EAST, WEST,
'HOME' IS BEST?

Vietnamese refugees and their relations to
home and homeland

Thesis submitted for the degree of cand. polit.

by

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To my parents

Contents

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The mistakes are my own.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

...most refugees want to return
home above everything else...
(Loescher 1989)

- Refugee, go home!
- He would if he could.
(UNHCR poster)

Wenn jemand eine Reise tut, dann kann er 'was erzählen.[1] How much the travellers can tell, and the degree of interest of their adventures to others, depend not only on their gifts for observation and for telling a story, but on the amount and nature of their experiences before leaving, while away, and upon return. Surely few people have a greater potential for narration than refugees do. However, their stories engage not primarily because the people have much to tell, but because their stories are not only their own. Theirs are stories of politics, of human rights issues, of history and contemporary history, of geography and of ways of life different from ours. 'Exactly because he destroys the old trinity of state-nation-territory, the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, deserves to be (...) considered as the central figure of our political history.' (Agamben 1993, as quoted in Warner 1994:16) Refugees' stories are also stories of human reactions to the most extreme situations imaginable - and sometimes beyond - of war, terror, chaos, oppression, exodus,

[1] "Anyone who makes a journey will have something to narrate". Originally *Wenn jemand eine Reise tut, so kann er was erzählen* from the poem *Urians Reise* by Matthias Claudius (1740-1815), this line has become a German proverb.

loss, and coping. For if our travellers had not somehow been able to cope, they would not have been there to tell us of the journey.

Through working as a municipal "refugee counsellor" for four years, I had the fortune to meet a few hundred of the over one million men, women and children who have left Vietnam since 1975. Through my fieldwork I have come to know some of these people quite well, the contact no doubt facilitated by the fact that many of them already knew me. On the other hand, my former position as a Norwegian bureaucrat also probably influenced some of the refugees' attitudes towards me, with varying implications for my fieldwork.[2]

I attempt to explore meanings of home and homeland to some Vietnamese refugees, in the face of a dramatically changing political climate. More specifically: how do the present policies of *doi moi* ("renovation", "perestrojka"), as well as increasing international emphasis on repatriation as "the best solution to the refugee problem", affect the concepts of home and of homeland? How do people try to control the situation and to consolidate, or change, their identity as refugees? As Longva (1994) puts it, exile populations consist of men and women who 'are not supposed to belong to where they live and do not live where they are supposed to belong'. My emphasis will be on the first part of this dilemma, on the supposition that the refugees really belong "there", not "here".

This supposition is an underlying premise in policy-makers' justifications of repatriation as the best solution not only for the host countries, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the countries of origin, but also for the refugees themselves. It has until recently not been discussed to any significant degree in academic work. Through focusing on this problem I hope to show some of the implications of being a refugee in a changing world. By directing attention to the transnational aspects of refugee life-worlds, the thesis will also bring into focus the intersections between micro levels and the levels of interaction between and within nation-states.

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[2] Cf. chapter 4.

Barbara Harrell-Bond, director of the Refugee Studies Programme (RSP) at Oxford tells the following story (Harrell-Bond 1992): she had been invited to give a talk at a Rotary club or some similar institution, her audience being educated men at the height of their careers, prepared to spend some of their surplus time and money on charity. She asked them, 'How many of you are still living in the place where you were born?' Two or three in the audience of thirty put their hands up. 'So why don't the rest of you just go home?!' was her follow-up. Of course, there was no answer. Somehow it was the wrong question - to some because they felt that their present place of dwelling and work was their home, to others because the place they might have liked to return to, had changed so much it no longer felt like home, or because they themselves had changed too much to feel at home in their place of origin. It all depends on what you mean by "home". For refugees, the paradox is not simply that they would like to go home but cannot. As time passes, it may be no more evident to them what constitutes "home" than it is to others who have grown attached to more than one place. The question 'why don't you just go home?' is one they may hear from time to time, posed by members of the "host" society or by fellow refugees, or family and friends in the country of origin. As time passes, it is also something many refugees ask themselves: am I staying "here", or going back "there"? It is a question with many aspects, both practical and emotional, political and personal. My thesis is an attempt to draw attention to various aspects, implications and meanings of "home" and "homeland" as seen by some Vietnamese refugees in Norway. It is thus not my intention to answer Dr. Harrell-Bond's question on behalf of these or any other of the world's millions of refugees.

At the outset, I intended to focus on the concept of "homeland", vaguely supposing that "home" and "homeland" were - roughly - two sides of the same medal. As so often happens when you really start thinking, I soon realised that the matter was a good deal more complicated than it had seemed. Far from being interchangeable in any simple way, "home" and "homeland" may sometimes refer to the same phenomenon, sometimes they appear to overlap, and then again the

phenomena they refer to may seem to be completely distinct ones. Drawing on the empirical material I present throughout, I will discuss these core concepts in the final chapter of the thesis.

Although individuals are transformed in the news media into "masses", "waves", or "flows" of refugees, they are in fact subject to the general rule that no two lives are ever the same. The exile Vietnamese in my study have been coming to Norway from about 1980 onwards, with a few newcomers still arriving. They have come here as "boat people" via refugee camps, or directly from Vietnam through the Orderly Departure Programme. They have very different backgrounds both in social, ethnic, religious and geographic terms; there are illiterate fishermen and peasants as well as teachers and bureaucrats, people born in South, Central and North Vietnam, there are Catholics, Baptists and Buddhists, there are ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese, and so on. One can hardly see them as one group, and indeed they form different groups on different levels, the criteria for membership varying along with the social context.

This is a study of refugees who happen to be Vietnamese, but it is also a study of Vietnamese who happen to be refugees. To emphasise one aspect at the cost of the other would be a gross misrepresentation of the subject matter. Likewise, to say that the Vietnamese in my project have different backgrounds, and simply leave it at that, would be an unforgivable understatement. In order to grasp some of the diversity I found, it became necessary for me to make Vietnam itself, as well as the transnational community of Vietnamese exiles, part of my thesis. My dilemma is but a dim reflection of theirs - I have only had to try to incorporate the complexity into my thesis, whereas they have the challenge of incorporating it into their lives.

OUT OF FOCUS: "MIGRATION STUDIES" OR "IMMIGRANT STUDIES"?

Vietnamese refugees, like anybody else living in Norway, relate to their Norwegian neighbours, friends and colleagues as well as to central and local administration and government. This aspect of their lives has been discussed in various projects within what in this country is known as "migration studies" (*migrasjonsforskning*),

but which might perhaps, on account of their predominant "host country" perspective, more appropriately be called "immigrant studies". Some examples of this are *Flyktningers tilpasning til det norske samfunn* ("Adaptation of Refugees to Norwegian Society", Kramer 1986) and *Hjelpeapparat, flyktninger og livsløp* ("Social service, refugees and life-span development", Knudsen 1986). These discussions, though valuable, can only give small parts of the picture. In seeing their units of analysis primarily as uprooted minorities, trying to strike new roots in Norwegian ground, some of this research may perhaps answer more to the calls of the Norwegian immigration system than to the needs of Vietnamese refugees: "Integration" of all minorities has long been Norwegian policy and expresses an egalitarian ideology which - still - prevails in Norwegian society, expressing needs which are not necessarily opposed to those of the refugees and other minorities, but which are not necessarily in accordance with them either. Furthermore, the term "integration" is to a large extent used as a euphemism for "assimilation", a confusion I shall discuss in chapter 3.

From a private and public Norwegian point of view, the Vietnamese refugees are a small and isolated minority in Norwegian society. From Vietnamese perspectives, this is far from being the complete picture. Changing the perspective may enable us to ask new questions about the reasons behind the relative invisibility of the Vietnamese, as compared to other immigrant groups in this country. 'The Vietnamese? Oh, but they are so blessedly quiet and grateful!' a prominent civil servant exclaimed during the coffee break at a seminar a few years ago. Now why do "we" have this impression? Given that they do not make themselves visible on the Norwegian arena, what, then, are their arenas?

PLACE AND BELONGING

"Norway" is a clearly defined concept both in geographical, political and - more arguably - cultural terms: either you are in Norway or you are not. In largely presupposing a one-to-one relationship between place and people, concentrating on the interaction between Vietnamese and Norwegians in Norway has the

advantage of making it easier to avoid the problem of the complexity of belonging: either you belong to one place or you belong to another place. For me and, as I shall argue, for the Vietnamese themselves, this complexity is fundamental. However, it poses methodological problems that are different from those for which "village anthropology" prepares us. These problems are not new: ' it is a mistake to regard sociology as being solely preoccupied with the nation-state society: an interest in global and universal processes can be traced back at least as far as the Enlightenment' (Featherstone 1990:3). Nonetheless, in anthropology a widespread interest in such processes is relatively recent. Anthropological studies that are based on fieldwork among minorities in Norway, but do not primarily focus on relations to Norwegian society include Grønhaug and Tesli (1986), Longva (1987, 1992), and Knudsen (1990). These studies, different as they are, derive their strong points precisely from being more in accordance with the perspectives of their informants than with that of the so-called "host society".

BRINGING THE PROBLEM INTO FOCUS: THE "DETERRITORIALISED FIELD" IN ANTHROPOLOGY

As outlined above, 'Society, conceived almost exclusively as the bounded nation-state' (Featherstone 1990:2) has formed a dominating, though not entirely hegemonic, frame of reference in sociology. In anthropology, "the village" has been the corresponding, classical unit of analysis. The problems of definition and delimitation of "the village" and other social units have received much critical attention, but the underlying premise, that social and cultural units are necessarily territorially bounded, has until recently not been challenged to the same extent. As Malkki (1992:24) notes, 'people have always moved - whether through desire or through violence. Scholars have also written about these movements for a long time and from various perspectives [Arendt 1973; Fustel de Coulanges 1980:190-193; Heller and Feher 1988:90; Marrus 1985; Mauss 1969:573-639; Moore 1989; Zolberg 1983].'. Yet among all these scholars mentioned by Malkki, Mauss is the only "classical" anthropologist. Indeed it seems that anthropologists did not appear

on the stage until the recent discourse led by people like Appadurai, Clifford, Rosaldo, Hannerz and others from the late 1980s onwards, as summed up by Malkki (ibid.). Malkki's valuable contribution to this discourse, based on the ideas of people like Douglas and Foucault, has been her analyses of refugee camps, from "above" and from "below". Through focusing on the interconnectedness of institutional, macro levels of power and politics on the one hand, and micro level organisation and construction of refugee identities on the other, she takes "refugee studies" out of the drawer labelled "ad hoc, victims, crisis, extra-ordinary" and into the main concerns in anthropology. That the studies of refugee-related issues were defined as peripheral or irrelevant to these concerns in the first place, is related to views of conflict and disruption as "dysfunctional" and "pathological". I will return to this issue in chapter 2, where, as in later chapters, I will also draw on Linda Hitchcox's work (1990), based on fieldwork among Vietnamese refugees in camps in Southeast Asia.

THE WHENS, WHERES, HOWS AND WHOS OF MY FIELDWORK

Most of my contacts live in the county of Akershus, just outside Oslo. I started fieldwork in March 1993 by taking weekly private lessons in Vietnamese, which I continued doing throughout the fieldwork period. Through my attempts to learn the language - not an easy task, but rewarding in many ways - I became partly able to communicate directly with people who did not speak Norwegian and to follow significant shades of speech in everyday language, as well as some of the many speeches held on formal occasions. In August 1993 I attended the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies (NIAS) interdisciplinary conference on Vietnam studies. During the autumn of 1993 I was busy studying for exams and had little time to do fieldwork. However, I continued the weekly language lessons and stayed in touch with a handful of families, who later have been very helpful in putting me in touch with other people, inviting me to meetings and celebrations of various kinds, and so on. By the end of 1993, there I was, talking to people about something called "Vietnam", and I realised I had not an inkling of what they were referring to.

Gradually, then, I became aware of the necessity of going to Vietnam myself. In December 1993 and January 1994 my informants helped me plan the journey, and they seemed to be just as excited as I was. At the beginning of January I attended the RSP's 4th International Research and Advisory Panel Conference, where several papers on "Home and the Meaning of Return" were given. A few weeks later I left for Vietnam, spending February with some of my informants' families in South and Central Vietnam. In March I studied Vietnamese at Hanoi University. To sum up my impressions very briefly, I found in Vietnam a cultural complexity and diversity even greater than I had expected.

Upon my return to Norway, I found that my relationship with the refugees had acquired a different and more reciprocal quality. Having my own experience of Vietnam, as well as studying the language, proved to give me invaluable insights into the life-worlds of the Vietnamese I have met, both in Vietnam and in Norway, worlds that would otherwise most likely have remained closed to me.

I have "gathered data" at various levels: primarily, there are my own observations of physical surroundings and of people interacting with each other, and with me, in Vietnam and in Norway. Secondly, there are people's oral statements, likewise in Vietnam and in Norway. On a third level, there are comments made by these people to my oral and written descriptions and interpretations of Vietnamese and exile reality. Then there are statements in the mass media, articles and books about Vietnam, by American and French authors as well as by exile Vietnamese. On yet another level I have found literature on exile Vietnamese, by "host country" researchers as well as by exile Vietnamese authors.

Much of the available literature on Vietnam in general and on Vietnamese history in particular is part of either "handbooks" for France before 1954, for the US army before 1975, or for Hanoi after 1975. There is also an abundance of books on "what really happened" during what is known in the West as the Vietnam War, and in Vietnam as the American War. The literature thus forms part of the contest of reality that the refugees are also struggling with. Until the politics of *doi moi* were warily and gradually put into practical operation, few "non-Communist" scholars

had the opportunity to enter the country, let alone do independent fieldwork there. This is slowly changing, and it was possible for me to work, as inconspicuously as I could, even in some cases staying with private people in their homes, and talking relatively freely.

It is not possible for me to point at my unit of analysis as one, territorially bounded entity, a "thing" that exists in a "place". My informants are scattered, "transnationally" as well as "nationally", partly as a result of international refugee policies, partly as a result of Norwegian "dispersed settlement" policies. As already mentioned, most live in or near Oslo, Norway; others live in Paris, France or Saigon, Vietnam; yet others in Orange County, California. Nevertheless, they are linked to each other: I encountered them - in person or through their codified statements - while I, and they, were, so to speak, moving along parts of a Vietnamese transnational network. Such a network can be analytically placed within the category Appadurai (1990:297) calls "ethnoscape" and which he sees as 'the (global) landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles...'. "Ethnoscape" may be a new name for an old phenomenon. Tourists apart, the term "diaspora" refers to much the same kind of reality as "ethnoscape". Indeed, research around the Jewish concept of diaspora has turned out to be useful in analysis of exile communities of many kinds. (See for example Clifford 1994).

Ethnoscape, diaspora, transnational networks - whatever name we give them, our "unbounded villages" have one fundamental aspect in common with physically located, "real" villages: they constitute a significant part of the life-worlds of their participants, that is, the 'total sphere of experience circumscribed by a natural environment, man-made objects, events, and other individuals' (Wuthnow et. al. 1984:31).

Modern communication technology plays an important role in the construction and maintenance of such transnational networks. Vietnamese refugees use telephones, fax, mail, the internet, and air travel, privately and for business and to varying degrees, to stay in touch with one another and to exchange information

and items of many kinds. The goods that are transmitted along the networks, such as food, incense, music and videos, are to a large extent material requisites for creating a Vietnamese world in exile. Another category of items consists of words: private letters between family and friends on the one hand, and public arenas for discussion such as newspapers and the internet on the other. Statements and discussions that "take place" in these arenas - which are not "places" - are important in the ongoing negotiations and constructions of reality. To some extent, radio and television also serve this purpose.

I am not saying that all Vietnamese refugees just sit there in front of their computers and other technical equipment. Face-to-face interaction is by far the most frequent, but this takes place within a wider, *Viet kieu* ("overseas Vietnamese") context which constitutes a shared frame of reference. The extent and the manner of this sharedness varies, for many reasons: with some people, using and building networks with other *Viet kieu* takes up a central part of their lives, whereas in other cases this is only a peripheral activity. I shall attempt to give an insight into the variation throughout, and attempt to sum it up in chapter 8.

So who are these people who have taught me what I claim to know? I have pondered the problem of how to present people clearly enough to give an image of a community, without breaching my promises of discretion to many of them. In the following, alphabetical list of people who are mentioned by name in the text, the names are fictional, and some of the information is garbled:

IN NORWAY:

Dung, married woman, 30. Thach's wife, grew up in South Vietnam with North Vietnamese parents. Converted to Catholicism when she married. Came to Norway from a Southeast Asian camp in 1993, among the last boat people to be "screened in" (cf. chapter 2). Language school student. Parents and siblings in Vietnam, some siblings also in "the West".

Hoa, married woman, 40, Son's wife, from a Protestant family in Saigon. Came to Norway in 1980 with her husband, who was also one of the "boat people". Now lives with him, their children and her mother, an "ODP"[3] in Norway. University graduate, factory worker in Norway, currently unemployed.

Hung, married man, 40, born in a village in Southern China. At the age of 3, he moved to Saigon with his parents, who were peasants in China, shopkeepers in Vietnam. Came to Norway as one of the "boat people" in 1980 and now lives here with his mother, wife, and children, who have come as "ODP's". He and his family are Buddhists. Shopkeeper. Knows most of the others, active in community work.

Nga, unmarried woman, 23, came to Norway from South Vietnam in 1982, lives with her parents and siblings, all "boat people". Works as a secretary. Buddhist. Friend of Thuy.

Nhat, married man, 50, Tuyet's husband, grew up in North Vietnam, in a Catholic family. Lived in South Vietnam from 1954, graduated from University and worked as a teacher before 1975. Came to Norway with his wife and children in 1980, as "boat people". White-collar worker. Former leader of the local Vietnamese organisation.

Phong, married man, 27, Thuy's husband. From Saigon, came to Norway in 1988. University student. Most of his family live in Norway.

Phung, married woman, 45, married to a Norwegian. Came to Norway as one of the "boat people". Family mostly in "the West". White-collar worker, colleague of Nhat.

Son, married man, 45, Hoa's husband. University graduate, factory worker in Norway. Active in community work, a friend of Hung's.

Thach, married man, 30, Dung's husband, from South Vietnam. Convert to Catholicism. Came to Norway in 1991, as one of the "boat people". Teacher by profession, now a high school student. Parents and siblings in Vietnam, wife and child in Norway.

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[3] ODP - Orderly Departure Programme. Also used to denote persons who have left Vietnam through this programme.

Thuy, married woman, 25, Phong's wife, from Saigon, a shopkeeper. Came to Norway in 1987 as one of the "boat people". Her parents and some of her siblings, who came as "ODP"s, live in Norway, other siblings in Vietnam. Buddhist.

Toan, married man, 45, from South Vietnam, where he was a fisherman. Never went to school before he came to Norway in 1990 as one of the "boat people". Now lives with his wife and children, who came as "ODP"s, and is unemployed.

Trinh, unmarried woman, student, 22. Came to Norway from South Vietnam in 1982 with her "1954 North Vietnamese", Catholic parents and 7 siblings.

Tuyet, married woman, 45, Nhat's wife. Grew up in a Buddhist family in South Vietnam. University graduate. Converted to Catholicism when she married. Manual worker. Known to many through community work, and respected for her discretion and tact.

Van, unmarried woman, 20, Nhat's and Tuyet's daughter, a student.

* * *

IN VIETNAM:

Mai, married woman, 45, journalist who lives in Hue with her husband and children.

Nam, married man, 65, Dung's father. Born in Hanoi, employed by the South Vietnamese army, therefore denied employment since 1975. Lives with his wife in South Vietnam. Most of their children were also denied education and employment and have left Vietnam.

Nguyet, unmarried woman, 24, university student who lives in Hanoi with her parents. Her father, a teacher, was for many years denied employment for political reasons.

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SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN REFUGEES

The first ten years or so after 1975, most of the refugees came from South Vietnam, fleeing from the Communists as many, especially Catholics, had done two decades earlier. Many found themselves leaving their homes for the second time, as they or

their parents had left the North in 1954. A large number of ethnic Chinese also left Vietnam, as relations between China and Vietnam deteriorated. However, a growing percentage of Vietnamese fled directly from North Vietnam, after having spent most or all of their lives under Communist rule. At the same time, the Western attitude towards receiving Vietnamese refugees was cooling off. This shift coincided with the beginning of the "end of the Cold War" in international politics.

Though some of my informants in Norway are North Vietnamese by birth, none of them are among the North Vietnamese who fled directly from North Vietnam decades after the Communist take-over of Hanoi in 1954. I know of a handful of these, who have come to Norway from Hong Kong detention centres, and for a long time considered seeking them out. In the end I decided not to do this. I have not met any of them "naturally" at Vietnamese social gatherings during fieldwork. This, along with what I have learned about the differences between North and South Vietnamese, has indicated to me that they are not included in the local, anti-Communist branch of the *Viet Kieu* network. This thesis, then, is not about them.

The thesis consists of three parts, which are in turn subdivided into chapters. In the first part, my intention has been to outline the processes of liminalisation of Vietnamese refugees in the national order, in relation to Vietnam as well as Norway. I then go on to show some empirical aspects of their lives in exile, focusing on how new homes and belongings are constructed and negotiated. In the final part I shall attempt to give an understanding of the importance of the Vietnamese diaspora to the consolidation of Vietnamese exile identities.

PART ONE - REFUGEES AND NATIONS:

THE UNBELONGING

CHAPTER II

WHAT BROUGHT THEM HERE?

O strip of homeland, half the letter S,[4]
I wish to leave you, wish to part from you.
I fell in love with you when I was ten
but you've betrayed me squeezing shut my life.
By now my love for you has turned to hate.
If leaving you I had to cut a leg
or chop off my right arm, I wouldn't mind:
I would think it the finest stroke of luck
because near you I've lost just everything,
because near you I've now become a beast.

(Nguyen Chi Thien 1984)

CHILDREN OF THE FAIRY AND THE DRAGON

Vietnamese national history, as taught in schools both before and after 1975, goes back to a remote and mythical past. *Viet* was the name of an ethnic group which originated in China and eventually founded their own state, first named *Van Lang*, later *Au Lac* and then, over 2000 years ago, *Nam-Viet*, in what is now northern Vietnam and part of southern China. Here, in the words of Nhat's and Tuyet's daughter Van, is a version of the origin myth of the *Viet* people:

> According to an old legend, the history of the Vietnamese people begins with De Minh, a descendant of the divine Chinese emperor who is considered the father of Chinese agriculture. De Minh married an immortal fairy,[5] and they had a son, who reigned over the country of the red demons. He married the daughter of the Dragon King of the Sea. Their son, the Dragon Lord of Lac, is considered to have

[4] South and North Vietnam together form an "S". The poet is referring to North Vietnam, the upper half of this shape.
[5] A *tien*, see chapter 5.

> been the first truly Vietnamese king. To establish peace with the Chinese, he married the immortal Au Co,[6] and she gave birth to one hundred eggs. From the eggs emerged 50 sons and 50 daughters. Half of them moved over the mountains with their mother, whereas the other half stayed with their father, on the plains by the sea. This legend, along with many others, tells us of unions, conflicts and separations between people of the north and the south, mountains and plains, inland and coast.

That the Vietnamese see themselves as "children of the mountain and the sea" is reflected in this and other legends as well as in many figures of speech, such as *non nuoc* ("hills and streams" - fatherland, or motherland): *Non* is one of many words for hill or mountain, whereas *nuoc* may, homonymically, refer to both country and water.[7] Also, as Van indicates, the relations between North and South Vietnamese are an important issue and a painful one, frequently referred to and hotly debated. The issue is closely related to Vietnamese nation building projects in Vietnam and in exile, as well as being inseparable from war and post-war experiences on both personal and political levels. Van also touches upon the relations between people of the 'mountains and plains, inland and coast'. Behind these pairs of topographic opposites lie the - in many ways problematic - relations between the ethnic *Viet* and the more than 60 other linguistically and otherwise distinguishable ethnic groups living within the territory of today's Vietnamese nation-state. These groups make up approximately 10% of the population, and live mainly in the mountainous inland regions. Except for ethnic Chinese, who constitute a separate category, all my informants are *Viet*. The conflicts between mountains/inland on the one hand and plains/coast on the other, though significant to a larger debate on the Vietnamese nation-state, are thus of little relevance to the particular themes at hand, and will not be discussed further in this thesis.

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[6] Who was also a *tien*. Nhat: 'Au Co was a *tien*, so our Mother was a *tien*.'

[7] Similarly, *Giang son*: "country, nation" - lit. "rivers and mountains". See chapter 9 for a fuller discussion of these, and related, terms.

FROM CHINESE DOMINATION TO VIETNAMESE EXPANSION

The state of *Nam-Viet* was occupied by China for about 900 years until just after 900 AD, when a new *Viet* state, *Dai Viet* ("Great Viet"), appeared. Because of their unique position in the national myths, manifest today in textbooks, popular art, spirit cults and the frequent naming of streets after them, some national heroes of great importance should be mentioned here. The first of these are the two Trung sisters (*Hai Ba Trung*), who led a famous revolt against the Chinese in the first century AD. Other heroes include Tran Hung Dao, who defeated the Mongols in the 13th century, and Le Loi who, with the aid of a dragon, a magic sword, and a giant tortoise drove out the Chinese colonial forces in the 15th century.[8] The *Dai Viet* state had by this time begun its gradual expansion southward past the mountainous "bottleneck" in the middle and into present-day southern Vietnam, previously the realm of the Cham and the Khmer kingdoms. By the 18th century, the *Viet* expansion had, under the rival and alternate leadership of different ruling families, roughly reached today's frontiers.

UNDER THE FRENCH: THE RISE OF ANTI-COLONIALIST NATIONALISM

By the end of the 1700s, French missionaries had arrived in Vietnam, and were soon followed by French merchants. Around 1800, a rebellious popular movement led by three brothers from the village of Tay Son was brought to a end when the French helped one of the rival princes to become Emperor of the whole country, to which he gave the name of *Viet Nam*. The French gradually strengthened their position, with the Emperor as their pawn, until the country was made part of French Indochina at the end of the last century. Now the Vietnamese elite no longer sent their boys to schools designed to educate mandarins. Instead, the young went to

[8] See Whitmore and Pham Cao Duong (1983) for a good presentation of the meaning of the national heroes today, in Vietnam as well as in exile populations. Also Anderson (1991:160): 'In a striking retroactive movement, dynasts who knew nothing of (...) "Vietnam" (...) became nationals'. The same could be said about Vietnam's national heroes. Apart from everything else, the name *Viet Nam* was not in use until centuries after the lives of the legendary Hung kings, the Trung sisters, and the other "national" heroes although they, it should be said, were all *Viet*.

French schools in Vietnam or even to France, and were introduced to the new ideas of nationalism, of social Darwinism, of Marxism.

Influenced by these ideas and by an acute, and growing, discomfort with the colonial situation, the "history" and "culture" of Vietnam became important political fuel for nationalist sentiments. The *nom* characters - an elaborate ideographic system (parallel to today's Japanese or Korean), which had replaced the earlier Sino-Vietnamese - was replaced by the so-called *quoc ngu*[9] alphabet, an adapted Romanised script. This simpler script was put into use by the new, French-educated intelligentsia who, disillusioned with the mandarinate and its "traditional" ideologies, turned eagerly to the new alternatives (Marr 1981). Also, legendary heroes such as the dragon Lord of Lac, the Trung sisters, Tran Hung Dao and Le Loi were, and still are, very much part of the nation building of this century. 'Looking to their own past, Vietnamese saw some grounds for optimism. Had not the Viet people managed to avoid assimilation during a millennium of Chinese rule? Had not Vietnam mounted its own march to the south, in the process eliminating the kingdom of Champa and wresting the lower Mekong delta from the Cambodians?' (Marr 1981:299). The Vietnamese nation as it now appears is largely a construct of the intellectual elite of the first half of this century - national crisis and colonialism leading intellectuals to examine "Vietnamese culture" selectively, rejecting many popular elements as "backwardness". Phan Ke Binh was one of several Vietnamese intellectuals who took upon themselves the task of national self-examination during the first decades of this century. In a series of newspaper articles (which have later been collected and translated into French) he went systematically through "Vietnamese Culture", from family to government level, from literature to hairstyles and religion, evaluating each custom as he went along. Vietnamese nationalism, from its roots in anti-colonial reactions was - in broad terms - eventually to split into Communist and anti-Communist branches. Exile nationalists among the refugees constitute one branch of this nation-building

[9] The use of the term *quoc ngu*, "national language", was transferred from denoting the *nom* script to the romanised script during French colonial rule (cf. Marr 1981:145).

project, seeing themselves as its true heirs, and the safekeepers of the exiled nation, in contrast to another, in their eyes corrupted branch of anticolonial nationalism - the Communists.

Towards the end of the 1920s, new, radical nationalist movements took form and replaced an older generation of more moderate nationalists who had protested in vain against French colonial rule. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, the anti-colonial movement became increasingly well organised. During World War II, the Vichy regime in France gave Japan the right to use French bases in Vietnam. The Vietnam Independence League (*Viet Minh*) resisted the Japanese, and by 1945 they controlled parts of northern Vietnam, including Hanoi, where the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was proclaimed in August 1945.

THE FRENCH WAR

The Emperor abdicated and was given the title of political advisor to the government of the new Republic, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. Meanwhile, the Western allies who had "won" World War II decided that the French had a right to reassert their authority in Vietnam, and France invaded the southern part of the country. War broke out between France and the *Viet Minh*. The Emperor changed sides and was declared head of state by the French in 1949. The French war lasted until May 1954, when the *Viet Minh* defeated France in the famous battle at Dien Bien Phu, north of Hanoi.

THE AMERICAN WAR

A treaty signed by France and the North Vietnamese government in Geneva the following summer stated that free elections were to be held within two years, and that until the elections were held the country was to be divided in a northern, *Viet Minh* Communist controlled part and a southern part controlled by the US-backed government. Neither the US nor the South Vietnam government signed the treaty. However, no elections were held, except for a 1955 referendum putting an end to the monarchy and paving the way for the declaration of the Republic of Vietnam

(RVN) in the South. In the North, radical land reforms were carried out in a manner so aggressive that Ho Chi Minh himself later had to admit they had gone too far. About 800,000 people, mostly Catholics, fled from the North and settled in the South. These "1954 Northerners", having spatially and politically distanced themselves from North Vietnam, are generally talked about as "a kind of Southerners" among today's South Vietnamese.

The South Vietnamese President, the Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, refused to hold elections according to the treaty, on the grounds that his government was not signatory to the treaty. Ho Chi Minh's Northern government became more militant, while the US greatly increased military support to the South. From 1960, North Vietnam launched guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam, Northern cadres joining and supporting the opposition against President Diem's regime in the South. As Buddhists and others who protested against repressive politics were increasingly persecuted by the Southern government, President Diem was killed in a CIA-supported military coup d'état in 1963, which was followed by 13 different governments in one and a half years. The United States' involvement in the war accelerated when the American air force started bombing North Vietnam and American troops were sent to fight in Vietnam. The war lasted until North Vietnamese forces seized Saigon on April 30th, 1975, leading to the capitulation of South Vietnam. North and South Vietnam were formally united in July 1976 when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) was proclaimed.

AFTER 1975

However, uniting the two parts of the country was easier said than done. Landscapes and people had deep scars and wounds from the war, and there was much bitterness on both sides. The two economic and political structures were largely incompatible. Ambitious plans of total agricultural collectivisation in the South failed, while private business was effectively banned. Tens of thousands of people, who had worked for the South Vietnam government or were otherwise considered to be "enemies of Socialism", left Vietnam illegally by boat and made for

the neighbouring countries in what became known as *vuot bien* - "escape past the borders". An unknown number of people were held in so-called "re-education camps", described by my informants as concentration camps, for varying lengths of time. Many lost their legal rights as citizens, including the right to work and access to higher education. In lower education, pupils and teachers were taught according to Communist frames of reference. According to Hitchcox (1990:63), 'The SRVN Government is attempting to reshape the Vietnamese culture in its own image' and as an effect of the practical measures deriving from this policy 'the pervasiveness of the communist doctrine effectively alienated many Vietnamese from their own homeland.' As one example of this alienation, Nhat insisted during my fieldwork that I must learn the meaning of *ho khau* ("household identification card"), to him a symbol of the legal rights he had been denied: 'Understanding the implications of the *ho khau* system is very important. The card is proof of your very existence. If you do not have it, you do not exist. You need it to go to school, to find employment, to buy rice in the government shops, everything.'

Although the American war was over, China was soon baring her teeth and objecting strongly to the ban on private business, which had hit the Chinese population in South Vietnam particularly hard. There were also growing tensions with the Khmer Rouge, and in 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia. All this led to high military expenses, and from 1978, when China withdrew its support to Vietnam, the Hanoi government became completely dependent on the USSR for support. Conditions for the population were extremely difficult. More and more people left Vietnam, risking their lives in rickety vessels on the open sea. Perhaps as many as 150,000 Vietnamese died at sea only between 1976 and 1979 (Hitchcox 1990:71). The number of "boat people" who landed in the neighbouring Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries continued to grow. In response to this, a conference was called in Geneva in 1979, the outcome of which was that the ASEAN was promised that the boat people would be resettled in third countries. In return, the ASEAN countries agreed to give the boat people temporary protection. From 1975 to 1988, over a million refugees left Vietnam. Their links to

relatives who stayed behind were not necessarily severed, and indeed those who stayed behind often relied on their refugee family members for survival (cf. Hitchcox 1990:44).

As an attempt at controlling the exodus and giving people a less dangerous alternative to the *vuot bien* by sea, in 1979 the Orderly Departure Programme (ODP) was established following talks between the UNHCR and the Hanoi government. According to the UNHCR, by the beginning of 1991 almost 250,000 Vietnamese had left Vietnam legally via this programme (UNHCR 1991). Most of these people, "ODPs" for short, were allowed entry to resettlement countries, such as Norway, to be reunited with family members.

TIME FOR A "NEW CHANGE"

In 1986, as an answer to the ever more precarious economic situation, the Sixth Party Congress decreed a policy of *doi moi*, usually rather drearily translated into English as "renovation". *Doi* means change, and *moi* means new, so the tautology "New Change", connoting a "second revolution", might be a better translation of the slogan. Parallel to the Soviet policy of *perestrojka*, *doi moi* encouraged an economic decentralisation, towards a market economy within the one-party political system. Slowly and erratically, things did begin to move and life became easier. Also, the last Vietnamese troops were withdrawn from Cambodia in 1989, ending what had amounted to almost continuous Vietnamese warfare since 1940. This had the effect of reducing the military budget and at the same time eased Vietnam's international position, which was an isolated one after the fall of Communism in Russia and eastern Europe.

In February 1994, incidentally at the time when I was in Saigon, the US embargo was lifted. I saw Pepsi and Coca-Cola advertisements being put up overnight. Two sardonic comments were frequent in South Vietnam around the time the embargo was lifted: 'The Communists need money now' and 'So, you see: the South is winning at last!' In the North, people would not comment the changes at all, at least not to me, and I did not press the point. After 40 years on the road to

Communism in North Vietnam, this is no joking matter. As for exactly how easy things are now, and what will happen next, well - these are crucial questions. Whether *doi moi* is to be perceived as "genuine change" or not is the crux of the matter, both to people in Vietnam and, not least, to the *Viet kieu*. I will return to this question in the discussion of *Viet kieu* concerns in chapter 8. At this point, it should be kept in mind that contesting conceptualisations of what happened in 1975, of the reasons for exodus, and of *doi moi* are essential and closely related parts of *Viet kieu* discourse.

ONE COUNTRY, ONE PEOPLE?

I was talking to Phung, who had recently been to both South and North Vietnam for an extended period of time, about how people conceptualise what happened in 1975, and she told me:

> 'This is very important: The people from the North, they think that these two things, reunification of the two Vietnams and Communist take-over of the South, were one and the same, that the South was in fact liberated in 1975. They really think so! They are so different from us. We are two different peoples really, like Norwegians and Swedes. Not one country at all. The people in the North, they are quite happy now, the way things are turning out. They believe in the "open door" policy, because they see that things are going better than before. They had a terrible time before, during the wars, starvation and poverty were the rule. In the South, people know alternative ways of thinking. Party cadres from the South never lasted long. The Northerners don't trust them, and this is because they know other ways of thinking which Northerners have no experience with.'

As Van also said in her comments to the origin myth at the opening of the present chapter, the differences between North and South Vietnamese are a recurrent theme in Vietnamese discourse. South Vietnam is conceived of as relatively "new" territory, settled by pioneers in a geographically, climatically and culturally very different land - the tropical, Hindu kingdoms of the Cham and the Khmer. The *Dai Viet* state had, by the time it included most of present-day South Vietnam in the 17th century, been divided between rival families into a southern and a northern part. Although the disparities between North and South Vietnam thus date back

much further than the exodus, further than the "fall" - or, alternatively, "liberation" - of Saigon in 1975, than the American and French wars and the 1945 Northern "revolution", they have certainly been aggravated by these events. The opposition between "us" - the South Vietnamese - and "them" - the North Vietnamese - follows the South Vietnamese in their exile, and even seems to petrify, providing a stable, moral contrast necessary to the process of consolidating a South Vietnamese refugee identity.

> 'There is very little contact with the Northerners here [in Norway],' Toan said, 'we Southerners think that maybe they are Communists.'
>
> 'They speak differently', said Tuyet. 'I understand most of the words they use but they always talk "around" things instead of being direct. You just never know what they are thinking, what they really want. It is difficult to trust them.'

"North Vietnamese" is in this sense primarily a political category, and only secondarily a regional one. Phung's view of South and North Vietnamese as two distinct "peoples" may also be seen as an attempt to re-define the conflict from Cold War terms of Communism and anti-Communism to the ethnic terms of the post-Cold War era.

INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE POLICIES AND THE "COLD WAR".

The widespread notion of the 1990s as the "decade of repatriation" reflected the triumph and optimism of the national order at the end of the Cold War.[10] Previously, the world had not only been divided into nation-states but, perhaps even primarily, into East and West, hemispheres of Communism and Capitalism respectively. People who managed to escape from the East - be it Cuba, East Germany or Vietnam - had automatically been given the status of political refugees in the West, where governments saw each refugee as an argument in favour of

[10] It was never formally declared as such by the UNHCR, as far as I have been able to find out. Somebody must have said it was, and everybody believed it and started referring to it. What I have found is the January 1992 issue of *Refugees*, in which the High Commissioner is said to have 'declared 1992 the "Year of Voluntary Repatriation" ' (UNHCR 1992:6).

Democracy and Capitalism, at the expense of totalitarian Communism. This had to change:

> 'With the end of the Cold War and the winding up of proxy wars, sympathy for refugees - often used as pawns in those conflicts - is disappearing as fast as their strategic value in many parts of the world.' (UNHCR 1992:7)

Without the polarised categories of Cold War rhetoric, the existence of the very term "political refugee" appeared to have lost its justification and meaning. When the relatively simple and absolute criteria of identifying "refugee-producing" regimes as basically good or bad, friend or foe, disappeared, the need for new criteria was met, not with another simple, total set of principles, but with the practice of trying each individual refugee case. In the process, the term "political refugee" itself became a relative one.[11] This affected the position of refugees in general, and although there have been few or no formal changes in the one-party systems in countries like Cuba and Vietnam, refugees from these countries, too, found that the international political attitudes toward them changed dramatically.

In Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the other countries of first asylum, the Vietnamese "boat people" had been placed in refugee camps while they awaited the promised resettlement in "the West". Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees departed from these camps and were "resettled" in USA, Australia and other countries. Late arrivals, however, who fled towards the end of the Cold War and the beginning of *doi moi* found themselves labelled "asylum seekers" and "detainees". Vietnamese "boat people" were no longer automatically accepted as being "genuine" refugees. This U-turn

'was officially set out in the CPA (Comprehensive Plan of Action) in 1989. (...) According to the CPA, which was adopted by all the first asylum countries at the June Conference on Indochinese Refugees in Geneva, June 1989, all new arrivals after the cut-off date in the country in which they arrived would be subject to a refugee determination procedure (or screening). The results of the screening would determine whether or not a particular person may be resettled in the West.' (von der Borch 1990)

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[11] This is true perhaps to a lesser extent in the case of Islamic states, although even refugees from these new 'enemies' of "the West" are defined less in easily recognizable block political, and more in differentiated religious or ethnic terms: Ahmadiya, Kurd etc.

Assessing the reasons for exodus, generally or particularly, is a highly complex task. Furthermore, it is in itself making a political statement, and this has, not surprisingly, become another key factor in the *Viet kieu* contest of reality and of identity, which I shall return to in chapter 8. Suffice it here to say that politics and economy are so closely intertwined that only in a minority of the cases is it possible to point at "purely political" or "purely economical" reasons for leaving Vietnam.

