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## Rubber and Race in Rural Colonial Cambodia (1920s–1954)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

THIS ARTICLE TRACES THE DEVELOPMENT OF RUBBER PLANTATIONS IN CAMBODIA and some of their most important consequences for Cambodian society. First, European land claims, often several thousand hectares, and subsequent land clearing radically altered the lives of local peoples and disease ecologies. Second, those engaged in creating plantations were at the same time recreating a rural border society, in particular a racial version of it, and tensions arising from perceived racial differences among the various local groups grew during the colonial period. Third, plantation owners imported large numbers of laborers from northern and central Vietnam thus increasing the circulation of people and ideas in Indochina. This migration gave rise to conflicts that were playing out in the broader politics of French Indochina, including anti-colonialism. Finally, during the First Indochina War, the plantation border region became a space of intense military conflict.

### *The Cambodia-Vietnam Border Region*

Rubber production in Cambodia began relatively late when compared with neighboring regions, such as British Malaya (1890s) and even Cochinchina, i.e. southern Vietnam (1910s). As in southern Vietnam, the majority of rubber came from plantations of *Hevea brasiliensis* trees, which secrete latex that is then processed into rubber.<sup>2</sup> The

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1. In addition to published sources, this article employs documents from the National Archives of Cambodia (NAC), Phnom Penh, National Archives of Vietnam 2 (NAV2), Ho Chi Minh City, National Archives of Vietnam 3 (NAV3), Hanoi, and the Centre des Archives d'outre-mer/Archives nationales d'outre-mer (CAOM/ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France. The author would like to thank the friendly and efficient staff of these archives for their help in locating documents. For a book length treatment of rubber plantations in Cambodia, see Margaret SLOCOMB, *Colons and Coolies: The Development of Cambodia's Rubber Plantations* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007).

2. For recent work on the rubber plantations of Indochina during the colonial period, see Michitake Aso, "The Scientist, the Governor, and the Planter: The Political Economy of Agricultural Knowledge in Indochina During the Creation of A 'Science of Rubber,' 1900-1940," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal* 3, no. 2/3 (2009); Christophe BONNEUIL, "Mettre en ordre et discipliner les tropiques : Les sciences du végétal dans l'Empire français, 1870-1940" (Université Paris VII-Denis Diderot, 1997); Marianne BOUCHERET, "Les plantations d'hévéas en Indochine, 1897-1954" (Université Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne, 2008); Webby S KALIKITI, "Rubber Plantations and Labour in Colonial Indochina : Interests and Conflicts, 1896-1942" (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2000).

first plantation in Cambodia was established in Kampot in 1911 but the most significant extension of plantation land happened in the mid-1920s during the so-called second rubber boom.<sup>3</sup> Numbers from the 1930s reveal the results of this growth as Cambodian plantations went from processing 346 metric tons of rubber in 1931 to more than 13,000 metric tons in 1937.<sup>4</sup> The late date of this expansion in production meant that plantations in Cambodia benefited from a framework for land, labor, and transport previously worked out in Cochinchina.

Although rubber production happened elsewhere in Cambodia, the majority of it took place in the three provinces of Kompong Cham, Kompong Thom, and Kratié. For Khmer, Vietnamese, and other local residents, the space of northeastern Cambodia was full of meaning. For the upland peoples, a system of *chamcar* (ចម្រារ) was in place long before the land became of interest to potential *hévéa* growers. The Stieng, and other local groups, had carried on trading relationships with Chinese merchants, giving forest products in return for rice and salt, that precious ocean commodity.<sup>5</sup> In addition, according to one French official, the name Kompong Cham had possibly originated from the area's past strategic importance for armies from Angkor, Ayudhya, and Hué.<sup>6</sup> For local Khmer residents the small *wats* (វត្ត) in the region suggested worlds of significance and David Chandler has described how *wats* incorporated nearby villages into regional political and religious networks.<sup>7</sup>

These meanings, however, were mostly lost on the Europeans who moved and thought in colonial networks that connected the region to Saigon and global commodities markets. Even before the beginning of latex production, there had been attempts to grow export crops, such as cotton and maize, both on large and small scales.<sup>8</sup> As with these other agricultural exports, *hévéa* plantations provided object lessons in linear historical development, competing with cyclical conceptions of space and time. Rather than the annual cycles of rice or swidden agriculture, the perennial *hévéa* tree lent itself to a narrative of birth, growth, maturity, and decay on the scale of decades.

