that even texts produced by their Spanish Dominicans colleagues next door, installed for two centuries in the Protectorate of Tonkin, were ignored. Language discrepancy here can only be partially blamed since all could communicate in Latin and probably French. In Yunnan and Guizhou, Protestant and Anglican colleagues from the China Inland Mission were even more alien to the French priests, sharing the double indignity of speaking English and not being Catholic. Thirdly, French secular sources, be it from Tonkin or southwest China, get scarcely better treatment. A few are invoked occasionally such as Émile Rocher, while many among the most eminent ones are ignored. Auguste Pavie's Mission papers, Émile Lunet de Lajonquière, Edouard Diguët or Maurice Abadie's ethnographic anthologies are all overlooked.⁸

Reconnecting here with the case of New France we explored in Chapter 3, let us consider in more details the first group, that of earlier French Catholic authors from outside Asia. Remember Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649)? As we have seen, Brébeuf was a Jesuit missionary to Huronia, who produced a seminal ethnographic text in 1635–36 on

⁸ Pavie, Auguste et al. *Mission Pavie. Géographie et voyages*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 7 volumes, 1898–1903; Abadie, Maurice. *Les races du Haut Tonkin de Phong Tho à Lang-Son*. Paris: Société d'éditions géographiques, maritimes et coloniales, 1924; Diguët, Émile (Capitaine). *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*. Paris: Librairie Maritime et Coloniale, Augustin Challamel, 1908; Lunet de Lajonquière, Émile (Commandant). *Ethnographie des territoires militaires*. Hanoi: F.H. Schneider, 1904.

the Huron Amerindians. For him, studying the ‘*sauvages*’ was a survival skill. It was needed in order to eat and feel reasonably secure among these hosts, in addition to the pastoral necessity of finding an effective channel through which the Bible’s message could be passed on.⁹ Brébeuf produced language tools to help his colleagues and wrote mainly for the benefit of his Society’s *Relations des Jésuites en Nouvelle France*. He thus fits our category of functional writers discussed above.

Brébeuf’s works are of interest to us here because they provided an early, easily available model for future missionaries to conduct ethnography. These works could have been explored by 19th recruits as a pragmatic measure to ensure the efficiency of the ministry and to ease hardships on assignment. In my opinion, had only one substantial body of missionary account from the French colonial past been available to future missionaries to muse over when preparing to perform their ministry, it should have been the massive, 41 volumes of the *Relations des Jésuites en Nouvelle France* of 1632–1673. These were perfectly coherent in style and purpose with the MEP *comptes-rendus*, their later counterpart. The formation years at the MEP seminary in Paris would have been a most appropriate moment to read and discuss them. It appears that such was not the case.

MEP clergymen interviewed in the course of researching this book could not explain such a regrettable absence. One can surmise that it may well have been dependent on two historical incidents. First, *Relations* was the product of the Society of Jesus, and the Jesuits were competitors to the MEP. The former’s relative arrogance and spectacular fall from grace between 1773 and 1814, with their suppression worldwide by Pope Clement XIV (bar Orthodox countries such as Russia) was cause for their existence before 1773 to become somewhat obliterated from French memory. The second likely reason for this short psyche relates to the oblivion into which the New France adventure itself fell in French collective memory after the humiliation of the Seven Year War of 1756–1763. Never a star colony, not quite as exotic nor as attractive to the metropole as Martinique or Tahiti, and in the end a resounding diplomatic and military failure, the New France experiment, despite its 150 years lifespan, was probably better forgotten.

⁹ Thérien, Gilles. “Introduction.” In *Écrits en Huronie*, Brébeuf, Jean de, Montréal: Bibliothèque québécoise, pp. i–lix, 1996.

