

Messianism as A Factor in Vietnam's Hmong Mass Conversion to Christianity: 1990-2005

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INTRODUCTION

In Robert Hefner's article, "World Building and the Rationality of Conversion" he quotes Emefie Ikenga-Metuh who says: "...our accounts of conversion must be 'multi-causal rather than mono-causal.'" Hefner adds: "As a social phenomenon religion is, to use Anthony Giddens's phrase, 'dually constructed' – emerging both from the ideas and the intentions of individuals and from the institutions and circumstances that constrain and routinize the world in which people act, often outside their full awareness."¹

This call to recognize the place played by both the agents of religious change and the socio-cultural context that affects change, is amply born out in the case of the Hmong of north Vietnam who since about 1990 have undergone a significant and, from the point of view of the Vietnamese government, troubling conversion to Christianity. To date, it is believed amidst a population of 787,000, there are somewhere in the range of 200,000 – 300,000 evangelical believers in the provinces of the north along the Lao and China borders.² What brought this about? What has transpired to drive this movement? A variety of factors have been claimed by the government, by the Hmong Christians themselves and by outsiders who have done their best, such as myself, to research this phenomenon.

As claimed by official publications of the Vietnamese government are there, in anthropological terms, messianic or millenarian factors at work? Which of these or both? And if these obtain, how do they relate to the interpretation put on it by Hmong themselves who tell relatives and international observers they have been motivated by the desire for a better life resulting from spiritual benefits afforded them by the Christian message.

THE HISTORY OF THE HMONG MOVEMENT OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Let us begin with the history of the movement. The first official acknowledgement of an upstart movement of Hmong religious change came from a 1991 article in the state newspaper *Nhan Dan*. [April 21, 1991] It identifies the month and place of its onset: Ha Tuyen province in September 1989. The publication states that the initial religious movement resulted from a revival and adaptation of Hmong belief in Vang Chu, a heavenly king, which Hmong legend foretells will come down to earth to save the Hmong in a time of extreme duress. "Vang" means king and "Chu" means owner or proprietor and together this means the "King who is Above All and Rules All."

¹ Robert W. Hefner, *World Building and The Rationality of Conversion*, in *Conversion to Christianity* (Berkeley: UCalifornia, 1993), 27.

² Population figures come from Chu Thai Son, Ed., *Nguoi Hmong*, (Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban Tre, 2005), p. 140. Number of evangelical (*Tin Lanh*) Hmong congregations supplied by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam – North.

In traditional belief, the Hmong might appeal to Vang Chu in case the ordinary means of dealing with disease or ill fortune by the shaman was ineffective. Associated with Vang Chu's power of occasional intervention is the belief he may at some future time actually descend to earth. This is not unlike beliefs held by millenarian movements which have periodically impacted other highland minorities of Southeast Asia in the last 100 years.³

At this point it seems prudent to briefly discuss messianism and a similar construct, millenarianism, as theories of religious change. First, messianism. Messianism, derived from the word messiah, is most often applied in Jewish, Christian and Muslim contexts though it is applied in other religious settings as well. In these religions a common feature had to do with anticipation of a coming or returning figure who would powerfully confront and conquer opposition and either restore a kingdom or bring in a glorious period that would end evil and bring unparalleled prosperity and peace.⁴

The theory of millenarianism, like messianism, is not a monolithic construct as there are many variations. But it can be summarized as "...the belief that the end of this world is at hand and that in its wake will appear a New World, inexhaustibly fertile, harmonious, sanctified, and just. The more exclusive the concern with the End itself, the more such belief shades off toward the catastrophic; the more exclusive the concern with the New World, the nearer it approaches the utopian."⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I will observe that both theories converge in suggesting that the appearance of an unusual figure will usher in a period of untold blessing and that this belief can trigger significant changes in the life and society of those holding these beliefs.

HMONG RELIGIOUS CHANGE FROM GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM SOURCES

The Hmong of Vietnam have seen religious change take place among them due to a number of factors. Tran Huu Son, an anthropologist of the Vien Dan Toc Hoc (Institute for the Study of Indigenous Peoples) identifies this in three phases.

