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Lowland Participation in the Irredentist 'Highlands Liberation Movement' in Vietnam, 1955-1975

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*In the field of mainland South-East Asian history, particular attention has been granted to highland-lowland relations following the central argument James Scott presented in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South-East Asia*. Scott's analytical perspective echoes a long-term trend of scholarly examinations in the region. In a similar fashion, historical examinations of the Vietnam War period view the so-called 'highlands liberation movement' or the Unified Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races (FULRO) through the lens of a highland-lowland dichotomy. However, based on an examination of the biography of the Cham Muslim leader Les Kosem and various FULRO documents, this article challenges dominant assumptions based on Scott's argument and argues that a focus on minority-majority relations is essential for understanding the origins of irredentist claims of indigenous peoples in the region.*

Keywords: FULRO; Highland-Lowland Relations; Irredentism; Mainland South-East Asia; Vietnam War

*Der Beziehung zwischen Hochland und Tiefland kommt in der Geschichte Festland-Südostasiens in Anlehnung an das zentrale Argument von James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South-East Asia* besondere Aufmerksamkeit zu. Scotts analytische Perspektive spiegelt einen langfristigen Trend der wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzung mit der Region wider. In ähnlicher Weise zeigen historische Abhandlungen der Zeit des Vietnamkrieges das sogenannte „highlands liberation movement“ oder die „Vereinigte Front für den Kampf der unterdrückten Völker“ (FULRO) durch die Brille einer Hochland-Tiefland-Dichotomie. Basierend auf einer Analyse der Biografie des Cham Muslim Führers Les Kosem und anderer FULRO-Dokumente stellt dieser Artikel dominante und auf Scotts Argumenten basierende Annahmen in Frage und argumentiert, dass ein Fokus auf die Beziehung zwischen Minderheiten und Mehrheiten zentral für das Verständnis der Ursprünge irredentistischer Ansprüche von Indigenen in der Region ist.*

Schlagworte: FULRO; Hochland-Tiefland-Beziehungen; Irredentismus; Festland-Südostasiens; Vietnamkrieg

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Introduction

In the wake of the Second World War (WWII) major political changes occurred on the global arena as a direct result of the process of decolonization. Minahan (2002) has referred to this process as the “second wave” of modern nationalism (pp. XX-XXI).² During this second wave of nationalism, the French fought a punctuated conflict against Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh to regain control of their former colony in the light of the Japanese retreat from the region. In an ill-advised turn against American ideals of democratic rights and self-determination, the United States sided with the French colonialists, as they fought to maintain control over Indochina until the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, which led to the Geneva Conference later that year and the promise of elections for the reunification of North and South Vietnam. In the South, after Ngo Dinh Diem removed Bao Dai from power in a gradual process from 1955 to 1956, culminating in fraudulent elections, minority communities became the target of Diem’s assimilationist policies, as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) (VN: *Viet Nam Cong Hoa* also “South Vietnam”)³ explicitly supported the migration of predominantly Viet-Kinh⁴ Catholics into regions populated by highland and Austronesian Cham minorities in 1957, as well as during the *strategic hamlet* program in 1959. In this period, all peoples in the South who were not Viet-Kinh were reclassified as *Dong Bao Thuong* or “ethnic minorities” that, in the words of Diem, “needed to assimilate” (Scupin, 1995, p. 315). The study of the Cham language was banned and Cham language books were burned while in the north, Ho Chi Minh promised to create “autonomous zones” for ethnic minorities, following both the Chinese and Soviet state models (Scupin, 1995, p. 315). For the Khmer Krom in the Mekong Delta, the Cham along the coast in Cambodia and along the Vietnamese-Khmer⁵ frontier,

2 Minahan (2002) divides the history of nationalism into three waves: The first wave relates to the period between the two World Wars; the second wave follows the post-WWII period, which is also described as the period of decolonization; and the third wave occurs more recently after the end of the Cold War in 1989.

3 The language of the original documents has been considered where felt as appropriate and indicated as follows: (F) for French, (C) for Cham, and (VN) for Vietnamese language. Due to formatting requirements the diacritics have been removed from this publication.

4 The definition “Vietnamese” indicating Vietnamese nationality, in opposition to “Vietnamese” as an ethnic identity, is rather inappropriate, due to the reluctance of many minority groups to be referred to as Vietnamese nationals during the period in question. Technically, the formal term for Vietnamese ethnicity is *Kinh*, while the informal term in many sources is *Viet*. Thus, to avoid additional confusion for individuals who may not be familiar with either the usage of *Viet* or *Kinh*, the hyphenated *Viet-Kinh* is used for ethnic Vietnamese throughout this article.

5 This refers to the contemporary border of Vietnam and Cambodia which was formalized as the border between the protectorate of Cambodia and the colony of Cochinchina during the high period of French colonialism in the early twentieth century.

and the highland minorities living in the Western Highlands region (VN: *Tay Nguyen*)⁶, tension mounted slowly throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s. Thus, the *Unified Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races* (F: *le Front Unifie de Lutte des Races Opprimées* or FULRO)⁷ emerged in 1964 as a merger of the disparate guerrilla movements to unite indigenous minority peoples along the borderlands of what is now Vietnam and Cambodia (FULRO, 1965, pp. 13-18).