However, there is hardly a fitting combination of historical explanations to wholly justify the MEP tendency to shun such a valuable heritage from its forefathers. Historical interpretation must combine with a more down to earth set of explanations. The simplest of these, and probably the most plausible one, involves ignorance, considered here both as a state of mind and a strategy. I use ignorance to express the shortcomings of the uninformed mind, which is rather obvious, but also to highlight the strategy by ecclesiastic authorities to efficiently form hard working and not unnecessarily sophisticated cohorts of young missionaries for the colonies, at the lowest cost. Frailty of character, intellectualism, and the need for a European level of comfort had to be discouraged at the earliest stage of drafting; robustness in every possible aspect had to already be present or fostered to manufacture sturdy missionaries fit for a life of hardships. Hence the convenient recruitment of candidates from rural peasant life, which guaranteed both their physical preparedness, vigour, and their lack of interest in intellectualizing the world and their personal place within it. The message of God to the ‘natives’ was a simple one, His messengers had to be uncomplicated spokespersons leading an exemplary life.

Ideology was also at play. In late 19th century France, the MEP missionary ideal that was offered to recruits promoted the ‘sacrificial lamb’ model. Martyrs of the Faith, as explained in Chapter 4, were the most compelling examples for many among the young men. These models were actively promoted by the missionary institution with implements such as a ‘martyr room.’ In-house hagiographies of Théophane Vénard, Jean-Charles Cornay, Pierre Borie, Jean-Louis Bonnard, and Augustin Schoeffler, all celebrated 19th century MEP men killed in Tonkin, were readily available. Thus, getting to read Sahagún, Lafitau, or Charlevoix for their views on the ‘savages’—presuming that some recruits may have wanted to do so—was not a straightforward task at all. In fact, reading just about anything outside the narrow focus of austere religious education was made even more difficult by religious censorship (*l’Index*) governing what could be accessed in the library.

It is difficult to deny that even by the turn of the 20th century, the MEP directors and educators in Paris were actively discouraging the extra-curricular learning process among their candidates to priesthood. The former showed little or no awareness of the ethnographic dimension of their pupils’ future work in the field. Yet, one can argue that without having in any way to unnecessarily expose the recruits to

unwanted theories on the origins of Humankind such as were being spread in evolutionist circles of the time, there were plenty of religious authors at hand who had said something useful on ethnography, either as a purposeful practice instrumental to the success of missions abroad, or as a potential glimpse back into the Biblical origins of Man. For instance, in 1887, MEP missionary Jean Guerlach (1858–1912), attached to the Eastern Cochinchina vicariate in the highlands of south Vietnam, wrote a few pages on his field methods in an article on the Bahnar minority published in the very correct *Les Missions catholiques*.¹⁰ Later, in *Anthropos*, Bishop Le Roy (1854–1938), probably the first missionary author to explicitly call for his colleagues to “become anthropologists,” released the article on the scientific role of missionaries mentioned in Chapter 8. He made the point that to successfully spread the Christian faith, a “battle plan” (his words) has to be established, which should comprise the study and understanding of the country and its inhabitants, including native mores, laws, religion, and languages. Made aware of the limitations of missionary formation and life by years of pastoral activity in Gabon, Le Roy also stated: “But the missionary too often lacks a scientific formation and a critical mind, he is not used to conducting research and intellectual work, he lacks time, money, organization, and the necessary encouragements.”¹¹ The message to clerical authorities here could not be clearer.

A few years later in 1912, taking up Le Roy’s call, Léopold Cadière (1869–1955), attached to the MEP Hue vicariate in central Annam and a prolific author on the religion of the *Annamites*, contributed a paper on fieldwork methods to the first conference on Religious Ethnology held in Louvain, Belgium.¹² With these *Instructions pratiques pour*

¹⁰ Guerlach, Jean. “Moeurs et superstitions des Bahnars. Journal de voyage de M. Guerlach.” *Les Missions catholiques*, vol. 19, pp. 441–527, 1887.

¹¹ Le Roy, Alexandre. “Le rôle scientifique des Missionnaires.” *Anthropos* vol. I, pp. 3–10, 1906, 10. See the analytical presentation of this article by Laburthe-Tolra, Philippe. “L’ethnologue Alexandre Le Roy (1854–1938).” *Mémoire spiritaine*, vol. 12, Second semester, pp. 62–71, 2000.