I should like to quote the following, which I found in a discussion paper written by experienced "detention centre" relief workers in Hong Kong. It sums up their view of the changing policies:

> 'The present generation of boat people is paying the price for the poor base on which international policy on their situation stood for most of the past 15 years. The decision in 1979 to accept all people who fled Vietnam as refugees eligible for resettlement in the West has brought us to the present situation, where thousands of asylum seekers from Vietnam still leave with what are historically legitimate expectations of resettlement. However, the interest of the West has now finally drained away (...) Thus questions have been raised about the legitimacy of claims to refugee status made by the boat people, leading to the emergence of the debate over true "refugee" (as defined in the 1951 UN convention and the 1967 protocol) versus "economic migrant". Both the countries of first asylum, long tired of the boat people and looking for ways to push the resettlement countries into a change of policy, and the resettlement countries themselves, have used this argument to justify the change of policy towards the boat people (...) The grounds on which the use of force is based should be clear. It is not a question of (...) a change in the type of person now seeking refuge from Vietnam(...) It is a political reality that international policy towards the Vietnamese boat people has changed, and it will become even tougher in the coming months.' (von der Borch 1990).

NEW WORLD ORDER, NEW POSSIBILITIES

The end of the "Cold War" brought with it the possibility of return for - or of, depending on the point of view - refugees from countries whose Communist regimes had fallen, such as East Germany, Poland, or Russia. Vietnam is not among these countries. Yet as an indirect consequence of the "end of the Cold War" and a direct consequence of the Comprehensive Plan of Action, tens of thousands of Vietnamese boat people have been returned to Vietnam from Southeast Asian

countries of first asylum. This has happened voluntarily - or, as transpires from the above quotation - by the use of force.[12]

Some have also been returned from "the West". In January 1995 a small notice appeared in the major Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*: 40,000 Vietnamese citizens had been warned that they would be expelled from the now united Germany. According to the newspaper, one fourth of these had been immigrant workers in East Germany, one fourth were illegal immigrants, and the remaining 20,000 had had their applications for asylum in Germany refused (*Aftenposten* 10.1.95). A few days later, right-wing member of the Norwegian Parliament Carl I. Hagen wrote a letter to the same newspaper: '(...) Furthermore, it is fantastic that we in Norway still have refugees from Chile and Vietnam who are living at the expense of Norwegian taxpayers, when other countries are returning their Vietnamese refugees and Chile has become a democratic country.'[13] (*Aftenposten* Jan. 1995). Again in the same newspaper 1.6.95, the general secretary of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Gunnar Andersen, was interviewed about the new "post Cold War" Norwegian refugee policy, under the headline: 'The Norwegian Refugee Council wants to send refugees home.' He was quoted as follows: 'The number of years is not important. In principle one should send refugees home when it is safe, no matter how long they have been here' and, the journalist continued, 'Gunnar Andersen holds the opinion that Norwegian refugee policy always has focused on integration of the refugees. Emphasising protection and return is a considerable reform for Norway.'[14] All this information, and much more, was received and discussed by Vietnamese refugees living in Norway. Though many of them have become Norwegian citizens, and none of them have

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[12] By September 1995 20,000 "screened-out" (rejected) boat people were still detained in Hong Kong. When China takes over Hong Kong in 1997, they risk being imprisoned, or put in "rehabilitation camps" in mainland China, according to Alexander Castella, Asia Director, UNHCR. (*På flukt*, no.8 1995)

[13] 'Forøvrig er det fantastisk at vi i Norge fortsatt har flyktninger fra Chile og Vietnam som lever på norske skattebetaleres regning, etter at andre land returnerer sine Vietnam-flyktninger og etter at Chile er blitt et demokratisk land.'

[14] 'Norsk Flyktningeråd vil sende flyktninger hjem (...) "Antall år er ikke viktig. I prinsippet skal man kunne sende hjem flyktninger når det er trygt, samme hvor lenge de har vært her." (...) Gunnar Andersen mener norsk flyktningepolitikk i alle år har dreiet seg om integrering av flyktningene. Vekt på beskyttelse og retur markerer en stor reform for Norge.'

any immediate reason to fear being forcibly returned to Vietnam, they have had to adapt to a radically changed political climate, in which the moral legitimacy of their exile is being openly questioned by (other) Norwegians.

The Vietnamese Prime Minister issued a decree, valid from 1.4.95, regarding repatriation of *Viet kieu* ("overseas Vietnamese") who have resettled in "the West". The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration had the decree translated from Vietnamese into Norwegian, "for their own use" according to my sources. Under the terms of this decree, only ODPs are welcomed back, as no *Viet kieu* with "illegal or unclear departure circumstances" are accepted for repatriation by the Vietnam Government. Also, subsistence guarantees must be given, and repatriation fees are to be paid, before a *Viet kieu* can be accepted for repatriation. As new laws and decrees are issued in Vietnam to keep up with the rapid change especially in foreign relations, I do not know for how long this particular decree will be valid, nor indeed if it has had any practical effect at all. It shows, nevertheless, how people who left Vietnam under "illegal or unclear departure circumstances", that is, an overwhelming majority among the *Viet kieu*, namely the refugees, still consitute an unacceptable category to the Vietnamese authorities. They have no place in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

ASSISTANCE AND CONTROL

As we shall see in the following chapter, 'Nations - never experienced as "mere" historical artefacts - have come to be perceived as an organic and necessary order (...). Precisely because refugees are interstitial in the order of nations, (...) states have developed systematized, "routine" techniques for dealing with (...) refugees' (Malkki 1990:33). As described above, Vietnamese refugees have been "dealt with" by the first asylum countries through the establishment of reception centres, refugee camps, and detention centres. This illustrates how one way to deal with these "unbelonging" is to construct separate, physical spaces for them. Thus the national order does provide spaces for those who do not fit in, but these spaces are marginal, liminal, often with an ad hoc character - physically and administratively

separate from the categories of the system proper. The establishment of refugee camps and reception centres for asylum seekers may, besides the apparently obvious instrumental purposes, partly be viewed as attempts to handle this particular anomaly of the national order. In this perspective, the "unbelonging" Vietnamese refugees are but one example of liminalised populations in a national world order. Linda Hitchcox, in her presentation of several such institutions in Southeast Asian countries of first asylum, describes a marked ambivalence in the perception of refugees, simultaneously as passive victims and as threatening agents within the framework of a national order, an ambivalence which permeates the role of first asylum countries: '(...) the perceived position of the host as benefactor and controller. (...) Considerations of this kind (...) dictate the purposes of the camps and are all-encompassing' (Hitchcox 1990:113).

The role of the refugee is simultaneously passive and active, one of victim and threat, and the host country role correspondingly one of benefactor and controller, of assistance and control. Hitchcox contends that 'refugees who are held in all the described localities experience very similar frustrations despite the differences in the organisation of each camp (...). The official notion of what the purposes of the camps are, and, following from this, what the category of refugee means, confronts all Vietnamese as being the same reality' (ibid.: 113). In other words, the refugee experience in the countries of first asylum is largely a frustrating confrontation with ambivalence. Is this true only of the countries of first asylum, of the camps? What happens when refugees leave the camps for the countries of resettlement? The policies directed towards the Vietnamese in these countries, as in the ASEAN ones, have varied, and with them the degrees of assistance and control. Barely one per cent of all Vietnamese refugees ended up in Norway. Did they meet a similar set of ambiguities in their new homeland?

CHAPTER III

IMPOSING ORDER:[15] CONTROL AND ASSISTANCE

NOTIONS OF NATIONS

We draw a map and call it "The World". We colour the oceans blue, split the continents into smaller parts and call each of them "countries" or "states". We give the countries different colours and teach our children that the world is a mosaic of states, with black lines, "borders", drawn neatly between the pinks, blues, greens and yellows. We learn that each state corresponds to a "nation", a "people", that may have achieved its "independence" through dramatic historical events. In this way we make the world appear to be a comprehensible and tidy sort of place. This image of a national order shows us what the world could be, if all was right and natural, indeed what it should be - or, perhaps, what it is "really" like, beneath appearances of confusion and chaos. The impact of this set of ideas has long been felt in classrooms throughout the world, from Britain to Japan, from Norway to Vietnam. This is no coincidence: 'It is education that must give souls a national formation, and direct their opinions and tastes in such a way that they will be patriotic by inclination, by passion, by necessity.' (Rousseau, as quoted in Bauman 1990:155).

A NATURAL ORDER

The national state as a social institution derives much of its legitimacy from appearing to be a logical necessity, a self-existing, "natural" order. In the words of Mary Douglas, 'most established institutions (...) rest their claims to legitimacy on

[15] Cf. "Imposing Aid" (Harrell-Bond 1986), a critical book on the international "refugee help industry". Cf. also Douglas (1975:53) "Pollution rules ... in so far as they *impose order* on experience, they support clarification of forms and thus reduce dissonance." (emphasis added).

their fit with the nature of the universe' (Douglas 1986:46). This argument certainly applies to the national order, surrounded and supported as it is by an abundance of "natural" metaphors, some of which I will discuss in more detail below. Anybody who has had any schooling at all, in this world where schools aim to "give souls a national formation" - both Vietnam and Norway most emphatically included - will most likely have absorbed a feeling that the national order is a natural one.

ROOTEDNESS TO THE HOMELAND

We do need conceptual schemes to describe and order the world. Feelings of attachment to landscape and country are very much part of people's lives, and may often make home and homeland into safe havens in an otherwise chaotic world. The "Map of the World" may be useful as a guide in chaos, and the national order as good an ideal as any other. Yet the map is not "The World", but an ideal representation of a particular social institution on a piece of paper. The national order is this social institution. There is a strong normative aspect to social institutions we subscribe to, in that it is through them that we see how things should be. Discrepancy between the conceptual scheme of a national order and experienced reality, gives an uneasy feeling that there is something wrong somewhere: 'That moral component of assigning reality to different categories becomes particularly apparent when things get out of place' (Wuthnow et. al. 1984:87). As long as we see the national order as legitimate and "natural", we search the ground to see why that does not fit the map.

What we see is a lot of people in the "wrong" places. Some of them seem to have been there always, like Danes in Northern Germany, or Kurds in Turkey. Our concern here is with another category, that of "displaced" or "uprooted" people. The biological metaphor of the individual subject as a tree with roots that need to grow in national soil 'leads to a vision of displacement as pathological' (Malkki 1992:31). In this view the "uprooting" of people becomes a cause of trouble to themselves, and in turn to their new surroundings. 'It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates "the problem"

not in the political conditions or processes that produce massive territorial displacements of people, but, rather, within the bodies and minds (and even souls) of people categorized as refugees' (ibid.:33). As I mentioned in the introduction, Liisa Malkki's concern is that many scholars, too, seem to have taken for granted a one-to-one linking of nation to territory. 'That the world should be composed of sovereign, spatially discontinuous units is a sometimes implicit, sometimes stated premise in much of the literature on nations and nationalism [e.g. Gellner 1983; Giddens 1987:116, 119; Hobsbawm 1990: 9-10]' (Malkki 1992:26). In accepting the premises of nationalist thinking, reflected in the apparently innocent use of "natural" metaphors, scholars may inadvertedly strengthen the arguments of nationalist politicians, lending legitimacy to the idea that refugees are problematic by definition.

REFUGEE FLOWS

Scholars and journalists, politicians and bureaucrats also routinely speak of "flows" and "waves" of refugees, playing on analogies with "natural phenomena". Sceptical voices in the "host" populations also make use of these refugee metaphors, evoking images of uncontrollable masses of water flooding the boundary "coastlines" of the nation - a tidal wave of people, threatening to drown us all. The alarm is sounded: we must build dams, make our boundaries watertight, before it is too late! The idea of the nation as an individual, described below, may explain some of the appeal this metaphor has: the waves wash the nation-person off his feet, "we" are in danger of losing our foothold, the contact with the national soil. The very existence of the nation, our national, territorial independence, is at stake. This "natural calamity" metaphor is related to other *force majeure* analogies, such as images of war and invasion. Here refugees are likened to conquerors and colonialists, or pictured as hordes of desperate people, ready to take over "our" country, be it through violence or sheer numbers.

Summing up, refugees are conceptualised as literally "inter-national": they exist as a category somewhere betwixt and between, rather than within, nations. As Bauman (1990:143, 148, 153) says:

'There are friends and enemies. And there are *strangers*. (...) The strangers (...) are, in principle, undecidables. They are that "third element" that should not be. (...) Like all the other self-perpetuating social groupings, both territorial and non-territorial, the national states collectivize friends and enemies. In addition to this universal function, however, they also eliminate the strangers; or at least they attempt to do so.'

Refugees are the "others" of nationalism on two levels. On one level, "they" do not belong "here". In this sense they are like any immigrant population. On the second level, however, they differ from other immigrants:[16] They have no place "there" either: that is, they have no place in their country of origin - if, indeed they can point to any one country as their "country of origin", which is tricky for instance in the case of ethnic Chinese Vietnamese. They do not belong anywhere, in the sense that they are excluded from our neatly drawn map of the world.

How do these general statements on refugees as a liminal category - the first Bauman's, the second mine - apply to the case of Vietnamese refugees in Norway? The views Norwegians hold on this will vary, and I have not done systematic fieldwork among Norwegians. Because the statements focus on "others" of the Norwegian nation, stereotypes are to be expected. Seen through Norwegian eyes, then, be it those of the right-wing nationalist or of the presumably neutral bureaucrat, Vietnamese refugees are very generally regarded as strangers - neither friend nor foe, but people who do not belong "here". Where they do belong is not really "our" problem, though it seems only natural that they should belong "there", in Vietnam - they are Vietnamese, after all. I think what Phong told me once is fairly typical:

> 'You know that Norwegians often ask how I like living in Norway. That can be pretty annoying. After all, I have lived here for a long time. I might as well ask

[16] Whether the difference between refugees and other migrants is a question of degree (of [in]voluntariness) or if they are somehow essentially different has long been debated, and I shall not go into that here.

them how they like living in Norway. And sometimes if I say that the situation is better in Vietnam now, they ask me: Why don't you go back? They don't understand that by now I like living here, I am used to it, my life is here.'

The perception of the Vietnamese as "strangers" to Norwegian society does not primarily imply that they should "go home". Rather, it conveys the message that they are not fully included "here", that their place in relation to the "host" society is marginal. I shall discuss this in more detail below, but let us first try to look at the general statements at the beginning of this subchapter again, this time through Vietnamese eyes.

Whose Vietnamese eyes? The question is pertinent because in any exile Vietnamese perspective, the statements approach fundamental questions of belonging. The answers will necessarily vary according to each person's own life history and position. A schoolgirl grown up in Norway, an academic-turned-factory-worker, or a fisherman on the dole - each will approach the question from his or her own angle. What most of them do have in common, and I think what may make the question of refugee-ness versus the national order difficult to handle to many exile Vietnamese, is that they have themselves grown up believing in the "naturalness" of the national order. They cannot step out of the national order as long as they think of it as analogous with 'the way the planets are fixed in the sky or the way that plants or humans or animals naturally behave' (Douglas 1986:47). On top of this comes the fact that they depend upon this view of the national order to legitimate their own political role vis-à-vis Vietnam: the Communists have taken over our country, but one day we, the exile keepers of Vietnam - or our children - will return to a free country. To my knowledge, many do not reflect critically on the national order *per se*, but do feel oppressed by its manifestations in their interaction with Norwegians.[17] This is particularly so in the case of those who received higher education in pre-1975 South Vietnam, in an educational system

[17] Cf. a letter to *Aftenposten* (Oct. 1995) from a person with a Vietnamese name who argued that "this isn't our country, so we must adapt to the Norwegian ways." (Unfortunately I do not have the reference of this.) This also connotes what I say below (see chapter 5) about Vietnamese religions: there is no one, universally valid truth; therefore, compromising does not create moral dilemmas like those for instance Moslems may experience.

mainly created by the French, and in an electric political and intellectual climate: 'Did you go to Cafe Tung? When I was at University in Dalat all the students used to gather there to discuss politics and the future of our country' one of them excitedly exclaimed when I said I had visited Dalat. The loyalty to the "Vietnamese nation" and a "free Vietnam" is still very strong among these highly articulate exile intellectuals. Reluctant and unused to seeing themselves as marginal, they may define their position as "high" in relation to the Vietnamese nation, "high" among other Vietnamese in Norway, and admit that they have a "low" position in Norwegian society. This may also be related to their habit of conceptualising the world in hierarchical terms, rather than in horizontal terms of centre and periphery.[18]

By late 1995, only 6 Vietnamese had accepted the Norwegian government's "repatriation funding", according to *Utlendingsdirektoratet*. This funding is to be granted to all Vietnamese who leave Norway to return to Vietnam for good, and was established in the late 1980s. More people may have returned than statistics show, but there is no doubt that the number of returnees is very low. To take this as an indication that an overwhelming majority of the around 12,000 resident Vietnamese feel that they belong in Norway, and not in Vietnam would, however, be a fallacy. Phong stated that he "likes living here", that his "life is here", but there are many other reasons for not returning. I was talking to a mother of five who had come to Norway with the children to be reunited with their father, only to find that he had in the meantime become a heavy drinker. She had been in Norway for nearly a year when she applied for a divorce. She knew no Norwegian, and was distressed about her "new life" to the point of mental exhaustion. I asked her if she had at all considered going back to Vietnam, where I knew she had family and friends, and she looked at me blankly: 'I can't start again there. This is the kind of decision you only make once.' Assessing her situation, I realise that going back to Vietnam would have meant economic insecurity, hard work, and disgrace both

[18] I shall return to corresponding aspects of Norwegian and Vietnamese ideologies in chapter 7.

because of being divorced and because it would mean admitting that she failed to "make it" abroad after having waited for so long. But how much better off is she here? Here, too, other Vietnamese will see her as that disgraceful thing, a divorced woman. Although she is economically safer in the social security system, she is extremely isolated, not being able to speak to Norwegians without an interpreter, and avoiding contact with other Vietnamese. She weeps when she thinks of her parents, whom she has not informed of her situation because she does not want to worry them. For her, there is no way back.

MACHINERIES OF ASSISTANCE AND CONTROL

Governmental and non-governmental organisations, whose job it is to control the "flows" of refugees on behalf of the national order, need to differentiate between refugees and asylum seekers on the one hand and "ordinary" immigrants on the other. In this context, "international" is an interesting term: "inter" is "between", both in the sense "betwixt and between" (a) and "reciprocal" (b). So the inter-national (a) refugees are managed by inter-national (b) organisations. The UNHCR is the main "inter-national" bureaucratic machinery which exists to take care of the category of refugees only, and operates along strict definitions as to who exactly is to be considered a refugee. Until 1988, the Norwegian bureaucracy was organised along similar lines. The Norwegian bureaucratic body that since 1988 takes over once a refugee arrives in Norway, *Utlendingsdirektoratet* (UDI) on the other hand, is responsible for implementing the government's policies towards all aliens on Norwegian soil - except Nordic citizens - refugee or not. In other words, there has been a good deal of reorganising during the period in which Vietnamese refugees have arrived in Norway, partly as an adaptation of the national "machinery of reception" to the international changes described in the previous chapter, and partly for more domestic reasons.

Until 1982, the Norwegian Refugee Council was responsible for organising the assistance to refugees who "were received by" Norway. The major refugee categories in this period included Jews, Hungarians, Chileans, Vietnamese and

others. Most of these people were taken into the country according to quota agreements between Norway and the UNHCR, after having been accepted as "genuine refugees" by the UNHCR according to the 1951 Convention. These "transferred refugees", or "quota refugees" as they were also called, were automatically given political asylum in Norway. Upon arrival, they were placed in "reception centres" either in Oslo or in the district where they were later "settled".

In 1982 *Statens Flyktningsekretariat* ("the State Refugee Secretariat") was established in order to take over the responsibility for reception and settlement of refugees. The actual contact with the refugees was from then on transferred to the local municipalities and the refugees were increasingly "settled" directly without the initial stay in reception centres. In my fieldwork area, the majority of "quota refugees" received in this period were an estimated number of 50 Vietnamese a year. While the total number of "transferred" or "quota" refugees remained relatively stable, around 1,000 persons arriving in Norway each year, the number of "asylum seekers" - people who arrived in Norway of their own accord and then applied for political asylum - increased from 150 in 1983 to 8,613 in 1987. While their applications were under consideration, they were accommodated in special "asylum seeker reception centres", often set up in hotels in remote mountain areas, rented by the Refugee Secretariat or agencies employed by the Refugee Secretariat. These people came from turbulent areas all over the world, mainly Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Statens Flyktningsekretariat was unwound in 1988 and a new bureaucratic body was established, this time *Utlendingsdirektoratet* (lit. "the Directorate of Aliens", formally translated "the Directorate of Immigration"). Unlike its predecessors, who were concerned solely with those who came here as "quota" refugees and asylum seekers, *Utlendingsdirektoratet* (UDI) includes in its target category all foreign citizens resident in Norway (except Nordic citizens). In brief, it is responsible for 'implementing the Government's immigration policy' (UDI 1994:1).[19]

[19] 'UDI gjennomfører statens innvandringspolitikk'

The development and reorganisations of the Norwegian bureaucratic machinery reflect the changes in the international political situation and, in turn, the international community's views on refugees. They also reflect changes in the domestic political climate. As the total number of refugees and asylum seekers to Norway increased, control and assistance went hand in hand in the attempt to "integrate" the newcomers. Summing up, there seems to have been a tendency from emphasising assistance of "genuine refugees" to emphasising control, explained by suspicion of "economic migration" motives for exodus. Compared to the situation during the Cold War, extremely few people who claim to be refugees are currently accepted as such in Western Europe, Norway included. This is both because the criteria for being accepted as a "genuine refugee" are being more strictly enforced as well as narrowed, so that the category is becoming almost empty, and because the two categories of "refugee" and "economic migrant" are less obviously distinguishable in the present political circumstances. The paradox is reflected in the increased Norwegian granting of residence permits on "humanitarian grounds" to people who do not fulfil the criteria for being granted political asylum - that is, "genuine" refugee status - but nevertheless admittedly have left their homelands "for refugee-like reasons".

The Vietnamese have mainly been "settled" (*bosatt*) according to the principle of "dispersed settlement" (*spredt bosetting*).[20] The verb is normally reflexive in Norwegian: to settle oneself (*å bosette seg*). The exception is this particular usage, where you *qua* refugee are passively settled by another agent, namely the government. This policy distinguishes them, not only from asylum seekers, but also from labour migrants, mainly from Pakistan, who have not been subjected to any form of controlled "settlement". The policy of dispersed settlement of refugees in Norway can be traced back to the case of Jews who came to Norway in the wake of World War II. According to Kramer (1986:58) the policy was chosen both

[20] The substantival *spredt bosetting* is borrowed from the field of Norwegian "district policies": it is an explicit aim for these policies to make the remotest districts of the country as attractive as possible to the population, mainly by economic compensation.

because housing was more easily available in rural areas and because one wanted the Jews to assimilate as quickly as possible. In the decades that followed, Hungarians, Latin Americans, Vietnamese and others were subject to the same policy - however, the assimilation issue was subdued. In 1995, the Government wishes to support 'a development in which municipalities in the entire country take their part of the responsibility for the domestic refugee work' (Stortingsmelding 17, 1995:104).[21] Ghetto scenarios seem to lurk in the shadows: 'A concentration of refugees in the largest cities should be avoided, so that this does not contribute to the strengthening of bad living circumstances and housing situations in some vulnerable/exposed urban areas.' (loc. cit.)[22] Dispersed settlement has no doubt contributed to the relative invisibility of the Vietnamese in Norway.

Figures published by the National Bureau of Statistics (SSB) support this argument. For instance, there are about 13,000 Vietnamese and 18,000 Pakistanis living in Norway (SSB 1995)[23]. The Vietnamese have "been settled" all over the country, in towns and "densely populated areas" (*tettsteder* - though what looks "densely" populated to a Norwegian may well look completely desolate to a Vietnamese) as well as in remote little parishes. A large majority of the Pakistanis have gathered in the capital and live in, or near, central Oslo, where they are very visible. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, although many of them do move after a few years, do not all seem to move to Oslo, or even to the other larger towns. Although many Vietnamese have moved to the Oslo area, they have mostly clustered in a handful of the dormitory towns outside Oslo proper. Many others have moved to small towns in other parts of Norway, with already established Vietnamese populations. Indeed the Vietnamese seem to have defined their own "centres", regardless of the size or centrality of these areas as seen from a Norwegian point of view (cf. chapter 8). One result of this is that the Vietnamese are largely out of sight of the majority of Norwegians, who do not themselves

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21 'en utvikling der kommuner over hele landet er med på å ta ansvar for det innenlandske flyktningarbeidet.'

22 'En konsentrasjon av bosetting i de store byene bør unngås, slik at dette ikke bidrar til å forsterke opphopningen av dårlige levekår og boforhold i enkelte utsatte storbyområder.'

23 *Personer med to utenlandsfødte foreldre* ("persons with both parents born abroad") - regardless of citizenship.

happen to live in any of these "centres". The Vietnamese have found their place on the outskirts of Norwegian cities and on the margins of Norwegian society.

From the moment their feet touched Norwegian ground, the help apparatus automatically registered the Vietnamese as "clients". This is a general euphemism for "recipients of social welfare money", and involves a high degree of both assistance and control. Many of the Vietnamese told me that they initially saw the money as a continuation of UNHCR "refugee camp allowances", as money they were entitled to because of their refugee status. Neither the automatic registration nor the refugees' perceptions of it are in agreement with the intentions of the welfare system, which emphasises assistance according to individual needs. A considerable amount of energy is wasted on both sides - refugees trying to understand the intentions and rules of an apparently arbitrary welfare system, and social workers trying to explain, and to assist and control these "clients", who hardly fit into a welfare apparatus designed for other purposes.

At the end of the 1970s, the numbers of Vietnamese in Norway were few, and manual work was relatively easy to get. Most of them were able to find jobs and become economically independent after a very short time. For the many who arrived later, however, this became increasingly difficult. The main reason for this was that general unemployment rates were rising. Yet, although the rates are down again to 7% of the total population, they are still around 25% for the Vietnamese (SSB 1994) :[24] when I asked to interview Phung, who was among the first arrivals and who is very concerned with the position of Vietnamese in Norwegian society, she immediately told me: 'I want to tell you about unemployment! Did you know that of all immigrants in Norway, the Vietnamese have the highest unemployment rates?' The labour market is another field where the authorities have established instruments of assistance and control at their disposal, and where there is considerable ambivalence towards foreigners. On the one hand, it is argued that "they don't want to work", on the other hand, that "they

[24] The proportions include persons who are taking part in *arbeidsmarkedstiltak* ("work training projects").

steal our jobs". Handling these two logically opposite arguments against immigration and the reception of refugees is a difficult task, and the solutions are often of the kind Næss suggests: '(...) if the country's own citizens react against immigration, the solution is to discriminate the foreigners by giving the country's own citizens the first choice on the labour market' (Næss 1986:33).[25]

Næss further argues that an underlying set of ideas in Norway's immigration policies seems to be that 'along with liberal ideas, welfare thinking and consideration for foreigners who settle in Norway, there is also a certain philosophy about what sort of problems the immigration of particularly alien foreigners may lead to, and what sort of solutions these problems have. The solution is to discriminate the foreigners. Thus, Norwegians are reassured.' (ibid.:34)[26]

The issues related to housing and settlement, to social welfare and to the labour market show again how "we" simultaneously subscribe to two apparently contradictory perspectives: refugees may be seen as passive victims of macro events (appropriate measure: assistance) as well as rational actors maximizing benefit (appropriate measure: control). In this way, "we" are also part of the picture.

IMPOSING *LIKHET*

I should like to quote the head of the Directorate of Immigration to illustrate this ambivalence as they see it. It is hardly a coincidence that he links the question of "equality" to the - to us - familiar theme of "assistance and control".[27]

> '(...) that the Directorate has both a controlling and an assisting function (...) it is very interesting to see this totality, because (...) there is obviously a connection

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25 'dersom landets egne borgere reagerer på innvandringen er løsningen å diskriminere utlendingene, ved at landets egne borgere får første valg på arbeidsmarkedet'

26 (...) at det ved siden av liberale ideer, velferdstenkning og omsorg for utlendinger som slår seg ned i Norge, også finnes en bestemt filosofi om hva slags problemer innvandring av særlig fremmedartede utlendinger kan føre til , og hva slags løsninger disse problemene har. Løsningen er å diskriminere utleningene. Derved beroliges nordmenn.'

27 He was interviewed at length as the "special guest" in a one-hour NRK radio emission, and the extracts are my translations from the Norwegian original. Being broadcast by the NRK, the interview, one may assume, is an official presentation of Norwegian government policy, although it was held in an informal tone.

> between the fact that we have a controlled and limited immigration and the fact that we are trying to reach a goal of genuine equality of status (*reell likestilling*) between immigrants and Norwegians.' (Kierschow 1993)

The ideal state of equality is to be approached through government assistance to and control of the "others". Language training is one example of these measures:

> '...the teaching and learning of the Norwegian language [to immigrants] is absolutely necessary in order to continue to have a society based on a relatively high degree of similarity/equality (*likhet*) and a relatively low level of conflict.' (Ibid.)

Closely related to Norwegian, as well as to other "Western" ideas of the national order, is the concept of the individual. An aspect of the egalitarian, individual type of nationalism which Kapferer (1989) describes is the problem of maintaining the integrity of "equal" individuals, while at the same time making these individuals into parts of a transcendent, national body. One way of countering the problem is by individualising the nation itself: the nation is pictured as one person, and each person carries the nation within her- or himself. People who are visibly and audibly different - alien - seem poorly equipped to satisfy Norwegian demands of being "equal" parts of the national body. They are conceptualised as "problematic" in relation to a nationalism based on "equality". Bauman states that the construction of homogeneity is a crucial element in nation-building, and concludes that: 'The state-enforced homogeneity is the practice of nationalist ideology' (Bauman 1990:154).

Now what are the relations between "equality" and "homogeneity"? What is "equality"? In Norwegian, it is *likhet*. However, the word *likhet* has two separate meanings, namely "equality of rights" on the one hand and "similarity", "sameness" or "homogeneity" on the other. The former corresponds to the supposedly universal ideals of the French Revolution. The latter, although related to these same individualist ideals, has fused with Norwegian nationalism to make Norwegian-ness the measure of homogeneity. There is widespread confusion of the two meanings of *likhet* in Norwegian discourse: 'In order to carry out the implications of the view (...) that immigrants themselves are to be given the

opportunity to choose their adaptation in Norway, one must be willing to pay the price of accepting that *likeverd* ["equal value"] does not depend on *likhet* ["homogeneity"] ' (Kramer 1984:96, original emphases).[28] The confusion arises and continues, I believe, not mainly for linguistic reasons, but because of a tacit agreement that you cannot have one without the other. The Norwegian brand of egalitarianism rests on a dominant myth of Norway as a homogeneous society. My point here is not that this myth is necessarily "false". Rather, I wish to point at the almost sacred nature of the homogeneity myth, and its hegemony in relation to alternative representations of Norwegian society as a conglomerate of groups and/or classes. At first, it may seem self-contradictory that Norwegians subscribe with great enthusiasm both to being exceptionally homogeneous and to being regionally different, with a widespread interest in local dialects, costumes and other local "traditions". Nevertheless, as Kramer (1984) points out, the overlying and uniting principle is that of common descent.[29] Significantly here, the myth of homogeneity is also a premise for the idea of "assimilation" - how can you "assimilate" at all if there is no homogeneous mass to assimilate with? Furthermore, as Schierup argues: 'if "integration" ideologically and in practical politics implies that immigrants must become culturally alike the "majority" in order to enjoy the welfare state's equal rights efforts (...) then these efforts may contribute to "disarming" immigrants of their own cultural resources. These resources are, however, a necessary condition for an active struggle for genuine equality of rights in a society characterised by increasing discrimination, xenophobia and real, social inequality' (Schierup 1988:242).[30] Although particularly prominent in Norway, the confusion of the two meanings of *likhet* is not a uniquely

[28] 'Hvis man skal gjøre alvor av å realisere det syn (...) at innvandrerne selv skal få anledning til å velge sin tilpasning i Norge, må man være villig til å ta den omkostning det innebærer å akseptere at *likeverd* ikke er avhengig av *likhet*.'

[29] This, incidentally, is very similar to the Vietnamese case (cf. e.g. the myth of origin in chapter 2).

[30] 'hvis "integration" ideologisk og i praktisk politik betyder, at indvandrerne kulturelt må blive som "majoriteten" for at kunne nyde godt af velfærdsstatens ligestillingsbestræbelser (...) kan disse bestræbelser medvirke til at "afvæbne" indvandrere for deres egne kulturelle resourcer. Disse resourcer er imidlertid i et samfund preget af voksende diskriminering, fremmedhad og faktisk social ulighed en nødvendig forutsætning for en aktiv kamp for reel ligestilling.'

Norwegian, or Scandinavian, phenomenon. Dumont takes France as his point of departure when he says:

'Make distinction illegitimate, and you get discrimination; suppress the former modes of distinction and you have a racist ideology (...) In the modern Western world not only are citizens free and equal before the law, but a transition develops, at least in popular mentality, *from the moral principle of equality to the belief in the basic identity of all men* (...) To sum up, the proclamation of equality has burst asunder a mode of distinction centered upon the social, but in which physical, cultural and social characteristics [of the individual, I suppose?] were indiscriminately mixed. (...) it is permissible to doubt whether, in the fight against racism in general, the mere recall of the egalitarian ideal, however solemn it may be, and even though accompanied by a scientific criticism of racist prejudices, will be really efficient. It would be better *to prevent the passage from the moral principle of equality to the notion that all men are identical*. One feels sure that equality can, in our day, be combined with the recognition of differences, so long as the differences are morally neutral. People must be provided with the means of conceptualizing differences. (Dumont 1980:262-265, emphases added.)

Difference (*forskjell*), or absence of *likhet* (*ulikhet*), is incompatible with the homogeneous model, at least as long as people are not provided with the alternative "means of conceptualizing differences" that Dumont calls for. Until then, the very difference of the different individual, or group of individuals, appears to be the problem.

Symptomatically, newspeak is widespread in this field: *Fremmedspråklige* ("language aliens") and *fremmedkulturelle* ("cultural aliens"), for some reason seem more acceptable now than "immigrants", "refugees" and the like, perhaps in a realisation that the formal status of people who are not like "us" is not "really" the problem. These terms are also adopted by extreme nationalists in their attempts to gain ground. One instance of this is the political party called *Hjelp de fremmedkulturelle hjem, ellers mister vi landet vårt* ("Help the culturally alien go home, or else we shall lose our country"[31]). Another, less extreme, example is the 1995 electioneering rhetoric of right-wing *Fremskrittspartiet* (the "Progress Party") and

[31] After this party came into existence (Aug. 1995), the word *fremmedkulturell* has, by bureaucrats and researchers, largely been replaced with *fjernkulturell* ("culturally remote"). For an example of this, see Djuve and Hagen (1995) - there, *ikke-vestlige* ("non-Western") is also used.

others, juxtaposing the topics of "immigrants", "refugees", "criminality" and "unemployment", as if these were "really" one and the same issue.

Repatriation aside, assimilation of the aliens is the obvious remedy to "cure" them of their difference. However, the case of the Sami people has made the term "assimilation" politically unacceptable, because it revealed the dominance of those who are "more equal" than others, of Norwegians over the Sami. 'Above all, the vision of assimilation was a roundabout confirmation of social hierarchy (...) It assumed the superiority of one form of life and inferiority of another' (Bauman 1990:158). This sort of dominance implies a hierarchy of power based on innate differences, which is again incompatible with the egalitarian legitimating basis of the Norwegian system.

The mix-up of the two meanings of *likhet* corresponds to the confusion of the terms *assimilering* ("assimilation") and *integrering* ("integration"). A novel use of *integrering* has gained prevalence in the national refugee debate: instead of a combination of all parts of society into an integrated whole, one talks about integration of particular persons or groups into society. In other words, society's presumed need of integration is projected onto those who are not yet part of it. The question of responsibility becomes complex: from integration of society being everybody's business, integration of the unbelonging into the nation becomes the shared responsibility of themselves and of that part of the state or local government "in charge of" the unbelonging. As I see it, a necessary condition for integration, as opposed to assimilation, is the realisation that it affects all parts of the future entity. As long as one sees "integration" as a process involving only one of these parts, this realisation is not likely to happen.

It is interesting to note that the Sami have consolidated their right to be different within the Norwegian nation-state through a 're-codification' (Eidheim 1974:75) in terms of similarity - their *joik* is "folk music", their clothes are "folk costumes", and so on, so that in the end Sami may appear to be just another, albeit eccentric, "local tribe of Norwegians". Although the case of the Sami is strengthened by their claims of autochtony, the strategy of re-codification is

available to other "ethnic minorities" in Norway. In chapter 6 I shall discuss whether some Vietnamese are trying to apply this strategy in the New Year celebrations.

Reell likestilling ("genuine equality of status") as mentioned by the Director of Immigration is now currently in use as more "politically correct" in the Norwegian context, as it nominally refers to equality of status. Why point out that the equality must be *reell* ("genuine")? What is added to "genuine equality" that just plain equality does not have? That the term is normally paired with "integration" may give us a clue. Behind the word *reell* are hidden the measures (*tiltak*) of assistance and control, implemented by local and central authorities, in order to "integrate" - that is, assimilate - refugees and other aliens.

The fear of giving the different "others" control of their own lives the Director of Immigration expresses thus, leaving the actual reasons for this fear to the imagination of the listener:

> 'We do not give them freedom and responsibility and initiative (...) because we (...) to a too small extent dare to let go of the reins and leave responsibility and freedom to these people.' (Kierschow 1993)

"Integration" has become a euphemism for "assimilation", and in Norway - as, according to Schierup, in Denmark - 'integration (is) an unspecified goal, but (...) the developed strategies are carried forth by assimilatory attitudes' (Horst 1986, as quoted in Schierup 1988:238).[32] Schierup continues: 'these assimilatory attitudes come through even when it comes to social scientists' analyses of "integration", which thereby seem to legitimate ideologically an assimilation policy' (ibid.:238).[33] This is parallel to what I pointed out earlier in this chapter: that the interchange of metaphors and their premises between scholars and politicians may lead to scholars' unforeseen legitimisation of discrimination.

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[32] 'integration som et uspecifiseret mål, men hvor de strategier, der er udviklet, er båret frem af assimilatoriske holdninger'

[33] 'Som det fremføres af Schwartz i bogen, *Reluctant hosts*, slår disse "assimilatoriske holdninger" igennem, også når det gælder samfundsvidenskabelige analyser af "integration", hvilke hermed kommer til at fremstå som en ideologisk legitimering af en assimilationspolitik.'

SOME VIETNAMESE RESPONSES

As we have seen, assistance and control form a recurrent theme at many levels of refugee policies, locally, nationally and internationally. At the end of the previous chapter, we saw that the Southeast Asian camps for Vietnamese refugees are examples of how 'the refugee camp emerged as the principal technique or instrument for ordering, administering and controlling refugees (...) the refugee camp has become emplaced as a systematized and generalizable "technology of power" [Foucault 1979]' (Malkki 1990:33). The "ordering" and "controlling" of refugees is not over once they are out of the camp. Rather, resettlement countries have their own - albeit less extreme, and hence less visible - techniques or instruments for the task. Now how are the Norwegian ways of "imposing order" perceived by Vietnamese refugees? I give the word to Phung, who is an outspoken young woman:

> Says Phung: 'There should not be just one immigrant group plus Norwegians in any *borettslag*("housing co-operative"), but different families from several nations. Then there will be tolerance. It should be irrelevant where people come from, what matters is who they are. Complete knowledge and understanding are not necessary for tolerance. Look at those multi-lingual children's books, where, as one man said to me "you pay for four languages and you can read only two of them." I told him: "They are there, that is all. All you have to do is accept that, even if you don't understand". Even in families, where people supposedly know each other, there is conflict. Understanding isn't everything, tolerance is something else. You Norwegians are obsessed with your version of "democracy". It means that everybody has to do exactly the same thing, like washing the stairs or taking part in the *dugnad* (nominally voluntary communal work in building co-operatives). If a foreigner does not wash it becomes a problem in terms of his being a foreigner, as if that had anything to do with it. Maybe he is lazy, that's all. If a Norwegian doesn't wash, is it because he is Norwegian? And at the *dugnad* the word goes: "Have the foreigners arrived yet? Right, then we can start working. If not, will somebody go and fetch them?" "Democracy" for you means to do just the same, to be just the same. People who don't do the same are not accepted, they are not "democratic".