3. De Lachevrotière was the first to grow rubber in Cambodia according to the *Annuaire* produced by Indochinese Rubber Planters Syndicate (SPCI). See also BOUCHERET, "Les plantations d'hévéas en Indochine, 1897-1954," 57. The second boom was the result of the Stevenson plan of 1922, which restricted rubber production in the British Empire.

4. 1931 numbers from Syndicat des Planteurs de Caoutchouc de l'Indochine, *Annuaire du Syndicat des planteurs de caoutchouc de L'Indochine* (Saigon: Maison Photo Nadal, 1931), 31. 1937 numbers from *Indochine, Adresses, Annuaire complet (européen et indigène) de toute l'Indochine, Commerce, Industrie, Plantations, Mines, Adresses particulières...* (Saigon: Imp. A. Portail, 1936-1937), 1974. The time lag between planting and rubber output occurred as trees planted in the late 1920s began to produce latex six to seven years later in the early 1930s.

5. Raoul CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française* (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1981), 31-38. These relationships reflected on a small-scale trade that had once taken place between the Khmer and the Chinese.

6. Lucien LOUBET, *Monographie de la province de Kompong-Cham* (Phnom-Penh: Imp. Albert Portail, 1939).

7. David P. CHANDLER, *A History of Cambodia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 1993), 102-103.

8. For example, in 1921, Mr. Hallet arranged for the transfer of 18,000 ha of land from the Industrial Cotton Society of the Hallet-Rivaud group to form the plantation of Chup (ជ្រូច). BOUCHERET, "Les plantations d'hévéas en Indochine, 1897-1954," 57.

In order to approach the diversity of rubber production and its myriad effects on local Cambodian society, this article both focuses on one plantation called Snoul (ស្នួល) and draws comparisons between Snoul and surrounding plantations. Owned by the Société des Plantations de Kratié, or Kratié Plantation Company, Snoul was created in 1927 and located a few kilometers away from the border between Cambodia and Vietnam that had been settled upon by the French administration in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> According to Raoul Chollet, the directing manager of the plantation from 1927 to 1947, an important shift occurred in the area around Snoul as it went from a space of nature to one of labor and production. This article now discusses this transition from forest to plantation.

### *Land Claims and Land Clearing in the 1920s*

One of the first and most important issues to address for would-be *hévéa* growers was the question of land rights. This question was a politically sensitive one in the 1920s as there had been several rebellions by so-called *mois indépendants*, such as the Phnong, in the region. Unrest continued into the 1930s and the feared Phnong chief Pa-Trang-Loeng (Pou Tran Lung), who had carried out devastating attacks on posts near Kratié, including one in August 1914 during which the famous French explorer Henri Maître was killed, was not captured until 1935.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the threat of violence, legal challenges to land ownership existed as groups such as the Stieng had requested rights to all of the land east of the Kratié-Kampong Cham road. The colonial administration was not prepared to grant this petition, as it would have eliminated most of the desirable agricultural land from European development. But potential unrest and a certain willingness to balance the needs of local residents with those of capital caused the colonial administration to restrain somewhat the territorial ambitions of plantation companies.

Such restraint is evident in the case of Snoul. In the mid-1920s, the Société des Plantations de Kratié had requested 6,000 hectares (ha) of prime *hévéa* growing land, the maximum allowed for such claims. Based on administration calculations, the 200 families living in the area, who practice swidden agriculture on *chamcar* plots (also called *rays* during the colonial period), needed approximately 2400 ha to complete their six-year agricultural cycles. In the end, the administration decided to grant only 4,000 ha of the 6,000 ha originally requested by the Société des Plantations de Kratié. Furthermore, Article 17 of the 1927 Terms and Conditions granting land ownership to the Société stipulated that local residents who had been growing crops on the concession land before the signing of the contract could not be evicted unless they were given land elsewhere. While the Société continued to hold out hopes for claiming at least part