The history of FULRO has remained problematic for contemporary Vietnam, as the nation continues to struggle with the healing process of conflicts invoked by the process of decolonization. Although FULRO was initially an extra-governmental organization, they did strive to form a legitimate government recognized by the international community. They claimed sovereignty over the Western Highlands region with the formation of the *Provisional Government of Champa* in 1965, with the Rhade leader Y Bham Enuol serving as Prime Minister (FULRO, 1965, p. 1; Garfour, 1991, pp. 8-9; LaBrie, 1971, pp. 80-82). Y Bham Enuol's position at the head of the Provisional Government of Champa reflected internal shifts in FULRO leadership, with highlanders eventually taking a greater part in the front's organization. This shift led to the contemporary conflation of *The Degar Foundation* and FULRO, particularly in the Vietnamese press in 2004, in the wake of widely publicized comments by then Vietnamese ambassador to the United Nations in New York, Le Luong Minh.⁸ However, the contemporary Degar Foundation is not a military organization, nor do they advocate any form of separatism, as FULRO did. Rather, they are an advocacy organization promoting the rights of highland minority peoples in Vietnam by non-violent means (Ksor Kok, 2012).

The perceived continuity between FULRO and The Degar Foundation is one of two major misconceptions of the movement. Even in the most well-rounded examinations of FULRO, the organization is most commonly referred to through a permutation of the terms *montagnard autonomy movement*, using the French colonial term for

6 *Tay Nguyen* is frequently mistranslated as "Central Highlands". Meanwhile "Central Highlands" would be more properly defined as *Trung Nguyen* in Vietnamese language. However, the meaning of *Trung Nguyen* is flexible in that it can also refer to the classification "midlands" by terms of elevation, rather than region. Finally, for the same region as the western highlands, the term *Cao Nguyen* meaning "plateau" is also used. Also cf. "Ban Bien Soan Chuyen Tu Dien New Era", 2011.

7 FULRO is sometimes erroneously translated as the Unified Front for the *Liberation* of Oppressed Races.

8 For more details, cf. "Day manh thong", 2004; "Nguyen, T. D. TRP", 2004; "Nung hanh dong", 2004; "Quoc te phan", 2004; Viet Cuong, 2004.

highlanders: *montagnards*.⁹ This analysis of FULRO correlates with certain fundamental elements of James Scott's (2009) thesis on highland-lowland relations, particularly with his depiction of the highlands as a "region of refuge" (p. 130) and extra-governmental authority. However, this framework obscures the significant participation of lowland minorities in FULRO and prevents scholars from seeing the initial origins and aspirations of FULRO as an organization.

When FULRO was founded it was in fact not a *montagnard* organization, but rather an attempt to form a trinity of minority peoples that had been repressed by the Vietnamese, particularly during the rise of Ngo Dinh Diem. While Austronesian Chams and Austroasiatic Khmers had their conflicts historically, both of them had been conquered in the process of the expansion of the Viet-Kinh Nguyen Dynasty from the mid-seventeenth to the nineteenth century. When, in the event of decolonization, certain members of the Cham and Khmer community came to view not the French but the Viet-Kinh as their true colonizers, irredentist sentiments arose.

Highland-Lowland Relations in Theory

The widely discussed work of James Scott (2009) argues that there is a distinct, unified, highland culture that exists in mainland South-East Asia. By maintaining this perspective, many scholars have been able to gain significant understanding with regard to this region. Based on Scott's argument, highland-lowland relations pose a critical element in understanding the resistance of highland populations to be incorporated into what is today Vietnam. Scholars have also noted the relatively friendly relations between the Cham and highland peoples. The epigraphic record suggests that Cham used military force to incorporate highlanders into their polities as early as the twelfth century, while later trade-tribute relations and a change in the composition of the Cham monarchy led Po Rome (1627-1651), a highland Churu, to become the sovereign of the Cham territories. Subsequently, 14 Cham sovereigns (C: *Po*) were

9 While LaBrie (1971) refers to FULRO as the "montagnard movement for autonomy" (p. 3), Salemink (2003) and Hickey (1982-2003) present more balanced analyses; although their focus is almost entirely placed on the highlands. Eventually, the role of the lowlanders in FULRO becomes, in Hickey's (1982/2003) words, "blunted" (p. 146) or overwritten in favor of the portrayal of the noble highlander resisting the inevitable machines of lowland civilization. Only Po and Phoeum (2006) highlight the nature of FULRO as a united highland-lowland minority movement.

Churu people, and from the seventeenth century onwards, Austronesian peoples in the highlands held Cham royal titles. Thus, irredentist claims of the Cham, Khmer, and highlanders in their opposition to the Vietnamese during the twentieth century were not only contiguous, they were overlapping. If considered at their greatest extent, the Cham could claim all of the territory from Hoanh Son to Mui Ke Ga (half of the contemporary coastline), while the highland peoples could claim the majority of the Annamite chain, and the Khmer Krom the entirety of the Mekong Delta, limiting the Viet-Kinh population to the territory north of Ha Tinh.¹⁰ These claims highlight the fact that FULRO cannot be analyzed by a mere application of Scott's theory, considering that the organization claimed a relatively small portion of territory in the Western Highlands.