Phung speaks her mind, and expresses her annoyance at hypocrisy wherever she spots it. Many Vietnamese hesitate to criticise Norwegian society, but her

straightforwardness was explained - or excused - to me by others: 'She feels part Norwegian herself, you know - her husband is Norwegian, her children are Norwegian, she must feel she has a right to say that kind of thing.' Most others are more reserved in their criticisms, such as Nhat, who shares a feeling of gratitude towards Norway with Phung and with many other "boat people" who were saved by Norwegian ships:

> 'Tuyet and I were watching TV last night. There was something on immigrants, a discussion programme, and we were both dismayed at the attitudes some of those people held. Tuyet was quite upset, and asked me if I really think most Norwegians look at immigrants and refugees as if we were all less intelligent, less human, than Norwegians. I hope it is not like that. But I remember how Vietnamese in Vietnam, too, tended to think of ourselves as superior to others.'
>
> Nhat suggested I interview Vinh, the author of *Nauy va toi* ("Norway and I"). She is from the North, but has been in Norway for ten years. She was well-known in Vietnam. Nhat thinks she is trying to establish a position here too, to make up for the one she lost - 'she does things I am sure she finds trite, like being a board member of the Vietnamese refugee - the free Vietnamese - association. She is very polite. She says that her task is to express her thankfulness and respect to Norway on behalf of many other refugees. If you interview her and find only politeness', Nhat said, 'that is a point in itself'. 'Her books are hampered by this politeness. She does not express any personal feelings apart from polite thankfulness, so in the end anyone could have written that book.'

The homogeneity basic to Norwegian conceptualisations of national identity is projected onto other national groups. One aspect of Norwegian obsession with *likhet* is thus 'our continual tendency to suppose that the immigrants make up groups with a high level of homogeneity and solidarity' (Longva 1992:55).[34] That for example Vietnamese refugees constitute a highly heterogeneous category, rather than being a "group" of the kind Longva refers to, does not fit in with Norwegian notions of nationality, and therefore they remain largely unseen. The contrast of Vinh's reserved politeness to Phung's open criticism is a striking example of this. Neither is "representative" of Vietnamese refugees in general. Yet Vinh fits in beautifully with the stereotype of Vietnamese that we saw in the

[34] 'vår ustoppelige tendens til å anta at innvandrerne utgjør homogene og solidariske grupper.'

Introduction: 'The Vietnamese? Oh, but they are so blessedly quiet and grateful!' Phung's frankness is conceptualised both by Vietnamese and by Norwegians as a result of her "being almost Norwegian", yet a closer scrutiny will show that this may mean two different things. To a Norwegian, saying that Phung is "almost Norwegian" is a compliment, and is to say that she behaves much like a Norwegian and therefore probably thinks like one, too: she has learned to think the Norwegian way, she has become similar to us. To a Vietnamese, the explanation holds because Phung has a right to say what she says only by virtue of her position within Norwegian society. Other Vietnamese may agree or disagree with her, and may well express similar thoughts in the company of Vietnamese friends and family. When Norwegians are present, however, most Vietnamese tend to behave according to the stereotype. What is this that Norwegians generally conceptualise as "quiet" and "grateful" about "the Vietnamese"?

As for the gratitude, to my knowledge this is very real, particularly among the boat people whose lives were saved when they were picked up by Norwegian ships. Why it should be a dominant factor in everyday interaction with Norwegians after ten or fifteen years is a different question. I think part of the answer with regard to both "quietness" and "gratitude" lies in a Vietnamese tendency to avoid confrontation and open conflict with those who are perceived to be in a position of authority. Withdrawing from further interaction is a more acceptable alternative. To a Norwegian way of thinking, "he who is silent, consents". Accordingly "the Vietnamese" - like other people - are taken to be happy enough as long as they do not complain. "We are so different" is a common Vietnamese explanation of why many have so little contact with Norwegians. To me, this has become a phrase which conceals accumulated hurt feelings, Vietnamese taking the responsibility for a situation which has gradually worsened in a schismogenetic process, where the reactions of Vietnamese and Norwegians respectively have been reinforced at every turn. At the bottom is the fact that Norwegians seem unable, or unwilling, to realise the unequal positions of "aliens" and Norwegians in Norway. I shall discuss this problem further in chapter 7.

Flight is the symbolic "death" of a national subject, just as the granting of a new citizenship is like a new "birth" into another nation. I have talked to European refugees who have expressed a strong disappointment with the lack of ritual when Norwegian citizenship is granted, confirming that the period between flight and new citizenship has been like "just waiting, being in a no-man's land". That Vietnamese refugees do not in my experience express such feelings, may well be because they feel no less liminalised after the formal granting of a new citizenship. At a meeting of the Vietnamese students' Oslo association, one speaker made this point clear:

> 'Why are we treated like "immigrants"? Even though we are [Norwegian] citizens, we are in practice still "just immigrants". How do we behave in this country, what have we done? Why do some people think of us as "immigrants" who are less intelligent, less capable, what is this?'

One of the students, a young man, told me afterwards:

> 'It is really a shame how we are continuously only seen as immigrants, as different, even though we are Norwegian by citizenship.'

Another explanation may be that many Vietnamese have in the meantime defined their own "home" as an alternative to a new "homeland" - what I have called the *Viet kieu* ("overseas Vietnamese") community. I shall return to this issue in the final chapters. Let us first take a closer look at how new "homes" can be constructed in exile.

PART TWO - AN EXILED WAY OF LIFE

CHAPTER IV

RECONSTRUCTING HOME

CULTURE IN EXILE

So far, we have followed the refugees from Vietnam, via international spaces and politics, to the "settlement" of Vietnamese in Norway. Let us now move our focus from Norwegian settings to the more intra-ethnic aspects of the life-worlds of Vietnamese in this country. In the two chapters following this one, I shall draw on empirical data concerning their everyday practices, particularly those related to food and drink, cosmology and ritual.

In "international"[35] refugee studies, as in other fields where the emphasis is on aid and urgency, research to a large extent corresponds to the calls of practitioners and politicians, in the form of evaluation and planning of policies and logistics. Survival, "to be or not to be", is the question, and rightly so, but that does not necessarily imply that there is no need to consider "how to be". Yet the feeling of crisis so pervades this field that spending time and energy on what some would be inclined to label "cultural stuff" may indeed seem an unforgivable luxury.

This way of thinking is related to the view of refugees as victims, as problems and as passive objects in need of aid, not only in the often appalling conditions of exodus and camps but also in countries of resettlement. Here, refugees are often seen as "problems" as long as they are not - or have not - "integrated" in the host society. Focusing one-sidedly on inter-ethnic "integration" as outlined in chapter 3, however, makes it difficult to see other aspects of refugees' lives. Furthermore, as I have shown in the case of Norway, "integration" as a euphemism for assimilation is

[35] This formulation may seem to imply adopting a set of "the West and the Rest" presuppositions. Yet it should rather be seen as reflecting the categories of the "international" refugee apparatus, which is also reflected in related fields such as "refugee studies". "International refugee studies", then, are studies of everything except "resettlement" - e.g. analyses of exodus reasons and studies of refugee camps - also, more vaguely, what the UNHCR, the Refugee Studies Programme and the Norwegian Refugee Council emphasise.

a solution to a problem that is in itself far from clearly defined. It is also a solution being imposed on lower social strata from above, or on outsiders from inside. In this part of the thesis, I wish to take as my point of departure how people are trying to live their lives, while other plans are being made for them. Longva argues that this is also a better approach even if the long-term adaptation of immigrants to their new social environment is your main concern: 'The debate has largely focused on situations that arise when Norwegians and immigrants meet (...) An aspect which so far has been ignored, but which plays an important role in the outcome of immigrants' attempts at adaptation is the organisation of *intra-ethnic relations*, that is, the relations between members within the immigrant groups' (1992:54, original emphasis, my translation).[36]

One reason behind the Vietnamese exodus was the desire to safeguard a "set of values", a "way of life", a "culture" which many perceived to be threatened by the implementation of Communism, as Hitchcox (1990) convincingly argues. Vietnamese fled not only to preserve their lives, but also to be able 'to maintain the old way of life elsewhere (...) the priority is primarily not to adapt or to be assimilated into another society (...) but to reconstruct respected cultural values in a more tolerant setting' (ibid.:5). This is reflected in the priorities of Vietnamese in Norway when it comes to how they spend both their money, time, care and energy. Before going into these "spending patterns", let us take a critical look at some of the concepts I have made use of above.

"CULTURE" IN EXILE?

The label "cultural stuff" is of course highly imprecise and non-anthropological. Hitchcox talks about "culture", "way of life" and "set of values". These are also rather vague and essentialising terms, but they are emic expressions I recognise from my own fieldwork. Perhaps seeing the topic in contrast to what refugees

[36] 'Debatten har stort sett dreid seg om situasjoner som oppstår i møtet mellom nordmenn og innvandrere (...) Et aspekt som hittil har vært oversett, men som spiller en viktig rolle for hvordan innvandrernes forsøk på tilpasning faller ut, er organiseringen av *intra-etniske forhold*, dvs. forholdet mellom medlemmer innenfor innvandrergruppene selv.'

themselves see it in contrast to, may give us a clue as to just what they are trying to maintain. Their "culture" is actually perceived to be between two fires: first, that of Communism, second, that of assimilation pressures in their new countries of residence, e.g. Norway. The following is an attempt to give a concise - and, accordingly, much simplified - presentation of this twofold threat. The examples are chosen partly on the basis of Hitchcox's argument, and partly on the basis of my own fieldwork:

Some examples of "traditional Vietnamese culture" perceived to be under threat of, respectively:	**Communist Vietnam**	**Social Democratic Norway**
Family	the state as organising principle	the state as organising principle
Religion	state surveillance and control	perceived freedom of practice
Food	freedom but scarcity and bad hygiene	freedom of practice, abundance, but limited choice
Language	Communist newspeak	freedom of practice
Education	state surveillance and control	ambivalent - state control, but the way upwards in society
Anti-Communist activities	forbidden	freedom of practice
Trade and other sources of income	state surveillance and control	state surveillance and control
Media, literature, videos, music, poetry	state surveillance and control	freedom of practice, but limited choice
Clothes	*ao dai* ("long tunic", worn by women) as national symbol in school and civil servant uniform	*ao dai* as national symbol separate from Communist nationalism

These are all building materials in the construction of refuge or shelter for the safeguarding of exiled "Vietnamese culture". Although they all form important parts of

Viet kieu ("overseas Vietnamese") lives, I shall argue that, primarily, practices related to family, food, religion and language have become constitutive pillars of the diasporic homes. These four top entries are closely interwoven and difficult to separate even for analytical purposes, to the extent that separation would render them virtually meaningless. In this and the following chapters, I am not leaving out "family" as a topic, but I shall try to throw light on the significance of the family by talking about food, religion and language.

Tieng Viet ("Vietnamese language") is the means of communicating between Vietnamese all over the world, but it is more than that. Being a native speaker of the Vietnamese language is a key criterion for being accepted as a *nguoi Viet*, a Vietnamese person, both in Vietnam and in exile. Ideally shared by all ethnic Vietnamese, it spans the gaps between the many different groups and categories that make up the otherwise largely polythetic category[37] of *nguoi Viet*. My having called this part of the thesis 'An exiled way of life' should not be taken to imply that I find the polytheticity or heterogeneity of this category insignificant. However, I find it interesting how, in spite of the considerable differences between them, people define themselves as belonging to this category, influenced both by Vietnamese nation building and by the contrast to the "host" populations in exile. "All" *nguoi Viet* eat "Vietnamese" food, from instant noodle soups to gourmet meals - it is easier sometimes to say what it is not: dairy products, boiled potatoes - . They "all" adhere to "ancestor worship" - except for some of the Christians, and the very disrespectful young - but how they explain what this cult or worship means to them is highly variable. "Family" is a primary organising principle for "all" - except, perhaps, for those who have fallen out with their own family due to disobedience or other disgraceful conduct, and who discover they can live on their own because of "host society" support. They "all" speak Vietnamese,[38] but there are many different dialects and class differences, as well as influences from different "host

[37] '(...) a polythetic conceptual class (...) that is, a set aggregated by serial or sporadic resemblance.' (Needham 1987:28)

[38] Except for a small percentage of the ethnic Chinese. Most of them speak fluent Vietnamese, but in some cases they do not. The only case I can think of is Hung's mother, who came to Saigon as an adult and spent nearly thirty years there living in Cho Lon, the Chinese city-within-the city, before joining her only son in Norway. However, it is doubtful

country" languages - all, that is to say, if we include the many young people who learn it imperfectly, lacking the appropriate social context. Language is also an important means of communicating and negotiating social positions, as it is virtually impossible to utter anything at all in Vietnamese without marking your place in relation to others. I shall return to the topic of language in Part Three, in order to illustrate the nature of Vietnamese social relationships in exile as an interplay of structurally opposed models.

BEYOND IMPOSED ORDER

When I suggest that a change of focus from subsistence to other issues may be useful, I admit that my particular way of doing it is partly a personal indulgence, in so far as the present topics happen to interest me. I could have chosen to focus on a myriad of other aspects of Vietnamese ways of life, such as "the house", "clothes", "music", "poetry", or "mutual aid associations". However, one has to make a choice, and important things will inevitably be left out. Yet there is more than personal preferences behind my present selection of issues. As I argued above, they all have relevance for life in exile. One reason for this is that they provide spaces for being at ease.

Much of their surroundings, what shapes the lives of refugees, is to a large degree out of their hands - locality and housing, the area around the blocks of flats, personal economy, language training and the labour market are but a few examples. As Longva (1987:36) sums it up: 'While the benefits of this comprehensive assistance are undeniable, the Norwegian relief policy leaves very little room for individual initiative. The Vietnamese often feel that they have no say in the decisions concerning their own lives'. Furthermore, as shown in the previous chapter, there is not likely to be much tolerance of public reconstruction of alien "cultural values" in Norwegian settings.

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if she would be categorised as a Vietnamese by any Vietnamese or Chinese at all, even though her son Hung sees himself, and is accepted by others of both groups, as being both Chinese and Vietnamese.

Their own food is one thing they are in control of. Norwegians cannot intervene much - as long as they do not smell the "strange" smells of Vietnamese cooking, or garlic on their breath, in which case many Norwegians will feel offended and naturally entitled to complain. Exile Vietnamese housewives spend as much time as their schedules allow in getting the right food. Some *Viet kieu* set up businesses, importing and producing food items for sale. Most of the Vietnamese I know go into a particular part of central Oslo now and then to buy special foods which they cannot get locally. Then comes the time for cooking, talking, remembering and comparing foods, tastes and smells of Vietnam and perhaps of other parts of the *Viet kieu* world, be it France or California, with what they have in Norway.

Everybody has to eat, and under normal circumstances food is part of everyday life for everybody. In that sense, as nourishment, countable in terms of calories and proteins, it is universal, yet it is universally qualitatively different. This being so, I found the issue of food something of a gate opener during fieldwork. Being interested in food and in cookery, I easily notice things associated with food, and throughout the fieldwork period I often found myself engaged in conversations about food related issues, or actually cooking meals together with other women or girls. This was both fun and instructive, and brought us together on equal terms. I was given access to the social spaces of food and food-ways by demonstrating interest, ability to learn, and humility: in this particular area, Norwegians are obviously in no superior position, and Vietnamese are rightly proud of their cuisine.

My interest in trying to learn about other aspects of "Vietnamese culture", such as beliefs and cosmology, once perceived as genuine, was received with similar openness. Yet as a "Western" person and a university student I had "double trouble" in getting people to talk about this - I belong to both of those categories of people who, in a historical perspective, sneer at it: "Westerners" and intellectuals. To a larger extent than in the case of food, therefore, these matters remained "backstage" to me. In the exile situation, getting access is similarly difficult when it

comes to spaces defined by activities "we" Norwegians do not, or might not, approve of - mutual aid associations being one example. I have had to accept that to many of my contacts I am, among other things, a representative of the Norwegian "host" population. This means that my position is higher than it would have been, had I been a Vietnamese student. This was all the more the case because of my former employment as a Norwegian "refugee assistance and control machinery" bureaucrat. However, there is nothing like a busy kitchen for replacing officialdom and positions with the relaxed atmosphere of an informal chat, which in turn gives information of many kinds. Sharing the meal afterwards - with the whole household, or just us two cooks - is pleasant and instructive as well, bringing the double enjoyment of food and company, and provides another good occasion for talking.

"Religion", like food, provides a field where the refugees are largely in control. As long as a religious minority does not challenge the world views of the majority,[39] "religion" is considered a very private matter in Norway.[40] Freedom of religious practice is in this sense a reality, often explicitly contrasted, mainly by religious leaders, to the situation in Vietnam. As with food and drink, many items considered necessary for Vietnamese religious practice have been made widely available, produced, imported and distributed by some *Viet kieu* to meet the demand. "Religious" celebrations are also very much public, social events for the exiles, who gather at temples, churches or rented assembly halls. People are knit together transnationally through organised religion, mainly Buddhism and Catholicism, some travelling extensively to meet their co-religionists.

BELONGING

In order to make homes out of the pre-existing, alien forms of houses and surroundings of the exile existence, Vietnamese try to reconstruct some minimal

[39] Which, incidentally, is probably what Moslems are often felt to be doing.

[40] As exemplified in the concept *personlig kristen* (lit. "personally Christian"), which describes the true believer, in contrast to the supposedly nominal faith of the vast majority of Norwegians - who nevertheless are members of the Norwegian State Church.

requirements of a "home" in Norway. As outlined above, these attempts are subject to the restrictions inherent in the Norwegian setting. They are also restricted by all the losses that are part of the exile situation: physically speaking, what you can take with you, or (re)create, is limited. Yet there are some things you cannot do without, in order to retain your dignity as a Vietnamese person. I am concerned with some of these minimal requirements as expressions of belonging.

Belonging is a matter of place and it is a matter of people. Belonging as a concept is "constitutive of" (Strathern 1985) the closely related concepts of identity and home. The "who am I?" of identity is answered in terms of the "where" or "with whom" of home, mediated through expressions of belonging. "Identity" and "home" as social concepts are meaningless without "belonging". But whereas the need for belonging is universal, expressions of belonging are distinguishing marks of community (Cohen 1985). The Vietnamese nation constitutes one thus distinguished community.

The *Viet kieu* find themselves "betwixt and between" nations: Although they are Vietnamese, there is no place for them in the current Vietnamese state, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and they are not fully participating and belonging members in what remains their "host" society in Norway. This is not purely a matter of "victims" being pushed out of one country and not being fully accepted in another; it is also a matter of not accepting the present political conditions of one country - Vietnam - and yet sustaining the bonds to this homeland. Thus the stay in limbo is protracted by "host" society mechanisms as well as by widespread *Viet kieu* hesitation towards the idea of becoming permanent members, rather than "guests", in the new country of residence. The hesitation largely derives from the dilemma of maintaining the legitimating, political basis for exodus through "myths of return" (Hitchcox 1990:67p, Ballard in Watson 1977:40p, Ben-Ezér 1994, Al-Rashid 1994, etc.) to a non-Communist Vietnam, while at the same time not knowing if or when such a return will be possible. In turn, the 'homeward orientation' (Foner, in Watson 1977:138) is strengthened by the many indicators that the "host" society prefers them to remain at the door. Thus, their "limbo" is becoming a more

permanent waiting room, indeed more and more like a home in itself, where its inhabitants are waiting both for the "millenarian" end of Communism in Vietnam and for social acceptance as full members of the new countries of residence. In a process sustained by the networks of their community, the "waiting room" is becoming their main space for the recreation of "Vietnamese culture", and a home for the otherwise long-term unbelonging.

FOOD AND BELONGING

Different kinds of food and styles of eating tend to be associated with particular places, and, in turn, with the categories of people who live there and "naturally" correspond to these places. This may be used to mark boundaries between such categories of people: "their" food, "our" food. Having said that Vietnamese food brings with it a social space of being at ease, and having said that this is part of an attempt to preserve one's dignity as a *nguoi Viet*, I do not believe that Vietnamese prefer Vietnamese food primarily in order to mark the boundaries between themselves and ethnic Norwegians. What people choose to eat can not be reduced to rational strategies of survival as a distinct category of people. I think they prefer it because they find it tastier, more fragrant and better looking than any other food. Habits of taste are obviously formed within social contexts, but reducing them to symbols of these contexts may be pushing the point too far. The sensory experience of food, of sight, smell, touch and taste should not be underrated. In the interplay of symbol and substance, this experience is a shared pleasure.

'So strong is the unifying ability of shared food and food-ways that it can operate not only between members of the group that are separated geographically but even between those separated by death.' (Kalcik 1984:48). This is in accordance with almost universal Vietnamese practices of the so-called "cult of ancestors". It is also a matter of emotional bonds between people with a shared memory of lost places. I shall attempt to explore some of the implications of belonging for *nguoi Viet* who do not live in the places they - and their food - "naturally" correspond to.

This may also throw light on the more general implications for refugees and other exile populations.

CONCEPTUALISING WITH THE STOMACH

Generally speaking, then, food is important for us all, and symbolically this is particularly true for exiles and diaspora communities. *Viet kieu* are certainly no exception to this. To the Vietnamese - exiles or not - the significance of eating finds expression in a special way, namely through providing a set of linguistic tools for conceptualising other phenomena. No less than six pages in my Vietnamese-English dictionary are dedicated to the word *an* ("to eat") and compounds beginning with *an*. Judged by frequency in use, on its own and in compounds, and by its richness of meaning, it is one of the main verbs in Vietnamese, along with *co* ("to have, to exist") and *di* ("to go"). According to Nguyen Dinh Hoa (1979), the core meanings of the verb are: 1) to eat, take; 2) to smoke, chew; 3) to consume, eat up; 4) to communicate; 5) to equal; 6) to earn (dishonestly); 7) to corrode and 8) to win.

> Typically, Nhat's comment when I told him I was planning to write a whole chapter about food was: 'You are right to do that. Food is so very important. Not least, you should include the many uses of the word *an* in expressions such as *an ban* ("corruption"), *an Tet* ("celebrate the New Year"), *an cuoi* ("wedding celebrations"), *an mung* ("celebration, banquet"), *an cuop* and *an trom* ("to rob" and "to steal", respectively), *an ý* ("to get along well together", lit. "eat [each other's] ideas").'

To these, I would add the obvious *an com* ("to have a meal of rice"),[41] which literally means "eat rice". Also worth noting are *an o* ("to behave, to conduct oneself, to live", lit. "eat life") and *cach an o* ("manner of living") and, not least, *an sau vao* (of feelings - "to become established, deeply rooted", lit. "eat deep in"). If a Westerner's heart is the centre of his person, the stomach (*da*) is the Vietnamese counterpart. If we look up *da* in the dictionary in order to explore this further, we find: 'stomach, abdomen; heart, feeling (...) *Ha da*: content, satisfied [lit.: "content stomach"]. *Chac*

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[41] *An com* is not entirely synonymous with *bua com* - (lit. "moment of rice"). *Bua com* is the meal as a social event, *an com* is basically the act of eating rice as opposed to eating *banh mi* ("bread") or anything else. See Dinh Trong Hieu (1988) for a discussion of this.

da, *vung da*: sure, assured [lit.: "sure or stable stomach"]. *Sang da*: Intelligent [lit.: "bright stomach"]. *Gan da*: Brave [lit.: "courageous stomach"].' (Nguyen Van Khon 1967, my literal translations). Phung told me once that:

> 'When boat people came to the camps and were asked their reasons for exodus, they would likely say that life was *khô* ("very miserable"), and that would be understood to be an economic reason. When asked to specify, they would say: there was no food, and this would be seen to confirm that it was purely economic. The soul is not what you mention first, and anyway, you know, with us the soul is in the stomach!'

BELIEFS AND BELONGING

Whereas food may be seen as a substance which symbolically unites *Viet kieu* with each other, as well as with the people and places they have left behind, the relation between beliefs and belonging is a more complex one. The influence of several doctrines and beliefs is noticeable in many aspects of Vietnamese life-worlds - in moral guidelines for conduct, in notions of family, of food and of the body, of power relations and politics, of time and space, in literature and poetry, all of these being aspects that are vital in constituting Vietnamese belongings.

I have used various terms so far to refer to these "influences". Being well aware of the daunting amount of literature which sets out to define "religion", and the problems involved in such a task, I hasten to state that I have no such ambitions. Rather, I take the many Vietnamese concepts related to the issue to indicate that not only may it be of little use to construct a tight compartment called "religion", we might also find it unusually difficult to force reality into it. Doctrine, way, belief, ritual, and cult are all concepts which relate to aspects of Vietnamese cosmologies.[42] Of these, belief, in referring to an inner state, is the one which is the most difficult for the fieldworker to observe: whatever the "inner state" of other people is, it is a

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[42] Some of these concepts are: *dao* ("way, duty, doctrine") and *giao* ("doctrine, teaching, religion, cult"). Also *tin* ("belief, trust, news"), which also occurs in the compound *tin nguong* ("faith in the above"). Another compound is *ton giao* ("to honour *giao*"), which is perhaps the closest equivalent to "religion", or "religious practice". Another important concept is that of *le* ("correct behaviour"), and its compounds *le bai* ("worship, cult") and *le nghi* "ritual, rite, ceremony, politeness". Finally, *cung* ("to make offerings") should be included, along with compounds such as *cung to* ("ancestor cult").

realm I cannot enter, and the social communication of these beliefs is consequently what I must focus on.[43]

In spite of all the differences very briefly touched on above, a common denominator for most of the Vietnamese "doctrines" and "beliefs" is the physical presence of altars and offerings, or just offerings, both in people's homes, in temples and churches, and elsewhere. The form of altars and offerings provides a stable and recognisable manifestation of Vietnamese cosmologies in exile as well as in Vietnam. This will be my point of departure in chapter 6. In extension, the prescribed form of ritual surrounding the altar, the well-known motions, is part of this recognisable stability. Looking at similarities and differences in the religious practices in exile as compared to my observations from Vietnam may also help us see how *Viet kieu* consolidate their identities in relation to those who stayed in Vietnam, and to Norwegians.

PONDERING THE PILLARS OF EXILE HOMES

Are the Vietnamese building exile homes, or an exile homeland? Do they see themselves primarily as an exiled nation, or as exiled villagers or family members? What narratives give their exile meaning? These are questions which surface in the following chapters, and which I shall later discuss in a wider perspective. As outlined by Boyarin (1993), Jewish diaspora myths spring from a religion based on place of origin, although even Abraham came from "somewhere else". Vietnam as true "origin" is absent in the Vietnamese national myths, such as the Ao Lac legend Van told us at the beginning of chapter 2. According to this myth, it will be remembered, the Vietnamese did not spring directly from Vietnamese soil or Vietnamese waters, but came into being through three generations of cross-

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[43] It was with interest that I read Needham's (1972) investigation into the Chinese word *hsin*. This word, etymologically the same as the Vietnamese *tin* (see preceding note) means "to believe", "to trust", "news" etc. When Needham infers that for *hsin*, 'the fundamental reference (...) would (...) be to social communication rather than to a relationship with (...) spiritual power; to public status rather than to an inner state' (ibid.:36p), I appreciate the implications of this - that presupposing a universal, inner state of "belief" is problematic. As Needham points out in the Chinese case, his inference is supported by the close relation of *hsin* to other terms, among them '*li*, rite, ceremony' (ibid.:37). This term corresponds to the Vietnamese *le*, which in addition to religious ritual also refers to social courtesy and politeness.

marriages: the marriage of a Chinese prince and a celestial fairy, the marriage of their son to a Dragon princess of the Sea, and the marriage of their son again to a celestial fairy. The religious doctrines, too, are understood to have been introduced into Vietnam from other places. Yet there is a haze of myths and poetry surrounding pre-Communist North Vietnam, which is regarded as the source of Vietnamese-ness.

' "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that - to borrow a phrase from music - is contrapuntal.... For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally." [Said 1984 (...)]. These reflections on exile apply to experiences of diaspora, but with the difference that the more individualistic, existential focus of the former is tempered by networks of community, collective practices of displaced dwelling, in the latter' (Clifford 1994:329).

My method in exploring the "pillars of Vietnamese-ness", then, is to describe them as I observed them in Vietnam, and to look into how these habits of life are carried out in the new environments of the Vietnamese diaspora and its networks of community.

CHAPTER V

FOOD AS SUBSTANCE; FOOD AS SYMBOL.[44]

INFLICTED STARVATION

A slice of pork, oh gosh, a masterpiece!
A slice of beef is twice as great.
Lemons, bananas, oranges,
sugar, sweet potatoes,[45] *beans, peanuts, rice -*
whatever man can chew,
thanks to the Party's touch,
becomes like magic great.
This is true life, yet you'd think it a myth,
a dismal dream.

(Nguyen Chi Thien 1984)

This poem, written by one of Vietnamese anti-Communism's most famous martyrs, tells of starvation inflicted by the Communists on their prisoners in North Vietnamese "detention camps" during the period 1956-1978, when he was imprisoned. Similar accusations against the Communist government are further specified in the work of a Vietnamese scholar and refugee - this time in prose, and concerning not only prisoners' camps, but society at large:

'(...) the VCP [Vietnamese Communist Party] (...) has succeeded (...) in imposing food rationing on the South Vietnamese people, and in using the chronic shortage of food to suppress all organized opposition and strengthen party control.' (Nguyen and Cooper

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44 This title is inspired by Marianne Lien's doctoral lecture (1995)

45 "Sweet potato" is *khoai* in Vietnamese, and this is the word used in the Vietnamese original. This was rendered "potatoes" (*khoai tay*, or "Western potato") in the English translation I quote here, and I have taken the liberty of adding "sweet".

1983:119). 'Food rationing is another means employed by the VCP to keep the general population under control. Without being adequately fed, people are not able to revolt. Citizens of all ages must have their names registered in a 'family book'. (...) Each registered member is allowed to purchase a prescribed amount of food at the official price. (...) if a person voluntarily moves to another place, that person will automatically lose the right to an official food quota. Noncompliance with an order from the secretary of the local party chapter or any activities contrary to the secretary's decision may result in the person being sent to a re-education camp, in which case that person's food quota is also cut off. (...) Prisoners are fed mostly on inferior and inadequate rations' (ibid.:151). 'The VCP (...) uses the stomach to control the spirit.' (ibid.: 210).

We are reminded here of what I mentioned in chapter 3: the *ho khau*, "household cards", which to Nhat had become a symbol of the denial of legal rights, of his very right to exist, under Communism. In the light of Nguyen Van Canh's writings, the symbolic importance of these cards is confirmed and gains prominence: those who by definition do not exist, are denied food.

In the preceding chapters we have seen that, in terms of classification, refugees fall between the recognised categories of the national order. By definition, they do not exist within this order. However, they are not denied food by the "international" community. Rather, they are usually given food without any requirements of direct exchange of work or money. Yet there are strings attached. Toan escaped from Vietnam by sea and spent two years in a refugee camp in Indonesia, waiting for a country to accept him for resettlement:

> 'The camp was bad - *Kho qua*! ("Utterly miserable!"). Only enough rice on the ration for a bowl and a half at each meal, not the three one needs. I got very thin.'

In her description of the closed camps of Hong Kong, where the so-called "humane deterrence" policies were implemented 'in the hope of deterring others from setting out [from Vietnam]' (1990:97), Hitchcox observes:

'The arrangement that most affected the refugees and distinguished the closed camps from the others was the restriction on cooking in the billet areas. Food was prepared and eaten in a communal kitchen and dining hall. The refugees queued up with their tickets at the appointed times. In the other camps, as in Vietnam, the Vietnamese cook three meals a day and take much time and trouble in the preparation of food.' (1990:103)

Of the Philippine camps she further notes that

'In the more liberal atmosphere of Palawan and Bataan there is a flourishing refugee market economy (...) The business enterprise of the Vietnamese is recognised as a separate, secretive aspect of life in the camp, not connected to their official refugee status, but functioning to draw people into a network of social contacts in which the prime foci are the cafés, shops and markets.' (1990: 236-237)

The Southeast Asian refugee camps for Vietnamese boat people are not all the same. Very different political and economic conditions in Hong Kong, Indonesia and the other countries of "first asylum" lead to corresponding differences in refugee camp policy and organisation. Yet, as Hitchcox found in her study of camps in Hong Kong, Thailand and the Philippines, they have common characteristics as institutions of control and assistance. As the above examples show, food is used by authorities and by refugees as an instrument in the struggle for control in the camps: in the severity of Hong Kong's closed camps, even the freedom to cook and eat as a household was denied the refugees, whereas in the Philippines, food provided a sphere of activities beyond the authorities' control. In the former, the control of food distribution appears as an instrument to control "flows" of potential arrivals, whereas in the latter, the refugees make use of food as a means of increasing their own control of their lives in the camp. As quoted above, the 'flourishing market economy' in these camps is largely a matter of food - of cooking 'three meals a day' and of taking 'much time and trouble in the preparation of food', and of 'cafés, shops and markets'. In these camps, controlling the ways and means of food provides a highly valued space for managing one's own affairs. Taking this space away from people, as is done in the closed Hong Kong camps, is a serious encroachment on their dignity. In this perspective, it is not surprising that Vietnamese refugees invest so much in the defence and upkeep of this space. It is as though they say: but we do exist! and this is our food.

In the countries of resettlement the Vietnamese do not starve. On the contrary, food is more plentiful than most of them would have imagined, but here another problem arises: Vietnamese food is no matter of course here. Although they in

some areas have the freedom they were deprived of in Vietnam and in the camps, the general feeling of powerlessness is overwhelming, especially at first. As Longva (1992:54) points out, 'in the initial phase, when one is trying to settle down in a new country (...) common needs and practical problems lead the immigrants to seek each other's company'.[46] Given that the local authorities normally take charge of housing and income in the initial period, one of the most immediate problems the Vietnamese face in Norway is that of how to *di cho*, "go to the market", to buy food. According to Kramer (1986:315), the first arrivals - except for the few who "were settled" in the vicinity of Chinese shops - found food *problematisk* ("problematic"). They complained of pains in the stomach, and were unhappy about Norwegian food in general and potatoes in particular. This applied especially to single men, who eagerly sought the company of Vietnamese couples in order to have 'properly prepared, Vietnamese food' (loc. cit.).[47] This is less than twenty years ago. Before considering the question of Vietnamese food and food items in Norway nowadays, let us turn our attention to Vietnam, the environment which invisibly - and, in Said's terms, contrapuntally - forms the background for *Viet kieu* everyday activities.

MEALTIME IN VIETNAM

The basics: Rice, fish sauce and table manners

As Dinh Trong Hieu (1988:50) points out, it is rice that makes a meal: 'Cooked rice (*com*) is consumed only during the course of a meal; in other words: the meal, to the Vietnamese, is the moment of consumption par excellence of cooked rice.'[48] Dinh Trong Hieu (ibid.) gives an excellent and detailed presentation of "the authentic Vietnamese meal". It should be kept in mind, however, that his is an idealised and orthodox representation of the North Vietnamese "traditional" meal, contrasted

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46 'I den første fase, mens man forsøker å finne seg til rette i et nytt land, fører (...) felles behov og praktiske problemer til at innvandrerne søker hverandres selskap.'

47 'skikkelig tilberedt vietnamesisk mat'

48 'le riz cuit (*com*), n'est consommé qu'au cours du repas; autrement dit: le repas, pour les Vietnamiens, c'est le moment de la consommation - par excellence - du riz cuit.'

with what he perceives as the degenerated, Europeanised food-ways that pass for meals among *Viet kieu* in France, where he evidently lives. To him, the meal simultaneously represents and reproduces a core "set of values" which it is a vital task for all *Viet kieu* to maintain and continually reproduce. The ideal Vietnamese meal he delineates may - in Geertz's terms - be seen as a model of, and a model for, social relations. For instance, he emphasises the *xin moi* ritual, which reproduces family unity and hierarchy at every meal, and serves to teach children their proper position and the correct use of kinship terms:

'When the persons who were served [rice] before you pick up their bowl and chopsticks, you may in turn pick up yours, and you invite your companions in the hierarchical order already established by the serving [of rice], till you reach the persons at your own level; you wait for these companions to eat before you yourself begin to eat. It is a choir of litanies one listens to: politely request grandfather to eat rice, politely request grandmother to eat rice, politely request father to eat rice; or, politely request elder uncle and aunt to eat rice, politely request father to eat rice..., politely request younger uncle and aunt to eat rice; or again: politely request elder brother to eat rice, politely request elder sister to eat rice, politely request the entire household to eat rice...' (Dinh Trong Hieu 1988:66p).[49]

Although this is presented as the typical Vietnamese meal, it is rather a stylised, formal, Northern meal which is described. Differences between South and North Vietnamese are evident in food issues. Southerners often emphasise their own informality and "laidbackness" in contrast to the much more elaborate *xin moi* rituals of the Northerners. I shall return to Dinh Trong Hieu and the topics of exile "orthodoxy" and North/South discourse and stereotyping later in this chapter.

Along with table manners, two components are basic to any ideal presentation of "the Vietnamese meal", in the North as well as in the South, among rich and poor, in Vietnam and in exile: *com* ("boiled rice") and *nuoc mam* ("fish sauce"). The uncooked rice should be washed well and carefully picked over, so as not to leave

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[49] 'Quand les personnes qui ont été servies avant vous prennent leurs bol et baguettes (*cam dua bat*) vous pouvez prendre à votre tour les baguettes, vous invitez les convives en respectant l'ordre hiérarchique ainsi établi lors du service, jusq'aux personnes de votre niveau; vous attendez que ces convives commencent à manger pour commencer à votre tour le repas. C'est un choeur de litanies qu'on entend: *Moi ong xoi com, moi ba xoi com, moi cha xoi com;* ou, *Moi hai bac xoi com, moi cha xoi com ..., moi chu co xoi com;* ou encore: *Moi anh xoi com, moi chi xoi com, moi ca nha xoi com*...' (The Vietnamese is translated into French in footnotes to the original text.)

any unwanted particles or stones. It is then boiled in unsalted water, and should end up having just the right consistency - not too dry, not too wet. The fish sauce is made from salted, fermented fish.[50] A watery liquid, brownish and odoriferous, it is an indispensable condiment, much like soy sauce to other Asian cuisines. You can buy it in any Vietnamese shop all over the world - the Vietnamese, Northern and Southern alike, do not seem to be able to exist as Vietnamese without it. Thach once told me that he eats *nuoc mam* only because his wife Dung serves it, he doesn't really like it that much: 'I am a strange kind of Vietnamese!' Depending on what dishes are served with it, as well as on the tastes and regional background of the family, *nuoc mam* may be diluted with water, lemon juice or vinegar, and sugar, as well as chopped, fiercely hot, red chillies, may be added.

Making the meal complete

A proper meal of rice, as opposed to breakfast and snacks, normally includes some kind of *rau* ("greens, vegetables") - raw or cooked - a *canh* ("clear soup") and at least one dish of fish, shellfish, eggs, or meat. I have no idea how many kinds of fish and shellfish are eaten in Vietnam - *co nhieu!* ("there are many!") Freshly caught in a country where fresh or salt water is always near, these are generally more easily available than meat. Often they are cooked with tamarind and chillies to make delicious hot-and-sour dishes, or they may be steamed with vegetables in various ways, dried and salted, and so on. With large choppers, the meat, fish, nuts and vegetables are deftly cut, chopped or minced, often by young girls, as required in preparation for cooking.

Seasoning - in the form of *nuoc mam*, pepper, garlic, ginger, spicy soy bean paste, five-spice, chillies - is added before cooking, as in the case of salads that are eaten uncooked, or minced meat grilled on skewers, during boiling or frying, and at table, in communal saucers with liquid seasoning based on *nuoc mam*, as described above and other saucers with salt, lemon, chillies and herbs, depending on the dishes served. The meat is usually pork or chicken, and the eggs may be

[50] It is also widely used in Thai cooking. I imagine the ancient Romans' *garum* must have been something like it, too.

hen's or duck's. The variety of dishes is impressive, and local specialities innumerable. In the South, tropical fruits, soy bean sprouts and fresh herbs are the most widely used; in Central Vietnam, hot chillies and peanuts are typically used in abundance; in the North, food has often been scarce, and the selection of food items more limited - *pho*, ("wide rice-noodle soup") here seasoned with ginger, as well as *bun* ("thin rice-noodle soup") and other noodle dishes, are considered "typical" of North Vietnam. This also applies to dogs' and cats' meat, which are, however, not everyday foods.