First, during the French colonial days, Catholic missionizing resulted in converting a fair number of Hmong to the Catholic faith. In many cases, Catholic ritual and practice was integrated with some aspects of Hmong traditional life. Since the collapse of colonialism, there continue to be a small number of Catholic Hmong in these provinces.

But after the French left in 1954 and the government took control of the north, traditional *Hmông* practices were severely suppressed under the new government's policy of banning superstition. The Communist government coerced religious change, where Catholic missions used only persuasion. Son tells us that from the 1960s to 1990, the government forbade many festivals and ceremonies and restricted the *Hmông* of Lao Cai to celebrate the New Year for only a few days rather than the traditional one month.⁶ Where there was resistance to such measures, *Hmông* traditionalists were dealt severe punishments such as arrest, imprisonment, and hard labor.

³ See Oscar Salemink, , "The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands," in *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia*, Don MCCaskill and Ken Kampe, eds. (Bangkok, Silkworm, 1997), 488-532.

⁴ See "Messianism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed. Vol. 10, pp. 469-472.

⁵ Hillel Schwartz, "Millenarianism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Lindsay Jones, Editor-in-Chief, 2nd edition, vol. 9, p. 6028.

⁶ Tran Huu Son, *Van Hoa Hmong*, (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban, 1996), 174-178.

This forced conversion to more enlightened practices was not restricted to the Hmong but included other mountain ethnic groups and their religions. Hoang Quoc Hai, an official of the Ministry of Education and Culture had this to say of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. "In the new way of life, we mobilized people to eradicate the family long-house system where many generations share the same house. We stopped all taboos and got rid of all evil spirit sacrifices and wizards. All bad customs such as infant marriage, funeral rites and hundreds of other superstitious practices were forbidden. The new policy was just aimed at elevating the standard of living of the minorities to cope with civilized life in the world today. That was our good will."⁷ The disheartening impact of this forced religious change was observed in the early 1990's by anthropologist Oscar Salemink who documented it in his published work about the Jarai.⁸

A third wave of change, the one we are to focus on, began in Hmong culture in Lao Cai province when large numbers of Hmong converted to Christianity. Son lays out details that sound messianic in nature. Hmong converts were told to prepare to receive a figure called "Vang Chu" and to do so in ways that were appropriate to the appearance of a king. The people were to stop their ordinary labors, slaughter domestic animals, dig underground shelters for protection against judgment, wear traditional clothes appropriate for receiving kings, and perform other auspicious acts suitable for the reception of the world redeemer. Tran Huu Son indicates that in 1989-1990 in Lao Cai province 1215 animals were slaughtered and offerings in the amount of 15,000,000 piasters were donated to welcome the "King."⁹

A 2005 government publication, *Nguoi Hmong* (Hmong People), elaborates on Son's details in the chapter entitled "The Phenomenon of 'Proclaiming a King' in the Hmong Community."¹⁰ In it we get the most current official interpretation of the Christian conversion movement.

The author, Vuong Duy Quang sets the Hmong Christian movement against events of 1918 in Lai Chau when Hmong resisted French attempts to tax them by "proclaiming a king." Led by Vu Pa Chay, and called the "Pa Chay movement," it spread across northern Laos and Vietnam. Vuong identifies the movement as a "revolt" to resist the French. It had, and still has, the following features:

The one claiming or proclaiming "a king" would put themselves in a position of subordination to the king never actually claiming themselves to be the king. They would call themselves sons of the king, or messengers of the king. The king had supernatural powers and those who were in the vanguard proclaiming the king promised that followers would be invincible against French weapons. Furthermore, the king could supply weapons superior to the French made of plants and provide stores of guns and heavy weapons such as tanks. Rumors held it that buffalos, oxen, chickens and pigs could be materialized from rocks and stones. The Hmong should have no fear of the French.

⁷ Hoang Quoc Hai, "Hay Cuu Van Lay Nen Van Hoa Cac Dan Toc It Nguoi," in *Cu Yang Sin*, no. 23, July, 17 (1994), 18.

⁸ Salemink, "King of Fire."

⁹ Son, 184-185.