¹² Cadière, Léopold. “La Semaine d’Ethnologie religieuse tenue à Louvain.” *Les Missions Catholiques*, 493–495, 1912. Between 1912 and 1932 five such *Semaines d’ethnologie religieuses* conferences were held, initiated by clerics such as Wilhelm Schmidt, at which were discussed matters pertaining to missiology and missionary ethnology. See Courtois, Luc. “La première semaine d’ethnologie religieuse à Louvain en 1912. Les débuts difficiles d’une démarche progressiste sur fond de crise moderniste.” In Servais, Olivier and Spijker, Gérard van ‘t (eds). *Anthropologie et missiologie: XIX^e–XX^e siècles: entre conviècence et rivalité*. Paris: Karthala, collection Mémoire d’Églises, 95–118, 2004.

les missionnaires qui font des observations religieuses [Practical instructions for missionaries conducting religious observations], Cadière wished to give a functional shape to the encounter with the ‘natives.’ To do that, he claimed, it was more crucial to master languages *in situ* over long stays, than to merely bank on professional techniques, like the emerging caste of academic anthropologists.¹³ Cadière’s instructions, immediately published in the in-house journal *Annales de la Société des MEP*, seem to have failed to reach his colleagues surveyed in this book who were still active then (Savina and Vial); or at least, none quoted him. A few years later again, Denis Doutreligne, missionary in Guizhou and a contemporary of Savina, clearly illustrated how the nascent field of missionary ethnology was gradually becoming an acceptable theme within the MEP. Doutreligne reported, in a short article included in the 1924 issue of *Bulletin de la Société des Missions-Étrangères de Paris*, on two recent meetings in which religious ethnology and religious science were discussed by clerics and secular scholars alike. One meeting was held in Tilburg, the Netherlands (the third *Semaine d’ethnologie religieuse*), the other in Paris.¹⁴ A sign of the changing times and of the increasing complexity of the social sciences, reference was explicitly made in those meetings to the Canadian experience, to Lafitau, and to more vocally anti-clerical authors such as Voltaire and Rousseau as well as social thinkers Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim. Doutreligne diligently reported on all these sources. Expectedly, however, he brushed off the unpleasant scientific arguments and prophesized instead that the Catholic doctrine shall prevail to single-handedly explain the origin of Humankind and intelligence in the Universe—not unlike the ‘intelligent design’ doctrine one might say. Doutreligne concluded on the vital role of missionaries in the field as providers of competent ethnography requiring in turn an “exact and rigorous preparation in the observation of facts.” Interestingly for us, the cleric also mentioned that an oral report on those meetings was presented to MEP recruits in

¹³ Cadière, Léopold. “Instructions pratiques pour les missionnaires qui font des observations religieuses.” *Annales de la Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*, nos. 92–93–94, 1913. Cf. Lange, Claude. “Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Vietnamiens. L’œuvre du père Léopold Cadière (1869–1955).” In *Anthropologie et missiologie: XIX^e–XX^e siècles: entre convivence et rivalité*, eds. Servais, Olivier & Gérard van ‘t Spijker, Paris: Karthala, collection Mémoire d’Églises, pp. 211–228, 2004.

¹⁴ Doutreligne, Denis. “L’ethnologie et les missionnaires. A propos de deux réunions: Tilburg (1922), Paris (1923).” *Bulletin de la Société des Missions-Étrangères de Paris* no. 33, septembre, pp. 549–554, 1924.

Paris, who thus learned from both verbal and written sources about the current debates in the field of missionary ethnology. From then on at last, the excuse of ignorance was not available anymore to future MEP ethnographers—assuming that an availability of information was a sufficient condition to trigger insights and changes in deep-seated behavioural patterns; this in all probability remains to be established.

Scientific thinking took time to pierce the walls of the MEP, and in all fairness, of most other European missionary societies too. In France, non-Catholic, lay authors were long kept at the gates of seminaries and out of sight in religious libraries, underlining the fact that the relationship between Science and Faith remained an uneasy one for a very long time. Defiance, even a mild form of arrogance, played a key role in keeping religious ethnographers in the exclusive intellectual company of each other.