The moment of boiled rice: bua com

The hostess ladles the rice into individual bowls - each person should eat three bowls of rice, as the saying goes - and after a round of *xin moi* the eating can begin. There is no fixed sequence of dishes along the lines of the European "soup, fish, meat, pudding" in Vietnamese meals. However, when sweets or fruits are served in connection with a meal, this is usually at the end. Apart from that, all the dishes that make up the meal are brought to table at once, and any combination goes. You simply use your chopsticks to help yourself to anything you like from the bowls or plates, and dip the morsels in *nuoc mam* on the way to your own rice bowl. You should not take things straight from the communal plates to your mouth, but go through the motion of putting it into your bowl and only then lifting it to your mouth, so as not to appear greedy.[51] As a guest, you will also have titbits added to your bowl by the host and hostess. This action, *tiep* ("supplying"), is 'only performed by elderly or responsible persons, or by the mother' (Dinh Trong Hieu 1988:63).[52] Drinks are not normally served with the meal - you may get coffee first and tea last, and the *canh* serves to quench thirst at any moment during the meal: whenever you feel like it, you help yourself to some *canh* and pour it on top of whatever may be left in your bowl. The bits and pieces as well as the rice can easily

[51] Foreign travellers eating out in Vietnam sometimes make the mistake of eating rice straight out of the small, earthenware cooking pots. These barbarian table manners have inspired the following lines of a jesting song: *Tay ballo, an com tho* ("The Westerner with a backpack, eats rice from the cooking pot"...)

[52] 'Elle n'est effectuée que par des personnes âgées et responsables, ou par la mère.'

be fished out with your chopsticks, and when you want a drink of *canh* you can lift the bowl to your mouth and drink straight from it. At more formal occasions, however, bottled drinks are served as part of the meal - usually beer for the men and Coca Cola for the women and children. *An com* is the main meal of the day, usually eaten in the late afternoon or early evening, though it can also be prepared for "lunch" when this is compatible with the family's schedule.

THE OMNIPRESENCE OF FOOD

The fragrances of cooking seem to reach the nose all day long. Little charcoal fires fill the air with smoke and promises. Eating out is almost as common as eating at home - which may indeed mean physically eating out, as many people prefer to, or are compelled to, cook and eat their food on the pavement outside their cramped homes. Meals and snacks are also prepared and sold for a song almost everywhere in the cities and towns of Vietnam. This particular kind of private enterprise was hard hit by the general ban on private businesses after 1975 and has only during the last few years again been allowed to flourish freely. There are the old women balancing their yokes, a small coal cooker dangling from one end and a basket with foodstuffs from the other. There are stalls and small rooms opening directly onto the street - "rice places" or "noodle places" and small, specialised restaurants serving for instance snails, dogs' or cats' meat (especially in the North), duck's eggs with the duckling foetus inside - good for you, because it enables you to eat the whole animal, I was told - or different kinds of *banh* (usually translated "cakes"), often local specialities. Some places, frequented by *xich-lo* ("cycle-rickshaw") drivers and other "rough" people are avoided by higher-class people and women, but most places are frequented by all kinds of people, and there is no very visible difference of standard. In all of these places you sit down on a low, wooden bench - or, in the name of progress, children's plastic chairs - at any table where there is room for you. There is no written menu, of course, as all the food is there for you to see and choose. These are family businesses, and as one of the family - a child, as often as not - puts the food in front of you, you or the youngest in your party selects

the cleanest-looking chopsticks from a jar on the table and wipes them carefully in a small piece of coarse tissue paper, which is there for that purpose, before handing out a pair for each - beginning with the eldest. Usually the same person then ladles rice into everybody's bowls - often after having wiped those too in the same manner - *xin moi*'s, and you are ready to eat - again, elders first. After everyone has had their fill, green tea is served. It is usual to rinse the cups with a few drops of hot tea from the pot, and then just pour it out onto the floor or pavement. This makes little difference, as most of these places are rather dirty... To bring the meal to an end, there are *tam*, toothpicks, for everyone.

Enjoying good food, or eating in style?

As a foreigner, I was expected by most Vietnamese both in Norway and in Vietnam to be better off in the "real", that is, "Western style" restaurants. Actually, the only time I was sick during my two months of eating in Vietnam, was after a meal in an expensive, "real" restaurant. These restaurants generally have tablecloths and elegantly decorated interiors. Here, the prices are outrageous and the food bland. For the sake of curiosity, one might mention that gastronomic tours of Vietnam are very popular with groups of French tourists, who travel from one "real" restaurant to the other. Although this is hardly the best way to savour *vraie* Vietnamese cooking, the fact remains that the former colony's cuisine is rightly famous in France for its great variety and freshness. This is also appreciated by most Vietnamese, to whom, however, the appearance of the locale and the friendliness of the proprietor is as good as irrelevant: what really matters is the quality of the food.

Breakfast is having a pho on the street

Breakfast (*an sang* - lit. "eat morning") is often eaten out, on the way to work or to school. The most widely preferred breakfast is the *pho* ("wide rice-noodle soup"), served at street stalls or in "*pho* places" where you can go inside. *Pho* is not just breakfast, it is eaten at any time of the day or night, but statistics, if they were made, would no doubt show a peak in *pho* consumption at breakfast time. Whether you eat in the street or in a room opening onto the street, the noodles are ladled

into your bowl, you make your choice of beef or chicken, whereupon strips of cooked chicken or raw beef are added to the scalding broth. This heats the meat through, and the *chi lam pho* ("elder sister who makes noodle soup") then ladles broth and meat into your bowl. You help yourself to lemon and chilli from small communal saucers if you like. Then comes what makes the difference between a true Vietnamese *pho* and any old noodle soup: heaps of aromatic, fresh herbs (*rau thom*, lit. "fragrant greens") at your disposal - always mint, and usually coriander and several others.[53] You pick what you like with your chopsticks, add it to your bowl and stir with your china spoon in your left hand and the chopsticks in your right. Then you eat, pay, and off you go.

Banh: *little packages with something good inside*

Vietnamese kinds of *banh*, "cakes" (lit. "small package"), are innumerable. They are eaten at any time, anywhere. Some are prepared at home, many others bought at shops or from little girls or grandmothers offering them for sale in the street. The most popular all over the country I think must be the *banh bao*. These are steamed dumplings of sweetened rice flour, with a savoury filling of meat and vegetables. There are several categories - some are more expensive and have more meat inside, and vice versa. This is indicated by little marks or dots on the outside - I was tricked into paying "meaty" prices for the cheapest variety many times before I learned this... But there are many other kinds of *banh* too, and most of them have little in common with our cakes. I do not know the names of half of the ones I tasted - one, *banh gai*, consisted of a black, almost liquorice-like, gooey interior, wrapped in leaves which had to be peeled off. Another, *banh beo,* was a custard-like substance served in tiny bowls and topped with dried shrimp. This is a speciality of Hue, the former capital of the Nguyen kings, where there must be hundreds of dishes especially composed for the king's pleasure. Mai showed me her native Hue mainly by feeding me some of these local specialities: tasting is seeing. I was eating Hue; experiencing its uniqueness with my stomach.

[53] More in the South, and there always fresh bean sprouts, which are not common in the North.

I have attempted to give the reader a small sample of Vietnam's delicious foods, and to show how they, in the form of meals and titbits, are somehow always there, in the homes and on the street. Yet, I was in Vietnam as late as 1994, and for a period of two months only. In a country changing at an ever accelerating pace, my brief impressions are hardly valid as descriptions of most exiles' experience of the homeland they left several years ago. The resonance I met when talking to them about the Vietnam I had encountered, however, made me see both loving recognition of the remembered homeland, and concern with the changes. Thus my descriptions may serve as background and reference, not so much for the exiles' daily lives as for my way of understanding what Said, as quoted earlier, termed the 'contrapuntal' nature of these lives.

CLASSIFICATION OF FOOD, CLASSIFICATION OF PEOPLE

One of the first questions virtually all of my informants in Norway asked me upon my return from Vietnam was: "But could you eat the food? Could you eat rice and *nuoc mam*? Could you use chopsticks?" My assurances that not only could I eat Vietnamese food, I liked it and was now trying to cook it in my own kitchen - and that I had even put on weight in Vietnam - were invariably received with incredulity mixed with pleasure. "You were not sick?" "You did not need to eat potatoes?" They had to redefine me as a person who was physically able to live on rice and *nuoc mam*, eating with chopsticks. I was no longer a standard "other", a fork-using eater of potatoes and gravy. But when I told them I had eaten dogs' meat, the reactions were different. At this, they were astonished. "What?! Did you really? You are not joking? You are really a tough lady. How did you like it? Did you have snake, too?"

A young lady like myself is not expected to brag about having eaten dogs' meat. Both eating it - a special food, very "hot" (*nong*) - and bragging about having eaten it, is masculine behaviour, and I believe this is partly what defined me as a "tough lady". Also, a *nguoi Na-Uy* ("Norwegian person") who dares to eat it is not the

usual kind of Norwegian, who is expected to find the very idea of eating dog revolting - did I really "like" it? By admitting that it is not the best meat I have tasted, and that I am not desperately keen to eat it again, I mollified my challenge to the categories of male and female and of *Viet* (or Asian) and *Na-Uy* (or Caucasian). Not least, it was reassuring to my South Vietnamese informants that I was not identifying myself with North Vietnamese "dog-eaters". Eating dogs' meat is much more typical of North Vietnam than of the South, and in South Vietnamese discourse it is one of the characteristics of the stereotyped North Vietnamese. That some categories of food may correspond to certain categories of people - such as Asians or Vietnamese, versus Europeans or Norwegians - is evident from the following extract from my field notes:

> I went to a Vietnamese supermarket in Oslo and bought some food (chicken, coriander leaves, *mút rau câu,* ("sweet agar jam") *rau muóng* (stems and leaves of a green creeper), chillies, carrot). They also had various *bánh* I haven't seen there before, probably for *Tet*, and duck's eggs. I asked where the eggs came from and the man said quickly 'Stavanger, but they are not suitable for you' so I said 'oh, they have ducklings inside, do they?' and he admitted: 'Yes, they do - but Norwegians cannot eat that!'

In the above, the significant categories of *Na-Uy*/*Viet*, man/woman, Northerner/-Southerner serve to illustrate how food provides a means for classifying people. At the same time, it works the other way round too: what you eat (*an*) becomes part of your body; you are what you eat. Because of the special position of *an* in Vietnamese,[54] this aspect of food is explicitly expressed in everyday language, so that Vietnamese speakers are more likely to be aware of it than many others. *An do Viet*, *an do Na-Uy* implies not only its literal translations ("eating Vietnamese food", "eating Norwegian food") but an incorporation of the Vietnameseness or Norwegianness inherent in the food. The bodily aspect of this should not be underrated. A wholly Norwegian diet, with its large proportion of milk, milk fats, potatoes and meat, and small proportion of vegetables, herbs, rice and spices, is practically indigestible to many Vietnamese - especially those who came to Norway

[54] 'providing a set of linguistic tools for conceptualising other phenomena', see chapter 4.

as adults. Vietnamese stomachs and Norwegian food are, according to their experience, largely incompatible. This may also be related to their surprise and delight at my taking to Vietnamese food: the surprise, because they had supposed their experience to be reversible - Norwegian stomachs and Vietnamese food thus supposedly a bad combination - the delight, because Vietnamese food turned out to be good even for Norwegian stomachs. The excellence of Vietnamese food was thus promoted to being more absolutely and universally valid.

THE DANGERS OF GOING BACK

As a result of the *doi moi* policies, around 1990 it became possible for *Viet kieu* to go back to visit Vietnam (*ve tham*, "return to visit"). At first, very few actually went, and those who did were condemned as weak and despicable characters, or even traitors: how could they even consider returning to visit Vietnam when the Communists were still in power? Gradually, however, more and more people could not resist the temptation to visit the land of their dreams and memories, not to mention old parents or other close relatives they had in most cases left behind. Their feelings about this were ambivalent - were they doing the right thing, or not? I shall return to a discussion of this issue in later chapters, but it is appropriate here to mention that I have noted with interest that the ambivalence is frequently expressed in terms of food and sickness. It is as if their "stomaching" Communist Vietnam inflicted corresponding punishment:

> I talked to Phung about people who came to Norway as refugees, and lately have been going back to visit Vietnam. She says a lot of people are going, but very few want to talk about it, as if they were afraid of being cold-shouldered. She told me that people are talking now about a family who went from Norway to Vietnam for Tet 1994. They had neglected vaccinating their children, who all became seriously ill. One child died in Vietnam, another on the way back to Norway. The food in Vietnam is dangerous, Phung said. When she was back there herself, she made sure the chopsticks were held for a minute in the boiling *pho* before she would let anyone in the family eat in the street, especially the children.
>
> Nga was telling me about her disappointments in visiting Vietnam, and added: 'I wasn't able to enjoy the food either - I was afraid all the time I would have tummy

bugs, so I made sure everything was boiled - I couldn't even eat any of the green herbs.'

At the celebration of the Buddha's birthday 1995, a man told me: 'I am dreaming of going back. It has been so long. I miss my mother. People who have been home on a visit say that it is great, wonderful. But they also say that it is very dangerous - the police, and the food, especially. Could you eat the food? Were you sick? Could I eat it, do you think?' I said I had stayed away from raw foods, so I had been all right. He was dismayed at this: 'What, no uncooked greens, no salad, no herbs?! Oh, no! Even if you are vaccinated?'

The many stories of stomach disease or fear of stomach disease ruining the re-encounter with the homeland are probably related to the transformation which has occurred in the *Viet kieu*'s eating habits since they settled down in Norway. On second thoughts: not only in their eating habits but also in the way they view hygiene in general. "Germphobia" seems to function as a self-reassurance that the *Viet kieu* is a better and cleaner person, in contrast to the stay-behinders who have been living under Communism, and who often in their turn view the returning *Viet kieu* with suspicion. Also, the emphasis on the dirty and unhealthy state of things in Communist Vietnam may be a way of marking one's continued distance to the regime: this is not the Vietnam they wish to return to, the Vietnam they wish to belong to. Talking about the dangers of eating in Vietnam is also making a statement about poverty and underdevelopment under Communism. The food, like the regime that controls and distributes it, is perceived as unclean, corrupt and dangerous. It may also be a way of marking the gradual changes in one's own person - from being a Vietnamese, adapted to Vietnamese conditions, to becoming more of a Westerner, with the Westerner's well-known vulnerability to tropical tummy bugs...

EATING IN EXILE - TRANSFORMATION AND ORTHODOXY

Kalcik (1984) points at another, although related, crucial tension in the exile situation: that between the urge to "adapt" and the urge to "hold on":

'The Vietnamese, as one of the most recent groups to migrate to America, illustrate other aspects of what happens to foodways in an acculturation or culture-contact situation.

Traditional foods and ways of eating form a link with the past and help ease the shock of entering a new culture; thus many struggle to hold on to them despite pressures to change. (...) It is easy to predict that the Vietnamese will make some compromises between their desire and respect for the old foods and the food habits of their new country, because the groups that have come before them have done just that.' (Kalcik 1984:37-38)

As we have already seen, the Vietnamese "traditional foods and ways of eating" are more than a "link with the past" and a help in easing the "shock of entering a new culture". They are, both as symbol and as substance, linked to the very reasons for exodus, and to the exiles' hopes of returning to a "free" - by which term they understand "non-Communist" - Vietnam.

'Any modification of this privileged moment [of boiled rice] will lead to modifications in the conduct of the young, accordingly in the social representation. This is particularly true for the Vietnamese community transplanted overseas (...) It should be remembered here that, if the Jewish table remains an open Bible in the Jewish homes, the Vietnamese table that tends to replace the "moment of boiled rice" in the Vietnamese families only responds to the physiological and gastronomic needs.' (Dinh Trong Hieu 1988:71-72)[55]

To Dinh Trong Hieu, then, any "adaptation" of Vietnamese table manners to those of the new country of residence implies a betrayal of the future "free" Vietnam, through breaking down the social representation of family hierarchy, which is a model for society at large (cf. chapter 7 below). Keeping this tension in mind, let us consider the following:

> At one visit to Thuy and Phong's, Phong told me: 'With Vietnamese foods I know which ones are hot (*lam nong*), cold (*lam lanh*) or neutral. With Norwegian foods, I feel that they are all neutral - maybe they are not, maybe it is just that we have never learnt what they are.' They served me rice with Norwegian-style chicken and mixed vegetables, both of the ready-to-cook, semi-processed frozen sort. Thuy said *xin moi*, in a general fashion, much as a Norwegian hostess would say *vær så god* ("please help yourselves"). We all helped ourselves from the serving dishes, and ate from plates, with knives and forks. There was *rød saft*, an everyday Norwegian soft drink, to go with it. Thuy offered me soy sauce to go with the rice,

[55] 'Toute modification de ce moment privilégié entraînera des modifications dans le comportement des jeunes, donc de la representation sociale. Ceci est particulièrement vrai dans la communauté vietnamienne transplantée à l'étranger (...) Il faudrait rappeler ici que, si la table juive reste dans les foyers juifs une Bible ouverte, la table vietnamienne qui tend à remplacer le "moment du riz cuit", dans les familles vietnamiennes, ne répond qu'à des besoins physiologiques et gastronomiques.'

> and served it the Vietnamese fashion - the way fish sauce is usually served - in a small saucer with a teaspoon, not from the bottle as Norwegians would. She urged me to eat, and put the last piece of chicken on my plate. Afterwards we had sweet, ready-made Norwegian biscuits. 'When we get home in the evening we don't feel like cooking', Thuy explained.

After a full day at work, many young Norwegian couples would have a easy-to-cook meal much like this one. Like Phong and Thuy, they would help each other get the meal ready quickly. They would use plates, knives and forks, and quite likely have *rød saft* to drink during the meal. As far as that goes, there is little left of the Vietnamese "way of life" in the meal they shared with me. Yet what made it a meal, the rice itself, was unmistakably Vietnamese. Most Norwegians would probably have served potatoes of some sort, or, had they served rice, it would have been of a different kind - parboiled, non-sticky. It would not have occurred to many Norwegians to serve soy sauce (in place of *nuoc mam*) with the fried chicken, either. And although it is common Norwegian practice, too, to urge one's guests to eat, simply putting the piece of chicken on my plate without question is not something a Norwegian would be likely to do. With Thuy this action of *tiep* ("supplying") her guest, seemed to be second nature, something her hands did while she was not looking.

This is the kind of meal Dinh Trong Hieu would probably not have honoured by calling it a meal at all. It is certainly far from the stylised description quoted at the beginning of this chapter - no big family, no litanies of *xin moi*, no bowls and chopsticks, no clearly defined and stratified social positions, 'at best, democracy reigns'[56] (ibid.:72), is his sarcastic comment to "adapted" foodways like these. At worst, we are led to conclude, all there is left is anarchy, chaos.

Dinh Trong Hieu's version of "the Vietnamese meal" is Confucian in its ideals, emphasising clearly defined and distinct roles, hierarchically positioned in relation to each other. These ideals correspond to what Hy Van Luong (1990:90) calls an 'Elite & Male-Oriented Conception' or 'organic unity framework'. As he, and

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[56] '..., la démocratie règne, dans le meilleur des cas'

Jamieson (1993) both point out, this framework, though dominant, is not the only one. They outline an alternative, yet no less "Vietnamese" framework which, they argue, is characterised by a much stronger emphasis on informality, equality and entropy. I shall return to a fuller discussion of these structurally opposed frameworks in chapter 7. Nevertheless, introducing the issue here will enable us to see the meal Thuy and Phong shared with me in a different light.

Two factors may be seen as symbolically confusing, or even opposed to, the clear distinction and stratification of social positions as they are reproduced through the *xin moi* ritual. One such factor is inherent in the meal itself: it is shared. Everybody, regardless of positions within the household, eats together. Also, generally, the idea of a meal is a shared one: every *nguoi Viet* eats rice and *nuoc mam*, so to speak by definition. Although what people actually do eat - what is available to them, what they like - varies a good deal, the idea of the meal of steaming, white rice and fragrant fish sauce binds the Vietnamese together. Also, once the moment of cooked rice has arrived, the food is shared not primarily according to position, but according to individual needs. This is evident in the action of *tiep* ("supplying"), which is the second factor I wish to draw attention to in this context, and which Thuy performed in my account above. This action carries a note of ambivalence: those in "high" positions may use it to consolidate their supremacy, confirming the debt of their dependants through this symbolic act of giving them food. On the other hand, it may just as properly be used by the host to honour a guest, or indeed by the mother to make sure that her children will have access to the tastiest and most nourishing bits of food.

It seems, then, that Dinh Trong Hieu's argument - that there is no acceptable alternative to his orthodox Vietnamese meal - is controversial within a Vietnamese context. The apparent "Westernisation" of *Viet kieu* eating habits may not be as degenerated as he would have it. Instead, I suggest that Thuy and Phong, and the many others who do not follow the orthodoxy of Dinh Trong Hieu, may be following another, but not necessarily less "genuinely Vietnamese", path.

Most of the Vietnamese I know in this country do in fact adopt some Norwegian foods and ways of eating. The degree to which this happens varies considerably. One might expect this to be a matter of generational differences, the people who grew up in Vietnam being more likely to be "orthodox" in these matters than the young who have grown up in Norway. To some extent, it is certainly so. Nevertheless, as we saw above, what is defined as "genuinely Vietnamese" ways of eating may vary according to people's backgrounds, their preferences and inclinations. This, I might add, applies to those who stayed in Vietnam as well as to the *Viet kieu*, although the question is hardly as poignant in Vietnam as it becomes in exile. But let us turn to the "physiological and gastronomic needs" that Dinh Trong Hieu holds in such contempt. How are these needs met in Norway - how, and to what extent, do the tastes and habits of Vietnamese ways of eating become available?

> I was talking to Hoa. Her daughter, aged fifteen, recently came to Norway as an ODP, ten years after the rest of the family. She had been living with her grandmother in Saigon. Hoa told me that her daughter's friends write to her, asking if she eats only Norwegian food now: 'They think she may forget *banh bao* and the other things they used to eat together after school - but look! My freezer is full of *banh bao*! I bake it at home now. For breakfast, we eat bread, so that the children will grow as big and strong as Norwegian children. Apart from that, I cook Vietnamese food only. A friend of mine taught me, and my mother brought me a cookery book when she and my daughter came from Vietnam. Would you like to borrow it? When I left Vietnam myself, I was young - almost up to then, I had been a student with no time for cooking. Now, I don't teach my daughter how to cook either. She is busy going to school. I do all the cooking in this family, but the children help me a little sometimes.'

In this example, we see people arriving in Norway from Vietnam, bringing with them their knowledge and memories of food, and cookery books. This symbolic capital is transmitted in face to face interaction, or through letter writing or the borrowing and exchange of recipes. In other cases, it is *nuoc mam*, tropical fruit, or dried squid they bring along by way of "initial capital" for the construction of new

lives in exile. Some of these items are kept for one's own use, but more often, they are used as gifts to family or friends, or potential friends and helpers among already established *Viet kieu*, who often express their nostalgia through a yearning for the tastes, say, of tropical fruit or real, Vietnamese coffee:

> Thuy and I went to the Vietnamese shop near Oslo City, where she found some frozen durian. Had I tasted it? So good, very good smell. She bought a packet for us, although it was very expensive: 'I am so tired of apples! Real fruit is what I miss the most, living here - fresh bananas, all kinds of tropical fruit, ripe and just off the tree.'
>
> 'When my sister came to visit us from Vietnam, one of the things she brought was coffee. There is nothing like Vietnamese coffee, and we can't buy it here', sighed Nhat.

Many foods are available, however, in a growing number of shops - often with ethnic Chinese owners. There is a concentration of these shops in east-central Oslo, with a few other ones nearer the neighbourhoods where many Vietnamese live. Food has, as far as I have been able to find out, until very recently not been imported from Vietnam itself. Again, doing this would indirectly imply accepting the Communist regime as legitimate. Lately, however, I have found some around the shops, such as packets of *banh trang* (paper-thin rice pastry, used for spring rolls), labelled "made in Vietnam". I take this to indicate that the attitude to import from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, like the attitude towards returning to visit Vietnam, is changing. At any rate, at least for the time being, the foods still seem to come mainly from Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore - and France. Some are even produced in Norway, like the duck's eggs with ducklings inside which, as will be remembered, were produced in Stavanger, South-West Norway. Then again, most people grow fragrant herbs in pots and - if land is available - vegetables, for their own use. Some even grow for sale:

> Phung told me about a family she knows who live just north of Oslo. They rent a small patch of land where they grow herbs and vegetables and sell it to other Vietnamese. They enjoy it very much, she said, because it reminds them of life in Vietnam.

In the Vietnamese and Chinese shops, too, you can buy bowls and chopsticks as well as cooking utensils and bamboo stirrers, steaming racks, choppers and so on. All is set for the preparation of food, Vietnamese fashion:

> I was visiting Thach and Dung one week-end. Dung prepared *com*, with fish - Vietnamese red snapper - bought in Oslo, by a friend - and black fungi (*nam meo*) and *canh* ("clear soup"). They had me taste *ca cuon banh trang* ("fish wrapped in rice paper") with some of the fish and things. They had a brand new, electric rice cooker. Dung told me that her father, Nam, had sent it to her as a gift from Vietnam, because they are too expensive here, or perhaps because he thinks they are unavailable. In fact most Vietnamese homes I have been to in Norway have them. Then they had me taste dried squid. They had got it from a woman who recently came here from Vietnam to join her husband. Even in Vietnam it is rather expensive, quite a delicacy.
>
> Van and I were cooking in my kitchen: *Goi*, which is a salad made with chicken, cabbage (as a substitute for green papaya), carrot, coriander, vinegar, water and sugar, to dip in *nuoc mam* with chillies and water added. Rice, of course. *Rau muong sao*, a leafy, green plant, fried with chicken, garlic and *nuoc mam*. And *canh rau muong*, clear soup with the same leafy plant, made with the chicken broth. She told me that her mother, Tuyet, squats on the kitchen floor even now, as she did in Vietnam, to chop the ingredients for cooking. And when they came all the way from the refugee camp to Norway, to begin the new life, what did Tuyet bring along? Bottles and bottles of *nuoc mam*! Even then, you could buy it here, although the selection in shops and items has grown enormously since then. Tuyet, like most other Vietnamese housewives I know, is sceptical to Vietnamese food in restaurants here. She feels she does it better herself. She is right, too, Van and I agreed.

This brings us on from cooking and eating at home, to going out for a meal. According to Kalcik (1984) - as well as to those of my informants who have visited *Viet kieu* settlements in America - Vietnamese restaurants there meet a not insignificant part of *Viet kieu* demand for Vietnamese food:

'Immigrants open restaurants so that it is more convenient to get certain foods that take a long time to prepare; they open stores so that ingredients are available; they grow otherwise unavailable vegetables and herbs in their backyards. One Vietnamese couple in Maryland has started a small factory to manufacture a Vietnamese style of that currently cannot be purchased anywhere else in the world; the first shipment went to large settlements of Vietnamese in Texas, California, and Paris.' (Kalcik 1984:38-39)

This has not - as yet - happened in Oslo. Here, a handful of Vietnamese cafés and restaurants serve either low-quality meals of rice, or only simpler dishes of *pho* ("wide rice-noodle soup"), *bun* ("thin rice-noodle soup") or *banh* ("cakes"). They cater mainly to single young men, and otherwise serve just for a quick *pho* when you are out shopping. Weddings are invariably celebrated at Chinese restaurants. In contrast to the *Viet kieu* settlements in central Europe or the United States, my informants generally agree that there is no good Vietnamese restaurant to take the whole family in, or near, Oslo.

> I told Thuy I was going to France. 'Are you going to Paris?' she asked. 'In one part of Paris, they have all kinds of Vietnamese food, at both markets and restaurants- you can eat anything there - all kinds of fruit, soups, cakes, rice, anything!'

To be a refugee is to have cut oneself off from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. To some extent, the exile also necessarily implies being cut off from eating Vietnamese food and eating the Vietnamese way. Above, we have seen how *Viet kieu* try to make up for this through using their networks to pass on memories, knowledge and items related to Vietnamese eating habits, without "eating", or, as it were, stomaching, Communism. We have also seen that the *Viet kieu* in Norway make up a peripheral part of these networks as seen in relation to their fellows in the United States or France. In Norway, the *Viet kieu* food is but a pale, refrigerated reflection of the real thing: one cannot get hold of many of the items considered necessary for a full, Vietnamese diet with its abundance of fresh, tropical tastes and fragrances. Bachelors who have come to Norway without their parents and do not know how to cook Vietnamese food, are even worse off than families. Particularly in exile, having a Vietnamese wife - or a Vietnamese mother - makes a big difference. The bachelors need to marry Vietnamese women, who through Vietnamese food can help them maintain and reproduce their Vietnamese identity. Until this happens - and with an approximate ratio of 1,800 single, young Vietnamese men to 1,000 single, young Vietnamese women (SSB 1994), making it happen is no simple task - they are often reduced to eating instant noodle soups, Norwegian fast food, or

having an occasional, second-rate *pho* in one of the few cafés. For those who are living without family, this sad state of things is never heavier than during the New Year celebration, *Tet*. Trying to explain the significance of *Tet* to Norwegians, *Viet kieu* will often say that it is "Christmas, everybody's birthday and the 17th of May [Norway's Constitution Day] all happening at once". Thach told me once:

> 'The first year I was in Norway, before Dung was allowed to join me here, I didn't celebrate *Tet*. Dung and the child were in the refugee camp, my parents and siblings were in Vietnam. I was all alone (*mot minh*, lit. "one self", or "one body").'

THE HUMBLE NEW YEAR CAKES AND THEIR ROYAL ORIGINS

In the family's preparation for *Tet*, two special "cakes" are made from sticky rice. One cake (*banh day*) is round, the other (*banh chung*) square. The cakes are offered to the ancestors, and later eaten. There is a legend relating the origin of these cakes. I have heard and read many versions of this legend. The following is my synthesis of these versions:

A king had many sons but was unable to appoint any one of them as his successor. Finally he decided that the son who could prepare the best dish of food to offer the royal ancestors, the first kings of Vietnam, for *Tet*, would succeed him to the throne. The sons all set out in different directions to find the best foods in all Vietnam. Only one son was too poor to travel to remote parts of the kingdom and to buy expensive foodstuffs, so he thought he had no chance of taking part in the contest. One night this son had a dream: a female spirit appeared to him and pointed, first to the heavens, then to the earth. Inspired by his dream, he decided to make two cakes from rice - one round, like the heavens, one square, like the earth. For *Tet*, all the princes gathered at the palace, and the king led the offering ceremony. After the ritual, the king himself tasted all the dishes, one by one, asking each son about the dish he had presented. The king tasted many rare delicacies from mountain and sea, but when he finally tasted the humble rice cakes, he immediately proclaimed that the one who had made the two cakes was to be his successor. By preparing the two cakes, the young prince had demonstrated his deep respect, love and gratitude towards his ancestors for all they had given. The land with its paddy, vegetables and animals, and Heaven's blessings: together they form the country of Vietnam.

Banh chung, the square cake, is the more popular of the two, probably because it is tastier. Unlike its "heavenly counterpart", *banh day*, which is made of rice only, the Earth cake has a savoury filling of meat and soy beans, and is wrapped in green

leaves: 'pork, beans and *dong* leaves represent beasts and plants and all creatures' (Truong Chinh 1984:6). Food signifies closeness to the land that yielded it, and to the ancestors who cultivated the land. We are indebted to the ancestors for giving us the gift of life. This brings us back to where this chapter begun: food is life. In its importance as substance lies its power as a symbol.

CHAPTER VI

ALTARS IN EXILE

The Lunar New Year, *Tet,* or *Tet Nguyen Dan*, is the most important annual celebration in Vietnam. It involves ties to family and ancestors, village and nation, Heaven and Earth. When I arrived in Vietnam towards the end of January 1994, it was the week before *Tet*. The Kitchen God, *Tao quan*, was just leaving for his annual mission to report to Heaven on the doings of men, and the whole country was buzzing with activity. Tailors worked frantically, sewing new clothes for 70 million people all at once. Markets were bursting at the seams with special *Tet* foods, pink firecrackers (*phao*) - assembled into chains, circles or elaborate dragon shapes - and many other necessities of the season. Streets were packed with people. Women with baskets and determined faces forced their way through the seething crowds, making sure their families got everything the celebration requires at the "right" price.

"Traditionally" - that is, in this case, as long as there was at least nominally a Vietnamese King, which means up to 1945 - *Tet* was also the most important annual occasion for the King's elaborate ancestral cult, and for his praying for the perpetuation of the mandate of Heaven. High and low, each family prepares its own *Tet* celebration. The central moment of *Tet* is at night, on the last eve of the Lunar year, when everybody is indoors, kin groups gathered in front of their ancestral altars to make offerings to the ancestors and pray (*cung*). At midnight, gongs sound, and men and boys set off the *phao*, making for a pandemonium with no parallel in Norwegian experience, "in order to frighten the evil spirits away", as the saying goes. Gunsmoke and heaps of torn, pink *phao* paper fill the streets, making them look like abandoned battlefields of broken hearts.[57] The following

[57] A well-known Vietnamese image. The scattered *phao* paper is also said to be a symbol of luck.

day, the first day of spring, is a day for going to the pagoda and for visiting family and friends. Where I was at the time, in Dalat, people went to a dance arranged by the local authorities in the evening of this day.

The celebration of *Tet* is something the *Viet kieu* have taken with them, all over the world. Hitchcox describes the boat people's celebrations in the Southeast Asian camps:

'Whatever their circumstances or the constraints of camp life, the Vietnamese try to celebrate their major festivals. These events have nothing to do with the administration but are an expression of the Vietnamese sense of themselves as a community.' (Hitchcox 1990:241) 'In Vietnam Tet was traditionally the time when the family came together; people once travelled hundreds of miles to be in their villages for the holiday. In the camps the festival is celebrated with very mixed feelings.(...) there is always an underlying tension created by the inner sadness of separation.' (ibid.:244)

In the countries of resettlement, as in the camps, *Tet* is celebrated with mixed feelings. In 1995, I was invited to three different *Tet* celebrations with *Viet kieu* in Norway: one organised by Buddhists, one by Catholics, and one by the local so-called Vietnamese Association. The first and the last of these events I shall present below.

'HAPPY SPRINGTIME IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG 1995'

The monks and the local Vietnamese Buddhist organisation arranged a big celebration in 1995. The event was to take place in a large school building which they had rented for the day. The following is an edited extract of my field notes from the occasion:

Schedule

> When I arrived at 11:30 people were trickling into the school building, hanging around at a makeshift café in the foyer. At 12 the formal programme started. There was a short opening part, young Buddhist "scouts" sang and there were two short speeches, one by the local Buddhist leader, one by the leader in Drammen. Then followed the religious ceremony. Around 12:45 the head monk gave the main speech, followed by a "lunch break" from 13:15 to 14:15. Then there was entertainment which, only interrupted by drawing winners in the raffle, lasted

until a break at 5 PM, when I had some more food and left. People said the programme was scheduled to go on until 8 PM.

Informal space

There was a table at the entrance where a monk and a lady sat, selling raffle tickets. They also had *lich am* ("lunar calendars"), sold in sets with cardboard pictures of the local Buddhist temple which is presently under construction. These pictures were printed in Norway, but the calendars, which give information about Buddhist holidays, had been imported from France - yet an example of how exile Vietnamese are able to get hold of necessary items. Next to this table was a showcase with - mostly jade - jewellery from a Vietnamese "bridal shop" in East Central Oslo. There was another table where they sold CDs and videos of the immensely popular *anh va em* ("boy and girl", romantic) and "Hollywood night" (glittering "American style" song and dance studio shows, all in Vietnamese) kinds. When I had passed this, I entered the café area with tables and chairs in groups - "outside", where people were socialising informally. The volunteers responsible for the café were serving *che* ("sweet, chilled soybean soup") and many kinds of Vietnamese drinks and titbits, coca cola and coffee. There was a *loto* ("bingo") too, with the speaker giving the numbers in song, to the amusement of many and the contempt of others. Here, the raffle tickets represent the future of the Buddhist "congregation". They are building a large new pagoda to replace the present one, which is housed in an ordinary, Norwegian suburban house. The new one will look much more like a "real" Vietnamese pagoda. People bought lots of tickets - I was told that all the 10,000 tickets were probably sold, at a price of NOK 20,- each.

Formal space

"Inside", in the gym, were rows of chairs facing the stage, for the formal part of the celebrations. A South Vietnamese flag to the left of the stage, a Norwegian one to the right. Across the top of the stage three posters. *Le cau nguyen quoc thai dan an, the gioi hoa binh* ("Ceremony of prayer for the tranquility of the people, the security of the nation and peace to the world"), *Mung xuan at-hoi 95* ("Happy springtime in the year of the pig 95"), *Dao phap truong ton, chung sanh an lac* ("The way of Buddhism is eternal/lasts forever, to the consolation of all living creatures"). At the front of the stage was a large, artificial *cay mai* ("plum blossom branch")[58] with *Tet* cards fastened to the branches, in a blue glass jar almost buried in an abundance of *quyt* (mandarin oranges), heaped up around it. Behind all this,

[58] Yellow or white/pink, the *mai* blossoms are supposed to open on the first day of *Tet*, which is also the first day of spring.

majestically placed at the back of the stage, was the altar, with candles, bowls of fresh apples, joss sticks, flowers (real ones), a heap of red packets of *li xi* ("lucky money") and a large golden statue of the Buddha with an electric "halo" of small, blinking bulbs. Almost all the objects on and surrounding the altar were yellow, orange, or red. At one side a table with a wooden drum on a red-and-yellow cushion, at the other a similar arrangement with a small brass (?) gong.

People

To begin with, there were not many people I knew - in fact, not many people at all. There were people from the local area, but also from Oslo, Kongsvinger, Trondheim, Drammen, Bergen. Quite a few of the dancers and singers had come from other parts of Norway for the occasion. Most people came after the ceremony was over, to see the show and meet at the café. There must have been hundreds of people there when I left. Most of the ones I knew were "just ordinary people" - out of work, or employed in shops or other manual work. Among the people I knew, I saw no Northerners, very few Catholics, and very few ethnic Chinese.

Opening of the formal celebration

When I arrived, I met a young girl I know, Nga, who kindly offered to assist me. She was one of the first to find a seat inside, and stayed there nearly all the time. Buddhist "scouts" entered the stage in their grey shirts - girls on the Buddha's right, boys on his left. An old grandmother was there too, at the front, on the girls' side but separate from them, in a grey Buddhist cloak. During the two opening speeches, the three monks were sitting in the front row (I was in the third) to the left. The "scouts" sang two songs. The Oslo leader, an elderly man, talked about it being 20 years since "we" lost "our" country to "the Communists", and how this *Tet* celebration was a reminder of what "we" have lost. Then the monks donned their orange and yellow cloaks on top of their everyday brown ones and filed out - 'Did you notice how the monks walked, in hierarchical order, the most important one first?' said Nga to me - and onto the stage, while from the loudspeakers came the rich, deep sound of large Vietnamese temple gongs.

The ceremony

The youngest monk lit the joss sticks on the altar and stood back, one found his place by the drum, another stood by the gong, with the head monk in front of the altar, facing the Buddha, kow-towing. He chanted the prayer, *Nam mo ...* while the gong beat the rhythm, and the old woman, the monks and the scouts chimed in and joined him in the kow-towing - down on your knees, up, from the waist, all

with the soft and graceful movements of humility and long practice. It was like a song with verses and chorus - the monk who led the prayer chanted the different verses, new for the occasion: *...tai Na Uy* ("in Norway")*...ty nan* ("refugees") *...Viet Nam ...* and they, the wooden drum, and later most of the congregation, all joined him in the increasing rhythms of the chorus *nam mo....* Everybody on the stage had taken their shoes off and were holding their hands in the Buddhist way, palms together. The three younger monks changed places with the head monk, kow-towed deeply, and went off the stage. Nga explained: 'He said the prayer for the Buddha to strengthen all Vietnamese here, in the whole world, and in Vietnam, physically and mentally, in these times when many monks are are having problems with the authorities in Vietnam.'

The main speech

It was time for the head monk's speech. Two video cameras were set up to record the speech. In the meantime, there was a steady noise of people talking outside: 'they only come for the fun,' said Nga contemptuously. They quietened down when the speech began. It was long, yet people listened intently, as if he were talking to each one of them in particular. Nga gave me the following summing up: 'Life is like a river, and we can not bathe in the same river twice because it is always moving, changing, nothing is constant. Difficulties arise, such as the ones now: I have recently been in Geneva on a hunger strike along with other monks, to tell the world about Buddhist monks currently being arrested in Vietnam. We must appreciate the good things we have at any time and take care of each other now, any moment we may lose what we have.' The speech ended with an invitation for all who wanted to come up to the stage and help themselves to *li xi* ("lucky money") and a *quyt* ("mandarin orange"), for luck.