9. Map is from CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française*, 12.

10. LOUBET, *Monographie de la province de Kompong-Cham*, 19-28; Annick GUÉNEL and Mathieu GUÉRIN, " 'L'ennemi, c'est le moustique' : Tirailleurs cambodgiens et pastoriens face au paludisme dans le Haut-Chhlong," *Revue Historique des Armées* no. 236 (2004); Mathieu GUÉRIN, *Paysans de la forêt à l'époque coloniale : La pacification des aborigènes des hautes terres du Cambodge, 1863-1940*, Bibliothèque d'histoire rurale (Caen: Association d'histoire des sociétés rurales, 2008).

of the 2,000 ha, a 100,000\$ (piaster) loan granted by the administration to help the Société through the rubber crisis of the early 1930s effectively ended such ambitions.<sup>11</sup>

Once landownership was obtained, work to clear away forests could begin. The first order of business was to find a way to feed and house the migrant workers brought from northern and central Vietnam to create the plantation. This task was made more difficult by the poor state of roads connecting Snoul to urban centers, which isolated the area from colonial networks of material and social support.<sup>12</sup> Chollet made the installation of a produce and cattle farm a priority in order to provide adequate levels of food in the absence of established food supply chains. This farm also helped reduce worker dependence on the small shops that sprang up around plantations, which often charged two to three times or more of the price of goods found in the nearest rural center.<sup>13</sup>

During the initial stages of land clearing and house building plantation labor faced very difficult living conditions and a particularly important cause of illness was malaria. Chollet described the land around Snoul as crisscrossed by a number of clear running streams, which is the preferred breeding site for *Anopheles minimus*. This species of mosquito is a vector of *Plasmodium falciparum*, which causes a serious form of malaria. The management at Snoul began to tackle the problem of malaria seriously in 1930, instituting a program of swamp draining that had by 1934 spend almost 14,000\$. This effort, along with quinine distribution, improved housing, and changing disease ecologies brought down rates of malaria from a whopping 580% of the workforce in 1929 to 40% in 1933.<sup>14</sup>

Extremely poor living conditions also resulted from the large numbers of workers involved. In 1928, the management of Snoul, for example, was responsible for housing, feeding, and providing medical care for approximately 600 contracted Vietnamese, as well as lesser levels of support for the temporary Cambodian labor and over 30 Vietnamese borrowed from the Public Works Department to work on the road between Saigon and Kratié.<sup>15</sup> During the arduous tasks involved in clearing the land and creating roads, workers were exposed to a variety of dangers including plants with razor-sharp thorns, temporary housing exposed to the elements, lack of clean drinking water, malnourishment, malaria, and moral despair. Without a fulltime medical doctor