Contemporary highland elements of the Degar movement, which include some former members of FULRO, have received much attention since 2001, when Human Rights Watch (HRW) examined the repression of highlanders, Viet-Kinh land grabs, and the increase in the policing of the Vietnamese border (HRW, 2002, 2011). While several sources place an emphasis on FULRO as a *montagnard* movement, a point that is not entirely incorrect, other sources have gone beyond the accuracy of historical representations: One historical dictionary source oddly refers to FULRO as an "indigenous *Vietnamese* resistance organization" (Berman, 2011, p. 403; italics added), while another major Vietnamese publication printed in English and aimed at the international audience notes: "In 1975 some wicked muslims [sic] set up the so-called Front for Champa Liberation, which diffused the idea of restoring the Chiem Thanh Kingdom, and participated in FULRO" (Nguyen Minh Quang, 2001, p. 69). By building on a damaging conflation between Vietnamese nationality and Viet-Kinh ethnic identity, the labelling of FULRO as an indigenous *Vietnamese* organization obscures the initial intentions of the movement; likewise, the *Front for the Liberation of Champa* (FLC) was not founded in 1975 by "some wicked muslims", but by the single figure of Les Kosem – one representative of the three member groups of FULRO more than ten years earlier.

¹⁰ Baird (2010) – in focusing on the Khmer minority in Laos and the Lao minority in Cambodia – defined *irredentism* as "the doctrine that a people or territory should be controlled by a country that is ethnically or historically related to it" (p. 187). In the case of highlanders, this would have been an *ethnically* related claim, whereas in the case of Chams and Khmer Krom it would be a *historically* related one.

The examination of the narrative of Les Kosem together with two other predominant FULRO leaders, Y Bham Enuol (Rhade) and Um Savuth (Khmer), combined with an analysis of the FULRO documents, shall provide a solid basis for the re-evaluation of secondary literature as well as for the reassessment of the analytical implementation of Scott's concept of lowland-highland relations. The central argument of the following analysis builds on both primary sources and secondary literature in English and Vietnamese accessed through the University of Wisconsin-Madison as well as on rare sources provided by Cornell University, and selected others, accessed during my research at the Faculty of Vietnamese Studies at University of Humanities and Social Sciences division of Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City. Primacy in this analysis is given to the FULRO documents, as they have not been well discussed in any English language analysis to date. Eventually, this article inquires whether and how minority-majority relations or relations between non-state and state peoples may provide a basis for a useful, nuanced discourse on FULRO. The analysis begins by delving more deeply into the historical background of Khmer, Cham, and highland irredentist claims, continues with a reassessment of the FULRO documents, and concludes with a consideration of how to reframe this history for the sake of accuracy.

Historical Background

There is an immensely rich literature in the field of South-East Asian studies that discusses the historical background of the Khmer, Cham, and the highland peoples who later became members of the FULRO movement. Many of these early studies were completed by French scholars at the turn of the nineteenth century. While they applied similar models of social organization in their theorization of early South-East Asian polities, they did not agree on early historical evidence. While Finot (1927) credited the earliest Sanskrit language inscription in the region of Vo Canh to Khmer authorship, one year later, Maspero (1928) credited the same inscription to Cham origin¹¹.

11 The Cham are an Austronesian peoples who controlled much of the Vietnamese coastline from the Hoanh Son pass to Mui Ke Ga (200 miles). They formed a complex poly-ethnic society with multiple kingdoms that, some have argued, relied heavily upon plunder or piracy. However, more recent examinations of the Cham economy have suggested that the Cham not only engaged in long distance trade with merchants from China and Arabia, but also were particularly linked to the Chinese courts through trade tribute. To make gains in this network, the Cham, who also relied upon salt water fishing, lowland rice agriculture, and swidden plots (C: *apuh*), formed trade relations with

Regarding Cham societal structures, the prolific historian of Vietnam, Keith Taylor (1999), recently suggested that early Cham polities would be better thought of as an “archipelagically-defined cultural-political space” (p. 153), considering the geographical features of the Vietnamese coastline reminiscent of insular South-East Asia, and therefore argued that early Cham polities had probably followed a Malay pattern of political organization, trade relations, and settlement. Although Taylor’s concept has been recently praised by leading scholars in the field (e.g. Lochart & Phuong, 2011), the terms *vuong quoc Champa*, literally “Champa Kingdom”, or *Chiem Thanh*, literally “Cham citadel”, still frequently appear as annotations for this “archipelagic space” in Vietnamese literature. Both terms are theoretically outdated. *Vuong quoc Champa* harkens back to Maspero (1928), while the term *Chiem Thanh* owes its historical origins to a different source: the fifteenth century Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu. In this text, *Chiem Thanh* does not refer to highland portions of Cham polities, nor does it include the northern polities of Amaravati and Indrapura. Thus, the term *Chiem Thanh* does not include substantial portions of Cham territory in the province of Quang Binh or the territory deep into the hinterlands of the Annamite Chain, despite evidence that Chams did control this territory (Gafour-Meth, 1991, p. 443; Li, 1998, pp. 80-86, 99-116, 139-158; Ngo Si Lien, 2010, pp. 310, 316-317; Po, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 2006).

The Khmer and highland peoples present a complex group whose consideration in the following analysis is rather reduced, considering that up to date my research has focused mainly on the Cham population. Meanwhile, highlanders generally originated in the Western Highlands region and represent a mixture of Austronesian and Austroasiatic peoples. They have predominantly relied upon hinterland products, which linked them to lowland trade. Importantly, historians have also suggested that there was a substantial trade of slave and debt-bonded labor that linked various groups together. The position of highland peoples changed substantially after the seventeenth century, when Vietnamese, fleeing the Nguyen-Trinh wars, were first allowed into Prey Nokor (now Ho Chi Minh City). As the trading port became increasingly popular both among Vietnamese and highland peoples who had migrated to the lowlands, lowland Khmer, known also as the Khmer Krom, eventually became a minority in the region of the Southern Delta (VN: Nam Bo).

highland peoples and even fought to bring highland peoples under their control.