Missed opportunities and the Republican obstacle

Beyond possible sources of scholarly inspiration within the MEP or the broader Catholic sphere, even within the Christian faith at large, be it from the same time or earlier in history, it looks very much like a combination of avoidance and ignorance—in the sense of actively refusing to acknowledge—prevailed regarding sources from authors located outside the religious apparatus.

A paradox of late 19th century French ethnographic practice is that the first three editions of the British *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, published in 1874 and re-edited in 1892 and 1899 have, to my knowledge, never been translated and published in French. James Urry has shown how important *Notes and Queries* have been to the development of British and American field research methods in anthropology in spite of flaws and errors that made them irrevocably outdated after the last edition in 1951.¹⁵ It is thus surprising that French ethnographers

¹⁵ First edition: British Association for the Advancement of Science (ed.). *Notes and Queries on Anthropology for the use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands*. London: Edward Stanford, 1874. And the last one: The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, 6th edition. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1951. Urry, James. “*Notes and Queries on Anthropology* and the Development of Field Methods in British Anthropology, 1870–1920.” Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute. [Reprinted in: Urry, J. *Before Social Anthropology: Essays on the History of British Anthropology*. Chur, Switzerland; Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Publishers, pp. 45–57 1993], 1972; Urry, James. “A History of Field Methods.” In

of all allegiances should have consistently passed up on the chance to use this handy toolkit to assist them in their own inquiries or simply to reflect on field methods. Beyond the language barrier, could ideological obstruction have been at play in this missed opportunity?¹⁶

Moreover, we know since the rediscovery of the original manuscript in the 1950s, that clear and practical instructions on how ethnographic inquiry should be conducted were written in French as early as 1799. A short-lived *Société des observateurs de l'homme*, the Society for the Observation of Man, had been set up that year, only to be abolished by Emperor Napoléon in 1804. Most notably, a conceptualisation and practical definition of participant-observation—though not called this—was proposed by Baron Joseph-Marie De Gérando in a series of detailed instructions to explorers setting out to study ‘*peuples sauvages*.’¹⁷ But this text remained confidential and practically unused for 150 years by French ethnographers.

Presumably, elements of methodological inspiration were tapped by our MEP missionaries in more general references. We saw in the previous chapter that Alfred Liétard in Yunnan quoted the work of Alexandre Chavannes, and François Savina referred explicitly to Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau.¹⁸ Chavannes’ book series was not methodological in nature but Quatrefages, writing a century later, added to his writings general anthropological instructions for travellers,

Ethnographic Research: a Guide to General Conduct. ASA Research Methods in Social Anthropology, ed. Ellen, R.F., London: Academic Press, pp. 35–61, 1984.

¹⁶ And I suspect that useful early works may have also been published by most of the other European colonial powers too, notably in Spanish, Portuguese, German, Dutch, Italian, Russian, and perhaps Swedish and Danish. My lack of familiarity with these languages prevented me from exploring these possibilities.

¹⁷ De Gérando, Joseph-Marie. *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages*. [Considerations on the diverse methods to observe savage peoples] Paris: Société des observateurs de l'homme, an VIII, 1799, reprinted integrally in Copans, Jean & Jean Jamin. *Aux origines de l'anthropologie française: Les mémoires de la Société des observateurs de l'Homme en l'an VIII*. Paris: Les cahiers Gradhiva, no. 23, Jean-Michel Place, 1993 [1978]. See also the seminal analysis of De Gérando's text in Stocking, G.W. “French Anthropology in 1800.” *Isis*, LV(2), no 180, pp. 134–50, 1964; and Moore, F.T.C. (ed.). *The Observation of Savage People by J.-M. de Gérando*. Preface by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

¹⁸ Chavannes, Alexandre César, *Anthropologie ou science générale de l'homme, pour servir d'introduction à l'étude de la philosophie et des langues et de guide dans le plan d'éducation intellectuelle*. 13 volumes, Lausanne, 1788; Quatrefages de Bréau, J.-L. Armand de. “Anthropologie.” In *Société de Géographie. Instructions générales aux voyageurs*, Paris: Delagrave, pp. 244–58, 1875.

above all on anthropo-biometry. But here again, referring to such sources was exceptional.