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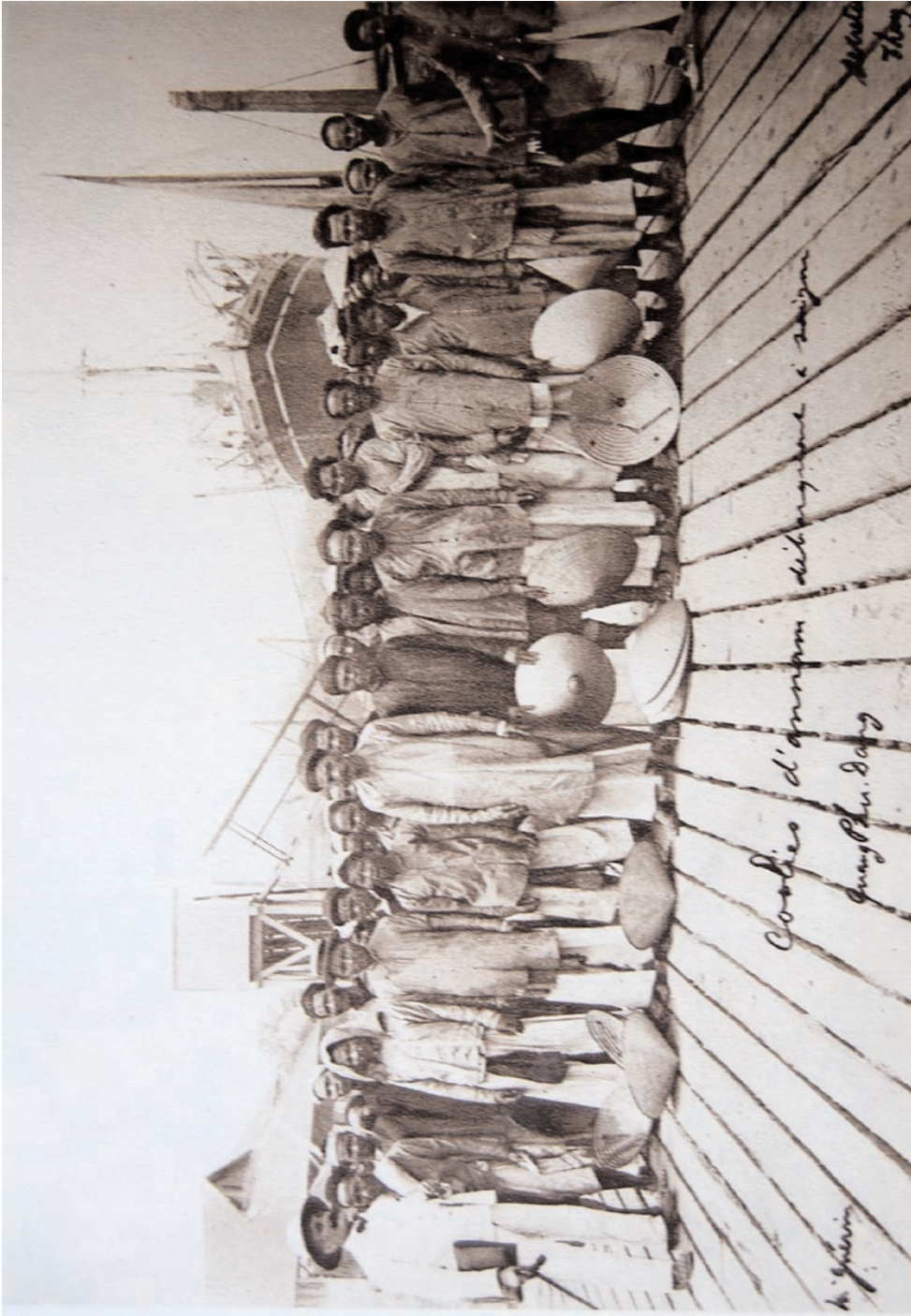
11. NAC 5547 Demande de concession d'un terrain sis à Snoul (Kratié) formulée par la Société des Plantations de Kratié, 1924-33. The rules of 4 November 1928 limited the Governor General of Indochina (GGI) to 4,000 ha per concession. There were ways around these rules as plantations of up to 15,000 ha could be controlled by the same owner. See LY-BINH-HUË, *Le régime des concessions domaniales en Indochine* (Paris: F. Loviton et Cie, 1931), 185.

12. NAC 11885 Certificat médical de Bui Quang Chieu concernant la situation du paludisme à Kratié, 1919. Chollet criticized what he saw as the *Travaux Publics'* (Public Works Department) apathetic approach to road construction. In fact, the *TP* most likely abandoned these road-building efforts in part because of high endemic malaria.

13. CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française*, 85-92.

14. *Ibid.*, 211-220. These pages are a reprint of Raoul CHOLLET, *Bulletin de la Société médico-chirurgicale de l'Indochine* (1934). Chollet, however, reflected on the belated nature of these improvements when he wrote that, were he to do things differently, he would start clean up efforts from the beginning.

15. NAC 1654 Rapports du médecin du service mobile d'hygiène, 1929, Le Nestour, 1-3.



Coolies d'Annam débarquant à Saigon pour les plantations (Archives nationales d'outre-mer).

or other forms of easily accessible medical care, it is not surprising that large numbers of workers fell ill and died. Yet without strong government enforcement of labor laws often little was done about such conditions.