Cham nationalism had its roots in the responses to early nineteenth century campaigns against Cham peoples, when the Vietnamese emperor Minh Menh (1820-1841) suppressed Cham culture and annexed the last Cham kingdom (C: *negar*) of Panduranga, now Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces, in 1832. However, a revolt led by Katip Ja Thak Wa (1834-1835) which aimed to establish a Cham state in Panduranga (Po, 1981, 1988, p. 60, 1987, pp. 153-155) defined Cham nationalist sentiments throughout the following century. While certain historians place an emphasis on the cooperative relations between Cham and Vietnamese during the process of decolonization (Cao Xuan Pho, 1988, p. 180), a close examination of the narratives of Les Kosem, Y Bham Enuol, and Um Savuth demonstrates that a contestation of participation in Vietnamese society was just as probable.

Les Kosem (alias Y Prin Enuol or Po Nagar) was a Cham Muslim, born in Phan Rang (now Ninh Thuan province, Vietnam) and raised on Khmer territory, where he eventually served together with Khmer Krom leader, Um Savuth (or Om Savuk alias Chau Dara) and formed an alliance with the advocate of highland nationalism and the highest-ranking representative of the Rhade people, Y Bham Enuol. By the 1950s, while Les was a leading operative in detachments to the Central Highlands,¹² Um Savuth was responsible for Khmer Krom operations in the Mekong Delta (Cornfield & Summers, 2002, p. 241; LaBrie, 1971, p. 113; Po & Phoeum, 2006, pp. 1-13).

There are surprisingly few sources available on Les' early career. One of the few accounts is Ngon Vinh's (1995) revision of an early work on FULRO, *FULRO: Hay la Tap doan toi pham (FULRO or A Criminal Organization)* (1983), which was published with the Cong An Nhan Dan or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's security police press. According to Ngon Vinh (1995), shortly after his work as an interpreter during the 1944 Japanese occupation of South-East Asia, Les Kosem founded a youth anti-French colonial resistance corps that hoped for the "restoration of the former kingdom of Champa" (VN: *phuc hoi co quoc Champa*) (pp. 6-8). However, although both Cham and Khmer shared the experience of Vietnamese conquest, it is unlikely that this restoration of the former kingdom of Champa would have entered the political rhetoric, since Les was focused on anti-French colonialist, rather than on nationalist aims.

12 At that time, the highlands were increasingly under the control of the Vietnamese government and administration.

Les' initial anti-French stance more likely put him in contest with the early ethno-nationalist movements of highland minorities. Minorities of the Western Highlands had previously fought for recognition with French colonial authorities. With the creation of the *Commisariate of the Federal Government for the Montagnard Populations of South Indochina* (F: *Commissariat du Gouvernement Federal pour les Populations Montagnardes du Sud Indochinois*) in May 1946, and an ordinance signed by the French High Commissioner Admiral Thierry D'Argenlieu, which founded the *Country of the Montagnards of Southern Indochina* (F: *Pays du Montagnard du Sud Indochinois* – PMSI) that same month, highland minorities shifted towards a relatively pro-French stance, even though D'Argenlieu's support of the PMSI was predominantly part of a larger plan to re-conquest Indochina after the surrender of the Japanese. However, highland sovereignty was quickly rescinded one year later (1947), when France granted the Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai the PMSI as part of his crown domain (Salemink, 1991, pp. 264-266, 2003, pp. 129-179). Highland movements at this stage became anti-Vietnamese rather than anti-French, moving parallel to shifts that occurred among the Cham and Khmer.

Les Kosem shifted to an anti-Vietnamese position after late 1954, when the Saigon regime enacted a migration policy, which led to a large-scale Viet-Kinh incursion into Cham, Khmer, and highland territory (Hickey, 1982/2003b, pp. 2-32). After his resistance movement was repressed by the Southern Vietnamese regime, Les relocated to France to train at St. Cyr Academy, where he worked together with Lon Nol's younger brother, Lon Non, studied law, and developed an interest in works with relation to the "history of the Champa kingdom" (VN: *lich su vuong quoc Champa*) (Vinh, 1995, pp. 6-8).

Although by the mid-1950s, Les Kosem was very likely concerned with the development of Cham nationalism, this did not preclude participation in the activities of Khmer elites or highland minorities. After Ngo Dinh Diem's 1955 fraudulent referendum victory, the RVN policy supported a predominantly Viet-Kinh Catholic migration into the highlands and Cham lands. Local authorities working for the Diem regime banned the use of Cham language and burned Cham books. As they enacted Diem's policies, they tended to refer to the highland populations as "savages" using the highly charged Vietnamese term *moi* or the French term *sauvages* (Salemink, 1991, pp.

264-266, 2003, pp. 129-179).¹³ Thus, by 1957 pressure on highland populations led to the formation of the BAJARAKA movement among the Bahnar, Jarai, Roglai, and Koho peoples, with Y Bham Enuol as one of the movements leaders, while Les, together with fellow Cham Muslims Chek Ibrahim (Che Ibrahim), El Ibrahim (Chak Prak Hum or En Rak Hum), and Prime, formed an advocacy group for Cham political and military participation in Kampong Chhnang province on Khmer territory (LaFont, 2006, p. 12; Vinh, 1995, pp. 6-8). While BAJARAKA's explicit resistance to the Diem regime resulted in the imprisonment of most of their leadership, including Y Bham Enuol, Les Kosem continued to partner with the Khmer elite (LaFont, 2006, pp. 11-12; Po & Phoeum, 2006, pp. 23-46).