¹⁰ Vuong Duy Quang, "Hien Tuong 'Xung Vua' O Cong Dong Hmong," (The Phenomenon of 'Proclaiming a King' in the Hmong Community," in *Nguoi Hmong* (Hmong People), Ed. Chu Thai Son, Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban Tre, pp 121-135.

The king was to arrive at any time, provoking an element of intense excitement which called for Hmong to prepare for his coming - some claiming it would be preceded by natural and solar phenomena. Others claimed it was necessary to climb high trees to welcome the king and offer sacrifices of buffalos or other animals in anticipation. Additional features found occasionally among Hmong messianists was the expectation the king would take his followers to a happy place where no work was required.

According to Vuong earlier Hmong movements of “proclaiming a king” were essentially politically motivated and only when they were victorious over the French, would the Hmong king return.”¹¹ Humiliated in their subservience to the colonial French, Hmong sought dignity and self-respect through “proclaiming a king”.

But the Hmong of the 1990’s “proclaim a king” for slightly different reasons. One is a “natural” motive to experience greater material prosperity like that imagined about their glorious past. But psychological pathology is also at work. Hmong suffer from delusions as well as an inferiority complex. Due to Taoist influence of magic and witchcraft “...Hmong are always developing illusions. They believe that someday a savior of their group...will bring prosperity and happiness to the people.”¹² Vuong categorizes the impulse for “proclaiming a king” as both secular (the desire for a better life) and religious (superstition).

Vuong recognizes, however, that the situation is even more complex. Though there is no unanimous agreement, the new Hmong movement, while a continuation of the older “proclaiming a king,” arises out newer “root factors.” These are as follows. Beginning in 1987 several Hmong took advantage of Hmong gullibility, claiming that following Vang Chu would bring prosperity if they would give money and goods to the leaders. Many proclaimers urged Hmong to listen to radio broadcasts (FEBC gospel radio programmed in LaMirada, California and beamed to Southeast Asia from Manila) which proclaimed Vang Chu as the “highest god.” Some announced that in the year 2000 Vang Chu would return to earth. The movement spread successfully across provinces heavy with Hmong populations. Citing details from commune after commune, and district after district, Vuong details the advance of the movement. But what is new since 1987 according to Quang is the notion that Vang Chu is the Christian god, something totally absent from Hmong legends and earlier “proclaiming a king” messianism. Vuong says, Vang Chu was “...totally nonexistent in the traditional culture of the Hmong” and has its origins in the new movement which drew on earlier notions of a “king” but merged and confused it with illusory notions of a Supreme Being, the very God of Heaven.¹³

THE MOVEMENT NOT MESSIANIC BUT A GENUINE CASE OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION.

A different story can be constructed about the fundamental impulse of the Hmong conversion movement. It begins as early as 1975 when FEBC began radio broadcasts by native *Hmông* speakers aimed at *Hmông* living in China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Letter responses from Vietnam’s *Hmông* were sparse in the 1980s, but in 1989 this began to change as recognized in the Communist Party newspaper *Nhân Dân* [The People].¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid, 127.

¹² Drawing here, as elsewhere for the English translation of *Nguoi Hmong*, on the work of Le Hoang Vu and Reg Reimer. Manuscript in author’s files.

¹³ Vuong , “Phenomenon,” p. 133. In other government documents, the Hmong conversion movement is seen as a direct though subtle attempt to introduce a fifth column in Vietnamese society and accomplish by peaceful evolution what they could not achieve by military revolution.

¹⁴ Nguyen Xuan Yem, “Hay Hieu Dung Ve Nguoi Hmong,” in *Nhân Dân*, April 21, 2 (1991).

It was about this time that I began my research. I have had access to hundreds of letters, tapes and documents from Hmong to friends and relatives in Laos, France, Canada and the United States that tell a different story from that constructed above. But one must acknowledge that it may be only one side of the story. And getting to the bottom of this unprecedented religious movement clearly awaits a time when Vietnamese authorities will permit the kind of research on the ground among the Hmong that they approved when Oscar Salemink researched ethnic religious life in the provinces hundreds of miles to the south. But from what I know, the following is a more accurate view of what happened.