Now, with the information available on which to pass judgement, we have little choice but to conclude that outside of religious circles, no sources on fieldwork methods were notably explored and used by MEP missionaries working in upland Mainland Southeast Asia. It is in large part this kind of paucity, this incapacity among ethnographers of the 19th and early 20th century in the French colonies—not just clerics in upland Indochina—to fetch and use the tools available at the time to produce sound ethnography, that infuriated sociologist Marcel Mauss long before he set out to publish the first modern French fieldwork method manual in 1947, *Manuel d'Ethnographie*. Thirty-four years earlier, in 1913, Mauss wrote:

Historians, faced with the shortcomings of France's description of peoples, will declare: 'France behaved towards her subjects like nations of the Antiquity towards the Barbarians. She proceeded with contempt and used methods from another age. It is the French Republic's fault if we know no more about the New-Caledonians than the Romans taught us about the Ligurians.'¹⁹

Even at that early stage in his career, Mauss was no stranger to the organisation of ethnographic research in upland Indochina. In the year 1900, aged 28, he had been consulted on how to organise field research in the highlands and contributed to preparing ethnographic enquiry tools.²⁰ Questionnaires were put together with his aid in preparation for the major 1903 ethnological field surveys commissioned by the colonial authorities to the commanders of the Military Territories; these yielded a wealth of internal reports consistently structured along the same principles. These reports eventually led to major publications.²¹

¹⁹ Mauss, Marcel. "L'ethnographie en France et à l'étranger." *La Revue de Paris*, vol. 20, pp. 537–60, 815–37, 1913, 837.

²⁰ Mauss, Marcel. *Carnet Instruction pour les collaborateurs de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*. Saigon: Imprimerie Ménard et Legros, 1900. Mauss, Marcel and Auguste Bonifacy. *Questionnaire de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*. Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1903. Regrettably, I could not lay eyes on either of these documents, which are not part of the 3 volume publication of the Mauss papers (Mauss, Marcel. *Œuvres*. 3 volumes. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969), nor do they seem to have left any trace in the EFEO archives or at the *Service Historique de la Défense*, the French military archives in Vincennes. Reference to them, to their shadow as it were, exists in a few contemporaneous colonial documents.

²¹ A number of these unpublished reports are kept at the EFEO archives in Paris, others can be found at the *Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence. Publica-

Ad hoc production of ethnographic questionnaires was not rare in the French tradition; these tools were designed by professionals to assist non-professionals in the field in ‘asking the right questions.’ As noted by Pels and Salemink, ethnographic questionnaires remained common in France until well after World War II.²² Surely, these questionnaires, either in their original forms or picked from published documents, could easily have been borrowed by missionary ethnographers in the region? It seems they were not.

In sum, a variety of methodological tools were unquestionably available to missionaries and to other ethnographers in the region at the time. Some stemmed from initiatives sufficiently distant in time and in physical as well as intellectual space to explain why they were not adequately known or used in field research. Some tools, however, stemmed from sources much closer to home. Such oversight was extensive and can be less comfortably forgiven. Indeed, missionary ethnological reflection at the time, in spite of Le Roy’s 1906 suggestion that Catholic missionaries should embrace ethnology, fundamentally stuck to what I am tempted to call a form of *bricolage*. Some of the *bricoleurs* were definitely talented and fully deserve scholarly attention today; I hope I have made the case for a few of them here. The vast majority, however, sticking to the religious organisations’ call, simply aimed at pleasing an audience of lay readers without taxing the latter’s intellectual resources beyond what was required to make them reach for their pocket.²³

Finally, beyond the practicalities of individual choices, the lack of adequate preparation and the unavailability of written sources, we must also take into account macro-political developments in the late 19th century that played a role in curtailing missionary initiative on the ethnological front. Circumstantial political conditions erected walls separating segments of French society, in our case powers-that-be and academics on one side, and clerics on the other. This major influence

tions stemming from the 1903 surveys include Lunet de Lajonquière, Emile (Commandant). *Ethnographie du Tonkin septentrional*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1906; and Diguët, Emile (Capitaine). *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*. Paris: Librairie Maritime et Coloniale, Augustin Challamel, 1908. This ethnological survey was originally meant to cover the whole of French Indochina, but few results ever materialized outside of the northern Military Territories.