Buddhists and Catholics

Time for a break, then, and food, before the entertainment. Nga and I passed one of the leaders of the Vietnamese Association on the way, and I said: 'He's a Catholic, isn't he, what is he doing here?' and Nga replied, disapprovingly: 'So I'd like to know!' After having eaten, I went back in to sit with Nga, and ask her about earlier *Tet*s. 'Didn't the Vietnamese Association use to organise *Tet* - why don't they do it this year?' I wondered. Nga replied: 'Oh, those people? Well, you see, most of them are Catholics. Last year we tried to organise it together. They refused because of this Buddhist ceremony that you have just seen. But that is how we celebrate *Tet*! If they can't accept that, how can we possibly celebrate together? This year, when they asked to celebrate together, we said "no!" - there was just nothing else to say.'

The show begins

It was time for the entertainment to begin. The altar was gone from the stage, the *cay mai* ("plum blossom branch") in the background. First came the dragon's dance - they had a large dragon costume for two men. The dragon's opponent or partner was a god with a fan-like thing in his hand, who tried to keep a plate full of *quyt* away from the dragon. The dragon danced down from the stage and out, to the great delight of everybody except the big-eyed little children - who were easily comforted by the gifts of *quyt* thrown to them by the god. Then came several "pieces": *anh va em* ("boy and girl") singing, with smoke machine and fake Northern accent and lights and all. This was the closest thing to the so-called "Hollywood night" video shows I have seen live on the stage, so far. These videos are worth mentioning: I am never sure whether the videos, mostly made in America or France - and available from Hanoi to California - are influenced by the stage shows, or if it is the other way around - possibly both. Then there were children dressed up like splendid cream cakes, singing - solo, duo and choir - about spring: *Mua Xuan*. There were several dance "pieces": some in "fancy dress" with pop song playback - Hollywood night again - mostly with children and young girls. Some of them had come all the way from Kongsvinger and Bergen for the occasion, Nga told me.

Some of these "pieces" were of the "traditional" kind, which I had seen at *Tet* in Vietnam the year before: young men and women dancing the chopstick dance, very well too. Nga told me they were from Bergen. Sweet young women dancing with two kinds of *non* hats, the flat, round ones and the conical ones, singing (playback) *O nha que...* ("in the village/country"). One of the *anh va em* songs went *em xin loi anh, em di ve que...* ("pardon me, my love, I am going back to the village/country"). A very young couple, 10-12 years maybe, did a pantomime of boy and girl meeting, her dropping a fan, him picking it up, her wanting it back... they were both dressed in old-fashioned very long and wide *ao dai* (long silk tunics worn with silk trousers), with perfectly matching headgear - "turbans". I asked Nga where she thought they had got those from. A silly question: 'From Vietnam, I guess - they make them there, by hand. I suppose somebody went back and brought those with them, that's simple enough!'

Tao quan (the "Kitchen god" or "Spirit of the Hearth") was there too, in a version which had people gasping, then laughing: live rock music and very funny actors. *Ong Tao* ("Mr. Tao") himself was a young boy with a long, long list of the doings of the Buddhist organisation. His "wife", another young boy, was busy doing her hair and touching up her make-up while her husband gave his report. Nga told me it was supposed to take place 'where the dead people go, and the one in the

middle is the chief god there'. *Ong Tao* was thirsty and was permitted to drink milk from an unmistakably Norwegian container. That was funny, too, as Vietnamese don't normally drink milk, but Norwegians do, a lot!

The head monk enjoyed the entertainment and kept going up to the stage after some of the shows to hand out *li xi* ("lucky money") to the performers. He turned around and handed me one, too, with a wide smile. During the intervals, people would come up to him, bowing and greeting him respectfully, exchanging a few words. Some would sit with him for a little while, or show their children to him, as for a blessing.

When they announced a break around 5, I went "out" to have some *bun bo* ("thin rice-noodle soup"). When I put chilli, lemon and *nuoc mam* in it, the man said: 'I see you have been to Vietnam - you know how to eat this!' Then I went out to take the bus home. Just outside, men and boys were smoking and talking in groups, and pairs of *anh* and *em* were talking. I overheard a young boy saying to the other *di Chua Huong nhi*? ("going to the Perfume pagoda, eh?") - referring to a famous romantic poem about a young girl who met her first love on a pilgrimage to this beautiful landscape in North Vietnam. They were greatly surprised to hear I had been to the Perfume pagoda - I think, to them, it's just a metaphor for young people in love. Of course, *Tet* is traditionally the time for that, too: on the first morning of the New Year, putting on one's beautiful new clothes, then walking slowly up and down the main street, giggling girls arm in arm, deliberately not looking at the droves of young men. Later comes the time for parties, dancing - and hopes for romance and a happy future together. *Tet* is the time for new beginnings.

ANOTHER CELEBRATION OF *TET* 1995

In 1992 and 1993 I had, as a Norwegian bureaucrat, been present at the *Tet* celebrations organised by the local Vietnamese Association. In 1994, I was in Vietnam during *Tet*. In 1995, the Vietnamese Association had not made any plans for a *Tet* celebration. Instead, Vietnamese Buddhists - as described above - ethnic Chinese Buddhists, and Vietnamese Catholics each arranged separate celebrations. As it turned out, there was to be a Vietnamese Association celebration this year after all, prepared at the very last moment. Hung called me a few days before the event to invite me - he was evidently pleased. I then talked to Hoa, who told me they were going to be there, did I want to come with them? Finally, I heard it

announced on the radio, NRK's Vietnamese news, the night before. Written invitations and programmes had also been sent out, a few days in advance.

Schedule

Announced to start at 2 PM, 'so as usual you should come around 2:30', Hung said. I did - Thuy and Phong gave me a lift. When we arrived, the dragon dance had already started. Then followed *Tao quan*. His report was all about the situation in Vietnam - people are starving, and they are not free - ending with Heaven's blessing upon all Vietnamese. A young man sang a song. Girls danced the *Ba mua xuan* ("Three springtimes"): This dance, Hoa explained, symbolises springtime in the South, in the North, and in the Central part of Vietnam. There was more *anh va em* singing and a dance with fans - all elements I recognised from the Buddhist celebration and from other *Tet* celebrations in Norway and in Vietnam. In between all this, the children were invited to receive *li xi*, which were handed out on the floor in front of the stage and did not come from the altar. The new leader of the Association - a Catholic - was given flowers and immediately passed them on to a Norwegian Catholic, who made an improvised speech of thanks. The local government's *ordfører* ("mayor") was present, too, and was summoned to the stage to be given two *banh chung* (the legendary New Year's cakes) in a basket, in return for which she gave an improvised speech about culture being to the good of everybody.

After the fun, Son showed three documentary films from Vietnam. The films were all pre-1975, and were lent to the Association by a local, private person for the occasion. The first film was very general, about Vietnam. The speaker was Norwegian, though I doubt if anybody noticed - people were really more busy talking than watching, even inside. It was like an old educational film of the kind we used to see at school, informative about things like principal industries, and romanticising things like poverty and "the fishermen's closeness to nature". The next film - which was when people started leaving - was black and white and showed prisoners in Communist camps. It was pretty horrible. After that came the *Tet* offensive in 1968, which could have been even worse, except that it was so brittle that it kept going to pieces almost from the beginning. Poor Son. I, too, left at this point, at 5:30. Later in the evening, there was to be karaoke and dancing.

Informal space

"Outside", in the foyer, there were a few food stalls selling *banh mi* ("French" bread with Vietnamese fillings) and other light foods, Coca-Cola and canned soy bean drinks, two kinds of *che* ("sweet, chilled soybean soup") - without ice - some dried

sweets and Norwegian chocolates and chewing gum and things like that. People were playing a *Tet* betting game, *bau cua*. And upstairs, on the landing, men were squatting, playing cards in two groups. There was no room for tables or chairs "outside", so people were walking around, standing on the stairs to watch the *bau cua*, standing in the doorway to see what was going on "inside", going out for a smoke...

Formal space

Coffee and tea were free, just "inside" the gym. Plates of sweet biscuits (of the "Western" kind - industrially baked) were handed around "inside", after first having been offered to the one Buddhist monk and the prominent men in dark suits. There were rows of chairs, maybe 120 in all. During the dragon dance - and I suppose, the welcoming speeches which I missed - there was an altar on the stage with the South Vietnamese flag on top[59] as well as some simple "decorations" or offerings. This altar was removed to make room for the entertainment. Later, when the *li xi* ("lucky money") were handed out, there was another altar arrangement with *cay mai* ("plum blossom branch") two plates of *quyt* ("mandarin oranges"), and a plate of *banh chung* ("Earth cake") and a South Vietnamese flag draped across the lower front - not at the top this time. No joss was lit, though there was joss on this altar, nor were candles lit. Over the top of the stage was one big poster saying *Cung chuc tan xuan, Godt Nytt År, At Hoi 1995* ("Respectful wishes for the end of spring/Happy New Year, Year of the Pig 1995")[60]. There was a South Vietnamese flag to the left and a Norwegian flag to the right of the stage.

People

In spite of the radio announcement and the written invitations, it was never quite full, inside the gym or in the foyer outside, though more people arrived after I did. When I commented on there being not that many people, I was told 'maybe a lot of people don't know about it - notice was given very late'; 'not many young people listen to NRK, sometimes people do and sometimes they forget, and maybe they had already made other plans for the day'; and 'people have already celebrated, not everybody celebrates *Tet* for a whole month, like you do!' I saw a lot of people I know, all local Vietnamese. There were a few old ladies, but: 'My mother is not

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[59] 'The flag of the Vietnamese Republic ... A rectangular, yellow flag with three red stripes along the middle. The yellow stands for the colour of our people's skin, the red colour symbolises the blood of the people, and the three stripes stand for the three parts of Vietnam ... for most exile Vietnamese this is the "good old flag" ' (Van, in a school paper, my translation from the Norwegian.)

[60] Considering that *Tet* marks the beginning of spring, this is an explicit concession to the fact that they were a month late.

here. She is afraid to go out since she broke her arm, falling on the ice. Also she said she feels so sad at *Tet* that she might start crying if she came, so she'd rather stay at home,' explained Hoa. To sum up: people who lived near and had time, rich and poor, educated or not, new and veterans, Buddhists, Baptists and Catholics came. I saw none of the local North Vietnamese. Some Norwegian "officials" had been formally invited: A Catholic leader, a social worker who had sent a stand-in, the Mayor, and I suppose also the municipal refugee office leaders, but they were not there. There were some Norwegian youngsters, coming along with their Vietnamese friends. The Buddhist temple was represented by a lay monk dressed in an everyday garment, with an old woolly cardigan over. He had a front seat and was served food, but had no "official" functions - he was rather treated as a respected outsider, and left early. Old Hoang came down to urge the Mayor, the Catholic and me in the back row to come and sit in front. Most people seemed to know each other and were moving around to chat. By the time I left, the gym was practically empty. Although there were more people in the foyer, people had mostly gone home during the films. When I suggested that it wasn't very polite of people to leave during the films, I was corrected: 'Those films made people feel sad. They showed things people wanted to forget, they couldn't bear it, so they went home.' Nevertheless, I am sure many of the young people simply found them boring. Also, I heard people saying they were going home to eat, then planned to come back later for the dance.

Evidently this celebration had been put together in a hurry. Singers had not had time to learn the lyrics and read them from sheets of paper. The speaker had not had time to prepare himself very well either. The band was eager to play and did so while Son was showing the films, drowning the film voices.

COMPARING *TET* CELEBRATIONS

Summing up the celebrations in Vietnam, they were centred around the ancestors and their descendants. In addition, there were Buddhist celebrations at the pagodas, as well as secular entertainment staged by the people's committees.

The celebrations in Norway, too, culminate in the *cung* of the descendants to their ancestors, each family surrounded by the thick walls of Norwegian-built homes and the cold stillness of the Nordic winter. Yet most of the kin group is absent - or, rather, the exiles themselves are the absentees. The experiences of loss of family and loss of home, often but not always synchronous, converge on an

elevated level in the exile celebrations of *Tet*. It is a simple fact that the people they have lost are all different persons. In this sense, in terms of family, the broken bonds are not the same. In the same way, the particular places they have left behind are different. On this level, celebrating *Tet* with strangers is an exile phenomenon, accentuating the feelings of bereavement.

Yet the symbolism inherent in the loss of Vietnam as "homeland" (*que huong*) transcends the individual bereavements, serves to ease the feelings of loss, and thus becomes a more powerful image in the process of constructing new bonds between the *Viet kieu*. This image was apparent in both the Buddhist and the Vietnamese Association *Tet* celebrations, but whereas the Buddhists had other sources to draw on, the secular Vietnamese Association had to rely almost exclusively on the appeal of their version of this symbolism. With the Vietnamese Association, there was no formal ceremony. Nor were there any long speeches, though there may have been some short ones before I - and most other people - arrived. However, there may, as in previous years, have been a short opening ceremony: the Association leaders walking up to the altar where the South Vietnamese flag held the place of honour, to lay down their offerings. In placing the South Vietnamese flag - the refugees' anti-Communist symbol of a "Free Vietnam" - at the centre for ritual offerings, such a ceremony serves to elevate the idea of a free homeland to a level of veneration. Apart from this, ritual elements such as the *li xi*, *banh chung* and the altars themselves were put on a level with the dragon dance and *tao quan* sketch: indispensable and welcome elements in any *Tet* celebration, but with no communication with gods or spirits.

From local community to religious networks?

The Vietnamese Association's evident problems in staging this year's celebration led me to think about the changing role of the Association (cf. Longva 1987). As the 1992 and 1993 *Tet* celebrations, staged by the Vietnamese Association, took place before I started doing fieldwork, unfortunately I have no notes or photographs to aid my memory of them. Provided, then, that I understood and remember

correctly, these events drew a large number of local and semi-local people, and revolved around homeland and anti-Communist terms of belonging. There was singing of the South Vietnamese national anthem, the South Vietnamese flag was honoured, and there were long speeches about Vietnam, the evils of Communism and hopes of freedom.

In the years before *doi moi* ("perestrojka"), intellectual Vietnamese refugees took their treasured idea of the Vietnamese nation with them, keeping it safe abroad, away from a Vietnam temporarily corrupted by Communism. They established associations such as the one I know of, and used them as the organisational basis for the exiled nation. Their positions as leaders were based upon this construct of the exiled nation, with themselves as its safekeepers. As Longva says: 'All calls to join, support and participate in the associations are made in the name of homeland (*que huong*) around which the association leaderships act like a devoted clergy responsible for the continued observance of its cult' (1987:129).

With *doi moi*, many Vietnamese who were lay members of the Association began to *ve tham Viet Nam* ("go back to visit Vietnam"), as I mentioned in the preceding chapter. They visited the corrupted territory and thus became traitors in the eyes of the Association leaders. In their own eyes, what they were primarily doing was visiting the village they belonged to, not the state, both the state and the nation being of secondary importance to them. For instance, here is what Hung told me during an interview the summer of 1994:

> 'The last 2 years, the Oslo Vietnamese Association with its 5000 members has not been able to celebrate *Tet*, because a lot of people have gone to Vietnam to visit, and others say that they are Communists.' He observed that 'it is easy to say that people who go to Vietnam are all Communists, if your own parents, spouse and children are all with you here. It is not that simple for those who still have all of their family in Vietnam.'

Thuy, who went back to her village for *Tet* 1994, held the same view:

> I asked Thuy if she had any trouble with people here because she had gone back - I know some people are against visiting Vietnam, did she tell everybody openly about her visit? She said: ' - well, some say that we left Vietnam, so why are we

> going back? But those people have all their family - children, siblings, spouse, parents, here, so that is why they can say this. People who have their family there do not say this.'

Tuyet's thoughts on this differ from Hung's and Thuy's:

> 'We could not live under Communist oppression. We sacrificed so much. We left our homes, our families, people who needed us. The Communists are still in power. How could we possibly go back, without degrading the very sacrifices we made, which are part of us, or the people we left behind?'

When members acted in opposition to the Association leaders by going back to visit Vietnam, the uncompromisingly anti-Communist unanimity of the Association weakened, and the corresponding version of *Tet* lost much of its appeal. Much of the conflicts surface as, and intermingle with, personal conflicts, and the quality of leadership is no doubt an important factor. On the other hand, possible personal conflicts and inefficient leadership are less likely to matter when everybody agrees about the big issues. Son's difficulties with the films he wanted to show illustrate better than words how the topics of war and Communism have aged in the eyes of many - while others still found them important. This new dissonance - emerging at the "End of the Cold War" - seems to have led Association members to turn to alternative frameworks for *Tet*, and for belonging together. The Buddhists and the Christian churches provide obvious alternatives, as they were already organised (within the pre-existing Norwegian framework for religious groups). We may note that the "news-value" of the charges against the Communists in the Buddhist monk's speech stands out in contrast to the Vietnamese Association's concern with the past.

I already knew that Hung was exasperated with the Vietnamese Association for not planning a celebration: 'They are being far too lazy', he grumbled a week before *Tet* 1995, 'maybe they want me to burn their houses down or something?' Hung himself is not among the intellectual leaders, but he needs or wants to belong to a Vietnamese nation. This may well be related to the fact that although he says he feels 'both Chinese and Vietnamese', he has no Vietnamese village to turn to: his native village, which he barely remembers, is in China. Another reason for his

outburst is probably to be found in his deep concern that Vietnamese should not give into what he calls "ghetto" tendencies of isolation from Norwegians. The Vietnamese Association *Tet* celebration has through the years been an occasion for the Vietnamese to invite Norwegians into their arena, in an attempt to communicate *likhet* through the recodification of "folklore" traditions as a strategy towards being accepted as part of Norwegian society. The fact that a number of Norwegian officials have been formally invited to celebration for many years, as well as the Association leader's formal presentation of *banh chung* to the Mayor, and his passing the flowers he was given on to the Norwegian representative of the Catholic Church, may serve to illustrate my point here: by including representatives of Norwegian society in their celebrations of *Tet*, the Vietnamese Association attempted to transmit, not only a collective Vietnamese gratitude towards Norway, but also a wish that the Vietnamese might be considered part of Norwegian society.

The Vietnamese Association *Tet* was a local event in terms of participants - local Vietnamese making up a "microscopic section" of the varied South Vietnamese population in a very small area, and some local Norwegians - but a national one in its emphasis on Vietnam, the homeland, as overriding symbol of community. The Buddhist celebration, on the other hand, was national in terms of participants - Vietnamese having travelled from all over South and Mid Norway to take part - but was less concerned with the homeland than with Buddhism in its symbolic contents. Relatively speaking, then, the Buddhist *Tet* was geographically "unbound", religiously "bound", whereas the Vietnamese Association celebration was opposite in these respects. Also, the Vietnamese Association's local event was a celebration of the "homeland" which, though spatially bound, is a construct of nationalism. The Buddhist religious network, on the other hand, largely celebrated the "home", in terms of family and multi-local belonging, of each participant.

A major problem in the construction of exile community is the polytheticity (Needham 1987:28) of the Vietnamese as a category. This is also manifest in the fact that there is no "national", all-encompassing Vietnamese religion - neither in the

exile nation nor in the "corrupted" state.[61] In Vietnam, cult leaders, Buddhist monks, spirit mediums, Catholic priests and others have all taken ritual part in different aspects of people's everyday lives, deaths and celebrations.

ONE TRUTH, OR MANY TRUTHS?

The topic of Vietnamese creeds is indeed one of diversity. In their *Tet* celebration, the Buddhists - although bound to "Buddhism" - were free to draw on this rich diversity to meet a changing world. Bound to their "religious neutrality", the Vietnamese Association, however, found itself largely cut off from such use of religious diversity in its attempt to unite its members. In the following, I shall try to give an idea of this diversity, which is drawn together in the celebration of *Tet*.

> My teacher and friend in Hanoi, Nguyet, and I were on our way from the Ho Chi Minh museum to a pagoda near the West Lake. She was driving her moped, I was sitting behind her on the passenger seat, and as helmets are rarely in use in Hanoi, we could easily talk while she manoeuvred through the slowly moving mass of other mopeds and bicycles. She wanted to talk about religion: 'Why is it that some religions in the West seem to bring people to fight each other, how can religion be a cause of war? It must be because you seem to think you have found the truth. This could never happen in Vietnam, don't you see? Because we do not believe there is one true way and the other ways are false. All our religions have a part of the truth, that's all. Here, everybody knows that it is so. There is no way we could fight about the truth. If somebody came and asked us to do that, nobody would listen to him at all.' 'Maybe Communism is more like western religions in that respect?' I asked. Silence was her reply.

Nguyet helped me to realise that not only does some sort of tolerance inherent in apparently contradictory Vietnamese belief systems make it possible for them to coexist: as parts of a whole, they are complementary, and in this perspective there is no reason why a person should adhere exclusively to one or the other. In contrast, monotheistic religions are "truth monopolies": mutually exclusive in the sense that if you profess one of them, you cannot at the same time convincingly

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[61] Although the exile cult of homeland makes extensive use of religious symbolism, and the King's Mandate of Heaven, Neo-Confucianism and Communism in themselves may be viewed as state religions, or at least legitimising ideologies, neither can really be said to provide a total framework for people's world views.

profess any other. The various religious doctrines and practices of Vietnam thus seem to be engaged in an unending flux of entanglement and disentanglement, simultaneously occurring at many levels of person and society, free of the rigid separation of monotheistic traditions and exclusive truths.

Yet doctrines advocating absolute and universal truth have also for a long time been part of Vietnamese lives: different as they are in their teachings, Christianity is one , Communism another - though, in order to avoid misunderstanding, I hasten to make it explicit that in my view they do not necessarily have much in common except for this quality of exclusiveness.

Sorting people by "religion"

When asked about their creed, Vietnamese who do not profess Christianity tend to call themselves Buddhists, both in Vietnam and in Norway. Yet what being "Buddhist" implies evidently varies from person to person. Nguyet expressed her relation to Buddhism like this:

> 'When I grow old, maybe I will become a Buddhist. But that will mean giving up so many things, like getting married, having children, enjoying good food and so on, so I will not become a Buddhist yet'. Nguyet likes going to the pagodas of Hanoi to pray and does so several times a month, but does not call herself a Buddhist - yet. In a letter to me later she said: '...most Vietnamese do not really have their own religion. We pray to our ancestors. Sometimes we also go to the churches or pagodas to pray for good luck. I don't know if there is a religion that is true or false... I believe and also don't believe everything. Probably I don't have my own religion, but I have my faith. I think there is a mysterious power controlling everything, which is named "Buddha", "God". Perhaps it is a complete truth? Suppose you came to Hanoi from Norway and John came from England. Everybody has his own way and his own idea of Hanoi, but Hanoi itself does not depend on what you think or which way you choose. It exists itself. But if you really love it, finally you will see it. This is how I think about all the religions...'

The tendency to conform to "exclusive profession" is stronger in Norway. Communist pressures against religious organisation in Vietnam is one reason for

this, but it is probably also partly due to assimilation pressures in exile.[62] These pressures, probably largely unintentional, begin in the refugee camps: UNHCR forms, filled in by camp personnel and handed over as "background information" to the authorities in each refugee's resettlement country, have a space for "religion". These spaces correspond to, and are to my knowledge invariably filled in according t, the "monotheistic principle", so that each person appears to be, say, either Buddhist, Catholic, or ancestor worshipper. Being in an extremely vulnerable and subordinate position, the refugees will answer such questions as well as they can, however off-target the questions and their underlying suppositions may seem to them.

Other factors also lead towards the strengthening of a "Buddhist" identity in exile. Phung shared her thoughts about this with me:

> I said: 'I have the impression that here, Buddhism seems to become more important to people than it was in Vietnam, involving people more personally, and more now than before'. Phung: 'It has to do with identity. Here, they all need to know who they are. The Catholics, they have always had each other, their congregation, receiving support from the state for each member. Now, even I am registered as a member of the Buddhist congregation, which I wasn't before. I let them put my name down, I think it is right. That is how the congregation is growing.'

VIETNAMESE CREEDS: THE POLITICS OF RELIGION

The question of what is "indigenous" and what is the result of "foreign influence" is part of Vietnamese nationalist political discourse, where ancient doctrines as well as young sects such as Hoa Hao and Cao Dai have their place.[63] Shamanist spiritualism and popular animism are also represented as "indigenous" in this context (e.g. Nguyen Khac Kham 1983).

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62 There seems to be a general Vietnamese Buddhist revival (historian of religion Egil Lothe, personal communication). With *doi moi* this is happening not only in the exile communities, but in Vietnam, too.

63 The syncretic sects called Cao Dai and Hoa Hao both came into being during the first decades of this century, as religious-nationalist popular movements, and were persecuted both by Colonial and Communist authorities for their political activities. None of my informants belongs to these sects, however.

Other influences are generally recognised to be of foreign origin. From China came the "three doctrines/religions" (*tam giao*) of Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, which through the centuries have been thoroughly incorporated into Vietnamese lives at all levels. From India Islam, Therevada Buddhism and Hinduism were introduced, the influences of which have been much less pervasive. Catholicism, later to be privileged by the French colonial administration, was introduced by the Portuguese as early as the seventeenth century.[64] Europeans and Americans later brought with them Protestant versions of Christianity.

From France, and later also from China and the Soviet, came the teachings of Communism, whose followers aim - in principle - at abolishing all the above "ideologies". In the eyes of anti-Communists, the Communist attempts at controlling and reshaping religious practice according to the new ideals represent a serious threat towards the Vietnamese "way of life". Many religious leaders - Catholics, Buddhists and others - who have been reluctant to conform to state-controlled religion, have been persecuted and arrested.

'In 1977 religion came under state control. Officially there was no direct persecution on religious grounds, but in practice religious affiliations were believed to be associated with dissidence. Religious activities were therefore tightly controlled and required the permission of the local People's Committee before they could be conducted.' (Hitchcox 1990:54)

I asked Hung if you could talk about something like a Vietnamese counterpart to the Chinese "cultural revolution":

> He said that the Vietnamese Communists were less direct, more subtle than their Chinese comrades. In Vietnam, for example, the Catholics would want to go to church on Sundays. So every Sunday there would be a socialist gathering you had to attend, and there would be no time for church. Or, in the case of the Buddhists, on Buddha's birthday everybody wanted to go to the celebrations, but then "they" found out it was necessary with some co-operative works and everybody except the very old had to go and work. The result was that only a few hundred old

[64] According to Marr (1992), at the time of the French colonisation, the number of Vietnamese Catholics was about 10-12% of the total population. Whole villages and towns were Catholic before the French war 1945-54.

people would turn up at the celebrations, which was presented as proof that in Vietnam, Buddhism was obsolete.

Three religions, two levels

The many variations within each of these "doctrines", the relations between them, and the practices associated with them, multiply the complexity very briefly outlined above. There is a corresponding increase in the diversity of options available as a means of flexible adaptation to change, or indeed as political strategies. Hung explained this to me:

I told Hung that I had read in a book about Taoism (Schipper 1993) that to become an ancestor it wasn't enough to have descendants, you somehow have to deserve it too. He dismissed the idea: 'How could that be? Anyway, ancestor worship isn't really Taoism, it's Confucianism.' I also explained how the author of this book argued that it is a mistake to separate the "high" and the "low" Taoism, it is all one - as you learn, you ascend, the levels are not contradictory. Hung said: 'Yes, that's right. Confucianism is the same in that sense. The "high" part of Confucianism is more philosophical, emphasising the relations between king - subject, and mandarin - lower civil servant, whereas the "low" one is more about relationships like husband-wife and elder-younger sibling, along with a lot of superstitions. Buddhism has that duality, too'. I remarked on how the monk at a Buddhist meeting in Oslo some days before had emphasised the importance of "high" Buddhism all evening and then at the end went on to the "low" one and sprinkled holy water on people for luck. Hung said, 'well - all the three religions have a high part and a low part, the low part being encouraged by the elite to make it easier to rule the common people.'

Hung instructively illustrated his argument by drawing a picture:

At the "high" level - that is, the level of doctrine, which he drew as the outer circle, it is - generally speaking - possible to distinguish the three systems. As we approach the central circle, the three "low" levels gradually merge. Asking if anything - a ritual, for example, or a person - "really" belongs to one or the other is more and more off the mark the nearer the middle we get. But in the central circle, the sum of the *tam giáo* ("three religions") is greater than the parts: this "something else" is what Hung labels "superstition", which involves a belief in spirits - spirits of the deceased, spirits tied to particular localities, and so on.

In Vietnam, there are offerings of incense in the form of joss sticks just about everywhere - stuck into the trunks of trees, in and around shops and vehicles, at images of animals, legendary heroes or other spirits in temples (*mieu*, *dinh*) and pagodas (Buddhist temples, *chua*), as well as on altars. Yet it has been difficult, both in Vietnam and in Norway, to get anybody to tell me about the recipients of these offerings. The few times I have succeeded, it was with people who had either through education or personal interest reflected thoroughly on these matters. They were people I knew well, and yet the information was given jokingly, as if to say: this is superstition and cannot be taken seriously. I take this to go back to the first decades of this century, when popular beliefs in spirits were blamed - as part of the "backwardness" or "decline" of Vietnamese "culture" - for having made the country an easy prey to colonialism:

> 'In the countries of Europe, apart from the cult of the founder of a religion, which is an act of remembrance, there is no cult of spirits, there is no belief in the efficacy of amulets nor of talismans, yet these countries are prosperous and all their

> peoples are powerful. Why, then, in Asia where the spirits are surrounded by a cult so respectful, have they not protected our countries, nor made us rich like the countries of Europe? This sole reason proves the error of our beliefs.' (Phan Ke Binh [1915] 1975, I:84)[65]

Largely corresponding to Hung's "high" and "low" religious levels, there seems to be a gradual transition between "frontstage" and "backstage" in questions of beliefs and practices. Doctrines, at the "highest" level of mutual distinction, are part of what any Vietnamese intellectual would be proud to present to foreigners as "Vietnamese culture". At the other end of the scale - the "lowest" - we find the beliefs and practices of an uneducated, mainly rural population. Educated people generally find no reason to take these "superstitions" seriously, and view them as a potential source of generalised ridicule and exoticising of "Vietnamese culture" in the eyes of Westerners. The "superstitious" themselves take care to keep to themselves what, according to their experience, brings upon them the scorn of their leaders and foreigners alike.

Political cults

For Vietnamese kings and elites, Confucianism has provided much of the ideological, legitimising framework, to varying degrees throughout the centuries. Under the last dynasty, that of the Nguyen (1802-1945), this was particularly so: 'The entire nation was meticulously organised in a hierarchically ascending series of replications of the same ritual patterns, these patterns themselves a replication of the natural order of the universe.' (Jamieson 1993:38)[66] This is, arguably, also a feature of today's rulers. Jamieson says of the North Vietnamese takeover of South Vietnam in 1975: '(...) like the Vietnamese Neo-Confucians they remained beneath their Marxist veneer, like the Nguyen emperors (...) - they quickly set about to

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[65] 'Dans les pays d'Europe, en dehors du culte du fondateur d'une religion (Giáo tô) qui est une marque de souvenir, on ne rend pas de culte aux génies (thân thánh), on ne compte jamais sur l'efficacité des charmes (âm-phù), ni sur celle des talismans (mac hô) et pourtant ces pays sont prospères et tous leurs peuples sont puissants. Pourquoi en Asie, les génies qui sont entourés d'un culte si respectueux, n'ont-ils pas protégé nos pays et ne les ont-ils pas rendus riches comme le sont les pays d'Europe? Cette seule raison prouve l'erreur de nos croyances'

[66] In the French-educated intelligentia's search for explanations of the Vietnamese vulnerablitiy to colonialism, their predecessors - the Confucian-educated mandarins - were blamed for their inability to think critically and meet the new challenges: The anachronistic rigidity of the Nguyen dynasty's "Neo-Confucianism" was identified as one major cause.

transform the alien reality of Saigon and the Mekong delta into conformity with the way, (...) the structure of reality as they conceived of it.' (ibid.:363) This Vietnamese linking of Communism to Confucianism is confirmed by Hy Van Luong (1990:146): 'In general, institutions in Vietnam can still be considered to have been reconstructed in a remarkable continuity with the pre-revolutionary past - an era when the Confucianism-reinforced organic unity framework reigned supreme in the native system', as well as by O'Harrow (1995:176-177): 'it is interesting to see that what is considered to be moral behaviour on the part of party cadres has many parallels with the proper behaviour of the Confucian gentleman'. As Nhat said in a comment to this,

> 'Ho Chi Minh - himself the son of a Confucian scholar - liked to fill old Confucian formulas with new contents. In Confucianism, *trung - hieu* ("loyalty towards king and country" - "filial love") are two cardinal virtues of gentlemen. This, he transformed into a Communist slogan: *Trung voi dang hieu voi dan* ("Loyalty towards the party, filial love towards the people"). This slogan is the most important vow of the Communist Youth. This example, I think, reveals the antagonism between Communism and Confucianism: at the same time as Communists make use of Confucianism, they attempt to destroy it.'

In this perspective, and keeping Hung's *tam giao* circles in mind, present-day political cults may be seen as strategies aimed at incorporating political doctrines into people's everyday lives. There is a marked difference between North and Central Vietnam as strongholds of Confucianism on the one hand and South Vietnam with its relaxed attitudes towards "Northern formality" on the other. '(...) the Communists were able to fill the vacuum left by the demise of the Confucian scholars, with Communist party members now playing the role of the scholars in the eyes of the village people (...) It is interesting to note that Communism took over South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia only by force, and still has trouble controlling the population in those countries, who do not have a Confucian tradition' (Nguyen Phuong Lam 1984:20, 25).[67] I found in North Vietnam

[67] This view is, however, debatable. "Low" Confucianism may well have been as much part of Southern lives as of Northern ones., and then rather a matter of class than of region: "low" Confucianism, Confucianism in the family, played a more important part in higher class family lives than in the lives of peasant families, all over the country.

something like the North Korean and Chinese "ancestorifications" of their deceased Communist leaders, a political cult of Ho Chi Minh. Here are Nhat's comments to a first draft of this chapter:

> Nhat was annoyed at my constellation of "Ho Chi Minh-ism" with the religions - 'that is an insult to true believers'. I explained to him that I had noticed in Vietnam how Ho Chi Minh seemed to be deified, as for instance both in the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum and in the new Ho Chi Minh museum. Also, there was a Ho Chi Minh altar in the *dinh* ("village temple", "communal house") in the village where a friend of mine was doing research. I got the impression the authorities want to use the well-known forms of ancestor cults and cults of the spirits of legendary heroes to create a Ho Chi Minh cult. Nhat considered this: 'Well - still, a cult is not the same as a religion. Even in my house in Vietnam we had a picture of Ho Chi Minh, and in all the villages they were competing to show the authorities their great admiration for Ho Chi Minh, "uncle Ho". Now if they had just left him to the historians, if they had buried him like a normal person, spoken of him as a great leader but a human one, he would be likely to last much longer. Both to the western countries and to the people of Vietnam this will be impossible to accept. If people had a choice, 90% would throw away their pictures of Ho Chi Minh immediately. What you are saying is actually good news to me: if this is what the authorities are trying to do now, I am happy. It will be the fall of Ho Chi Minh, and falling from a high place it will be all the more fatal.'

Vietnamese anti-Communism is a product of Vietnamese Communism, having come into being as a specific reaction against the implementation of Communism in Vietnam. Anti-Communism is no truth monopoly, however. Rather, it advocates the fallacy of one such doctrine, and the undesirability of its effects. As an answer to Communist oppression of all religious practices, such practice - regardless of creed - has in itself become politically symbolic of anti-Communism. And as Communism reigns in Vietnam, anti-Communism has held the field in exile.[68] There is no one all-embracing, organised religion to oppose the regime, but the form of the cult of ancestors - and those of other spirits - is part of every Vietnamese person, exiled or not. Adopting this form, as in the cult of Ho Chi Minh, may be

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Furthermore, a weaker position of Confucianism is hardly the only reason for the reputed unruliness and relaxed informality of "South Vietnamese mentality" - nor does it explain fully the historically differently rooted anti-Communisms of Laos and Cambodia.

[68] Except, for historical reasons, in France, cf. Bousquet (1991).

one way for the Communist doctrine to penetrate into the lives of ordinary people. And under the umbrella of its antithesis, exiled anti-Communism, yet another cult has sprung up: the cult of homeland, as exemplified in the Vietnamese Association *Tet*.

What is "cult", what is "religion"?

When I asked Nhat - who is, as we know, a Catholic - about "cult" vs. "religion", he said:

> 'Well, there is idolatry (*ton sung ngau tuong*), too - like what you called the Ho Chi Minh "cult" - making a statue and worshipping that, like the golden calf in the Bible. That is negative, very negative. People do this largely because they are forced or brainwashed to do it. It certainly has nothing to do with religion, though you might perhaps - for your purposes - call it a cult. Some writers, I know, have likened Communism to religion, with the dream of a kind of Paradise in the end, and the god of this "religion" I suppose, is Ho Chi Minh. Now "cult" (*tho cung*) is a private affair, and neutral - I worship my ancestors and it is no concern to anyone outside the family. I do it to commemorate them, to show my respect. A cult does not necessarily imply any particular belief, it is more of a certain form of ritual. There are other cults apart from that of the ancestors, like *ong Tao* [the Kitchen God] for instance. Religion (*ton giao*) is something else, and more. It entails belief, a whole system, moral guidance, a wide overall perspective. It gives meaning to my actions and to the world, it shapes the way I see things and what I do.'

THE PLACE OF HUMANS AND SPIRITS

So far, we have met some beings who, though familiar to any Vietnamese, may require further contextualisation here: Notably, in chapter 2, the immortal *tien* Au Co - Mother of the Vietnamese. In the present chapter we have encountered a *than*, *ong Tao* (or *Tao quan*), who at *Tet* gives his report to Heaven, as well as the ancestral spirits. Humans share the Universe with a great many other invisible beings as well, but I shall not go into that here. The question to be kept in mind in this context is: to the extent that belief in the worldly presence of spirits - spirits of the earth and of the hearth, of the village, of the ancestors and of the nation - is

somehow part of Vietnamese identities in Vietnam, what happens in exile? Do the spirits also travel?

> *Than* and *tien* according to Nhat: *than* and *tien* are separate, they belong to different worlds or parts of the Universe. *Than* are gods, they inhabit every part of the Universe - heaven, earth and the underworld. They exist in a hierarchical system with "Heaven" (*Troi*: also known as *Than Hoang*, "King of the Gods") at the top, he is the one they all have to report to. The *tien*, on the other hand, are at home in heaven only. Heaven's court is made up of *tien*. They can visit earth, the world of humans, but it is not their home. Yet Au Co was a *tien* 'so our Mother was a *tien*', Nhat added.[69] *Tien* are always good, whereas *than* can be good or bad ('a bit like the goblins, *nisser*, in Norwegian stories', Nhat said). Every village has a *than* who is worshipped in the *dinh*, the village communal house. Each profession has a *than*, even thieves and prostitutes. New professions may "invent" their own *than*, as the army's radio department who made a general who had used pidgeons to send letters their *than*. A tree can become a *than* if it is several hundred years old. If you see joss sticks at the foot of a tree, it may be this. Or it may be because people who live upstairs, or have no house at all, worship the Earth *than* on the ground by the tree. Or it may be that something has happened just there. Maybe the *tien* belong to Taoism as the *phat* ("boddhisatvas") belong to Buddhism, Nhat suggested, but the *than* he could not place within any of the three doctrines. I tried to make a drawing of the Universe he had described to me, and asked if the *phat* have any place of their own. He said 'I think a Buddhist would probably say that the *phat* are everywhere in this Universe'.[70]

I asked Nhat if he thought that people who are used to believing in and worshipping the *than* - do they stop doing it in Norway? Do the *than* come with the people or do they belong to the landscape? He answered:

> 'Like the Norwegian *trolls*, they have sprung from the landscape, from the *nui* ("mountains") and *song* ("rivers") of Vietnam. When I was a little boy, if we went to swim in a river we did not know and there were sudden ripples on the surface, I was afraid it might be dragons. But although the landscape in Norway is very different, the concepts *nui* and *song* exist here, too, and so the *than* exist. Haven't you been to Gi Phong the supermarket, in the centre of Oslo? Did you see the altar they had? An altar which was placed on the floor, because it was there for

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[69] Au Co is the "Mother" in the Vietnamese origin myth, see chapter 2.

[70] *Tien* may be male or female, *than* are all male, *than* are dangerous, strong, ambivalent, belong to a different sphere from the *tien* who are always good and who belong to the mountains. *Thanh* are male or female, always good or wise, another category. *Ong Tao* is very familiar, part of your own kitchen and daily life. The three men are a bit like him, but higher up in the cosmological hierarchy, yet also very much part of daily life.