After the foundation of his advocacy group, Les moved on to gain support from Cambodian Prime Minister Prince Norodom Sihanouk, which granted Les access to arms and funds. In his support for Khmer irredentism, Les became a founding member of the *Liberation Front of Northern Kampuchia* (FLNC) in the late 1950s, while Diem's repression in the highlands continued with the reorganization of hamlets until 1959 (Kahin, 1986, pp. 99, 108-109; Po & Phoeum, 2006, p. 39). It was around this time that the relationship between Les Kosem and the Khmer Krom leader Um Savuth became of critical importance. Both worked for the Khmer secret service and simultaneously fed information to the remnants of the French secret service agency, the *External Documentation and Counter Espionage Service* (F: *Service de Documentation Exterieur et de Contre Espionage* – SDECE) (White, 1992, p. 143). Thus, by 1960/1961, Les was in a good position to found the FLC (VN: *Mat Tran Giai Phong Champa*) which sought to liberate the poly-ethnic “territory of ancient Champa” (Hickey, 1982/2003b, p. 46; Po & Phoeum, 2006, p. 39; Po, 2007, p. 49).¹⁴

While the Ngo Dinh Diem regime had stalled hopes for peaceful negotiations, the winds shifted after the coup of 1963 and the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem. Demonstrating his connections to Saigon, Les managed to petition the new generals in power – General Le Van Kim, General Ton That Dinh, and Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi¹⁵ – and

13 According to Scupin (1995), the Ngo Dinh Diem enacted ethnocidal policies against the Cham, as Cham language materials were burned, the study of Cham was banned, and they were reclassified as ethnic minorities (Dong Bao Thuong) that “needed to assimilate”, whereas in the Northern Vietnamese territory Ho Chi Minh promised to create autonomous zones for ethnic minorities (Scupin, 1995, p. 315).

14 Ngon Vinh misrepresents the FLC as the: *Phong trao phuc quoc Champa* or the *Front for the Restoration of Champa*. (Vinh, 1995, p. 10)

15 Le Van Kim was the brother in law of Tran Van Don and the two had formed a triangular relationship with Duong Van Minh (alias “Big Minh”), which resulted in the coup of 1963. General Ton That Dinh became a member of the

secured the release of Y Bham Enuol in 1964. Later that same year, Y Bham Enuol was proclaimed President of the High Plateau of Champa, that is, the non-coastal provinces of the II corps region. The ceremony was held in front of a group of three thousand FULRO members with Les Kosem on their front (Kahin, 1986, pp. 93-181; Po & Phoeum 2006, pp. 42-46; Tarling, 1999, p. 218). FULRO then released a series of proclamations declaring their objectives. Almost no secondary accounts of FULRO examine the actual contents of these statements, even though they were collected and published by the organization itself as a reflection on the events that led up to the foundation of the Government of the High Plateau of Champa and their participation in the Conference of the Indochinese Peoples in 1965.

The FULRO Documents

The FULRO documents are a collection of archival materials, photographs, newspaper clippings from *Agence France Presse* (AFP) and the *Phnom Penh Post*, the FULRO proclamation, and the FULRO declaration. While some of the documents were originally written in French, others were translated into English. The collection, which was published by FURLO leadership and members of the Government of the High Plateau of Champa at the Conference of Indochinese Peoples in early 1965 under the title *The FULRO History*, represents the most concise collection of primary source documents that give a clear self-portrayal of the FULRO movement.¹⁶ What follows is a detailed analysis of these materials, not present elsewhere in secondary literature, beginning with the FULRO proclamation that marked the organization's official founding on 1 August 1964 with the following words:

The Cham, Rhade, Jarai, Churu, Raglai, Chauma, Bih, Hrue, Bahnar, Sedang, Hre, Kabuan, Hadrung, Mnong, Stieng, and Khmer Krom peoples of the center and south of Vietnam have today joined the coup of the Viet Cong [sic].¹⁷

This is because Nguyen Khanh and his valets are incapable of guaranteeing our life and our liberty and also undertook pretexts for our suppression and maltreatment.

Military Revolutionary Council (MRC) after the coup and commander of the III corps tactical zone. While Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi had previously fled to Khmer territory, after the coup he was put in control of the I corps tactical zone under the command of General Nguyen Khanh.

¹⁶ This compilation is available at Cornell University.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Viet Cong is a rather pejorative appellation for Viet Nam Cong San or "Vietnamese communist".

[These actions] prove that the Vietnamese have brought an unnecessary campaign of destruction against our grand races.

Since we are not able to support the repressive policies of the [south] Vietnamese: We establish FULRO to release us from their yoke.

By this proclamation we make a solemn appeal to the countries of the world to help us arrive at our goal, which aims to make the attempt at the extermination of our great races by the Vietnamese colonialists a failure.

Signed,

President Chau Dara (Om Savuk)

Vice-President Po Nagar (Les Kosem)

And Vice-President Y Bham Enuol (FULRO, 1965, pp. 13-17)

The declaration begins with a list of the lowland and highland peoples who have joined “the coup of the Viet Cong”. The use of the pejorative Viet Cong, as opposed to the *National Liberation Front* (NLF), suggests a relatively anti-communist stance of FULRO leadership. The second section also notes the peoples’ explicit dissatisfaction with General Nguyen Khanh who had become the President of the RVN in January 1964. The dislike of both the communist and the Republic’s stances, combined with a strong sentiment of fear that the “repressive policies” of the South Vietnamese were aimed at the “extermination” of FULRO, present a leading motivating factor in the “appeal to the countries of the world”.