In contrast with Snoul, the management of neighboring Mimot (មីម៉ូត), established at nearly the same time, expressed little concern for its labor. In response to incidents of worker desertion, including more than 300 laborers who left Mimot *en masse* early in 1927, the French colonial government sent its Inspector of Political and Administrative Affairs, Delamarre, to investigate conditions on the plantations. Delamarre wrote a strongly worded report, criticizing both the individual brutality of a young Belgian assistant and the orders for physical punishment given by an older Belgian manager. Although the cruelty of these two towards the workers cannot be excused, the ownership of Mimot seems to have been particularly unwilling to pay for any improvements in working conditions. The local health director remarked that the housing of Vietnamese workers resembled chicken cages and that of Europeans was not much better. He also complained that the scarce resources of his service were being diverted to care for the plantation sick, Mimot's in particular.<sup>16</sup> Such iniquitous systems were largely sustained by a racial vision of the border society that this article now examines.

### *Race and the Creation of Plantation Space, 1920s-1930s*

At the time of the first plantations, northeast Cambodia was already an ethnically mixed region. The process of creating plantations depended, however, on establishing racial and gender divisions that were new to local society. Pierre Brocheux has written about the racial-spatial organization of plantations in southern Vietnam and similarly in Cambodia racial and gender divisions helped European management to classify those who worked below them in ways that made running a plantation possible.<sup>17</sup> Chollet, for instance, wrote about the aptitudes of the "races" for the various plantation tasks, assigning different jobs to different "races." With respect to tree tapping, the "Tonkinese," i.e. Vietnamese from Tonkin, were the Chollet's preferred choice. This group could also carry out road building and other heavy tasks. Next, in terms of tapping, came the "Annamites," i.e. Vietnamese from Annam. Chinese, Javanese, and Tamils were also used for tapping, while Cambodians and Malays, by which Chollet probably meant Stieng and Cham Muslims, were mostly used to clear land.<sup>18</sup> Lighter tasks, such as tending to saplings and weeding, were generally assigned to women, children, and the ill.

Plantation populations were large enough to affect the surrounding society as well and the large Vietnamese migration meant a changing ethnic composition. For exam-

16. NAC 8218 Rapport sur la situation matérielle et morale des émigrés tonkinois...1927; NAC 1654 Rapports du médecin du service mobile d'hygiène, 1929, Le Nestour.

17. Pierre BROCHEUX, "Le prolétariat des plantations d'hévéas au Vietnam méridional : Aspects sociaux et politiques (1927-1937)," *Le Mouvement social* 90(1975). See also Martin J. MURRAY, " 'White Gold' or 'White Blood'? : The Rubber Plantations of Colonial Indochina, 1910-40," in *Plantations, Proletarians, and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, ed. E. Valentine DANIEL, Henry BERNSTEIN, and Tom BRASS (London: Frank Cass, 1992).

18. CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française*, 145. See also KALIKITI, "Rubber Plantations and Labour in Colonial Indochina : Interests and Conflicts, 1896-1942," 239.

ple, a 1904 census carried out in the district in Kratié in which Snoul is located counted 1,131 “Annamites,” or Vietnamese in a general sense, a little over 1% of the total population of 85,349. Estimates for the entire province of Kompong Cham in the late 1930s counted 17,000 Vietnamese, of which 14,000 lived on plantations, just over 3.5% of the 463,000 residents of the province. While the increase may not seem like much, the first percentage comes from a district that later was very heavily covered in *hévéa* trees while the second percentage includes regions that did not produce latex. In other words, those regions with *hévéa* were largely influenced by plantation life.<sup>19</sup>

Conflicts that arose between Vietnamese and Cambodians were blamed on the historical intrusion of Vietnamese into Khmer land. As a 1923 report states, “The Annamite is for the Cambodian an age-old enemy.”<sup>20</sup> While there may indeed have been some Khmer who resented Vietnamese incursion, this framing of the conflict depended on a particular understanding of history. Elsewhere, there had been peaceful mixing in the border region of Cambodia and Vietnam. It was the opinion of the Governor of Cochinchina in 1915, for example, that the peaceful expansion of the Vietnamese into the Phnong lands around Kratié should be encouraged. He wrote positively of a measure that “would encourage and protect Annamese infiltration who, in crossing the Song-Be [river] already, have imperceptibly spread into the groupings of the *moïs indépendants*. There is, as much from a political viewpoint as from an economic viewpoint, a great benefit in encouraging this attempt at peaceful penetration.”<sup>21</sup> Ironically, plantation management, through its demand for Vietnamese workers, was creating resentment among Vietnamese, Khmer, and others.