²² Pels, Peter and Oscar Salemink. “Introduction: Five Theses on Ethnography as Colonial Practice.” *History and Anthropology*, vol. 8, nos. 1–4, pp. 1–34, 1994, 10.

²³ Such cynism was not shared by everyone of course. See Spindler, Marc, “L’argent des missions et l’argent des chrétiens”, *Ad veritatem* [Faculté universitaire de théologie protestante de Bruxelles], no. 27. Septembre, pp. 2–12, 1990.

related to the Third Republic and its anti-clerical—its defenders would say secular—ideals.

In her book, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, a timeline matching ours, Aline Conklin demonstrates that under the Third Republic, which spanned from 1870 to 1939, France developed a colonial programme determined by the pursuit of economic profit—*la mise en valeur*—and by a political agenda of dominance that materialized in a self-ascribed mission to civilize—*la mission civilisatrice*. Incidentally, in the case of Indochina, this agenda was suitably illustrated in the titles of two publications from the 1920s by Albert Sarraut, Governor General of the Indochinese Union in the 1910s: *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*, and *La mission civilisatrice de la France*.²⁴

The Third Republic was born from the hot ashes of France's 1870 defeat to Prussia at a time when a nation mourned the loss of important segments of its territory to the victors. For the national political elite, collective humiliation was the dominant sentiment. The new breed of post-war leaders thus insisted on reinstating and spreading Republican ideals inherited from the Revolution with renewed vigour. Profitable overseas expansion became a golden opportunity to restore national pride, among other things. In Conklin's words, political leaders of the early Third Republic knew that "the ideology of the civilizing mission could not but strike a responsive chord in a nation now publicly committed to institutionalizing the universal principles of 1789." By 1895, this mission had become the official ideology of France's imperial expansionism.²⁵

Conklin also shows that a fracture occurred between the first colonial push of France, which ended at the conclusion of the Seven Year War in 1763, and the second colonial push starting with the North African adventure in the early 19th century. She demonstrates that the fundamental ideological shift that made the second phase distinct from the first was a consequence of the introduction of the modern notion of

²⁴ Conklin, Alice L. *A mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*. Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1997. Sarraut, Albert. "La mission civilisatrice de la France." *Panorama* no. 132, 1925; *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*. Paris: Payot, 1923.

²⁵ Conklin, Alice L. *A mission to Civilize*, 2. See also Girardet, Raoul. *L'idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962*. Paris: Hachette, 2005; Mayeur, Jean-Marie and Madeleine Rebérioux. *The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War, 1871–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

civilization. In the first phase, commercial partners were sought in far away territories, and the fact that these partners remained ‘barbarians’ was of little concern, as long as business went on. Christianizing some among those partners merely meant, for France, lubricating the cogs of the trading machine. However, in the second phase, thanks in large part to the combined ideological effects of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, the exotic ‘Other’ had been promoted to the rank of a potential ‘Us’, a ‘less-civilized’ on a universal scale comprising all of humanity, in need of France’s cultural lights to progress towards the more palatable state of ‘near-civilized’—full equity was not quite yet deemed achievable. The expanding industrial agenda, based on increasing production and the constant need for new markets, became the motive for vigorous *mise en valeur*, conveniently posing in colonialist rhetoric as a positive outcome of colonisation for the ‘natives.’