The proclamation was published in several languages – not only in French and Khmer but also in Cham Akhar Thrah script, the Malay-Jawi script used by Cham Muslim populations in Cambodia and South Vietnam, and two highland languages, most likely Rhade and Jarai, given the large participation from these two factions. The spread of the proclamation across linguistic barriers and regional boundaries was thus a primary concern for the organization’s leadership, a step not taken in the FULRO declaration, which was published at the same time with the following wording:

Declaration of the High Committee of the Unified Front for the Fight of the Oppressed Races

Our peoples: the Cham, Rhade, Jarai, Churu, Raglai, Bih, Hrue, Bahnar, Sedang, Hre, Kabuan, Mnong, Stieng, and Khmer-Krom, have been brought together into a community by the expansionist South Vietnamese. A systematic policy of genocide is keen on destroying our civilizations, our cultures, our religions, our nationality, and our languages.

Our chief religions have been attacked, our historical monuments and our temples bombarded, our schools closed, our youth enrolled in the army of the South Vietnamese imperialists in order to be used as flesh in the gun of their civil war against the Viet Cong. These are immense sufferings. We have undergone them for 10 years and we are not going to endure the amplification of them.

The total elimination of our grand races from the center and south of Vietnam was at one time considered inevitable. If we do not react against the crimes of the South Vietnamese perpetrated against us this will be the case. This is the same for all minorities, representative of our being of common identity, original inhabitants of the countries of our father of the center and south, that were integral in the Kingdoms of Champa and the Cambodians, who decide to form the Unified Front for the Fight of the Oppressed Races called FULRO. Our goal is the defence of our survival, for our cultural, spiritual and racial patrimony and the independence of our country.

It would not be superfluous to emphasise to all countries who enthusiastically support peace, the hardships that we have endured vis a vis the South Vietnamese imperialists, supported by the American imperialists who seek to involve by any means [available] the countries of Southeast Asia in SEATO, their block of war, and do not back down in front of any crime, even if offensive to them and their goal.

The list of their [South Vietnamese and American] crimes is already long and well-known in the world, and it is not our intention to say more. We announce solemnly: today, to all of the members of the United Nations, the Member States of the Committee of Decolonization, the existence of our Unified Front for the Fight, and also our determination to fight until the end, to safeguard our races from extermination by imperialist Vietnamese and their American patrons.

We have the conviction that all the people of the world who enthusiastically support peace will not miss the opportunity to contribute their effective assistance to release us from the yoke of the South-Vietnamese colonialists. (FULRO, 1965, p. 18)

The declaration of FULRO seems to have been published only in French, which was still the de facto lingua franca of FULRO leadership and most likely a result of the predominance of French education amongst FULRO leaders. FULRO leaders drew upon the language used in the FURLO proclamation, extending the accusation of a coming extermination of FULRO peoples to a coming genocide. The grievance against the repression of minority languages, culture, and religion, along with the abuse of minorities in the *Army of the Republic of Vietnam* (ARVN) was a unifying call. It is important to note that the appeal of FULRO was not directed to the national authorities but rather to the United Nations as the Committee for Decolonization presented a means to make legal petitions to the international community.

Although the wording of the FULRO proclamation is, as common with nationalist material at that time, sprinkled with the hyperbolic language of radical nationalism, the petition to the international community provides evidence that the organization intended to act in accordance with international law. With this concern in mind, FULRO leadership began to plan the next phase of their revolt, the coup of 20 September 1964, which resulted in the capture of a large portion of Western Highland territory. From the radio station at Ban Me Thuot, FULRO leadership began to broadcast their proclamation, which was quickly dismissed as “propaganda” in several press sources. Nevertheless, Nguyen Khanh responded to their appeal, and although the declaration of FULRO had referred to him as the “leader of the puppet regime of Saigon”, he did promise FULRO’s “Austronesian brothers that they would be granted legitimate rights” (FULRO, 1965, p. 1). However, Nguyen Khanh did not mention any Austroasiatic participants and, according to dispatch No. 2.086 on 24 September 1964, the Saigon regime maintained its prejudices as it “feared the instalment of a local autonomous government” and was “under the influence of Viet Cong propaganda that tended to emphasize divergences existing between the tribes of central Vietnam and the populations of the Delta”. Additionally, an AFP/*Saigon Press* relation during this time confirms Nguyen Khanh’s “fears” that the FULRO revolt would “divide the country in two” (FULRO, 1965, p. 32). Khanh’s words reflect the assumption that the “Delta” populations were already synonymous with the majority Viet-Kinh population, while FULRO’s self-proclaimed aim was to unify lowland and highland minorities.

In response to FULRO’s continued petitions, General Khanh visited one of FULRO’s police constabularies in the Western Highlands on 17 October 1964 to assure “64 compatriots representing the Austronesians” that the promises of 28 September 1964 remained in place (FULRO, 1965, p. 1). These promises included development programs, the restoration of land rights to minority populations, and the restoration of ‘the right’ to join the ARVN. Not only did Khanh address solely “Austronesians”, and thus disregard the participation of Austroasiatic minorities, he also disregarded one of FULRO’s major concerns: how minorities were forced to serve and die disproportionately for the ARVN’s cause. On the same day of General Nguyen Khanh’s visit, FULRO leadership thus founded the *Provisional Government of Champa*, appointing Prime Minister Y Bham Enuol, Minister of Foreign Affairs Khoa Y Ruah Anha, and Minister of War Khoa Ip’ha L’and, while FULRO remained the military wing of the provisional government (FULRO, 1965, p. 1; Garfour, 1991, pp. 8-9; LaBrie, 1971, pp. 80-82).