Hmong letters by the thousands, detailing their thoughts and actions, have been sent to FEBC's mailbox in Hong Kong and later archived in California. These indicate that the *Hmông* movement arose in a fructifying context of complex socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious conditions. The short wave radio messages of Evangelical broadcasters triggered diverse responses: messianic, Evangelical, and even quasi-Christian.¹⁵ There seems no reason to deny Vuong Duy Quang's account about bizarre and occult practices accompanying some Hmong religiosity in this unusual period of time. But it is clear that of all these movements vying for followers, only the Evangelical movement, though resisted and egregiously opposed by government policies and practices, has gained a substantial following and has secured for itself a permanent toehold in Vietnam's rich and variegated religious landscape.¹⁶ Today, between 1000-1200 congregations constituting a community of 200,000- 300,000 claim to be evangelical Christians. This is supported by the fact that the officially recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam has appealed repeatedly to the government to extend recognition to these churches, though without much success. While the government has not yet recognized them as legitimate members of the larger evangelical community there are signs that the SRV is slowly revising its stance. International advocates for the Hmong are hopeful the government will cease misrepresenting the main core and impetus of the new Hmong religious movement, and extend to them the religious freedom it promises in its constitutional and policy statements.

What is missing in the Vuong Duy Quang account and in every, I state again *every* account of the contemporary "Vang Chu" movement put forth by Vietnamese offices, is any voice of the Hmong themselves. The Hmong are repeatedly said to be subject to illusion and gullibility. Apparently they are also mute and illiterate. Such is far from reality. Petition after petition has been submitted by Hmong leaders to the central government, with the assistance of the legally recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) have been laid aside.

But the letters of Hmong, mentioned above, tell in plain terms of their acceptance of gospel salvation and ask questions about what it means to become a Christian. Other letters share their struggles in how to understand the Christian message and others ask for help in life crises. Again and again they complain of government interference with their religious choice, puzzled at why others are extended the right to become Christians, they are forbidden.¹⁷ Some ask for more information indicating they have not made up their minds but are

¹⁵ More needs to be learned about two cultic movements, Yang Shong Meng and Eastern Lightning which coexisted alongside the dominant Christian element.

¹⁶ For a more full account of this see my article "The Evangelical Religious Movement Among the Hmong of Northern Vietnam and the Government's Response: 1989-2000," in *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2002, 16(2): 79-112.

¹⁷ A copy of a March 2006 letter recently arriving on my desk details official abuse so typical of the past fifteen years. Available on request.

seriously considering “believing in Jesus Christ.” They also request Bibles and hymnbooks and seek help about how to perform Christian ceremonies such as funerals, weddings, and Christmas and Easter rites. Clearly, a nascent Evangelical movement has been established among the *Hmông*.

Some letters also indicate concern about the emergence of quasi-Christian cults whose practices vary from what they understand should be the norm. Some converts, alas, have followed *Hmông* leaders who claim to be either *Vang Chú* or Jesus Christ himself who and claim paranormal powers.¹⁸ But the following statement from a *Hmông* in 1992 is repeated, in tone and content, again and again: “When it comes to following our old tradition—the practices of the shaman and animistic ways, we are tired of it. We don’t want anything to do with it. That is why we decided to keep our faith even when the government persecuted us. What this is, is the right and good thing. It is good for us.”¹⁹ Hoang Quoc Hai, an official of a government cultural commission, makes no reference to deviant, messianic or cultic practices when favorably contrasting the pre- and post-conversion worldview of Evangelical ethnic minorities of both the North and South:

When the Evangelicals introduced them to a powerful God, He not only loved them but teaches them all kinds of practical and easy-to-do lessons. That God also is personified in flesh and bone and they can even look at his picture in real life.... Their own gods traditionally only receive the offerings, but never give them anything. This God, on the contrary, only gives but never demands anything of them. They believe God is their provider and protector. God is just like a precious treasure that they found for the first time. They are ready to cut off with their past and follow God.²⁰