Nowhere in her book, though, does Conklin address the issue of Catholic missions and their political role in this expansion. Whether deliberate or fortuitous, this omission can be appraised in historical terms. Over most of the 19th century, the Republican ideals and scientific discourse on human progress inherited from the 18th century were challenged by numerous short lived and highly antagonistic regimes: the First Empire and Napoleon’s hegemonic wars (1804–1814), restoration of monarchy (1814–1830), popular uprisings and military clampdowns (1830–1852), and, leading to the Commune uprising in Paris and the defeat to Prussia, the Second Empire of Napoléon III (1852–1870). Overall, a series of elitist, bourgeois or aristocratic governments were periodically challenged by the people. The quick succession of these regimes made French politics altogether volatile and hardly predictable. In the process, between 1799 and 1870, the battered body of the Catholic Church, which had enjoyed enormous privileges under the monarchy but narrowly survived the trauma of the Revolution, found itself invigorated by the restoration of its privileges under imperial and neo-monarchist governments. When came the Third Republic however, political leaders, many of them Free Masons, firmly intended to curtail this new strength. The Third Republic, most importantly, wanted to be secular and the landmark law of 1905 separating the Church and the State (*Loi relative à la séparation des Églises et de l’Etat*) came to crystallise this agenda.

For the *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, this new political climate made recruitment more difficult at home, the image of the Catholic Church being demoted publicly by the secular authorities. It also made the

running of missionary affairs in the colonies a much more complicated task with relationships with the state being less fluid than before. For all their astuteness, Bishop Puginier and his successors, as seen in Chapter 6, had to push hard to be heard in gubernatorial circles. In the field, individual missionaries were less and less capable of performing their work without the increased level of administrative support it required. More isolated in their individual missions than ever before, with dwindling numbers of new recruits from France to help and succeed them, but also with a growing threat of being drafted by the military to play the role of chaplain for the troops when the clampdown on nationalist forces began to expand, proselytizing was made difficult. The performance of any task not pertaining to core religious duties was becoming gradually impossible. Devoting time to observing the local hosts, to reading scholarly authors, or writing sound ethnography was not anymore an option for the vast majority of clerics stationed in outposts. This goes a long way to explain not only the decline in missionary activity in the northern uplands after the 1920s, but also the gradual disappearance of missionary ethnographic publications from highland Tonkin and Yunnan after Paul Vial and, a few years later, François Savina left the scene.

FINALE

Over four hundred years, from the 16th century with the first state commissions for clerics to board exploration, military, and merchant ships sailing to the new worlds, to the mid 20th century when independence wars sent European colonists packing, a degree of continuity in the methods, style, presuppositions, intentions, and even intuitions is recognizable from the time of the early generations of missionary observers and writers, to their heirs in the heyday of 19th century French colonialism. For the missionaries of the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* presented in this book, this continuity, in all likelihood, appears to have been both contextual—as demonstrated throughout this text—and fortuitous. It was fortuitous in the sense that, based on a lack of evidence to substantiate a possible claim that any heritage from their forefathers was effectively communicated to younger generations through seminary curriculum, it was not the result of a consciously produced and pursued strategy. Unconsciously, however, with the stability and the conservative values defining the missionary institution, a type of missionary *habitus*

had formed in context and was efficiently passed on to new recruits through religious education and the emulation of deserving elders. Based on the examination of the works of MEP missionaries posted in the Mainland Southeast Asian Massif detailed in this study, we can state that this stability was ensured by a lacking or a defective capacity to cumulate knowledge and learn from predecessors and contemporaries, religious as well as secular. Instead, a form of intellectual inbreeding was prevalent, comforted in the assurance that there could be nothing like a Catholic missionary in the field, living for most of his life among ‘his natives,’ to become the best possible person to study, understand, represent, and publicly discuss their language, history, religion, and culture. The black robed bearded men in colonial hats may have been inclined by vow towards modesty, but they were not totally immune to the sin of pride.