The foundation of the Provisional Government of Champa marked an important shift in the formation of the FULRO movement, as the military group was now to take a backseat in relation to the provisional government, which exhibited significantly more highland leaders in its administration. Additionally, as displayed by the words of Y Bham Enuol upon the foundation of the provisional government, FULRO leadership began to take a slightly softer stance towards Saigon:

Dear Compatriots!

Our coup of 20/9/64 is for us a bright national victory. Hasn't our victory meant the occupation of most of the Zone [II] of the Western Highlands, where our forces killed many enemies and we have more than 70 prisoners? Our forces have been able to occupy without difficulty the radio station of Ban Me Thuot and broadcasted in several languages a proclamation of our territorial claims.

On 24/9/64, General Khanh promised in front of 300 representatives of the Western Highlands that he would restore our land rights and on 28/9/64 those representatives returned with the general to Sarpa, where he insisted in front of our brothers in arms upon these same agreements. Colonels Freund and Wendt and General Depuy, having played a key role in this process, are the principal persons in charge of continued negotiations. It is with the insurance of these American senior officers and the government of Saigon that our brothers in Sarpa have accepted the truce.

Dear compatriots, we ask you to take guard of these verbal promises. In case the Vietnamese government does not give us satisfaction in the immediate future, we will take up arms again in our struggle until the final victory.

Long live FULRO!

Long live the countries enthusiastic of PEACE!

Down with the Vietnamese colonialists!

MADE WITH CHAMPA,

October 17, 1964

Y-BHAM Enuol (FULRO, 1965, p. 19)

Although the composition of the Provisional Government of Champa reflected a shift towards increased representation of highland peoples, Les Kosem remained an instrumental link to the Khmer Royalty, guaranteeing the presence of FULRO in the Provisional Government of Champa and resulting in their participation in the Conference of Indochinese Peoples in 1965. This process began with FULRO letter No. 111, dated 17 December 1964 and addressed to "His Royal Highness Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk Varman" and ended on 19 February 1965, when FULRO members received their official invitation, just three days before they arrived in Phnom Penh (FULRO, 1965, p. 2).

Although FULRO leadership participated in the conference, they only acted as the military wing of the provisional government. FULRO sources document the participation of the Provisional Government of Champa with Y Bham Enuol as its President in meetings with the Vietnamese NLF and the delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It was during this meeting that Y Bham Enuol refers to the “historically friendly relations” between all “Austrien” peoples for the first time (FULRO, 1965, p. 2; Gafour, 1991, pp. 8-9; Hickey, 1982/2003b, pp. 164-165).

Although the so-called “Austrien” peoples were in fact not always characterized by “historically friendly relations”, as major conflicts between Cham and Khmer appeared during both the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, Y Bham Enuol’s use of the term *Austrien* reflects a greater project at hand. Les Kosem had created the term as a merger between *Austronesian* (covering Cham, Raglai, Jarai, Rhade, and Churu factions) and *Austroasiatic* (covering Khmer, Koho, and Bahnar factions). The creation of this term, combined with general trends in FULRO decision making at that time, suggests that the immediate goals of the Provisional Government of Champa and FULRO were not to reclaim the historical territory of “Chiem Thanh” or “co vuong quoc Champa”, as Ngon Vinh’s account would suggest, but rather to create a unified identity of highland and lowland, Austroasiatic and Austronesian minority peoples under the banner of Austrien. Under this same banner, FULRO members sought to establish a series of relations with Vietnamese, Khmer, and international forces that would guarantee FULRO members rights to territory in the Western Highlands (FULRO, 1965, p. 2; Gafour, 1991, pp. 8-9; Hickey, 1982/2003b, pp. 164-165).

Initial press releases and sources from Saigon were inaccurate as they greatly overstated FULRO’s territorial claims and did not consider their symbolic role, dismissed the FULRO proclamation and declaration by using the term “propaganda”, and suggested that the rebellion included “only small groups of highlanders” who were “illiterate” (FULRO, 1965, pp. 25-32). Subsequently, in June 1965, when General Khanh’s regime collapsed and Vice-Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky became Prime Minister of the RVN, the Vietnamese leadership terminated the afore proposed development programs. As the tension continued to mount, American Special Forces maintained a close relationship with FULRO for at least another several months as they recognized FULRO, rather than the ARVN II corps command as the primary authority of the Western Highlands (Hickey, 1982/2003b, pp. 164-165; HRW, 2002, pp. 13-25; Socheruk, 1965, pp. 39-54; 5th SFGA, 1965, p. 15).