CONCLUSION

It seems that soon after 1989 in Hmong areas, three distinct religious responses coexisted in both mixed and separate forms in different localities. There was a revived and traditional *Hmông* messianism, as claimed by government studies. Also there were cultic and quasi-Christian manifestations. But what has been dominant, and probably so from the first, is the emergence of a new Evangelical community not unlike the century-old evangelical community of the lowlands among the ethnic Vietnamese (Kin). This mixture, I believe, best accounts for some of the uncertainty expressed by officials in internal documents about whether the *Vang Chú* religion is Evangelicalism or something else.²¹

In the early 1990s, anthropologist Oscar Salemink researched a millenarian movement of the 1930s among the E-de (Jarai) in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. He contrasted his findings with published scholarly views about the motives of this millenarian movement. Earlier social scientists had concluded the E-de “Python-God” movement of French colonial days was, at bottom, a political reaction to colonial oppression. His research uncovered otherwise. He reports

¹⁸ V-1094-2-Y, #P, a letter in FEBC files, describes similar circumstances in his area since becoming a Christian in 1989. A copy of the same is in my collection of documents.

¹⁹ Audiotape from Mr. P.C. to FEBC, archives FEBC office, LaMirada, CA. 1992.

²⁰ Hoang Quoc Hai, “Hay Cuu,” 18.

²¹ Hanoi official Mr. N told a news journalist in August 1999 that the *Vang Chú* religion was “not Protestantism yet.” Name withheld to protect source. However, the internal SRV document published by, Freedom House, *Directions*, “Program 184B – Developing the Economy and Culture, Normalizing Society and Building Political Infrastructure in the Mountainous Regions Where Minority Peoples are Christian Believers,” Document 3, 3 concludes that the *Vang Chú* religion “...has the same contents as the Christian [*Tin Lành*] religion.”

that the E-de clearly had forgotten it, and concludes it was "... a religious cult with no political intentions at all, which had nothing to do with the French presence in the Highlands..."²² He further observed that "...politicized interpretations of millenarian movements...preempts the possibility of other motives..."²³ In my view something like this has occurred as the government has failed to recognize a legitimate religious movement for what it is.

So is the Hmong conversion movement messianic? Yes, but only in the same sense in which Christianity itself is a messianic movement. Salemink, in a different field-based study of the Jarai legend about "the King of Fire," notes that earlier studies had similarly given it an anti-colonial political interpretation. Then he goes on to comment about the recent resurgence of Christianity among the Jarai: "Nowadays, the most conspicuous act of covert resistance is in the field of religion. With their traditional religious practices branded as superstition and outlawed, many Montagnards have turned to Christianity as an act of protest."²⁴

While the conclusions of Salemink about Ede and Jarai religious life in the Central Highlands does not settle the question about what has driven the Hmong conversion movement, it is instructive. Against anthropologists who see Jarai millenarianism as a reaction to colonial and post-colonial penetration, he sees it as due to religious factors within traditional Jarai culture. Failure to understand this, in his view, leads to a serious flaw of interpretation: "...Montagnards are denied agency, without space for autonomous action."²⁵

The Hmong conversion movement cannot be dismissed as the result of traditional messianism that has uploaded illusory notions of "Vang Chu" as the supreme deity as claimed by Vuong Duy Quang. Though many factors are involved, Hmong have made a rational choice and with agency have embraced what they think in their best interest. While it cannot be disconnected from the broader context, neither can it be reduced to political aims, ethnic gullibility, ancient superstition, or bad people seeking personal gain. I look forward to the time when the government will permit unhindered research in the northern provinces to verify, adjust or falsify these conclusions.²⁶

²² Oscar Salemink, "The Return of the Python God" in *History and Anthropology*, 1994. vol 8, nos 1-4, 132.

²³ Ibid, p. 131.

²⁴ Oscar Salamink, "The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands," in Don McCaskill and Ken Kampe, eds., *Development of Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia*, (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 1997), p. 521.

²⁵ Salemink, *Python*, 157.

²⁶ Salamink's "King of Fire," comments on ethnic Jarai reasons for converting to Evangelical Christianity, I believe, apply equally to the Hmong: "...I have not come across any Montagnard counterdiscourse relating Protestantism to political opposition." pp 522-523.