> two *than* who are worshipped on the ground - the Earth and the Money gods. That must mean that these *than* are present in Norway, too.'

Nhat was right. I had seen offerings to *than* - to ong Tao, to the three old men called Prosperity, Longevity and Happiness - not only in grocery shops and hamburger bars owned by Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese in Oslo, but in private homes as well. From my visit in Toan's house near Oslo:

> At first I could not see any altar, but just before leaving I found it over the sofa, next to the door, so near the ceiling that the electric joss-sticks had left a mark on the ceiling. It had no photos, ancestral tablets or figures as far as I could see, but there were pictures in predominantly pink, gold and red. The one I could see from where I was standing depicted three figures, probably the three old men - around the altar coloured electric light bulbs, unlit, were draped - the joss-sticks were lit, or rather, turned on.

The *than* are here, all right.

Ancestors in exile

As Nguyet said in her letter: '...most Vietnamese do not really have their own religion. We pray to our ancestors.' Nhat confirms this: 'The cult of ancestors is very important: it is perhaps the only common practice in all religions of Vietnam.' Almost everybody, then, in Vietnam as well as in Norway, practises "ancestor worship" (*phung su tô tông*, literally "obedience/service towards the ancestors". Phan Ke Binh [1915] 1975, my translation). That is, they show their ancestors their respect and filial piety (*hieu*) by keeping in their living room a small altar with pictures of their deceased parents or grandparents, or ancestral tablets, with ritual offerings of artificial or real flowers, food, drink and incense.[71] The most important occasions in this context are the death anniversaries of the ancestors, and *Tet*. According to Confucian ideology, the eldest son in the senior branch of the patrilineage (*ho* or *toc*) is responsible for the cult, and ideally he will spend the income from ancestral land, set aside for the purpose, to pay for the necessary

[71] 'the cult of ancestors, which places the spirits of the dead relatives in the very heart of the household (...). In their [Vietnamese] homes, altars to the ancestors occupy the place of honor. It is in front of these altars that ceremonies such as weddings and New Year's celebrations are performed' (Nguyen Dang Liem 1985:115).

rituals. Whether this was ever a reality for a majority of the people is not my concern here. But in present-day Vietnam - after decades of war, disruption and collectivisation of land - few, if any, lineages possess ancestral land, and in any case lineage members are often living too far apart for the lineage to be a truly corporate group. Again, there are marked differences between South Vietnam on the one hand and North-Central Vietnam on the other. Yet the cult or worship of the ancestors is as widespread in the South as in the North. It is interesting to note, however, that even in the North, maternal ancestors are also worshipped, although on a smaller scale, as stated by Hy Van Luong (1990:65) and Nguyen Trieu Dan (1991:87).

Exceptions to the practice of ancestor worship are few, and are mainly to be found among the most fervent Christians. To others, there seems to be no essential antithesis between being a Christian and "worshipping" the ancestors, as long as the "worship" implies paying your filial debt (*on*)[72] and not believing in reincarnation or the actual presence of the ancestors' spirits in this world. This connotes the writings of Tran Trong Kim, who, according to Jamieson, in the first half of this century 'modified, redefined, and reorganised [traditional values] into an essentially Western framework. Students were taught, for example, that "we worship our ancestors not because we fear that otherwise they will find no place of rest (as traditional belief would have it). This worship is performed in order to remember our *on* ["moral debt"] to the forebears who wholeheartedly strove to create our homes and our land for us".' (Jamieson 1993:82)

We have already seen that *than*, such as ong Tao and the three old men, have found their way to Norway. When it comes to the question of how the exiles may attend to their ancestors, Hitchcox observes that in the refugee camps:

'Beliefs also have to be adjusted to the fact that the graves of the ancestors can no longer be attended. Sometimes Vietnamese mentioned that they had arranged for someone to take

[72] I have here followed Jamieson (1990), who uses *on* to denote the moral debt of children to their parents. According to Nhat, this is not strictly correct: firstly, *on* is not restricted to the relationship between parents and children. Secondly, *on* refers to the act of favour, not to the moral debt, which is rather an effect of *on*. This effect is evident in compounds like *tra on* ("return *on*") and *nho on* ("remember *on*"). In these compounds, *on* may be translated "debt".

care of the family tombs before their departure, but they regarded this as little more than a gesture, not likely to function satisfactorily in the long run. The connection between the spirit, the place (inherited land) and the tomb is therefore displaced in favour of the idea that the ancestors are still able to accompany and protect them, if relatives continue to pay due respect. Accordingly a shelf is usually allocated to the pictures of ancestors in front of which incense is burnt and offerings are made at least once a day, usually using food taken from the family meal.' (Hitchcox 1990:217)

Considering the major upheavals Vietnam has undergone in this century, as well as the migration of *nguoi Viet* to the south in the preceding centuries, I find it likely that such a redefinition of ancestors - from spatially bound to being able to follow their descendants into exile - may have begun before the exodus. Be that as it may, Hitchcox's observation is confirmed by my informants' practices in Norway:

> I asked Nhat, who is a Catholic, about a translation of the word "altar" into Vietnamese. He explained that there are several, more specific terms: *Ban tho* is a table of worship at home for ancestors or gods, as well as in temples and in church. The one Nhat has at home is a *ban tho*, but a very simple one. Before the ecumenical Vatican council Vietnamese Catholics were not permitted to have *ban tho* for their ancestors in their homes; lighting candles, they prayed for them in church instead. But now most Catholics do have them. I said: 'Thach doesn't' and Nhat replied: 'He is a convert, isn't he? How about his wife, is she a convert, too?' (as if that made all the difference). I said she had converted when marrying him, and he observed that 'like my wife, Tuyet, she converted too, but in fact neither of them really practise Catholicism'.
>
> Phung and I were talking when she said: 'You know, I have never *lam gio* ("perform the death anniversary rituals"),[73] on the death anniversary of my father. I often meant to, but I get confused over the date: should I follow the Lunar or the Solar calendar? I don't use the Lunar one otherwise, so I forget. But I want to do it next year. I'll follow the Solar calendar, at least then I will remember. I'm not a Buddhist, but Buddhism is the religion that is closest to me - anyway, it is not a purely Buddhist practice. To me, it is a question of identity. Also, because my mother and siblings have all become such fervent Christians, they don't observe this ritual any more. I don't want my father's death anniversary to be forgotten.'

The practice of ritual offerings, *cung*, to the ancestors is a family matter. Nhat pointed this out above, when explaining how he perceives the difference between

[73] This is also often called *an gio* ("eating the death anniversary rituals", cf. chapter 4).

cult and religion: 'I worship my ancestors and it is no concern to anyone outside the family.' In this matter, the anthropologist remains an outsider. Consequently, I have not been present at any such occasions. What I have observed is that altars and offerings to the ancestors are present in most of the Vietnamese homes I have visited - in Vietnam as well as in Norway - and that, when asked, most people confirm that the cult is a part of their lives.

NEW HOMES, OLD SPIRITS

Linda Hitchcox says of the Jubilee open camp in Hong Kong:

'The refugees were allocated living spaces measuring about three metres by two metres that were arranged in tiers within each room. The daily tide of dirt, rubbish and excreta lapped up to the edge of the doorways, but inside, over the threshold, the rooms were kept immaculate. Fish tanks and televisions were much in evidence, as were family altars in front of which candles or lamps were kept constantly burning.' (1990:100)

and, of the Phanat Nikhom camp in Thailand:

'The scene within the buildings is one of extreme cleanliness and intense order, no small achievement in view of the overcrowding and the water shortages. Many living spaces are painted and decorated with carvings and pictures, often including a small shrine to a favoured deity or ancestor.' (ibid.:110)

To me, these descriptions sum up the prominence of spirits and ancestors in the refugees' constructions of new homes. Surrounded by chaos, the refugees seek to reinstate the order and harmony of the world they know. Within this order, they have their place: they belong, and no outsider can take the knowledge of this away from them.

Among the Vietnamese I know in Norway, there are a number of Catholics and Baptists, many of whom were among the first Vietnamese refugees to arrive in Norway. The majority will, however - when asked - call themselves Buddhists. Both Thach and his wife Dung have converted to Catholicism. They told me that their parents are Buddhists - although again, this is a matter of degree. Thach converted in Vietnam, as an adult, 'because I believe in God, and of all the religions I found out about, this one suits me best'. Dung converted when she met and

married Thach in the refugee camp. Thach and Dung have three pictures of Christ over a shelf with candles and artificial flowers, like a small altar, in a prominent place in their living room. Thach, looking at my photographs from his parents' house in Vietnam:

> 'My mother has always been an early riser, getting up to pray at 5 o'clock. She prays to Quan Am.[74] In Nha Trang, too, they had a special altar room upstairs just as they do now in Saigon. My mother thinks it is more respectful to place it at the top. That is usual. In Nam's [Dung's father's] house it is like that, too. My mother prays a lot, a long time in the morning and only 15-20 minutes in the evening. My father never prays. He does not believe in God or Buddha. Only twice a year, on the death anniversaries of my grandparents, he prays. It is his duty, because he is their eldest living son. Later, my eldest brother will take over that duty.'

Altars of home, altars of homeland

The many beliefs and doctrines of Vietnam have one thing in common: they are viewed as part of the "culture" or "way of life" which is oppressed by Communism, being under state surveillance and control. Therefore, and for other reasons, they are anti-Communist and therefore, they have gained additional significance for the *Viet kieu* as a symbol of collective opposition, epitomised in the *Tet* celebrations which were centred around the cult of homeland (which may be seen as a counterpart to the cult of Ho Chi Minh). The faction whose views were formerly hegemonic, supported by the international Cold War climate, had based its popular appeal partly on the condemnation of Communism in broad terms, and partly on pointing at the atrocities committed by *Viet Cong* ("Vietnamese Communists") during the war and the first decade after 1975. Up to the implementation of *doi moi*, this was enough. With the differing responses to the new political signals, apparent in the increasing number of people who *ve tham* ("go back to visit"), the anti-Communist umbrella was no longer sufficient. Homeland, associated with the transientness of politics and anti-Communism, was becoming less important than the home from which homeland derived its symbolism, a home of circular time,

[74] Guanyin or the Goddess of Mercy, female aspect of the boddhisatva Avalokitecvara.

associated with family and village: homes of the living, homes of their departed, homes of their tutelary deities.

PART THREE - TOWARDS NEW BELONGINGS

CHAPTER VII

STRUCTURAL OPPOSITIONS

FROM "HIERARCHICAL" VIETNAM TO "EGALITARIAN" NORWAY?

The journey from Vietnam to Norway is, geographically speaking, quite a leap. Going from a hierarchically ordered world to one of insistent, Social Democratic egalitarianism may appear to be an even more daunting voyage:

> 'Look!' Dung and I were downtown Oslo, when she drew my attention to a man on a bicycle. Attached to his bicycle was one of those little carriages for children, with a small passenger inside. They are quite common in Norway in spite of being rather expensive, and I saw nothing strange about it. 'Look!' Dung insisted, 'How odd! In Norway, parents are their children's *xich-lo* ("cycle rickshaw") drivers!'

To Dung, who had come to Norway just the year before, this was the world turned upside-down. For one thing, in Vietnamese families, the subordinate position of children is simply not questioned. Furthermore, in society at large, the subordinate position of *xich-lo* drivers is an equally undisputed fact. This sets the very notion of a father being his son's *xich-lo* driver in an absurd light.

It is self-evident to most Vietnamese that the world is a hierarchically ordered whole. The world of men, women and children is ordered this way, as is the world of gods and spirits, which is part of the same universe. As a Vietnamese in Vietnam, you grow up with this notion of hierarchy as a given fact. Conformance to this notion as a "natural" necessity is a condition for harmony (*hoa*), made very explicit within the family, at school, among friends, colleagues and neighbours as well as in the surrounding world. I employ the term "hierarchy" here in its minimal sense of "stratification" because this is how it is explicitly expressed in Vietnamese language and social interaction.[75] Below I shall discuss a more Dumontian

[75] According to Nhat, within the Confucian tradition the principle of hierarchy is *ton ti trat tu*. *Ton* is "above, respect, great" and *ti* is "below, little, humble". *Trat tu* is "order". The concrete manifestations of hierarchy, the stratified forms of organised social units, may be designated *he thong dang cap* ("system of graduated rank"), or - similarly - *he thong cap bac*: ("system of issued grades").

approach to the concept of hierarchy,[76] but let us first take a closer look at some of these Vietnamese expressions of hierarchy:

> Hung: 'But you know, even though we do have classes it is possible to climb and to fall. If a high class person behaves like a low one amongst his own, he will fall. If he does so amongst his employees that is OK, he can do that. With you, class is expressed with things, cars and so on. With us, it is the form of social behaviour that marks class belonging.' (Emphases added.)
>
> *Tren kinh, duoi nhuong* (lit.: "Above, respect; below, yield", i.e. "respect the senior, yield to the junior"). (Vietnamese saying, as quoted in Luong 1990:59. Translation in the original, literal translation mine.)

As in these two examples, differences in social status, whether defined by age, educational merit, wealth or other criteria, are usually expressed in vertical terms of "higher" and "lower" social positions. So, in Vietnam, hierarchy in the sense that there is always someone above you, and always someone below, is an unquestioned truth and a basis for interaction. From the way you move your body, to your language and general behaviour and actions, all should be in harmony and concordance with your "role", in Confucian terms.

> Nhat taught me about Confucian ethics: 'The five key role relationships of Confucius are: King - subject (*vua tôi*), father - son (*cha con*), husband - wife (*chong vo*), elder brother - younger sibling (*anh em* or *lon nho*) and friend - friend (*be ban*), the first four of these relationships being hierarchical. Each role relationship implies an ideal form of reciprocity: *Vua tôi thi co nghia* ("Between king and subject, there is loyalty" - 'although *nghia* is more than loyalty', Nhat added). *Cha con thi co tinh than* ("Between father and son, there are feelings of lasting, familiar bonds"). *Chong vo thi co phan biet.* ("Between husband and wife, there is distinction"). *Lon nho thi co thu tu* ("Between elder and younger [sibling], there is order"). *Be ban thi co long tin* ("Between friends, there are feelings of trust"). *Nghia*, that is part of all these relationships. It is the "right way" *(dao phai)* between king and subject on a national level, father and child, husband and wife in the family, and between friends in the community or village.'

[76] On hierarchy versus stratification, Dumont says: '(...) in sum, the main point is to give primacy to meaning (hierarchy) over the mere external form (stratification).' (Dumont 1980:xx). See also Dumont 1980, appendix A.

Body language of hierarchy

The criteria for specifying who is to be found at the different levels is something one certainly may, and frequently does, debate. But the principle of hierarchy itself is taken for granted, and as such it is 'incorporated' knowledge (Connerton 1989:102). Vietnamese body language is accordingly codified, in a - by Norwegian standards - highly explicit and detailed manner. Hand and arm gestures, smiles, nods, scarcely perceptible or deeper bows (*cui*), and kow-tows (*lay*) carry specific meanings and are differently performed, or not performed, according to position and context. As Dung put it:

> 'Living here, we even have to learn to move differently. For example, I find it so difficult to get used to the Norwegian gesture that means "come here".' She moved her hand gingerly, palm up, first finger wiggling. 'With us, you may perhaps beckon a dog like this, possibly a small child but never, never anybody you feel the least trace of respect for! It is very offensive. We do this instead,' and she waved her whole hand at me, palm down. I laughed: 'The first time I saw a Vietnamese doing that, I thought he wanted me to go away!' Dung said: 'I have learned to beckon the Norwegian way now, but it feels strange! And there is much more, you know. Towards people who are "higher" than me, I move respectfully, but you Norwegians do not have this.' She showed me how she would fold her arms close to her body, gripping her elbows and bowing slightly, with a smile, to *cui chao* ("bow in greeting"). 'They will not return the bow, of course, but smile and nod at me in greeting.'

Dominant Norwegian ideology

If hierarchy is in principle unquestioned by most Vietnamese, it is equally evident to most Norwegians that it is suspicious and undesirable, corrupt and corrupting. In Norway, "hierarchy" is just another word for "inequality": it is the negative counterpart of the highly valued "equality". Consequently it is a potential threat to a nation founded on humanistic, individualist premises, as discussed in chapter 3. There is little doubt, then, that to Norwegian minds, it will generally be understood as very true that 'inequality is evil' (Dumont 1980:12).

Realities and ideologies

How do Vietnamese in Norway try to make sense of this apparent Norwegian "inversion" of their own social values? Do they see it as a simple inversion? I would argue that most do not. Instead, they do what they have learned to do to perfection: they look for the hierarchical order in their new surroundings - and they find it.

What Vietnamese see because they are looking for it, and what Norwegians will rarely permit themselves to see, is that hierarchy is part of Norwegian reality. It is on the ideal level that *likhet* - equality-cum-homogeneity[77] - is hegemonic in Norway. As Gullestad observes, the Norwegian difficulties in handling difference is 'the dilemma of having an egalitarian ethos in a stratified capitalist class society.' (Gullestad 1984:322)[78]

It should be kept in mind who defines the underlying criteria for being, or not being "equal", as well as who defines whom. Why does Van, for instance, feel that she is caught in the middle between Norwegians and Vietnamese, that she belongs neither with the one nor with the other? She cannot simply choose to be both, she told me:

> 'You know, it is strange, I do not tell people this, but when I walk in the streets here I really do not feel my feet are on my own soil. What I am walking on, just is not mine. I wish, I hope one day to feel that I have my feet on my own soil, maybe if I went to Vietnam...' I suggested this may have to do with Norwegians' attitudes towards her, always asking her where she is from, as if she could not really come from Norway, but she would not put it that way. 'No, I think it is more that I have my memories from Vietnam, they are precious to me and they make a difference. Of course people ask, it is obvious because I look different. It must be easier if you are Hungarian, for instance, you are white and do not look different. The [Vietnamese] people I know in France and America don't feel the way I do about walking in a country which I do not own, a country I have no right to. I don't think they do, they seem to feel more at home there and they don't stick together that much, like we do here.'

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[77] For more on *likhet*, see chapter 3.

[78] She also argues that: 'The hierarchical dimension of equality versus inequality is tied to the horizontal dimension of sameness versus difference. For a Norwegian it is difficult to handle difference and hierarchy (...). Conceiving equality on the basis of difference and complimentarity is almost impossible (...).' (loc. cit.)

Van herself would not blame Norwegians for making her feel like a stranger. Yet she admitted that what made her feel this way was not only her childhood memories of another country: she looks different, and in Norway that makes a difference. Her view that looking different logically implies that you do not belong, is in accordance with Norwegian ideas of equality-cum-homogeneity (*likhet*) as outlined in chapter 3. Van, who has grown up in Norway, seems to have absorbed the Norwegian brand of egalitarian ideology to a large extent. I shall return to this point towards the end of the present chapter.

Analytically and generally speaking, Vietnam and Norway each comprise two systems, one of hierarchy and one of equality. As we shall see presently, at the Vietnamese level of ideology, hierarchy and equality coexist - although not necessarily peacefully - as they do in Vietnamese reality, hierarchy being dominant. At the Norwegian ideological level, all-embracing *likhet* is hegemonic. The empirical existence of inequality is unacceptable in the egalitarian order. This leads to widespread Norwegian conceptualisation of empirical inequality in non-hierarchical, horizontal terms such as marginality, liminality, or outsider-hood. Such concepts are part of the language of egalitarianism: if the system admits to having one level only, there is no place for those who do not belong on this level. In other words, being empirically "less" equal implies being defined out of the egalitarian, ideological system. It is in their lived realities that the Vietnamese find hierarchy in Norway. They find the egalitarian aspects in an ideology which denies not only the reality they experience, but also the validity of their knowledge that there is hierarchy. Paradoxically, then, partly as a result of an egalitarian ideology, they find themselves at the bottom of a class system, the very existence of which is largely denied by those on higher levels.

Like all generalisations, this leaves out nuances and empirical exceptions, at the risk of stereotyping or even misrepresenting. However, it raises questions which may throw light on the "invisibility" of the Vietnamese in Norway, which I pointed at in the Introduction to this thesis: 'The Vietnamese? Oh, but they are so blessedly quiet and grateful!' It may also help us see some of the processes within the

Vietnamese community in Norway, and in a wider context within what I have named the *Viet kieu* transnational community.

These questions are: To what extent are Vietnamese ideas of "hierarchy" consistent with Norwegian ones, and with Norwegian reality? Likewise, to what extent are Vietnamese notions of "equality" consistent with Norwegian ones, and with Norwegian reality? What happens in practice, when people bearing their versions of these systems in mind, meet and interact?

Summing up my arguments, the following is not meant as a complete representation of the matter at hand, but rather as a "visual reading aid":

Perspective	**Ideal**	**Experienced reality**
Vietnamese	Hierarchical whole, with undertones of equality.	Rigid hierarchy frontstage, egalitarian tendencies backstage.
Position of Vietnamese refugees in Norwegian society, according to own perception:	Hierarchical position depends mainly on changeables such as education, age and behaviour. Climbing possible.	Bottom. Climbing very difficult.
Norwegian	Equality.	Formal equality. Informal hierarchy.
Position of Vietnamese refugees in Norwegian society, according to Norwegian perception:	Equal, but they seem reluctant to participate.	Liminal (or marginal, or outside). One possible way in seems to be through assimilation, which implies learning to negate the existence and desirability of hierarchy.

Table 7.1

I shall develop these points later, but before doing so, a closer discussion of what "hierarchy" and "equality" mean in the Vietnamese context will be necessary. Let us turn again to Vietnamese ways of expressing these notions.

Verbal language of hierarchy

Like body language, verbal language provides myriads of examples of such expressions. In Vietnamese, the words used to refer to persons (Person Reference Terms - I shall henceforth use the abbreviation PRTs) are particularly loaded in this sense. In Norwegian, as in other Indo-European languages, persons are referred to by personal pronouns chosen according to the gender and number of persons, and whether the person referred to be the speaker, the spoken to, or somebody else. Personal pronouns in this sense do exist in the Vietnamese language, but for reasons I shall discuss below, they are not used extensively. Instead, the Vietnamese mostly use kinship terms, words that literally translated refer to family members. The hierarchy of kinship which we glimpsed in chapter 5, in the description of the *xin moi* ("politely request grandfather, grandmother, etc., to eat rice") ritual at mealtimes, is manifest in many ritualised patterns of interaction, the use of kinship terms being one of the most prominent of these. The use of such terms covers all spheres of social interaction - between kin and non-kin - which may, for our purpose, analytically be divided into two main spheres of usage: that of family, friends and village life on the one hand, and that of strangers and city life on the other. Kinship terms, then, serve to place the speaker, the spoken to as well as the spoken of in proper relation to each other, higher or lower, whether they are kinsmen or not.[79] The use of kinship terms and other PRTs also varies according to the speaker's regional and class background - education being an important factor - thus indicating these to the informed listener, or causing friction if the uninformed listener feels insulted by unexpected usage.

[79] 'In the native metalinguistic awareness, the pervasive use of kinship terms towards non-kin reflects, not a genealogy-unrelated conception of *ho* relations, but extended usages to structure greater solidarity (...) among non-kin.' (Luong 1990:71)

Negotiating positions: hierarchy and beyond

Using the terms "correctly" is no easy task, and indeed this is one of the greatest difficulties I have had in trying to practise Vietnamese myself. The interpersonal relationships to which the terms refer are not constant, and the terms are used not only to describe relationships but also more actively to negotiate them. Even Vietnamese who have grown up in Vietnam are often in doubt, and will frequently disagree as to which terms are the most appropriate in a given situation. In exile, new complications arise, when - among many other things - the Vietnamese have to learn a completely different system of person reference:

> Thach, who had at the time been in Norway about one year, wanted me to explain to him how to use the Norwegian terms of address. Up to then, I had found it slightly amusing that he invariably said *De* ("you") to me while I, just as invariably, said *du* ("thou") to him.[80] This is not consistent with Norwegian usage - for one thing, saying *De* to a friend is most unusual, but more importantly in this context, when the person addressed as *De* (the "higher" person in hierarchical terms) replies - as is normally the case nowadays - in the *du* form, this is a signal to the presumed "lower" person that equality prevails, and that both accordingly should use the *du* form. This may serve as one example of how "equality" is often (over-) emphasised in Norwegian interaction. Now, in the Vietnamese system of thought, it is perfectly consistent that my friend and I should address each other differently, even when the relationship is not particularly hierarchical. In Vietnamese, I am *chi* ("elder sister") to him, and at the same time he is *anh* ("elder brother") to me. This means, in fact, that we are on the same level - none of us is "younger" (= lower) than the other. We are equals, but at the same time we form parts of a greater hierarchical system, and thus we address each other in terms appropriate to that system. Referring to myself when speaking to him, I may say *tôi* ("subject of the King"), which implies distance, or possibly *em* ("younger sibling") which implies a closer friendship. He will likewise call himself *tôi* or *anh*, but he cannot call me *em* - that would open for an emotional intimacy which is reserved for his wife and, of course, for his own younger siblings. He might also call me *co* ("father's younger sister"), which is what his daughter, aged two, is told to call me, thus taking her perspective. This kind of referential perspective is considered too complicated to use with foreigners, so that he normally calls me *chi* and himself *tôi*. This choice may make things simpler for me, but it confuses the

[80] In Norwegian, the formal *De* is rapidly becoming obsolescent - even a journalist doing an interview will most probably say *du* to the Prime Minister.

child, who is always making mistakes, calling me *chi*, or even worse, *chi Marie*, when she is in no position to do so...[81] Also, due to the lack of Vietnamese context, it is difficult for her to learn that she should refer to herself as *con* ("child") when talking to her parents, and *chau* ("niece") when talking to me.

As the above example shows, it is not a simple question of choosing the "right" words, according to a fixed set of rules. These are words that help structure all relevant social relations in terms not only of hierarchy versus equality, but also of distance versus intimacy, and with deeply emotional as well as with more intellectual aspects. There is, then, in addition to the dimension of hierarchy/equality, another of distance/intimacy, which is expressed in the uses of PRTs. These two dimensions are related: hierarchy to distance, equality to intimacy, but they are far from being entirely conflateable. Hierarchy may largely correspond to distance, but can be either positive or negative in terms of feelings. Fear of the superordinate on the one hand, respect on the other, related to the dimension of power, will in turn influence the choice and implications of PRTs. Although the use of PRTs thus may be analysed along several "dimensions", my intention in the following is to concentrate on those which illustrate the most important aspects of hierarchy versus equality.

When I speak to Trinh, who is about 10 years my junior, both she and I will normally refer to me as *chi* ("elder sister") and to her as *em* ("younger sibling"). She was quite happy when I agreed to this, explaining that it felt 'much closer and friendlier'. The obvious alternative, as we had not known each other very long, would have been me calling her *em*, her calling me *chi*, and both of us referring to ourselves as *tôi* ("subject of the king").

That *tôi* implies distance is also indicated by the fact that it is the normal, neutral term for self-reference when one is talking to strangers. Or it may even mark the

[81] You are not supposed to use your superiors' names to their face. This also relates to what Luong (1990:121) calls the 'name taboo', which, although it was stronger under the Neo-Confucianism of the last dynasty, is still practised. One example of this is what Nguyet told me: "When I was a baby, my parents wanted to call me something else, a very beautiful name. But at the last moment, one of our relatives recalled that this had been the name of a deceased female relative, a senior aunt. So they could not use that name again, to give the name of a senior to a junior would be disrespectful. If I were naughty, how could they scold me, using her name? The name they found for me then, in a hurry, it is not very nice."

abrupt suspension of an intimate relationship, replacing it with one of cold distance, as one man told me:

> 'When my wife and I have a serious argument and I am angry, I will go to the extent of calling myself *tôi*. This really draws a line between us, putting us apart. Normally, of course, we both refer to me as *anh* and to her as *em*. Some uneducated people will, however, refer to both themselves and their spouse as *minh* ("we", "self", "body").'[82]

"Backstage": nuclear family, friends and village

The PRT *minh* seems to belong in an intimate 'backstage' (Goffman 1959:114) context in relation to outside observers, strangers, especially foreigners or Vietnamese members of the elite. This backstage is not just the field of interaction between spouses, but between spouses of the uneducated class, especially in rural Vietnam, in the villages where such outside observers are few and far between. We are reminded here of Hung's illustration of "high" and "low" religion in the previous chapter, which I also linked to the terms "frontstage" and "backstage". This is a matter of degree, where at the one end of the scale we find an educated, urban elite and at the other the large majority of rural, uneducated peasants and fishermen. For the elite, what I call "backstage" is a very small social sphere. At the lower levels in the hierarchy, this sphere takes up an increasing part of people's lives. My view here finds support in Hy Van Luong's observations:

'(…) the unity of the conjugal unit is reflected in the use of the linguistic form *minh* to refer both to oneself and to one's body on the one hand and to one's spouse on the other (…). The term *minh* ["we", "self", "body"] is also used in contrast to *ho* ["they", "patriline", "bilateral kin outside of the household", my translation]. (…) I suggest that this contrast between *minh* and *ho* can be seen in terms of the conjugally based household in opposition to the more distant relatives on both sides of the family.' (Luong 1990:64) '(…) *minh* is used more among spouses in the countryside (…) this pattern of usage is considered indiscreet in more educated circles.' (ibid.:191).

Accordingly, then, this pattern is predominantly used by the Vietnamese "grassroots", the large majority of rural and/or uneducated people. Another

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[82] Cf. Thach at the end of ch 5: '*mot minh*' ("all alone", lit. "one body", "one self")

example of this backstage-type choice of PRTs is the use of the personal pronouns proper[83] *tao/may* ("I/you") between close friends. According to Longva (personal communication), this usage occurs only in very close friendship relations. Even so, the terms carry a note of aggression: breaking with hierarchy marks a defiance which cannot be neutral within the Vietnamese context. This is more so, the higher the class of the speech interactants.

A PRESENTATION OF HY VAN LUONG'S TWO MODELS

"Frontstage": patrilineage and nation-state

According to Hy Van Luong (1990), two structurally opposed models underlie these ambiguities, which pervade the Vietnamese system of person reference. One, what he names the "male- and elite-oriented model", is of a Confucian nature: The social unit, basically the localised, corporate patrilineage, *ho*, and by extension the nation-state, *quoc*, is an organic, hierarchically ordered unity, strictly formal and male/elite-oriented. As one manifestation of an intellectual tradition more than two thousand years old, this ideal model answers to academic calls for coherence, system, and logic. Not surprisingly, then, other literature systematically describing this model in Vietnamese society abounds (e.g. Cadiere 1931, Marr 1981, Dinh Trong Hieu 1988, Phan Ke Binh 1915/1975).

The alternative model

Drawing on Turner (1974), Luong describes the other model, the "alternative framework" (Luong 1990:90), as one of "anti-structure", of "communitas". The key social unit in this model is the *nha* (lit. "house"), that is, the nuclear family and bilateral kin, and by extension the village, *lang*. This "alternative" model, he argues, tends towards equality and informality and is "non-male/elite oriented". Of this

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[83] I have not been able to trace the etymology of *tao* and *may*, which might well have shown that they were at one time nouns and not pronouns. Being terms that are used actively to mark equality, opposition to the dominance of hierarchy, they necessarily lack the "neutrality" of pronouns in European languages where this is not an aspect of person reference terms. Yet I find it convincing when Luong argues in favour of considering these terms - along with *no* ("he, she, it"), *ta* ("we"), *bay* ("you") and *chung* ("they") - pronouns, mainly because of what he calls their shifter function: 'the referent of a shifter (...) changes with each speech utterance' (1990:10).

model there are few other descriptions. Hickey (1964), in his ethnography of a South Vietnamese village, seems closer to empirical description of it than most. He concludes that village life is characterised by a high degree of homogeneity, of a kind he associates with Durkheim's mechanical solidarity, Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and Redfield's little community model. Yet this village is not the self-sufficient, closely knit unit "behind the bamboo hedge", as is the stereotyped North Vietnamese village. Rather than localised patrilineages working together to perpetuate their fathers' life-styles, this South Vietnamese village consists of people who live in separate conjugal units, and who 'are of a tradition in which one guards the old ways while adopting the new ways necessary to changed surroundings' (Hickey 1964:285).

To many Vietnamese the alternative model may be reflected in the Buddhism they claim to profess when asked about their religious faith; to the pre-and post-revolution elites it is, rather, superstition, stubborn unruliness, and lack of education. Whatever name we give it, this model affects the everyday lives of Vietnamese peasants and common people no less, possibly even more, than the "frontstage" model. Luong sums up the two models in terms of different conceptions of time and space:

'Of the two structurally opposed models in Vietnamese kinship, one is male-oriented, and the other, non-male-oriented. One is based on the rigid separation of the sexes, and the other, on the unity of opposite-sex individuals. One has as its key unit a spatially bound but temporally unbound entity [the patrilineage, *ho*], and the other, a spatially unbound but temporally bound one [the conjugal unit or household, *nha*]. One is constructed in terms of the linear conception of time, and the other, in terms of a cyclical conception.' (Luong 1990:49-50)

Luong also links the two models to Confucianism and Buddhism respectively, according to and corresponding to their different conceptions of time, of souls, and of the afterlife (Luong 1984:302,304 and 1990:69).

Luong's abstractions mainly derive from observations made among North Vietnamese, in Vietnam as well as in exile. He says of his exile informants that

'The majority of them (...) are two-time refugees from north Vietnam. Most of their larger kin group members are still in Vietnam or spread all over the West. This is also true for refugees from south Vietnam (...) - a region which was settled mostly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and where the male-oriented model has not been as strong.' (1990:191)

This is indeed all the more so in the case of South Vietnamese refugees, who may have several generations, as well as thousands of miles, between themselves and the villages where their ancestors - themselves migrants - originated in an increasingly mythical past. In other words, the "spatially unbound but temporally bound" alternative model, with the *nha* as its central unit, has a stronger position with South Vietnamese in general, and with South Vietnamese refugees in particular, than it has with North Vietnamese.

Hierarchy and equality in Vietnam

Historically, Hy Van Luong argues,

'it would be simplistic to consider the conflict between the two models merely as an opposition between Chinese-imposed and indigenous south-east Asian kinship models (...) or as a transitional conflict between tradition and modernity' (1990:80).

Rather, the temporary predominance of either model should be seen as part of the general political picture:

'It is through the widely shared native view on the vital pragmatic role of language and through the rules specifying the pragmatic relations between person-referring forms and interactional patterns that the Confucian elite in the pre-capitalist social formation of nineteenth-century Vietnam reinforced the male- and elite-centered conception of reality in the native universe.' (1990:169)

As a result of the French colonial presence, higher-class people educated within the French educational system - in France or in Indochina - have, since the first half of this century, occasionally used French personal pronouns while speaking Vietnamese among themselves - perhaps as a more refined counterpart to the vulgar, indigenous *tao - may* ("I - you"). Hy Van Luong relates this use of French - and, among Vietnamese in America, English - PRTs in otherwise Vietnamese utterances to his models of "communitas" and "hierarchy":

'Being used primarily within French-educated circles, the French pronouns *moi ... toi* presuppose and imply informal and egalitarian solidarity among speech interactants.' (1990:140); 'It is also within this *communitas* model that the use and native meanings of the French pronouns *moi* and *toi* are embedded.' (ibid.: 141); 'If the male- and elite-centered conception of organic unity and its naming taboo corollaries reigned supreme in the 19th century, the structure itself was transformed in the fateful encounter between the French colonizers and the (...) colonized' (ibid.:121).

It should be remembered, too, that Confucianism was an ideology most adamantly adhered to by the mandarins and other upper class people, who sought to emulate Chinese mandarins. Neither in the North nor in the South did it have the same influence on the daily lives of the lower classes - the village peasants, fishermen, artisans, and shopkeepers.

Also, during the first decades of the 20th century, as part of the intense intellectual efforts to purge Vietnam of the "backward" tendencies that were blamed for laying the country open to colonialism, the use of PRTs was deliberately changed, according to Marr:

'Phan Khoi [in 1930] limited himself to proposing several modest reforms. These included: upgrading the first-person singular *tôi*, which at one time had probably been limited to the "ruler-subject" (*vua-tôi*) relationship; (...) Within a decade or two these suggestions were commonly in use. (...) As some Vietnamese women began to object in print to their traditional position of inferiority (...) it was inevitable that this, too, was linked to the language question. Thus one prominent female writer [also in 1930] (...) criticized her peers for referring to themselves in print as *em* 'younger sister' (...) Instead, women should use *tôi* 'I' just like the men and thus help to raise their collective status.' (Marr 1981:172-4)

Hy Van Luong versus Dumont

So far, I have discussed the formal stratification characteristic of the "male-oriented model" itself, as opposed to the tendency towards equality and entropy of its "alternative model". However, Luong contends that both models:

'(...) are encompassed within the overarching organic unity framework which emphasizes (...) solidarity and hierarchy among the members of the same sociocultural unit' (1990.:49); 'On one level, the male- and non-male-oriented models (...) appear complementary to each other. First of all, both are constructed out of the same sets of elements: genealogy and behavioral patterns. (...) Secondly, both (...) models are encompassed within the organic

unity framework (...). This framework is constructed on the principles of hierarchy and solidarity.' (ibid.:69-70)

This sounds like something else - an all-encompassing, hierarchical framework? Yet, he stresses that the apparent complementarity of the two models within such a larger framework is questionable. Rather, Luong argues,

'These models are constructed on the basis of mutually exclusive principles: linear time vs. cyclical time; bound vs. unbound space; and separation and hierarchy among opposite-sex actors in contrast to their unity and equality. I propose that in the Vietnamese sociocultural system, the male- and non-male-oriented models of and for kinship relations exist inextricably in opposition to each other.' (ibid.:80).

Searching for further descriptions of the larger framework, we find: 'The diverse behavioral patterns (...) must be seen as constituting an *interrelated but not necessarily integrated whole*.' (Luong 1984:309, original emphasis).

It may prove helpful here to have Dumont's concept of hierarchy in mind.[84] He defines hierarchy as '*the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole*' (1980:66, original emphasis). He describes the relation between two 'classes or categories' (1980:241) as hierarchical if one category - the superior - encompasses its inferior opposite. Transferred to the matter at hand, this way of thinking would imply that of Luong's two models, the male- and elite oriented model would be identical with the "overarching organic unity framework", encompassing the alternative model (and with it, the principle of equality) in a hierarchical relationship. That is, I take it, that although the principle of equality may be prevalent within some domains - such as those I have described as "backstage" above - these domains are only subordinated "pockets" within the dominant, hierarchical system as a whole.[85] But whereas Dumont finds complementarity at this level, Luong finds contradiction.

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[84] Dumont has been accused of essentialising, exoticising and totalising Indian society in terms of one phenomenon, the caste system, and in terms of a single value, namely that of "purity" (Appadurai 1988). I shall not go into the extensive discussions around this criticism of the empirical presuppositions and implications of his analysis here. Rather, I shall make use of some of the more theoretical aspects of Dumont's model where relevant to those of Hy Van Luong.

[85] According to Fox (1994:94), these notions of Dumont's are similar to the Chinese system of yin and yang: '(...) the recognition of a relationship between Dumont's Figure 2 and the classic Chinese representation of the embodiment of Yin within Yang. Indeed, the notions of inclusion/exclusion and the "encompassing of the contrary" are precisely what the Chinese representation of Yin and Yang is intended to convey.' (Fox 1994:94).

Nghia *and the co-existence of the two models*

In Dumont's presentation of Indian hierarchy, the elements are ranked according to one single value. It would be misleading to claim the existence of any such paramount value in Vietnamese hierarchy. This is also indicated in Luong's argument (quoted above) that the "overarching framework" is not an unambiguously consistent, ordered system, but rather that it 'must be seen as constituting an *interrelated but not necessarily integrated whole*.' People are ranked, or given precedence,[86] according not to one, but to various criteria, such as age, generation, gender and (educational) merit. The following discussions of the meaning of *nghia* illustrates the abstract argument in more empirical terms, and may also serve to indicate how the mutual oppositions of Luong's two models may be negotiated and counterbalanced:

> Once again, Nhat returned to the concept of *nghia*, trying to make me understand: 'Husband and wife have *yeu* ("romantic love") and *nghia*. Even if, after many years, *yeu* is no longer there, *nghia* is a bond that may keep the spouses together. Between the two of them, it is *yeu* and *nghia* that matter. Only as the outward appearance is the *le* ("ritual") of the wife's submission important. *Nghia* is between equals, friends, as well as between king and subject. The king's *nghia* to his subject is the same as that of his subject towards the king. *Nghia* is a deep, reciprocal duty inherent in the roles. Another example of *nghia* is two friends, one is a policeman and one is a criminal. The policeman can't arrest his friend because of the *nghia* between friends. Although he has loyalty towards his employer, too, that is not *nghia*. This proves that *nghia* is more than loyalty.'