The Second Revolt Through the 1970s

With the successes of the coup of 20 September 1964, the Conference of Indochinese Peoples, and the official recognition by the American forces, it was clear that the Provisional Government of Champa and FULRO had made substantial gains in relation to Saigon. The newly created *Front for the Liberation of the High Plateau of Champa* (FLHPC) was technically under Les Kosem's command, along with the FLC, the FLNC, and the FLKK.¹⁸ FLHPC was responsible for creating, in the words of Scupin (1995), a "political renaissance" (p. 316) amongst the Cham, as language materials and teaching manuals were published in the Cham script (C: *Akhar Thrah*) and radio broadcasts released. However, internal divisions within the FULRO command structure were pressing. The subordinate command of former BAJARAKA members loyal to Y Bih Aleo remained loyal to the NLF, while the majority of the FULRO command owed loyalty to Phnom Penh, and a small minority to the Americans. However, due to a lack of recognition on the part of Saigon, a second revolt broke out in December 1965, which eventually led to negotiations. In its aftermath, Paul Nur (Bahnar) was appointed to the position of Directorate General for the Development of Ethnic Minorities and negotiations prompted the Plains of Pleiku Conference in Ban Me Thuot from 25 to 27 June 1967, when 250 FULRO fighters were allowed to return to the Western Highlands from their posts in Cambodia (Hickey, 1982/2003b, p. 164; HRW, 2002, pp. 13-35; Socheruk, 1965, pp. 39-54; 5th SFGA, 1966, p. 15).

The Plains of Pleiku Conference was a continued attempt by the RVN to court highland elements of FULRO that were not yet loyal to Phnom Penh and the NLF, which aimed to drive a wedge between highland and lowland elements of FULRO. Nguyen Cao Ky's Saigon regime proposed the creation of the *Commiserate of Montagnard Affairs* with Paul Nur at its head, if FULRO elements would rally against the NLF. Yet, the Provisional Government of Champa rejected Ky's offer on 7 July 1967, and in August 1968, Prime Minister Y Bham Enuol made an additional plea for the sovereignty of the Cham people (Hickey, 1992/2002, p. 275; Scupin, 1995, p. 317). The wedge between the highlands and Saigon continued to grow in 1969, as accusations that FULRO leadership was selling out to RVN began to spread. These and other concerns brought Les Kosem back to center stage and by June 1970, Les' new Cham battalion came in line

18 *Front for the Liberation of Kampuchia Krom*

along with a subordinate command responsible for a territory ranging from Modulkiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie, and Kampong Cham to the Kampong Speu transfer depot, monitoring the arms for rice trade along the borderlands of the Khmer Krom (Ahern, 2009, pp. 36-39, 49; Hickey, 1992/2002, p. 275).

It was the arms for rice trade that first brought Les Kosem into working directly with the CIA in 1970.¹⁹ At this time, working with the agency proved deadly, as collaboration with the CIA became one of the first grossly exaggerated accusations of the Khmer Rouge regime against the Cham population of Cambodia. Furthermore, in the blowback of the coup, dubious sources reported that Les' militias were massacring Khmer Rouge villages (Vickery, 2000, pp. 1-27). The combination of these accusations, along with claims of Chams collaborating with Saigon, quickly contributed to a political situation that rapidly spiraled out of control. Even though many Cham members of the FLC, the FLHPC, and FULRO had supported the Khmer Rouge, policy quickly turned towards the systematic execution of *tuan* and *hakem* Islamic intellectuals who were the pillars of the community, forcing the ingestion of pork, forbidding the teaching of *kitab* Qur'anic commentaries, desecrating the Qur'an itself, and forcing Cham to wear blue and white checkered scarves, marking them for execution. The result was a genocide committed against the Cham population of Cambodia, wherein Cham accounted for 25 percent of deaths (400,000 to 500,000 deaths) between 1975 and 1979, while they represented only 10 percent of the total population. In the fervor of this socio-political disaster, Y Bham Enuol was executed, the Provisional Government of Champa was disbanded, and Les Kosem exiled to Malaysia (Hassan, 1992, pp. 21-22; Osman, 2005, pp. 100-118; Osman, 2006, pp. 2-17; Vickery, 2000, pp. 1-27). Only from this period onward did FULRO become an almost purely highland organization.

Conclusion

The biography of Les Kosem, combined with the history of FULRO and the Provisional Government of Champa, urge historians to reflect on the nature of interpersonal politics and political speech in the history of Vietnam and Cambodia from 1955 to 1975, as the analysis of the macro-spatial actors of American, Vietnamese, and Khmer

¹⁹ For example, Les Kosem was actively recruited by the agency to produce a collection of documents known as *The Kosem Files*.

elites is not enough. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that to look at the history of FULRO as the history of a highlands movement is potentially misleading. The participation of significant lowland members in the FULRO movement demonstrates that, rather than thinking in highland-lowland dichotomies, it may be useful to focus on the dualities created by majority-minority relations in the region, in order to better understand the irredentist claims of FULRO. The events described in this article provide evidence which suggests that lowland Cham and Khmer territorial claims are equally important historical considerations, along with Les Kosem's creation of the Austrien unified highland-lowland identity and appeals to the international community. Barring re-examinations of this history bodes poorly on the improvement of minority-majority relations throughout South-East Asia, and in Vietnam and Cambodia in particular. The future of these relations could certainly not improve without direct policy initiatives by South-East Asian governments themselves, as even this brief examination of FULRO highlights the reconciliation work that remains to be done and the tensions between minority populations and government authorities that continue to provoke incidents with negative consequences for all parties involved. Nevertheless, scholars of the region can continue their work by striving to present a more detailed understanding of this borderlands region, from the periods of the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, giving greater primacy to Cham, Khmer, and highland language sources. Thus, only through the continued study of non-English language material will historians gain a better understanding of the interstices between national frames in the region and, perhaps for scholars working in Vietnam, a better understanding of minority populations as a whole.

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