In the days of growing political unrest of the late 1920s and 1930s, race also served to mask potential fault lines, such as politics, and hardened racial categories caused management to misunderstand breakdowns in the relationships among those who worked for them. When tension arose between Tonkinese and Annamites in May 1930 on the plantation of Stung-Trang (ស្ទឹងត្រង់), owned by the Société des Caoutchoucs du Mékong, management blamed racial difference. At the heart of this conflict was a Vietnamese from Tonkin named Dang Van Kien. Dang and some “Annamites” were reported to have been in the room of one of the plantation *cai*, or caporal, when a scuffle

19. A 1923 government report on the working aptitudes of the different races of Cambodia helps reveal the ways in which racial division on plantations drew from and fed into other imagined assemblages of labor, land, and race. This report suggests, for example, that the Cambodians of the countryside were independent and did not like to submit to working for others. For plantation managers, this trait made Cambodians lazy workers and for French administrators, Khmer-speakers were “very independent” and uninterested in improving their lot through hard work. Yet, as local residents Khmer-speakers had family ties and other social networks, working for a plantation was an unattractive option when compared with farming one’s own land. Conversely, Chinese were able to integrate and become “le facteur essentiel de la prospérité économique” and “l’intermédiaire indispensable.” The “Chinese” could fulfill the role ascribed to them by the French in part because they had ready access to capital and social networks. They were also much more reliant on forming liaisons with locals as a way into society. NAC 4369 Aptitude au travail des différentes races qui habitent au Cambodge, 1923, 4. The ten-fold increase in absolute numbers suggests the possibility of an increasingly strong Vietnamese community in the region.

20. NAC 4369 Aptitude au travail des différentes races qui habitent au Cambodge, 1923, 5.

21. NAVN2 2921 Troubles Phnongs à Budop (Thu Dau Mot), 1915, 1917, 1919, 1921.



had broken out in which Dang had gotten hurt. He left, but then returned with several others from Tonkin and in the ensuing brawl Hoang Van Dek from Annam was killed.

Though the details of this incident remained unclear to administrators, they appeared satisfied with the explanation that the fight between those from Annam and those from Tonkin arose at least in part because “a certain discord that always had existed between Annamites from northern Annam and Annamites from Tonkin.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, the mysterious role of the *médecin indochinois*, or Indochinese medical doctor, noted by the work inspector and the fact that he had originally requested three *gardes indigènes*, or native militia, suggests that the cause might have in fact been of a political nature. The 1930s were a time of growing Communist activity and the plantations were a favorite site of activity. There were several recorded incidents of nurses working to spread Communist teachings and the fact that a single Vietnamese from Tonkin, Dang, was in the housing of those from Annam suggests an effort to recruit for a possible strike. This is speculation but activity of a political nature continued to trouble plantations even as living conditions improved and latex production came on-line.<sup>23</sup>

### *Factory Production and Worker Dissent, 1930s*

By 1935, *hévéa* trees that had been planted on 1,196 ha of Snoul’s land in the late 1920s were producing latex, which needed to be processed into rubber before it could be shipped out on newly constructed roads. In order to process the latex, a temporary factory was built. This factory had tanks for mixing the latex with formic acid to coagulate the colloidal suspension. The resulting ribbons of rubber were then rolled into sheets, cut into meter-long sections, processed into crepe, dried, smoked, and packed to be sent to the port of Saigon and from there shipped to markets in Singapore, France, and the United States. In 1935, ten years after the land contract had been signed, 96 metric tons of rubber was manufactured. And after the permanent factory was constructed in 1937, Chollet reflected somewhat wistfully that from then on “the operation is bound to be nothing more than routine work.”<sup>24</sup>

Overall, during the 1930s, working conditions on the plantations showed marked improvement. As a result of a desire to “settle” the workforce, labor activism, and political movements such as the Popular Front, plantation management started social programs, which included the building of churches, pagodas, hospitals, and schools. Worker housing, too, improved in many locations as individual residences became more common than the collective barracks and more permanent structures replaced

22. NAC 36063. Rapport de l’inspecteur du travail sur l’affaire d’Au-Chhok/plantation de Stung-Trang, 3.

23. NAC 36063. For the perceived racial difference between those from Tonkin and those from Annam, see CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française*, 102. Often, however, these conflicts arose not simply from racial, or cultural, differences, but from tasks assigned to the groups. For example, the fact that lower level managing positions, such as *cai* or *su*, were often assigned to “Cochinchinese,” or those from the south, and to métis, often made conflict with tappers from the north difficult to avoid. For more on racial conflict and communist activity, see Tu Binh TRAN, *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* (Athens, OH: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).

24. CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française*, 149-53. Quote from page 153.

temporary facilities. One of the most significant steps taken to ameliorate living conditions was the effort to treat and prevent diseases, in particular malaria. Mimot's management, for example, hired a military medical doctor on leave who, in cooperation with the Pasteur Institute, began to institute malaria prevention measures.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, during the 1930s, workers continued to commit individual and collective acts that resisted management control. Incidents took place on plantations, such as Mimot, despite the claims of some companies that there was "no sign of unrest."<sup>26</sup> These disturbances resulted both from local grievances against *cai* or *su*, overseers, seen as particularly brutal or unjust and for anti-colonial motivations. Other movements, too, tried to capture the hearts of workers. In March 1933, the *Surêté* tracked the movements of the ex-journalist Le Thanh Lu, who was directing a theatrical company called "Dông Ky" that had played on many plantations, including Snoul. As this troupe from Cochinchina supposedly had connections with the Cao Dai, a politico-religious organization, the colonial administration decided not to allow it into Cambodia again.<sup>27</sup>

Unrest also arose from class dynamics within plantation society itself. In a letter Chollet wrote to the Resident-Judge at Kratié, he complained about the wives of the *cais* who took advantage of the other workers by charging high prices at their shops. Chollet singled out Nguyễn Thị Hương, wife of Nguyễn Văn Thịnh, and recounted the steps he had taken to lessen Hương's influence. To fight back, Hương and others had led a group of workers to desert section B of the plantation. The Labor Inspector located the workers who, other than the ringleaders, were apparently happy to return to the plantation as long as they worked under Trung, a respected overseer. These power struggles on the plantation reveal the continuing negotiations that took place between management and labor.<sup>28</sup> In general, plantation companies were able to handle these work interruptions; they could not, however, handle the interruption of World War Two.

#### *War and Plantations, 1940s-1954*

The 1940s marked the beginning of a difficult period for rubber production and the French in Indochina. When the Japanese military took control of 90% of the world's rubber lands in 1941, it had a surplus of this material and with export elsewhere impossible, Indochinese plantations sat idle. Finally in 1945, Chollet and the other European staff at Snoul were evacuated to Saigon while the Vietnamese plantation workers were told that they would be growing oil and textile-producing plants. At this point, the Japanese manager who took over Chollet's position told the Vietnamese workers to "keep in mind deep down inside that you alone are responsible for your acts and not your French bosses of yesteryear." Such assurances represented a challenge to the racial order that management had viewed as crucial to the running of plantations.<sup>29</sup>

25. BOUCHERET, "Les plantations d'hévéas en Indochine, 1897-1954," 439, 442.

26. Quote from *Compagnie du Cambodge* report, 1937, *Ibid.*, 442.

27. ANOM 65446, *Surêté* report, 1933.

28. NAC 36492 Rapport sur une tentative de protestation... Snoul, 1936.

29. CHOLLET, *Planteurs en Indochine française*, 173. The Japanese military and political effort in Southeast Asia depended on winning the allegiance of local peoples through a pan-Asian vision of race symbolized by the Greater Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere.

When World War Two ended, rubber plantations faced other formidable challenges. These problems included the reversion of plantation land to forests, the destruction and loss of equipment, and most importantly the dispersal of the labor force.<sup>30</sup> Yet by 1946, production in Cambodia had resumed and output eventually matched and even exceeded pre-war levels, despite the greatly reduced number of workers. This production was made possible because of the higher productivity per worker, which itself resulted from a combination of improved techniques, trees that had rested during the war years, and, in some cases, unsustainable tapping methods undertaken in an effort to maximize profits as many companies feared losing their plantations. In 1953, 22,000 metric tons of rubber was produced in Cambodia.<sup>31</sup> The growing conflict on the Indochinese peninsula, however, represented another grave threat to the industry.