This explanation differs from the one he initially gave me, presented at the beginning of this chapter: now, Nhat intended to deepen my understanding of what *nghia* "really" means. This time, he no longer emphasised the hierarchical nature of social relationships, but related the concept of *nghia* to characteristics such as emotion, informality, equality and conjugal unity. As a Confucian concept, it can be explained in Confucian terms of duty and loyalty, within the "male- and elite-oriented model". However, to give a fuller understanding of the concept of

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[86] See History and Anthropology 1994, vol. 7, 1-4, which is a special issue on Dumont's Indian single-value hierarchy versus Southeast Asian multi-value systems of "presedence".

nghia, Nhat found it necessary to reach beyond this, and to make use of both this model and its alternative.

Nghia is the kind of concept of which it is hard to give a precise definition, because it appears in different contexts, with different meanings. It forms part of compound terms such as *chu nghia* ("doctrine" or "-ism", *chu* being "master") or *le nghia* ("politeness and reason", *le* being "ritual, ceremony"). What follows is an extract of a conversation I had with a small group of young people, squatting comfortably in the main hall of the Buddhist temple, during the *Phat Dan* ("Buddha's birth") celebration in 1995:

> They did not manage to agree on one explanation of *nghia*. '*Hieu - trung - nghia*, the three go together. *Hieu* - you know that word? Do you know what it is in Norwegian? It is so difficult to explain to Norwegians.' [It is usually rendered "filial piety" in English]. '*Trung* is loyalty: it means that for instance you do exactly what the king wants you to do, you cannot fail him. *Nghia* is not loyalty. *Nghia* means "meaning" as such, you know - its own meaning depends on the other word in the compound, and on the general context. *Tinh nghia*, it is friendship or love, between friends and man/wife, not parents/children, that is *hieu*. *Nghia* is love, that's what it is, with the word *tinh* ("feeling, sentiment") in front, and that is its main meaning in the *hieu - trung - nghia* context. But how can we, who are just ordinary people, know what it means when it stands alone? The monks will know more about this. *Le nghia*, it is respect, politeness, what you have to learn before you go to school - otherwise you would not know how to talk to the teacher, of course. But you can't say *trung nghia*, that doesn't make sense.' [It is in my dictionary, however, with "loyal" as the English translation...]

Nghia may be translated as "loyalty" and "justice", "righteousness", "love" and "duty", but as these people pointed out to me, it may also literally mean "meaning": the meanings of words, phrases, gestures and other symbols. In its being so general as to lend itself to constant redefinitions, it seems to fit into Rappaport's (1995) "ultimate level" of meaning, where the distinctions necessary to create meaning on lower levels are transcended and obliterated. As a Confucian concept, *nghia*

'(...) was based entirely on behaviour in key social roles. It dictated, for example, how a son should behave toward a father, how a younger brother should behave toward an older brother, how a subject should behave towards a king, and so on.' (Jamieson 1993:19)

On the other hand, the above examples show that both to a scholar with a North Vietnamese, Catholic background and to a group of young South Vietnamese Buddhists, there is more to it than Confucian 'primacy of social obligation' (ibid.:19) and total submission to the 'calm rationality within the structure of *ly*, the nature of things (...).' (loc. cit.)

What I am suggesting, then, is that *nghia* lends itself to constant and contextual redefinition according to the backstage and frontstage models of and for interaction, in drawing on the legitimating sources of Buddhism and Confucianism respectively. The case of *nghia* thus serves to illustrate how people may emphasise one or the other of these models according to what they find the most appropriate in a given context. The meaning of *nghia* may be perceived and put into words in accordance with either model, but in the "overarching framework" the perception is one of *nghia* as a glue that sticks social units together; as deeper feelings of attachment that bind people together in a meaningful way. It may, in other words, also be seen as a means to mediate the contradictions between the two models, helping to make it possible for them to co-exist.

HIERARCHY AND EQUALITY IN EXILE

Intra-ethnic: defying hierarchy among the Viet kieu

Bearing the Vietnamese system of person reference in mind, let us turn to what may happen in exile. Hy Van Luong bases his argument on fieldwork conducted in a refugee community in Calville, California as well as in a village in North Vietnam. He notes from the former that: 'Among Vietnamese speakers in the West, addressor- and addressee-referring terms frequently become conspicuous by their absence. (...) [They] often resort to zero signs, always with an acute sense of rule violation.' (1990:5). And, he observes, 'the non-male oriented model seems to have become more important among the Calville Vietnamese'. This is in accordance

with my own observations. For instance, it may be established that among Vietnamese in Norway, too, the system of person reference terms is simplified 'because this is a more informal place' as Nhat put it to me:

> He also told me that he had been speaking to a young woman, a stranger, on the telephone to France and had been taken aback when she called him *anh* ("elder brother") straight away - of course, in Vietnam, she would have called him *ong* ("grandfather") as a sign both of humility and respect and of formal distance towards a stranger, thus at the same time ensuring her own position as a respectable woman. But, as he told himself, 'maybe I have a young voice on the telephone, and anyway things are not so formal here.'[87]

Said Phung, who is as determined to avoid being ascribed a low position in relation to other Vietnamese as she is to avoid being liminalised in the Norwegian context:

> 'We manipulate language too, of course: I may say *bac* ("father's elder brother") or *chu* ("father's younger brother") and yet call myself *tôi* ("subject of the King"), that puts me in a much higher position! I couldn't do that in Vietnam, but here we are more free to do this. It is a way to move from one position to another.'

It seems reasonable to see this example in the light of the Vietnamese language reforms of the 1930s, and thus to see Phung's exile "climbing" as a further extension of the use of *tôi*, made possible by the presence of a dominant egalitarian ideology.

If the male- and elite-oriented model is supported by an "overarching framework" of Dumontian hierarchy in Vietnam, I suggest that the alternative, Vietnamese model is likewise supported by a corresponding framework of egalitarianism in Norway. In this light, we find that the Norwegian all-encompassing framework appears as a true, Dumontian hierarchy: in the guise of egalitarianism, it is a single-value hierarchy based on the value of *likhet*, or equality-cum-homogeneity.

Non-Vietnamese terms, too, slip into everyday *Viet kieu* language to some extent. As in the case of French and English influences in Vietnam and America, it is no coincidence which specific terms are replaced by Norwegian ones, by whom,

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87 "Here" refers to a telephone line between Norway and France. The whole world outside of Vietnam is to the *Viet kieu* "here", or "exile", whereas Vietnam itself has become "there", "non-exile", homeland, place of origin - what the rest of the world/the exile is not, what it is defined in opposition to.

and in which contexts. This is confirmed by Longva: 'The use of the Norwegian *jeg* (I) and other non-Vietnamese pronouns is neutral, and a way to escape from hierarchy.' (Personal communication)

> Van and I had cooked Vietnamese food together at my house and were eating and talking. Van said: 'In Norway, we young people sometimes use Norwegian words like *jeg* ("I") - not *meg* ("me"), of course, that doesn't fit into the Vietnamese sentence because we don't inflect words.[88] But saying *jeg* is so simple: if we use that we don't have the problem of choosing a Vietnamese term. I wouldn't do it talking to you, or to older people at all, only to those who are my age. By the way, that was really funny when I was in France. In French, you know, they repeat the pronouns like in *Lui, il veut...* ("him, he wants...") so in Vietnamese, young people there can say *Anh, nó muón...* ("him, he wants...")! *Nó*, that is not very nice at all,[89] but it's the same pattern as in French. - Most of all, I think some Vietnamese take themselves too seriously, they are too easily offended if I use the wrong pronoun or in other ways don't behave according to Vietnamese rules for being polite.'

Norwegian egalitarianism, as one kind of Western egalitarianism, is perceived as related to the Vietnamese form of equality, as found in the "non-male-oriented model". People - young people, women - who feel that this model supports them, providing them with arguments in their opposition to the Vietnamese dominant structure of hierarchy, see this as an opportunity which was not available to them in Vietnam to the same extent. In Norwegian reality, hierarchy is still there, but using it as a legitimating ideology is much more difficult because hierarchy is defined as ideologically "evil" by the Norwegian majority. The surrounding society is thus perceived to support women and young people in their struggle for a higher position. Yet it would be too simple to see this as a gender issue arising in exile. Firstly, as we have seen, the conflict between the two models is not an exclusively exile phenomenon. The difference is mainly that the "overarching framework" of hierarchy is weakened in exile. Secondly, both in Vietnam and in exile, there is a 'strong commitment of many female actors to the male-oriented model (...) the

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[88] Considering the use of the French emphatic/accusative forms *moi* ("me") and *toi* ("you"), there seems to be no obvious logic in this use of the Norwegian subjective forms *jeg* and *du*.

[89] *Nó* ("it, he, she") is unmarked when referring to animals, and a derogatory term when used to refer to humans, even within the "backstage" model.

ideological opposition here between male- and non-male-oriented models does not necessarily imply conflicts strictly along the gender line' (Luong 1990:68). Other factors, such as age, class or religious affiliation, are probably of no less importance than the question of gender.

Similar tendencies of movement away from the male- and elite-oriented model are evident in other aspects of exile lives. We may for instance recall the informal meal Thuy and Phong shared with me, described in chapter 5. I contrasted this occasion with a description of the ideal Vietnamese meal as a ritual reflecting and recreating Confucian hierarchy. In chapter 6, we saw how expressions of belonging tended towards emphasising a spatially unbound "backstage" of a Buddhism associated with home, village and family, moving away from "frontstage" political celebrations of the homeland. I shall return to these aspects of the two models in the final chapter.

From intra- to inter-ethnic relations in exile

As stated in the Introduction, in this thesis I have focused on Vietnamese intra-ethnic relations. The Norwegian surroundings of the Vietnamese living in Norway have accordingly remained peripheral to this study. Yet, as I argued in chapter 3, the Norwegian majority necessarily affects Vietnamese lives, generally through forming a new structural framework of opportunities and limitations, and particularly through imposing *likhet*. In the following, I shall outline some final reflections on the topics of *likhet* and hierarchy, as they may surface in the inter-ethnic relations between Vietnamese and Norwegians.

Vietnamese perceptions of the differences between Norwegian and Vietnamese societies vary. The length of time spent in Norway seems to be decisive in this respect. New arrivals, such as Dung, tend to interpret the differences as simply antipodal: the father as his child's *xich-lo* driver, Norwegian body language as disrespectful and inadequate. Old-timers, who have had years to ponder the differences, tend to refine their interpretations in various ways. Hung, we remember from the beginning of this chapter, concludes that Norwegians and

Vietnamese just have different ways of expressing class belonging. Van, on the other hand, who has grown up as a "different" person in "homogeneous" Norway, seems to have accepted Norwegian ideology in the sense that she does not see her social position as an immigrant in hierarchical terms. She does not dispute Norwegian ideology. Instead, she privatises the problem of her own difference.

Such differences in how to interpret Norwegian ways of life may surface as conflicts, particularly within the family. Hoa, Son and I were talking about the difficulties for Vietnamese parents in bringing up their children in Norway:

> They were particularly worried about the gang violence and drug addiction that some Vietnamese young people are mixed up with. They said that it is very difficult to bring children up the Vietnamese way in Norway, because Norwegian authorities do not approve of it. Teachers will encourage children to speak up for their rights and not bend to their parents' authority. Norwegian children are brought up to think of themselves, and not the parents and other family members, as the centre of their lives. This may sometimes make it difficult for Norwegian teachers to understand that Vietnamese parents may not be bad parents even if they seem more authoritarian than Norwegian parents. This may lead to a worsening of conflicts within the family. Where Vietnamese children would normally be compliant, the reactions from Norwegian friends and teachers to the Vietnamese upbringing makes Vietnamese children distance themselves from their own parents. In serious cases, the Child Welfare Authorities may eventually get involved. This may easily make the conflict even more difficult to solve, because the child then has the massive support of all authorities except their own parents, who are in effect rendered powerless. It is extremely difficult particularly for uneducated Vietnamese parents to understand why all this happens, and to handle this kind of tension. They also said that in the cases where the young people actually succeed in obtaining their "independence" from their parents, they are not prepared for it. Vietnamese ways of bringing up children does not prepare them to face being alone, being responsible for everything on their own, for living without the family. Not being prepared to cope entirely on their own, they may first seek the further support of Norwegian authorities, who most probably consider their job done, and who are not prepared to "parent" what they see as a young adult. In their disappointment, the youngsters may turn their frustrations against the Norwegian society which, they feel, has failed them.

The relationship between parents and their children is strongly affected by the contradictions between the Norwegian and Vietnamese dominant ideologies, and

by their sometimes very different perceptions of Norwegian reality. The family itself, we remember from chapter 4, is at the heart of the "traditional Vietnamese way of life" which many Vietnamese refugees have strong commitments to preserve in exile. Vietnamese parents are worried about their children growing up in a society seemingly lacking many of the moral standards they themselves value. Those who have little contact with Norwegian parents - and this most probably includes a majority of Vietnamese parents - will have little access to information about how many Norwegian parents may feel about *their* children growing up in a society without many of the moral standards *they* value.

Phung, too, wanted to discuss the relations between Vietnamese parents and their children.

> She blamed those parents who are "not open" towards Norwegian society for "closing the door" - not only to this larger society, but to their own children, who are Norwegians too. I objected to her describing these children as Norwegian, but she said: 'They are born here, or were four or five when they arrived, what else can they be?' I said that some of those young people seem to get their information about Norwegian ways of living from school and from friends. They have little access to what Norwegians, other than teachers and young people, think about this. I suggested this, combined with the experience of their own difference as problematic, may lead some young Vietnamese to seeing themselves as "outside" both Norwegian and Vietnamese societies. She agreed to this, but argued that precisely in refusing to let Norwegian influences into their own homes, refusing to let their children speak Norwegian to them, not learning Norwegian themselves, not trying to learn about Norway: in doing this, the parents are also to blame for their children's lack of understanding of how Norwegian society really works. She admitted that learning this takes a long time, even for those who are "open". Phung thought that the parents refuse to admit Norwegian influences into their homes largely because they will not stop thinking that one day they will return to Vietnam, and that they and their children must be prepared for that day. 'As if those young people will want to live in Vietnam! The parents must realise that it will never happen.' I reminded her that this is a very painful realisation, that it means giving up much of what gives their lives meaning - their dreams of return. She agreed but said that, even if it is hard, it is the only way their children can fully enter Norwegian society.

From schismogenesis in the family to schismogenesis in society

Towards the end of 1995, a report on the living-conditions of refugees in Oslo was published. This report describes the Vietnamese refugees included in the survey as strikingly passive and isolated as compared to the other groups in the survey:

'The Vietnamese differ significantly [from refugees of other nationalities] by feeling neither discrimination nor degrading treatment from Norwegians. (...) Discrimination and racism are aspects of interaction between people. If the immigrants lead extremely isolated lives, or have social contact only with others of their own nationality, one will only to a small extent be exposed to situations where one may be, or may feel, discriminated. This probably explains why for instance the Vietnamese differ so strongly [from the other groups], by experiencing neither discrimination nor racism.' (Djuve and Hagen 1995:103-104).[90]

Phung commented the report when I met her shortly after it was published. Her interpretation was very different from the one I just quoted above:

> 'When we got that report at work, the boss had marked that passage for us three Vietnamese. All three of us were sitting there looking at that passage, and we just laughed. Not discriminated! How could we help laughing? So, you do understand. You saw through that, you saw it. It's cultural, isn't it, really. Norwegians were not supposed to know they feel this way. It just shows how little a survey of that kind can really say, unless people are going to answer the questions truthfully and directly, which they won't do as long as the interviewer is a representative of Norwegian society, of the authorities.' 'Isolation is better than discrimination, but it is a result of discrimination too. And don't forget that supposedly successful, educated people who have work and make their own money feel exactly the same. They are isolated too, they have no Norwegian friends either. They work, they go home, they talk to nobody except each other. It's hard on everybody. Jobs don't give integration, more hours of Norwegian classes don't give integration. Contact is the only way. Norwegians have to start talking to people if they want integration, if they want to solve the problems.'

To Phung and her colleagues, Vietnamese isolation is no explanation of non-discrimination, as it is presented in the report. In their view, the researchers have

90 'Vietnameserne skiller seg markert ut, ved hverken å føle diskriminering eller nedverdigende behandling fra nordmenn. (...) Diskriminering og rasisme er aspekter ved samhandling mellom mennesker. Om innvandrerne lever ekstremt isolert, eller bare har sosial kontakt med andre fra egen nasjonalitet, vil man i liten grad bli eksponert for situasjoner hvor man kan bli eller føle seg diskriminert. Det er nok dette som forklarer at for eksempel vietnameserne skiller seg så kraftig ut ved at de ikke opplever verken diskriminering eller rasisme.'

put the horse before the cart, in the sense that isolation is a Vietnamese strategy to avoid discrimination from Norwegians. More importantly, however, from a Vietnamese perspective, isolation is also conceived to be a Norwegian form of discrimination. For the Vietnamese, pointing this out to the interviewers would have been rude and uncivil, demonstrating a complete lack of respect and politeness.

The contradictions inherent in the Norwegian part of table 7.1 applies to all minorities in Norway, making it very difficult to find one's place as a *different* person or group. Why, then, are Vietnamese so much more invisible than for instance Pakistanis? One reason is, as I argued in chapter 3, to be found in the controlled, dispersed settlement of refugees, in contrast to self-settlement of labour immigrants, but this hardly accounts fully for the striking differences in visibility of the two groups. The oppositions related to hierarchy and equality do not constitute the only factor in inter-ethnic interaction, and analysis of these cannot explain all difficulties that arise in such interaction, nor indeed absence of interaction. Both Hung and Nhat have reflected on how schisms between Norwegians and Vietnamese seem to grow, schisms with more complex roots than a simple opposition between hierarchical and egalitarian ideologies:

> Nhat said that the leaders of the Vietnamese organisations were having second thoughts on the appropriateness of their choice of strategies. The Vietnamese have achieved a reputation in Norway for being quiet, polite and undemanding, but other immigrant organisations are getting a bigger proportion of the resources for their work. 'What is the use of a good reputation, if you do not get the money you need to do important social and preventive work?'
>
> Hung was telling me how he felt he could not succeed at work in a large company in Norway because he could not bring himself to "brag" about his qualifications to the boss. In Vietnam, it is the boss' duty to notice which of his subordinates are doing a good job, and to promote those who deserve it. In Norway, working hard and diligently will get you nowhere if you do not at the same time succeed in making the boss notice your qualifications. I asked Hung about this again on a later occasion: 'Do you remember the example you gave me from the office, how a Vietnamese or Chinese cannot point at his own abilities as a worker, this the boss must do? Why is this? First, I thought it was to do with knowing your position in

> the hierarchy but maybe this is wrong, if the boss can't do it either?' Hung answered: 'The boss can't, nobody can. This is very deep, a very difficult question - I don't know. There is a saying: The mandarin is Confucianist at the office and Taoist at home. Maybe this is to do with Taoism? Because it has to do with feelings, with the informal. You should always be humble (*khiem nhuong*). It is also in the *le nghia liem si* ("politeness, courtesy of the honest man") which of course has to do with Confucianism. *Khiem nhuong* is within the *le nghia liem si*, within it. But why - ? It is traditional, it is the habit, we do not question it. If you are good at something (*gioi*), there is always something you are not good at, and there is always someone who is better. Maybe the man who sells soup in the street is better than you at something. And if he makes good soup, he should not say so. People will find out. If his soup is the best in town, people will notice. There is another saying: Even if a capable person goes into the deep of the forest, people will always find him. It is not necessary to be pretentious if you are truly good, maybe on the contrary we suspect a pretentious person to be less clever than he says. Maybe we will laugh at him, but mostly we just don't care to talk to him, it isn't worth the trouble.' Hung quit his job shortly after this talk, telling me that he found he could no longer bear being ignored - as an employee by the boss, and as a person by his colleagues. He now runs his own little business.

This "bragging taboo" may be part of it - it prevents conflict with Norwegians because it satisfies a similar Norwegian norm, *Janteloven*, and makes the normally rather noisy Vietnamese behave quietly, which is also in accordance with Norwegian norms of behaviour. Sadly, however, it seems to contribute to the prevention of any contact at all. On the other hand, Pakistanis can hardly be said to be particularly prone to bragging. They do, however, make themselves visible, they put forth claims "as if this were their country" - which would not seem unreasonable, after 20 years of paying tax - thus taking the risk of making themselves unpopular. Unlike most Vietnamese, they do not generally make an effort not to be a nuisance, but insist on their equal rights as citizens. In Bateson's terms (Bateson 1972), this aspect of the relationship between Pakistanis and Norwegians is one of symmetric schismogenesis, whereas between Norwegians and Vietnamese the relations tend towards a more complementary type of schismogenesis.

This seems to be a matter of the first-generation Vietnamese knowing that they are in an inferior position, because of their great *on* ("moral debt") to the givers of a new life in exile. Particularly the first generation - and, among them, especially the "boat people" - feel that they are in a position to be grateful, not to criticise. One might suggest that from this point of view that theirs is an *on* comparable to that of children towards their parents, an *on* so great as to imply a kind of *hieu* ("filial piety") between the refugees and the nation to which they owe their lives. The problem, seen in this light, is that, after having "given life", the "parents" act largely as if they were not part of the same social unit after all. With the above discussion of the concept of *nghia* as "the deeper feelings of attachment that binds people together in a meaningful way", I suggest that between Vietnamese and the Norwegian majority, *nghia* is, largely and regrettably, wanting.

As we have seen, the position of Vietnamese in relation to the Norwegian majority may be understood in egalitarian terms as one of marginality, or in hierarchical terms as one of subordination. Both modes of understanding are applied by Vietnamese in Norway. Generally speaking, there is a tendency for those who grew up in Vietnam to take the hierarchical view, and for those who are growing up in Norway to adopt the egalitarian standpoint. However, whereas there are only between 10,000 and 15,000 Vietnamese in Norway, there are about 65 million Vietnamese in Vietnam and nearly two million Vietnamese outside Vietnam. In the following chapter, the main emphasis will be on the relations between Norway Vietnamese and those living their lives in other countries and continents.

CHAPTER VIII

VIET KIEU COMMUNITY

THE MEANING OF *VIET KIEU*

The term *Viet kieu*, usually translated "overseas Vietnamese", is compound by the two words *Viet* and *kieu*. The *Viet* are the ethnic group that forms the basis for, and makes up the majority in, the nation-state of *Viet Nam* ("South Viet")[91]. *Kieu* means "bridge", and occurs in other compound terms as well, such as *kieu bao* ("emigrant") and *kieu dan* ("immigrant"), *bao* meaning "shaved off", *dan* meaning "citizen". However, my speculations on this are of limited value compared to how the concept is used and understood, as expressed by Vietnamese themselves:

> Thach said that *Viet kieu* is not a term he would naturally use among *Viet kieu* people. It is mostly used by the leaders outside Vietnam and by the people still living in Vietnam. But he would probably use it if he went back on a visit, telling people in Vietnam that he is a *Viet kieu* living in Norway.

As this indicates, a *Viet kieu* is a Vietnamese who lives in a foreign country, or *ngoai quoc* (lit. "outside country"), as seen from inside, from Vietnam itself.

During my stay in Vietnam, I noticed that there, people did not use the word *ty nan* ("refugees") to refer to Vietnamese outside Vietnam. Indeed, people seemed taken aback when I employed the term, which is used by Vietnamese in Norway in self-reference.[92] Even those who were evidently not very fond of the government just talked about people who had "left", people who "lived in America" and so on. The concept "overseas communities" seems appropriate - satellites, or colonies if you will, with Vietnam as the centre, and with no implication of a breach with the "mother society". "Here" - Vietnam - is contrasted with an undifferentiated "there" -

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[91] See Goscha (1995) for a thorough discussion of the various names and political and spacial definitions of Vietnam throughout the centuries.

[92] According to Longva (1987) the term was only gradually and reluctantly put to use by the Vietnamese in Norway.

outside Vietnam - where people are rich. Seen from Vietnam, the distinction between the "us" and "them" corresponding to "here" and "there" is not clear, because "we", the *Viet*, are both "here" and "there". Those who have left are still a part of "us" in spite of being viewed with a certain suspicion.[93]

Nhat told me that in his view:

> '*Viet kieu* was originally a neutral term but now, because it is used mostly by people in Vietnam of Vietnamese visitors from abroad, it is slightly negative. It is not a term one would normally use if one is a Vietnamese in exile (...). A Vietnamese in exile would probably say he was a *nguoi Viet tai Na Uy, tai Phap,v.v.* ("a *Viet* person [living] in Norway, in France, etc.").'

In this example, Nhat indicates the tensions between Vietnamese who stayed in Vietnam and those who left. Such tensions, not unusual between refugees and those who stayed behind (see for instance Munch 1994), are also touched upon in the following extract of a newspaper interview with the director of the film *The Scent of Green Papaya*, Tran Anh Hung:

> 'In the West, for better or worse, he is viewed as a Vietnamese filmmaker, but in Vietnam he is still regarded as an outsider. In the end, he occupies an uneasy position between these two worlds that is difficult to resolve. It is an ambiguity that may be summed up for him in two words: *Viet kieu* (overseas Vietnamese). '...I am seen as viet kieu, in other words a Vietnamese who is somehow impure, who is not entirely of Vietnam, who is in some ways a monster, a foreigner.' " (International Herald Tribune, 24.3.95)

With the steadily increasing number of *Viet kieu* who *ve tham* ("return to visit"), and their personal experiences of confronting present-day Vietnam, has come a growing awareness of difference between *Viet kieu* and those who stayed behind.[94] This awareness has come as a confirmation of one of the reasons for exodus which, as

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[93] The acceptance of *Viet kieu* as part of "us" by Vietnamese still living in Vietnam is a matter of degree - family members more, strangers less, and people who behave badly towards other Vietnamese least of all. The ultimate "they", the *tay* ("Westerners"), are largely irrelevant to this picture.

[94] How *Viet kieu* are regarded by those who stayed behind is perhaps beside the point here, although many *Viet kieu* themselves are keenly aware of this as a painful subject. Part of the picture is a very visible, but not necessarily large, proportion of *Viet kieu* men who visit Vietnam, and there exhibit kinds of conspicuous consumption that may be earning the *Viet kieu* in general a dubious reputation.

we remember from chapter 4, was a desire to protect "Vietnamese culture" from the destructive forces of Communism. As Van told me:

> 'I have talked to people who have been back to visit, and they tell me what fun it is - all the people, the activity. But they also tell me people's mentalities have changed from being under Communism for so long.'

Phung, too, had reflected upon the often strained relationships between *Viet kieu* and Vietnamese who had not left Vietnam. She and I had been talking about the differences between North and South Vietnamese, with regional differences of language as one key indicator, when she suddenly said:

> 'The *Viet kieu* speak differently, too. If they go back, and imagine to themselves that they are going home, people will always notice them and say they are *Viet kieu*. This is painful. It shows that they are different.'

Viet kieu perceptions of present-day Vietnam as a fulfilment of their gloomy prophesies, and the awareness that their own "culture" is no longer the "culture" of those who stayed behind, connotes Cohen's contention that: 'People become aware of their culture at its boundaries - that is, at becoming aware of different cultures beyond' (Cohen 1981:199). There is such a boundary now, not only between *Viet kieu* and members of the "host" populations, but between *Viet kieu* and their former compatriots in Vietnam. Van tried to explain to me how she perceives her own position:

> 'In between - I am in between. It was more of a problem to me before, when I was fourteen and fifteen years old. By now I feel more Norwegian. If I am with a person who is very Vietnamese, who just came from Vietnam, or with a Norwegian person, I think I feel more at home with the Norwegian. But really, I feel the most at home with the other "in betweens". We have the most in common. No, we do not use the word *Viet kieu* about ourselves. We are only *Viet kieu* in relation to those who are still living in Vietnam. I, and people who live in France or Australia, just call ourselves *nguoi Viet* ("Vietnamese persons"). I think I have more in common with those Vietnamese than I do with Vietnamese in Vietnam, or with Norwegians. People who just arrived from Vietnam are different, they speak a very broad Vietnamese - it may be a lack of education, but I think the language there changes too. And our language changes - you know, in France, the Vietnamese say *tel* instead of *dien thoai* ("telephone"), in America they say "call",

and in Norway we use the Norwegian word *ring*: *Em se ring chi* ("I'll call you later")! My mother did that in France - she was telling something to someone and using Norwegian words in between, they could not understand it! But they do exactly the same with French words, so it didn't matter that much. They could understand why she was doing it.'

In the above, Van identifies herself primarily with other *Viet kieu*, or the other "in-betweens", in spite of the fact that their exile experiences differ in many ways. One aspect of such difference is to be found in the various "host" societies surrounding them, such as the examples of "host" language words seeping into their Vietnamese. The differences in language have their counterparts in other aspects of the exiles' lives. From the painful discoveries of growing differences between *Viet kieu* and their compatriots in Vietnam, Phung passed on to some significant differences among *Viet kieu* themselves:

'And Norwegian *Viet kieu* are different from French ones who are different from east and west coast American ones. In France, you know, it is difficult to live - more racist, more isolated. In America at least the racism is different, less obvious maybe. Looking different doesn't matter so much there, where they are all immigrants. Especially in California this is so. But in France they have another difficulty too: the Vietnamese have been there for so long, some since the beginning of this century. Not all are refugees, not all are anti-Communist. Some of them have been there a long time. They are more French than Vietnamese, and very political. For example, there is a *Viet kieu* lady now who is a member of the EU parliament. But she has a lot of contact with Hanoi, she is not a refugee, she is a Communist. So you see, that kind of people can be *Viet kieu* in France. There is a lot of political conflict among the *Viet kieu* in France.'

As she indicated here, the situation in France is one of extreme political polarity,[95] but there are many, although less extreme, examples of political conflicts among *Viet kieu* all over the world. I shall discuss some aspects of such conflicts below. Yet, let us keep in mind that on another level, what the *Viet kieu* have in common may turn out to be more important to them than what sets them apart. On this level, the sharedness of their experiences enable them to understand one another

[95] The opposition between Communist and anti-Communist Vietnamese in Paris is discussed in Bousquet (1991).

better than anyone else. This, as Van pointed out above, is the case when it comes to hybridisations of the Vietnamese language among the *Viet kieu*.

'Much the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities', argues Anderson (1991:133). Given the central part the Vietnamese language has played in building awareness and attachment to the Vietnamese nation, Anderson's argument seems particularly suited to the matter at hand. If we follow this line of thought, we find that, after 1975, Vietnamese language has developed in two principal directions - one as a direct result of Communist language policies within Vietnam, and the other among anti-Communists in exile. This appears to have contributed to the current development of two main, distinct "imagined communities". The "imagined community" of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam transcends the regional differences, such as the main dialects of South, Central and North Vietnamese, with post-revolution North Vietnamese as the "standard" language. In exile, pre-revolution North Vietnamese is considered the "purest" form of Vietnamese, although the majority of the refugees themselves speak South Vietnamese. Hyphenated *Viet kieu* "dialects" such as French-Vietnamese, American-Vietnamese or Norwegian-Vietnamese add another, global dimension to the notion of "regional differences".

Contest of reality and of identity. Doi moi*: change or continuity?*

In the Norwegian *Viet kieu* political picture, there is no morally acceptable alternative to anti-Communism. People who are suspected of having Communist sympathies may even, in extreme cases, be ostracised. Among the anti-Communist *Viet kieu*, how to assess the last decade's Communist policies of *doi moi* ("perestrojka"), has turned into a source of internal conflict. Basically, the problem was one of predicting the future: should *doi moi* be shrugged off as propaganda, intended to make possible the badly needed foreign investment in a practically bankrupt Vietnamese economy? Should one suppose that any concessions of political freedom, made in the heat of negotiations with foreign governments and investors, would later be withdrawn at random? Or were at least some of the

Communists in earnest about changing the Party policies towards a more democratic regime? Could one, perhaps, imagine a gradual and peaceful transition from Communism to freedom? If so, should the *Viet kieu* contribute to this development, or would that imply supporting the Communist regime? What stance to take was a central topic at a Vietnamese Students' Association meeting in Oslo in October 1994. Representatives from French and American branches of the *Hoi Chuyen Gia Viet Nam* ("Vietnamese Professionals Society") had been invited as speakers. One speaker used the image of food to illustrate the dilemma the exiles are currently facing:

> 'We [*Viet kieu*] have enough rice, our bellies are full, but our brothers and sisters in Vietnam are hungry and they need our help.' Several of the speakers took up the urgent question *Chung ta phai lam gi*? ("What must we do?"). The answer they agreed upon was: *Lam truong nghia* ("To be stirred to action by *nghia*", cf. chapter 7). One speaker recounted her experiences from a recent visit to Vietnam. As a medical doctor, she had been shocked at the low level of professional doctors in the Socialist Republic, and she urged her fellow *Viet kieu* professionals to help improve the lives of people in Vietnam by transmitting some of their knowledge to colleagues in the Socialist Republic. This appeal was met with scepticism, and openly rejected by some of those present. As one of them put it: 'Does the Professionals' Association want us to support Hanoi?'

In the summer of 1995, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet made an official tour of some Western countries, among them Norway. He was met with *Viet kieu* protests and demonstrations in several countries. I went to the demonstration staged in front of *Stortinget*, the Parliament building, in Oslo. The demonstration had, in addition to other means of communication, been announced through a *Viet kieu* newsgroup (*soc.culture.vietnam*) on the Internet.

> There were many people I knew among the perhaps two hundred who had gathered in front of the Parliament building. There were old and young, men, women and children, too, including the leaders of various Vietnamese associations, such as the *Hoi Nguoi Viet ty nan tai Na Uy* ("Association of Vietnamese Refugees in Norway"), and their families. Several of these leaders were among the "safekeepers of the exiled nation" or "homeland cult clergy" (cf. chapter 6). I was told that people had made the trip from many places, such as Kongsvinger (but fewer than expected, 'because of the flood they have to help

there'. I read in *Aftenposten* later that Vietnamese had indeed been helping to build dams in the Kongsvinger area). There were people from Porsgrunn, and I saw some with 'Vietnamese refugees in Bergen' written on their posters. I also saw one of the young monks from the Buddhist temple, and was told there was a monk from France, too, who is here because of the celebration of Buddha's birthday at the new temple that weekend. People were wearing yellow headbands with red letters, saying *Demokrati for Vietnam* ("Democracy for Vietnam"). I got there at 10, and was told they had started at 8. They had been at the foreign ministry and burned a Communist flag outside. Yesterday, when Prime Minister Kiet and his delegation arrived at the airport, the demonstrations had been 'more violent - at this occasion we must show Norwegians that we are not nice, not only nice, we have to speak up, to show them', as one of them told me. 'In Berlin on April 30th,[96] we had a huge demonstration against the Communists at Brandenburger Tor, over 2,000 people came from all over Europe. We were 42 people coming from Norway, one busload, and many, many more from France and Germany. That was just great!' another of the demonstrators said. He also told me that Prime Minister Kiet had been in five other countries before Norway on this tour, and had been met by demonstrations everywhere. Two of the leaders eagerly explained to me the purpose of the demonstration: 'Kiet and his fellows are corrupt. The [Norwegian and other Western] aid will go in their pockets. Everybody in the police are corrupt too, they have to be, because salaries are so low. They are all either party members or have influential parents. We, the Vietnamese people, those outside Vietnam, and especially those in Vietnam, are suffering. They [the people in Vietnam] are not allowed to hold demonstrations like this one.'

People were carrying South Vietnamese flags - many, I never saw that many, big and small - the anti-Communist symbol of a free Vietnam. There were posters in Vietnamese, English and Norwegian, saying *Det vietnamesiske kommunistiske partiet er roten til alt ondt i landet* ("The Vietnamese Communist party is the root of all evil in the country"), *Tu do cho Viet Nam* ("Freedom for Vietnam"), 'Aid to Hanoi is $$$ to concentration camps', and *Hør ikke hva Kiet & Co. sier, men se hva de har gjort!* ("Do not listen to what Kiet & Co. are saying, but see what they have done!"). Other slogans were 'Democracy', 'Religious freedom', and 'Human Rights'. The Vietnamese journalists from the Norwegian Broadcasting Company's immigrant section told me they had met historian Stein Tønnesson at the Ministry on the way, and interviewed him: 'As an admirer of Ho Chi Minh, what do you think of the demonstration?' Tønnesson had replied that he sympathised with it, and that Ho Chi Minh was not to blame for the present situation in Vietnam, as his

96 "The 20th anniversary of the liberation of Saigon" was celebrated in Vietnam 30.4.95.

testament had not been followed through by his successors. He had also said that it was regrettable that the demonstration used 'some of the old symbols'. The journalist commented this to me: 'Kiet has been saying that, too, in Canada for example. The South Vietnamese flags, in particular, I think they disapprove of.' I pointed at the Norwegian flag one man was carrying, and he said thoughtfully: 'Maybe there ought to have been more Norwegian flags.' A Christian Democrats (*Kristelig Folkeparti*) member of Parliament came outside and gave his verbal support to the demonstration. This was evidently popular, most of the demonstrators crowded in on him, and he told them how happy the Christian Democrats are to have Vietnamese refugees in this country, which they all applauded.

There was some commotion as five men, three of them dressed up as prisoners, in chains and barefoot, one of these dressed like a Buddhist monk - the two other as *Viet Cong* ("Vietnamese Communist") soldiers. They staged a maltreatment of the "prisoners", kicking and hitting them to the ground. One woman spectator was so agitated by the spectacle that she shouted *Viet cong!* and hit one of the "*Viet cong*" over the head with her umbrella. Some laughed uneasily at this, others just looked embarrassed. People wanted to know afterwards if the symbolic message of this staging was clear to me. Did I think the message would get through to other Norwegians?

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Kiet and his people had slipped into the Parliament building by the back door. While the demonstrators were waiting for him to re-emerge, they walked in a procession in front of the building. After a couple of rounds, shouting slogans, they gathered in a circle, singing the popular song *Viet Nam Viet Nam*. (I said something to one man about the weather getting warm, and he said 'too warm'. I said 'do you think so?' He replied: 'well, it' so humid, I don't like that' and I said: 'excuse me, but this is nothing compared to Vietnam, is it?' - at which he shrugged: 'well, I haven't been there in 15 years, have I?') Then there was great commotion: Two limousines had picked up the delegation and were leaving the Parliament building. People shouted *Cong san! Cong san!* ("Communist! Communist!") angrily, shook their fists, and ran after the limousines until they speeded up and were gone.

This was the refugees' first encounter with Vietnamese Communist leaders on Norwegian soil. It was also clearly expressed and perceived as symbolic evidence of new, friendly relations between the governments of Communist Vietnam and Norway, their country of refuge. Such relations hardly came as a surprise, but were rather a "local" climax in the process of reconciliation between Communist

Vietnam and the capitalist West. The demonstration was laden with familiar anti-Communist symbolism - burning the Communist flag, brandishing the South Vietnamese flags, the slogans, the enactment of *Viet Cong* maltreating their prisoners, and so on. Yet there was a note of desperation, of a last effort to rally around the old truths, as if the battle were already lost. To me, the seemingly halting grammar of one slogan says it all: "Do not listen to what Kiet & Co. are saying, but see what they have done!" this slogan went, pointing at the wrongs committed by "Kiet & Co."[97] up to the implementation of *doi moi*, when the distinctions of the Cold War were still clear and undisputed. Had it not been for the uncertainty of interpreting the political implications of *doi moi*, they would have been able to say, more convincingly, "Do not listen to what Kiet & Co. are saying, but see what they are doing!" Yet, had it not been for *doi moi*, the visit would not have happened. This serves to illustrate again the point I made in chapter 6, that the way the secular leadership seeks to preserve an unanimous, anti-Communist refugee identity is to focus on crimes committed by the Communists during the Cold War.

NETWORKS OF COMMUNITY

Community

Before considering the part networks of the exile community play in the lives of *Viet kieu*, we need to reflect on some basic questions: What is "community" to a Vietnamese person? What contributes to a feeling of "we-ness" (*tinh chung*), to a common feeling of "friendship or love" (*tinh nghia*)? Whatever answers one might give to such questions, they should reflect the polytheticity of the category of *nguoi Viet*, or "Vietnamese person(s)", itself. I have touched upon this polytheticity several times, notably in chapter 4, where I pointed at the apparent paradox that the differences that separate the Vietnamese do not interfere significantly with their defining themselves as belonging to this one category. As I mentioned, I take this

[97] This is further complicated by the fact that Vo Van Kiet is generally perceived to represent a more liberal faction within the Party, trying to reform the system from within, in opposition to hard-line "conservative" Communists.

to be a product of Vietnamese nation-building, as outlined in chapter 2. *Viet* identity was further consolidated in exile, as the boundaries between themselves and the "host populations" were drawn, as described in chapter 3. *Viet kieu* identity is in the making, such as I outlined above, the confrontation with the realities of today's Vietnam acting as a catalyst in this process.