Their attitude towards their protégés revealed a political sensibility too. While it is undeniable that these Christian messengers worked from inside and in harmony with the colonial system, it is equally true that many followed in the footsteps of Bartolomeo de Las Casas in denouncing the exploitation of the ‘natives’ by that same system. Paul Rabinow remarked, on their practice of ethnography, that:

[Missionaries] saw that ethnographic understanding was [not only] a linchpin for their own mission [but also one] for the survival of native culture in a healthy form. The task of the missionary-ethnographer was to gain an understanding of local custom that would enable him to change it without ‘violating’ its life sustaining form.²⁶

Indeed, in this book, we have encountered open condemnation from a number of missionaries of the exploitation of the ‘natives.’ As thinking individuals, missionaries were agents, they could not be reduced to being uncritical, passive instruments of an arrangement bent on civilizing and generating profit for the colonists, its elite, and the metropole. Holding a definite share of power as actors, even if moving within an otherwise guarded configuration (the Church and the colonial state of course, but also on a personal level, their rural origins, their restricted education, their condition as single men, and so on), they could also envisage the situation from their particular viewpoints and pursue

²⁶ Rabinow, Paul. “Facts are a Word of God.” In *Observers Observed*, ed. Stocking, George, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, “History of Anthropology” series vol. 1, pp. 196–207, 1983, 201.

another agenda. Hence the need I have emphasised in this book to analyse each missionary's written production against the particular background of their own life experiences.

Given its ideological foundation and tangible framework, the pastoral venture turned potential individual agency into practice. Agents like Savina used all the levers accessible to him in order to remain part of his missionary society while taking a distance from apostolic work and, in its place, engaging in scholarly pursuits more in tune with his personal desires and his beliefs on the role he could and should play regarding the highlanders. Others, like Vial, used his 'objective' position to set up, within the borders of his mission, a model society reproducing Western societal ideals and educating the 'natives'. He wished to provide them with the economic skills needed to survive those fast times and to resist assimilation. Alfred Liétard and Aloys Schotter both explicitly stated that their actions among their converts were at least in part directed at supporting the latter's efforts to maintain their cultures in the face of Chinese economic, political, and cultural hegemony. Like many amongst the best of missionary ethnographers, they were driven, in van Beek's words, by a "profound empathy for 'their population'."²⁷

For each of these men, their true 'mission' had roots that went beyond the missionary ideology they adhered to. It was the product of a combination of opportunities including family background, early childhood experience, and social *habitus*. One could assess that these men, because of who they were as total *personae*, not just because of who they had turned into as priests and colonists, were subversive. They used what was left of their liberty to try to counteract excessive exploitation, support the underdog, and delay assimilation as much as possible. Being priests, that is, advocates of peace, not many tools were left to them to accomplish this. Observing, learning, understanding, and crucially, publishing became the means for some of them. Going public with their observations and opinions, sometimes against the wishes of their bishops and colleagues, was their personal form of sedition. Their efforts, as futile as they might appear a century later, were not misplaced. Missionary ethnography is being revisited, not just by modern clerics and scholars, but also by the heirs of the subjects themselves. Highland

²⁷ van Beek, Walter E.A. "Anthropologie et missiologie ou la séparation graduelle des partenaires." In Servais, Olivier and Spijker, Gérard van 't (eds). *Anthropologie et missiologie: XIX^e-XX^e siècles: entre connivence et rivalité*. Paris: Karthala, collection Mémoire d'Églises, 25-44, 2004.

ethnic groups forced to navigate the treacherous waters of globalization, ever more exposed to the siren song of the liberal market economy with its glittering promises, find in these early monographs a dog-eared portrait of themselves which, if not always true, remains decipherable and genuine. As Margaret Swain very sensibly wrote in the conclusion of her analysis of the work and legacy of Paul Vial in Yunnan: in the face of great adversity, “missionary Orientalism in Southwest China was a factor in ethnogenesis among peripheral groups”.²⁸

As ‘incidental’ ethnographers, missionaries in the mountains of Mainland Southeast Asia were remarkably qualified with vernacular languages and local experience. They were in a unique position to produce distinctive and exceptional observation pieces. After the incessant disorder of wars and revolutions that shook the region for so long, their texts today have become unique and priceless glimpses into the earlier embodiments of numerous minority cultures that have themselves substantially changed since, or, for many, have lost the memory of their past.

²⁸ The same could be said of Laos and Vietnam. Swain, Margaret Byrne. “Père Vial and the Gni-p’a. Orientalist Scholarship and the Christian Project.” In *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Harrell, Stevan, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, pp. 140–85, 1995, 172.