Fierce fighting between Viet Minh and French military forces occurred in southern Vietnam. The Viet Minh had skillfully exploited the power vacuum created when the Japanese surrendered and, although the urban revolution in the south was not as successful as that in the north, Viet Minh partisans controlled many parts of the southern countryside. Viet Minh records indicate that up until 1950 or so, there was an official policy of sabotage and terror carried out on plantations such as Snoul, as rubber was seen as an important factor motivating the French to stay in Indochina and as a way for the French to finance their war effort.<sup>32</sup> For their part, Chollet and other plantation personnel joined the so-called *Garde volontaire de la Libération* (Voluntary Guard for Liberation), which aided the French military by acting as local guides.

Although less fighting occurred in Cambodia than in Vietnam, there were anti-colonial efforts in the former. 1949 witnessed both the creation of a Cambodian state and the founding of the *Syndicat des ouvriers du caoutchouc du Cambodge* (Union of Rubber Workers of Cambodia) started by, among others, Thanh Son.<sup>33</sup> This organization, created late in 1949, had the following three goals: “the struggle to improve the living standard of the workers, the sabotage of plantations, and gathering for the Bo Doi [Viet Minh] of the region.”<sup>34</sup> In order to conserve limited resources while combating such groups, the French military attempted to create “autoprotection” forces on the plantations. European plantation employees, however, expressed little enthusiasm for such schemes. They recognized the realities of their region’s remoteness and of the impossibility of patrolling the vast network of plantation roads. Furthermore, the diffi-

30. BOUCHERET, “Les plantations d’hévéas en Indochine, 1897-1954,” 524.

31. *Ibid.*, 585. The total was 75,000 metric tons for Vietnam and Cambodia.

32. For example, NAVN3 2012 Phủ Thủ Tướng, Công văn, báo cáo của Bộ Canh nông, Liên đoàn Cao su Thủ Dầu Một, Ban Cao su Bà Rịa, Biên Hoà, Liên hiệp Công đoàn Nam bộ về tổ chức, phá hoại cơ sở cao su ở Nam bộ năm 1949, 1950, 1952 and 3022 Bộ Nông Lâm, Báo cáo của Liên hiệp Công đoàn Nam Bộ về tình hình phá hoại cao su của địch từ tháng 7 đến tháng 10 năm 1949.

33. Thanh Son was possibly short for Nguyễn Thanh Sơn, a member of the Committee of the South responsible for organizing anti-colonial activity in Cambodia during the Resistance War against the French. See Pierre Lucien LAMANT, “Les partis politiques et les mouvements de résistance khmers vus par les services de renseignement français (1945-1952),” (*Sikṣācakr*, no. 11, 2009) 74.

34. BOUCHERET, “Les plantations d’hévéas en Indochine, 1897-1954,” 582.

culties of recruiting sufficient labor for rubber production meant there was little manpower to spare for added military duties. In the end, plantation managers worked out a *modus vivendi* with anti-colonial forces in which the flow of materials to and from the plantation was allowed to continue in exchange for a cut of food, cash, and other supplies to keep the system going.<sup>35</sup>

With the Viet Minh's victory over the French military at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Snoul and other plantations in Cambodia reached a crisis point. It appeared as if the French planters might have to leave Cambodia after more than 30 years of growing rubber. The industry remained in French hands, however, due to a United States commitment to a non-communist Republic of Vietnam. After 1954, Cambodians gradually replaced all of the Vietnamese workers, as Vietnam and Cambodia became separate, independent nations. Despite this turmoil, plantations continued to produce rubber as all sides of the ensuing war attempted to maintain control of the precious labor and export earnings that resulted from this production. Chollet left Snoul in 1947 but others like him continued to run the plantations in ways that echoed colonial practices. Racial lines that had been drawn during the colonial period began to harden during the nationalist wars that followed.<sup>36</sup>

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35. *Ibid.*, 571, 72, 82, 92.

36. See Michel-Maurice MICHON, *Indochina Memoir: Rubber, Politics, and War in Vietnam and Cambodia, 1955-1972* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 2001). North Vietnamese forces used Cambodia to stage attacks on the Republic of Vietnam and the United States military dropped bombs and defoliants on the region as the border between southern Vietnam and Cambodia became strategically important.

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