Sociologically, as has been pointed out, defining "community" is a task which 'causes immense difficulty' (Cohen 1985:11). In the context of de-territorialised populations such as the *Viet kieu*, I find it useful to follow Cohen's argument that:

'We do not have to construe community just in terms of locality, but more properly, in (...) the sense of a primacy of belonging. Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call "society." ' (Ibid.:15).

Belonging to a "culture in exile" (cf. chapter 4) is mainly what they have in common: the distinctiveness of Vietnamese food, language and cult practices, all revolving around the family as an ideal, organising principle. These are the "pillars of the diasporic homes" - as I called them in chapter 4 - in Australia, France, and California alike, as they are in Norway. Yet the concept "*Viet kieu* community" is not in common use among the *Viet kieu* themselves - with the notable exception, as Thach indicated at the beginning of this chapter, by people who see themselves as leaders of such a community. Paradoxically, their leadership is mostly based on a commitment to the common past and future of Vietnam and the *Viet kieu*, rather than to a separate present of the *Viet kieu* community.

The relationship between the Vietnamese nation as an imagined community, and the *Viet kieu* community, is a close one. Anderson's words apply to both:

'It [the nation] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (...) In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. (...) Finally, it [the nation] is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.' (Anderson 1991:6-7).

Vietnamese national discourse derives much of its imagery and popular appeal from the same sources as the *Viet kieu* community, namely from the nuclear family and the village. Precisely because this blurs some of the extreme differences between the members of the nation, for instance poetically referring to Vietnam as *que huong* ("homeland", lit. "country village") has proved extremely powerful. I shall return to this in the final chapter. Let us first consider how the potential of a *Viet kieu* community is actually activated. In the words of Clifford which we remember from chapter 4, 'the more individualistic, existential focus of the [exile] is tempered by networks of community, collective practices of displaced dwelling in the [diaspora]' (Clifford 1994:329). In the following, I shall consider the importance of such practices.

Networks

When I think of the collective practices of *Viet kieu* dwelling, 'The image I have is of a set of points some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, or sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact with each other.' (Barnes 1954, as quoted in Hannerz 1980:164). Barnes' image of social networks derives from his observations of a small fishing village in Norway. One might expect such a local community to have few characteristics in common with a transnationally dispersed community like that of the *Viet kieu*. Yet Barnes' abstraction, in having 'no great respect for conventional boundaries' (Hannerz 1980:174), and in making it possible to let go of the conventional presuppositions of territorial boundedness, is particularly "good to think with" when it comes to widely dispersed communities. As Longva (1993:11) observes, 'An implication of migration is the extreme unboundedness of social networks and universe of discourse and relationship'.

A steady flow of communications, as well as the distribution of *Viet* commodities, is essential to the existence of an active *Viet kieu* transnational community. 'Separate places become effectively a single community "through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information" [Rouse (...)].'

(Clifford 1994:303) Partly, it is a matter of transmitting along the networks what, especially before *doi moi*, gradually achieved the character of an 'imaginary homeland' (Rushdie 1991) of an increasingly mythical past. The significant items were the same as those considered necessary to construct and maintain Vietnamese homes: foods, items of worship, videos and music, letters and literature - through which are distributed sentiments, gossip, news and information from Vietnam and the *Viet kieu* community. Partly, it is also the simple fact that people do know one another, regardless of the distance separating them: as with other diasporic populations, family and friends do not cease to be family and friends just because they live far apart. Continued contact is, in our times, greatly facilitated by efficient means of communication. This is particularly true for the *Viet kieu*, who are mostly living in rich countries, where the infrastructures of telecommunication and air travel are highly developed and widely available.

All the above examples of network practices also exemplify how people spend their energy and care, their time and money. Spending patterns in a more strictly economic sense also indicate the strength of bonds between people. Remittances are an important indicator of such bonds. Part of practically every *Viet kieu* household's expenditures, remittances go mainly to family and kin living in Vietnam. According to Hitchcox (1990:44), 'A survey conducted in 1987 by the Vietnam Government found that 60 per cent of the people living in Saigon relied upon receiving assistance from relatives living abroad'. Economic help to family members is also extended to newcomers within the *Viet kieu* community:

> One of Dung's sisters, who lives in California, invited Dung and Thach to come and see her. Because the sister and her husband were long established in the West, with jobs, while Dung and Thach had only recently arrived, the sister had offered to pay the fare. Dung showed me the letters from California, and sighed: 'We can't go anyhow - we're not Norwegian citizens yet, there is no way we can obtain entry visas for the United States.'

A different aspect of *Viet kieu* networks are the variety of religious, social and political activities. Buddhist monks, like the ones we have met while they were visiting the new temple (*chua*) outside Oslo, serve here to exemplify the extensive

contact between *Viet kieu* "professional" religious persons. Lay people, too, travel to other parts of Norway, or to other European countries, in order to join their co-religionists at holiday camps, *Tet* and other celebrations and meetings for *Viet kieu* Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostalites or Buddhists.

Like the religious organisations, Vietnamese Refugee Associations, Students' Associations and many other membership organisations claim to be "non-political", and deal with educational programmes, professional activities or local *Viet kieu* community work. Whether it is at all possible to be "non-political", and whether some of the organisations may be involved in homeland politics in spite of their expressed objectives to the contrary, is hotly debated. The suggestion that perhaps the Vietnamese Professionals' Society wanted to help Hanoi, in the above example from the Vietnamese Students' Association meeting, may be seen in this light.

A further extract from my notes made at this meeting illustrates another point, namely that communication with Vietnamese outside the local, not to say peripheral, Norwegian context is an important concern:

> A guest from the Vietnamese community in *bac Cali* ("North California") gave a talk about the importance of communication between the *Viet kieu* in different parts of the world through fax, e-mail, and the Internet. People were really enthusiastic to get the details on this, and asked a lot of questions. The main problem discussed was how to connect the Norwegian *Viet kieu* to the American parts of the Internet, for communication with the many Vietnamese there. At the break, people crowded around the stands where Vietnamese software, made in America and France, was sold.

Apart from the Internet, which is both a means of two-ways' communication and a mass medium, there are the other, long established kinds of mass media, such as books, newspapers, newsletters and magazines. Many of these are published in France and California, and read, say, in Scandinavia, Holland, or Germany. To my knowledge, such printed media are not available in shops in Oslo - one has to subscribe, to order by mail, or borrow from others. This applies to Norwegian-Vietnamese newsletters, too, such as the *Vuot Song* ("Across the Waves"), published by the *Hoi Nguoi Viet ty nan tai Na Uy* ("Association of Vietnamese Refugees in

Norway"). Then there is the video industry, which has a large market among the *Viet kieu*. Videos serve as global transmitters of *Viet kieu* music, poetry, and fashion. Immensely popular are the glittering "American-style" shows produced in California, Sydney and Paris, with names like "Hollywood Night", "Paris by Night" or *Dem Saigon* ("Saigon Night") (cf. chapter 6). Another popular genre is the village comedy, with Vietnamese actors in today's Vietnam. These partly nostalgic, partly mocking, always stereotyped, presentations of Vietnamese village life are produced in Vietnam and distributed in the diaspora, where they are widely popular. There are several shops specialising in Vietnamese videos and music in central Oslo. People also distribute videos and music among themselves. Like books and magazines, videos can easily be sent by mail, or brought along in the luggage at the end of a visit abroad.

Viet kieu to a large extent spend their holidays visiting one another. Depending on their means, and on where their kin and friends live, they may go to other parts of Norway, or to Paris, or in some cases even to California, in order to visit friends and relatives, to eat Vietnamese food, perhaps rather than to do conventional sightseeing. American *Viet kieu*, for instance, use the Internet to get information about the best places to have *pho* ("wide rice noodle soup") when they go on holiday to other parts of the *Viet kieu* world. As Hannerz (1990:243) puts it, 'a surrogate home is (...) created with the help of compatriots, in whose circle one becomes encapsulated'. The circle of *Viet kieu* compatriots is one that transcends locality.

So far, I have concentrated mostly on how people spend their free time, their time at home - except for the few, such as shopkeepers or the professionally religious, whose professions at least partly involve distributing requisites of "home", or "homeland", to others. What about work, one might ask - how do people generally link their professional occupations to their leisure preoccupations? Considering that Vietnamese "professional occupations" in Norway range from unemployment via language courses, shopkeeping and factory work to engineering and medicine, a general answer to this might not prove very useful. Nevertheless, I

venture to suggest that, in broad terms, work is important partly as a source of income which is preferentially invested in the *Viet kieu* networks, partly as a way towards paying the debt to Norway for giving refuge. Only a few - such as academics, religious leaders, journalists, artists, or wealthy business people - have the opportunity to be "full-time *Viet kieu*", to make a living from activities related to the *Viet kieu* community. To some, the attractions of such full-time involvement are less than obvious:

> Phong left Vietnam with his parents at the age of 15. He is keenly interested in cultural and social matters, reads a lot, spends most of his money on books and periodicals on Vietnam, and even writes articles himself. 'People are surprised, they ask me why I don't try to become a journalist instead of an engineer. But I want to be able to stay outside the debates, to observe what is going on, to know everything that is going on, as a neutral person. It is difficult to take part in the discussions. Norwegians can discuss anything and afterwards things go on as before. With Vietnamese, it is different. People can get very upset - especially older people, because of the war. They are very categorical. If they come from the South, they find it impossible to co-operate with people from the North. We younger people see that there is some good on both sides, that it is better to co-operate.' I asked him why he is so keen to know all about what is currently going on in Vietnam. He said he was always interested in reading and knowing these things, even when he was a boy in Saigon - it is not something he started doing here. He gets a lot of material from Vietnamese publishers in the US and Canada, and offered to help me get lists of books for mail ordering.

Centres and peripheries

How much the Norway Vietnamese participate in the mainstream diaspora culture is hard to specify, partly because it is difficult to measure the kinds of activity involved: how much do they contribute to it, and how much do they simply consume? Systematic investigation along these lines would be beyond the scope of this thesis. It is, however, worth noting that the information I do have is mainly of the kinds available at the consumption end. This relates to the fact that in Norway, there is very little production of Vietnamese requisites for the larger *Viet kieu* market. The only instance I have heard of when it comes to contributions from

Norway is that the book *Nauy va toi* ("Norway and I"), written by a Vietnamese woman settled in Norway (cf. chapter 7), was very popular among the Vietnamese in California.

Some items are produced in Norway and distributed for consumption within the country. This includes printed matter, notably the newsletters of various membership organisations. There is also a modest and mainly seasonal production of food for sale, such as garden products - mainly herbs and vegetables - *trung vit lon* ("ducks' eggs with the duckling inside"), the *Tet* "cakes" (*banh chung*), and other "cakes" (*banh*). These products may be distributed directly to other Vietnamese, or sold through the shops owned by Vietnamese or Chinese. Apart from this, most *Viet* necessities which are not also available on the general Norwegian or immigrant market,[98] are imported to Norway.

This is in part due to obvious climatic restrictions: growing tropical fruits and vegetables, not to mention rice, in Norway is practically impossible. There are also structural reasons behind it, such as the immense bureaucratic complexities and expenses involved, say, with buying farmland, or with setting up a production unit of a size corresponding to a transnational market. Being able to overcome and adapt to such restraints inevitably takes time and money. The Vietnamese in Norway, unlike their fellows in France and the United States, have not had a colony of pre-1975 old-timers to lean on. Also, the generally strong homeward orientation has made them inclined to wait and see, investing what resources they may have had in remittances, in upholding the network itself, in immediate consumption, or in more central parts of the world (re-emigration is an extreme example of this, and may also be seen as a way of getting nearer to "home") rather than in long-term investments in remote Norway.[99]

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[98] Vietnamese do, of course, buy a large proportion of what they need for everyday life - pork, beef and chicken, onion and cabbage, clothes, detergent, and many other things - in shops run by people who are not associated with the *Viet kieu* community. Also, shops which do form part of the *Viet kieu* networks, obviously do not get their goods exclusively from *Viet kieu* partners.

[99] This seems to be changing... The number of Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese shops in East Central Oslo has certainly increased since I started fieldwork.

The main centres of production of specifically *Viet* essentials are, apart from Vietnam itself, located in the United States of America, in France, and in Australia. As far as I have been able to find out, California would probably top a list of exporters of Vietnamese commodities. *Viet kieu* living in Norway are in this sense doubly "peripheral". The Norway *Viet kieu* are not necessarily passive subjects within the larger system. Vietnamese-ness does not spring from California, but dates back to a time and a place in which all *Viet kieu* have their share. One may, however, suggest that the present *Viet kieu* reconstruction and negotiation of Vietnamese-ness is a process in which Norway *Viet kieu* are not able to make themselves heard as much as their more centrally placed fellows. In this crucial process, they are also at the receiving end.

This is a truth qualified by differences that are not geographical. The degree of influence people have on what is transmitted through the *Viet kieu* networks is also a matter of class. I mentioned above that only a few occupational categories, such as academics, religious leaders or "big" business people, have the opportunity to be involved with the transnational *Viet kieu* community on a full-time basis. In terms of class, these categories may be further divided in two on the basis of Vietnamese criteria: wealthy business people and artists on the one hand, and people with the higher status of secular or religious teachers on the other. *Viet kieu* engineers, doctors, priests, and other professionals are both formally - through their organisations - and informally in touch with each other transnationally. It is among these people that we find most of the *Viet kieu* leaders. Business people may influence the networks in so far as they actively make use of *Viet kieu* networks in their businesses, the obvious example being those who import and distribute *Viet* commodities.

Most *Viet kieu* - as indeed, most Vietnamese - do not belong to any of these two categories. Both "fishermen" and "ordinary people" (Longva 1987) find themselves more in the roles of consumers. In terms of friends and family as well as of consumption, however, most - if not all - have a strongly transnational aspect to their life-worlds. Yet keeping up a frequent level of communication in personal

relationships, too, is easier the more education or wealth one possesses: literacy is a condition for writing and reading letters, money is a condition for telecommunication and travelling.

What constitutes the "centre" of people's worlds is, needless to say, a matter of context. In national terms of "homeland", the centre for all *Viet kieu* is Vietnam. It is the Vietnam of village and countryside, it is pre-revolutionary Hanoi, which symbolises the mythical past, and Saigon, which to many stands for the present and the future, as well as for the immediate past. Locating "homeland" is perhaps not as simple as it may seem. Locating "home" may turn out to be an even more complex task.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER EXILE

HOME AND HOMELAND

Some Vietnamese concepts

As I indicated in the last chapter, *Viet kieu* networks transmit meanings of homeland as well as meanings of home. This relates to the fact that Vietnamese national discourse - in exile as in Vietnam - has drawn extensively on symbols of family and village. In other words, the "homeland" derives much of its appeal from the realm of "home". Let us examine some of the concepts and images which are crucial to understanding how this works.

The Vietnamese word for "home" is the same as for "house", *nha*. Your *nha* is not only the physical construction, the space, but also includes the people who share the dwelling with you, transforming the space into a socially meaningful unit. "Home", then, is "the house" as well as the "household" and the "conjugal relationship". This is further confirmed in the compound terms *nha toi*, which may be rendered "my house", but also, notably, "my wife", and *nguoi nha*, which means "people belonging to the house", but also "people belonging to the family" as well as, by extension, "close friends considered part of the family".

The *nha*, as "house", had to be left behind in Vietnam, and was usually either sold or confiscated. In many cases, the flight was the last in a series of "moving house" in Vietnam. It should be kept in mind that people have migrated, more or less of their own choice, from North to South Vietnam, and from village to city, for centuries. I have been told of how houses were taken over by the Communists, who made people "voluntarily" transfer the ownership of their houses and belongings to the government.

However, the *nha* as "home" can be, and is, brought along into exile. As we have seen above - particularly in chapters 4, 5, and 6 - people actively transform their new, alien houses into homes. The presence of family members (*nguoi nha*) is the single most important criterion. Other pillars of the exile homes are altars to the ancestors and to other tutelary spirits, and the use of Vietnamese foods. Thus, the concept of home is present both as an ideal model for construction, and as physical realities as this process of construction gradually causes new homes to appear.

Another significant term is *que* ("native village", "countryside"), which appears in compounds like *que nha* ("native country") and, very much to the point at hand, *que huong* ("native land, homeland"). *Huong* is another word for "village", giving emphasis and weight to this doubled element in a sentence - but its homonym means "fragrance" or "perfume". The word-play speaks to well-known poetic images of misty, fragrant landscapes, of lush, emerald green paddy fields, of herbs and cooking, of flowers and incense. These impressionistic connotations evoke nostalgic memories of individual, sensory experiences of one's own particular home, which becomes a metonym for the homeland. As I argued in chapter 6, these individual memories and emotions merge in a collective veneration of *que huong*, the homeland, which in exile is an abstraction, a synthesis, of the shared feelings of bereavement.

> One of the demonstrators against Prime Minister Kiet's visit to Norway explained to me: 'We have so many words for homeland - *que huong*, or *to quoc*[100], for example. We Vietnamese who live outside of Vietnam most often say *que huong*'. I asked: 'As in village, or countryside?' He replied: 'No, no - well, in a way, literally speaking, but to us it is homeland.'

The homeland, *que huong*, as a physical reality is spatially bounded, and cannot be brought along. Unlike the home, it cannot be reconstructed in exile. It is the whole village and its surroundings, and by extension all of Vietnam, with paddy fields, rivers and mountains, the landscape as a whole. Yet the abstract idea of it, the mythical *que huong*, does travel. Indeed, it has travelled for centuries already: with

[100] "Fatherland", see below.

migrants and refugees from North and Central Vietnam to the deep South, from villages to cities, and across the waves, to freedom in the non-Communist West.

Nuoc is also an important term: on its own, it translates "country", "nation", or "state" - and, curiously, "water", "liquid". The hidden sense of this apparent self-contradiction is apparent in the compound terms *non nuoc* and *dat nuoc*, "mountain (and) water" and "land (and) "water" respectively. From chapter 2, we may also recall the similar compound term *giang son*, "rivers and mountains".[101] As Schafer (1985:8) shows, such coupling of contradictory terms serves as a means to bridge real or potential opposition, as a 'myth-evoking strategy'. He argues convincingly that:

'It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of coupling in Vietnamese language and culture. Vietnamese describe their country as emerging from the reconciling of oppositions between dragon and fairy, sea and mountain, water and land. The creation of nationhood is mirrored in the process of idiomization of the coupled expressions con rong chau tien ["children (of) dragon (and) grandchildren (of) fairy"] and dat nuoc ["land (and) water].' (ibid.:13)

Hence *non nuoc*, *dat nuoc*, or simply *nuoc*, refer to the nation. Yet at the same time, like *que huong* and *giang son*, it refers to the special place which each person has in mind when talking about the nation: again, we may speak of a metonymic relationship. The *nuoc* merges with the homeland in idioms such as *que huong nuoc me*, "mother country". In this expression, *nuoc* also refers to the waters surrounding and protecting the child within the womb. This is evident in that one cannot say *que huong nuoc cha*: there is no such thing as *nuoc cha* ("water [of] father"). In *que huong nuoc me*, then, the mythical "homeland of home", of village and landscape, is linked to the close bonds of mother and child. Thus, an image of the nation as a nurturing, mythical "Motherland" emerges, and the bonds between land and people parallel the unbreakable bonds uniting Mother and child.

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101 'The state gives worship officially to the spirits of the "Rivers and Mountains" (...). But more popular spirits are those which each village designates by an encompassing general term, "Rivers and Mountains". It is these, rather than the spirits given official status by the government, which are the true protectors of the community. (...) whenever a Vietnamese wishes to give expression to his love for the special locality that was his birthplace, it is always these spirits that he will name, whether ceremonially or in everyday speech.' (Cadière [1944] 1989:25).

The concepts I have discussed so far evoke images of a mythical and nostalgic nature, which easily lend themselves to a "politization of individual homesickness" (Warner 1994). They refer to a "traditional", rural life "behind the bamboo hedgerow", where the individual is at home, both with people and with place, as poignantly expressed by a *Viet kieu* in the following poem:

The bamboo hedgerow cut a dark-green swath
across the autumn field of golden rice.
Over the blue of mountains blurred in mists,
the azure skies, a few white clouds on high.

Screened by bamboos, the village showed no stir,
yet something brewed and smoldered, live, inside.
It had the farmers' simple thatch-roofed huts;
it had those people who'd brave rain and sun,
all forces quiet but persistent, tough,
those buffaloes so gentle and so fierce,
a life at one with nature, flowing on
as slowly months and years or seasons flow,
a clean, plain world of toil with decent dreams
nursed in the shadow of those tall bamboos,
with joys from caring for the green rice shoots
while gladly feet tramped mud and hands touched soil.

Those tall bamboos once screened a good, full life
with plantains lush amid aureca palms,
with ponds where fishes swarmed, with plots of greens
and yellow flowers speckling mustard-beds.
At daybreak, roosters crowed and hailed the dawn,
the age-old chime of clocks for rural folks,
the soul of life that sang a hymn of triumph,
the friendly call that woke the village up.

That bamboo hedgerow! Once, behind it all,
when autumn breezes brought a hint of grief,
when rice spread wafts of scent around the house,
I suddenly felt so sad for no real cause.
The cherished scene my heart could not let go
lies now beyond the seas, beyond the clouds.
Of that green bamboo hedgerow I still see
a swirl of autumn leaves all through my soul.

(Nam Xuyen 1983)

This happy land is one of simple, informal lifestyles and hard work for all, yet one of shared hardships and shared bliss. It is a land where the Mother is loved for nurturing her children, where time follows the cyclical rhythm of the seasons, and where spring is celebrated as the time for young, romantic love. It is localised Community.

As taken up in chapter 7, Hickey (1964) links the concept of *Gemeinschaft* - as well as those of Durkheim's mechanical solidarity and of Redfield's little community model - to his own observations of a South Vietnamese village. I further pointed out that there are many resemblances between Hickey's observations and Hy Van Luong's (1990) "non-male-and elite-oriented", alternative model which is based on the nuclear family, *nha*, and by extension on the village, *lang*. In turn, I argued that this model, with its tendency towards equality and informality, is strengthened in exile. Where Tönnies and Redfield took locality for granted, Hickey pointed out that:

'The people of Khanh Hau are not descendants of ancestors who have lived in this place a thousand years, perpetuating a parochial village world. Their ancestors were migrant people - pioneers who left their natal places in the narrow coastal plane of central Vietnam about a century ago (as, indeed, *their* ancestors had quit their places of origin in the past) to settle in the strange new surroundings of the vast delta of the Mekong river.' (Hickey 1964:285, emphasis in the original)

The "classical" aspects of community which we find in the works of Durkheim, Tönnies and Redfield, such as homogeneity and mechanical solidarity, are picked up by Luong in his "communitas" model. However, his model differs significantly from the functionalist tradition in that it has spatial unboundedness as an important characteristic. Applying Luong's model to my material, we find that the *Viet kieu* community is reproduced through mechanisms that differ widely from those associated with "traditional" Vietnamese village life, that are innovative.

These are mechanisms that seem to be common to many diaspora communities. I shall return to this point towards the end of this chapter.

Quoc ("nation-state", "country"), is, intuitively, a different kind of term. This concept brings us abruptly back into the realm of politics and power, of prestigious hierarchy, and of Confucian ideals. This is all the more evident in that it appears in compounds such as *quoc gia* ("nation", "national") and, significantly, *to quoc* (lit. "country [of the] ancestors"; "fatherland", "native country"). This is reminiscent of the realm of Luong's male- and elite-oriented model which, as we remember, he links to the patrilineage as the basic social unit, with the nation-state as its extension.

How, then, about the *quoc* - the nation-state, and the *nuoc* - the nation: do they travel? The nation-state is by definition territorially bounded. It is also a political entity, requiring a state apparatus and government. History has given us various examples of exiled and exile governments that have seemed to enjoy the support of "their" people, whether the latter be in exile or not, as well as the recognition of other nation-states. However, no one has so far succeeded in earning the broad support necessary for an exile government in the Vietnamese case.

Yet the South Vietnamese flag, strictly speaking symbol of the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975), is still presented by many, especially by hard-line anti-Communists, as their true flag, the "Freedom Flag" of Vietnam. It is the paramount symbol of Vietnamese anti-Communism, and at the same time - in the eyes of anti-Communists - of the only legitimate government of the nation since before the French. Thus this version of the idea of the nation, which is a version of the nation itself, is kept alive in exile. This may serve to exemplify Appadurai's general observation: 'the nationalist genie (...) is now itself diasporic' (1993:413).

Let us return again to Luong's two models. As we recall, he contends that in the case of the male- and elite-oriented model, the *ho* or spatially bound patrilineage is the basic social unit, and, further, that the same principles of hierarchical formality apply on a larger scale in the *quoc* or nation-state. He also points out that this model is, in broad terms, more dominant in North Vietnam than

in the South, and less dominant in exile than in Vietnam. On the other hand, Luong argues, the alternative model has as its basic unit the spatially unbound *nha*, or conjugal family. The tendencies within this model of relative informality and equality are also present on a larger scale in the village, *lang*. Within the alternative model, distinction is applied not so much hierarchically as between insiders and outsiders, in what I noted was similar to the horizontal language of egalitarianism. In terms of philosophy and cosmology, the male- and elite-oriented model is closely related to Confucianism, whereas the alternative model is more easily associated with Buddhism, Taoism, as well as other, less academically elaborated systems of "popular" beliefs and practices.

Let us examine the consequences of this analysis for the concepts of home and homeland as I have ventured to describe them above. How do they fit into these two models? To suggest a simple and rigid classification within one model or the other would fail to do justice to the interwoven nature of these models. I will not attempt to do this, but suggest the following illustration:

male- and elite-oriented model	alternative model
(home-as-) homeland	(homeland-as-) home
patrilineage	conjugal family
separation of the sexes	unity of opposite-sex individuals
nation-state	village
temporally unbound	temporally bound
linear time	cyclical time
spatially bound	spatially unbound
formal	informal
higher - lower	inside - outside
North Vietnam	South Vietnam

I will return to this towards the end of the chapter. First, however, we need to consider more closely not only the dimension of space, but also the dimension of time.

TIME

As Warner (1994:21) points out, 'We can go back to a place, but we cannot go back in time'. In the following, I will attempt to outline some of the implications of this to Vietnamese refugees' conceptualisations of home and homeland. The first ten years after 1975, filling their ascribed, collective identity of "refugee" with constructive meaning was a major concern. At the end of this period, Longva observed: 'The way to reconcile refugeeness and belonging to a homeland is by linking them to the concept of communism (...) The refugees are not simply victims, they are martyrs, people who suffer for a well-defined and noble cause, that of freedom (*tu do*)' (Longva 1987:123ff.). She continues:

'The refugees now find it possible to nurture the conviction that they are not here to stay. The mystique of return has rapidly gained grounds (...)' (loc. cit.). 'By equating anti-communism with love of homeland, and support of communism with its betrayal, the Vietnamese are establishing a charter for identity management which makes it possible to counter-balance the stigmatizing effects of refugeeness. (...) what we are witnessing here is an ethnic group in the process of "writing its social biography" (...). A group's biography explains and legitimates the group's existence.' (ibid.:134f.)

As these observations were made, the policies of *doi moi* were in their infancy; as we have seen (cf. chapter 2), they were decreed by the 6th Party Congress in 1986. In 1996, as the present thesis is nearing its conclusion, and the Socialist Republic is preparing for the 8th Party Congress, *doi moi* is completing its first decade. Equating love of homeland with anti-Communism is becoming increasingly complex as Communism combines with Capitalism. The very legitimating basis for their painfully established identity as anti-Communist, refugee martyrs has become subject to discussion.

Home and homeland are shifting notions. What they refer to varies from one person to another, depending on which stage of the life-cycle they are in, as well as on their occupations, their social statuses, geographical backgrounds and so on. It also varies for the transnational *Viet kieu* community as a whole, depending on factors such as change of political orientation in the Vietnam regime, on the economic ups and downs in Vietnam, or on Vietnam's reputation in the world - as a

closed country or as a popular tourist spot. Through the following examples, I shall attempt to illustrate some of this variability.

Home, or homeland, revisited?

In chapter 6, I pointed out that the opening of opportunities to go back to visit Vietnam gave rise to conflict among the *Viet kieu*. Two perspectives on the action of *ve tham*, or "returning to visit", clashed. The critical point related to the meaning of Vietnam itself, to the distinction between a timeless, homeland-as-home on the one hand, and homeland as a politically governed, temporally and spatially bounded entity on the other. Some, in particular those belonging to the association leaderships, subscribed to the latter view and maintained that returning to visit Vietnam was a betrayal of the collective identity as anti-Communist refugees. In this perspective, the return to the homeland, indeed the return of the exiled, mythical homeland to its rightful territory, should only come at the end of exile, which was equated with the end of Communist government in Vietnam. Initially, this stance was hegemonic, in line with the previous state of things. To the majority of lay association members, however, going back also meant fulfilling a dream of seeing old parents and other family members again, and of visiting their home villages - their own particular *que huong*. Increasingly, this majority have defied their old leadership. Many have gone back, others have given moral support to those who have returned to visit. In the process, the majority's view has - at least for the time being - gained the upper hand.

> 'Those who are sceptical to participate in *doi moi* are gradually becoming a minority among the refugees, because too many feel tempted to go home and live in the lap of luxury' (Nhat, June '93)

A third, and probably growing, category consists of young *Viet kieu* who have little or no personal memories of the *que huong* they have inherited from their parents, and who go there to search for it for themselves. For this category, the old distinctions between Communists and anti-Communists have little relevance to their own immediate experiences. Considering the powerful effect of the "old

symbols" such as the "Freedom Flag" as an expression of anti-Communist love of homeland, the following statement from a young girl is an example of this generational difference:

> 'Those [yellow and red] colours of the old flag doesn't really mean much to us young people anymore', Van explained to me.

Whether these young people find their own *que huong* in Vietnam or not is an open question. Perhaps by way of compensating their untimely crossing of moral and political boundaries, accounts of the dangers of *ve tham* - mainly in the form of confrontations with poverty, disease, corruption and crime - make up a large proportion of the narratives of those who have returned to visit (cf. chapters 5 and 6), regardless of their backgrounds.

> Thuy said she doesn't think she will be going back soon again. She can't afford it: ' - it's not just the fare, but going there you have to give away money, everybody asks you, even the family. It's just money, money, money - they don't see you, only your money.'
>
> Trinh told me that many *Viet kieu* go back to Vietnam to visit (*ve tham*) but could not imagine going back to stay, living there. They are afraid of robbers and of being cheated and dare not go out alone.

Life is "there", not "here".

The experience of utter contrast between Vietnam and Norway is a striking one, and perhaps above all an experience of the senses, of the body. To me, arriving in Saigon was a physical shock, and it took weeks to get accustomed to the humid heat, the noise, the crowds of people, the traffic, the smells - in short, to what initially amounted to an invasion of my totally unprepared sensory apparatus. The confrontation with the cold quiet of Norway must be equally awesome for people whose senses are adjusted to the intense and tropical vivacity of Vietnam. Upon my return to Norway, the still and eery emptiness of Oslo was frightening even to me, who had, after all, only been away from my home town for two months.

These contrasts seem to be a favourite topic among Norway Vietnamese, whether they have just arrived, or have been in Norway for a long time. Dung had been in Norway for barely a year, when she told me:

> 'I do miss Vietnam. I don't go outdoors very much here. It is very cold, and there is nobody. Vietnam, now, that's completely different, that's *nhon nhip* ("full of life") !'

Hoa came to Norway 13 years before Dung, and has not been back to visit Vietnam. Let us give the word to her, as she looks partly at my photographs from Vietnam, partly at her own memories:

> 'Oh look, how nice, the Cathedral! It is so beautiful,' Hoa said wistfully, as she was looking through my photographs from Saigon [now Ho Chi Minh City]. 'On Christmas Eve, everybody used to be there - everybody.' I asked: 'The Catholics?' 'The Buddhists too. Everybody likes festivity! The square was just packed with people who gathered there, just before midnight, to be there the very moment Jesus was born. We always used to do that, too. The first year we were in Norway, we went to the centre of Oslo on Christmas Eve to share that great moment with all the people there. We looked by the Cathedral, and we looked in many other places, but we found nobody. So quiet! And terribly cold. There was nobody outside at all except us. We went back to our apartment, just the two of us, feeling very sad.'

Hoa and her husband had been trying to establish a belonging in Norway through linking a space - the Cathedral - and an event - Christmas - in a way which they believed to be universal, to transcend locality. Their disappointment was all the greater: even at the ultimate occasion for gregariousness, Norway showed no signs of life.

Unlike Hoa, Thuy and Phong came to Norway with their respective parents, and have both been living here since their early teens:

> Thuy told me: 'You have seen for yourself that life in Vietnam is much more difficult than here.' Phong intervened: 'But some things are good! For instance, many young people who have been living in Norway for some years, feel that they have lost a lot of time. Here, you have to be inside, closed up, there is nowhere to go, only the disco. I don't like discos, not everybody likes to go there. But in Vietnam life is open. Maybe a lot of people sleep in the same house, but in the daytime they go out, they don't stay at home, they go everywhere, to different

places. Then they go back home to sleep. Here, you don't talk to the people in your neighbourhood, you only say hello if you meet them. You can be at home alone, for a long time. Even if you are sick, or dead, your neighbours don't know anything. But you go to school and you meet your friends there instead. I have tried to describe life in Norway to people in Vietnam, but how can they understand? They can't imagine what it is like here at all. I have really tried, but it is not possible, it is so different from what they know.' I suggested that Norway is really quite boring, and they both sighed a little and said 'oh yes, so very boring...'

It struck me how similar these statements were in their presentations of Vietnam as full of life, with Norway as its antithesis - not as presenting death, but rather absence of life. How much of this is publicly approved and standardised discourse, how much is personal experience? People who left Vietnam at a very early age are living their lives here, but they will have been told over and over by their parents and other seniors how *nhon nhip* - "full of life", "bustling with activity", "noisy", "busy" - Vietnam is. In the stereotyped discourse, Vietnam is always *nhon nhip*; Norway is always quiet, frozen, lifeless and - void? It is as if time stood still, as if nothing happened - as if the time spent in Norway were just a parenthesis in one's real life. Thus the interim nature of exile is emphasised, in accordance with the still dominant homeward orientation. In this stereotype, Norway *Viet kieu* transmit the sense that they are not so much living their lives "contrapuntally"[102] as being half-asleep, dreaming about being awake, in Vietnam in the past and in the future. More central parts of the *Viet kieu* world are presented as being somewhere in between these extremes:

Van: 'I think Vietnamese in Norway stick together much more than Vietnamese in other places. I think it has to do with the climate, and with the environment - here, everything is so different. In America or France, it is not so cold, people are maybe not that different either. I went to Paris once, and we stayed in what is called the "Chinese" quarter. That was wonderful! The whole street was just Vietnamese, hairdressers', everything, a lot of good things to eat, a market, lots of

[102] In Said's sense of the term: 'both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occuring together contrapuntally.' (Cf. chapter 4)

people everywhere and everybody looked like me. In Norway, everything is so very different from Vietnam.'

To Van, then, the alien environment explains the crystallisation of "the Vietnamese" as "a group" in Norway. In the course of our talks, Van expressed ambivalent feelings: longing for a place to call her own, a place she has a part in, a right to, where she is not different; longing to see Vietnam, a place where everything is moving, activity, people, noise, colours, food. On the other hand she was afraid of being disappointed, of having her carefully preserved memories smashed by the ugliness of poverty, and by people who are like herself only on the outside, while inside they are corrupted by poverty and by Communism, not 'honest, trustworthy and open like Norwegians are'.[103]

HOME IS BELONGING

Nhat and I had a conversation about the meaning of "home" after he had read through my first draft of this thesis. I shall use the following extract of this conversation as a point of departure to discuss some of the central issues he introduced:

Nhat: 'Here are my conceptions of "home", they are my own personal ones, you understand: Geographically, "home" for me, my *nha*, is at my present address, just outside Oslo. If I am in Oslo, it is the place outside Oslo. If I am in Tønsberg, it is Oslo, as "Oslo and surroundings". But when we were in France this summer, both my wife and I made the slip of saying "Vietnam" when we meant "Norway". This shows that Norway is now our home. Nostalgically, my "home" has changed through life. First, it was Hanoi, from I left the North in 1954 to 1975.'
I: 'But you left Hanoi when you were very small, to live in the village, was that not your home?'
Nhat: 'Well - it is easier to think of Hanoi, there are so many poems, so many stories to help you remember.'
I: 'Maybe also it was a case of relative proximity as in the Norwegian home?'
Nhat: 'Yes - maybe - it could be that "Hanoi" represented the North. When I left Hanoi, I was neutral. During the whole period 1954 to 1975 I was politically

[103] Van's describing Norwegians as "open" may appear to contradict Phong's statement about Norwegians "not talking to their neighbours". On the other hand, it agrees with Norwegian self-presentations of themselves as straightforward and honest.

neutral, although I worked for the [South Vietnamese] government. In March 1975, I was actually in the US, but I went back even after the Communists came to power in the South, before they came to Saigon. I thought it would be possible to live under the new conditions. However, I was soon very frustrated. Hanoi was killed for me.'

I: 'From 1975 until you left Vietnam, what was home?'

Nhat: 'During this period there was no home, that is the time it took to take Hanoi away from me. From the time we left Vietnam, Saigon has been my nostalgic home. But there is a third nostalgic home, what to call it, utopic? Like in fairytales or dreams? I don't know if it will ever be, and it can be two different things: Either the New Vietnam, without Communism. Or here, in Norway, completely integrated in society.'

I: 'Then society will have to change?'

Nhat: 'Both society and I will have to change.'

I: 'With Norwegians, people who have lived all their lives in Oslo may still consider the farm of their ancestors their "home". To Vietnamese and to the Chinese too, ancestors seem to be even more important than they are to us, so maybe being buried where your ancestors are buried is a way of "going home"?'

Nhat: 'Well, maybe - we have a saying to console mourners: "Life is your temporary lodging, death is your coming home (*Song goi, chet ve*, or *Sinh ky tu qui* in Sino-Vietnamese)".'

I: 'How about you, does it matter to you where you will be buried?'

Nhat: 'No, because I have my own philosophy: although it sounds trite, home really is where your heart is. Sometimes, if I am in a room with only Norwegian people who are chatting to each other, and nobody is talking to me at all, I tell myself this, over and over again: "You are home, this is your home." I do this because the worst thing that can happen to anyone is being alienated. Another thing is that, for those who are still in Hong Kong camps, or others who have had no time to create a new home, it is easy to go back. But for us who left 5, 10 or 15 years ago, it is difficult indeed.'

In this conversation, several topics may be separated for analytical purposes. Nhat began his comments to my writing about "home" by describing how he perceives of his home at present - his home of the here and now, which constitutes the first topic. This contradicts the "official version" of the stereotyped discourse, where life in Norway seems to be of no significance in comparison to that in Vietnam.

He went on to the second topic, that of what he called his "nostalgic home", the reference of which has changed with the changing circumstances of his life, with the losses he has experienced.

From looking back to these shifting "nostalgic homes", Nhat turned towards future ones, introducing the concept of "utopic home", which constitutes a third topic. The two "happy endings" he delineates are completely different. One is the fulfilment of the Vietnamese refugees' "myth of return", completing their "social biography". The other deviates from this standard, and is a linear continuation of topic one. It opens for the constitution of not only the new "homes" of the first topic, but of new "homelands". However, Nhat makes it clear that he has little hope of ever seeing either of the two utopic homes he dreams of.

From changes in a linear time perspective, the conversation then turned to the fourth topic, namely how "home" relates to the changes in individual life cycles. The question of death and burial is particularly illustrative of this. Perhaps because of the dominance of the male- and elite-oriented, Confucian-inspired aspects of "the Vietnamese" in Western descriptions, one is inclined to over-emphasise the prominence of patrilineal ancestors, of native villages, that is: of ancestral land as the origin and the home. To Nhat, this is evidently not the whole picture - other considerations are just as important. What is more, the picture is moving, and adaptation to changing circumstances is part of it. This is also evident in those cases where people have actually passed away in Norway, and the question of burial comes up. To my knowledge, those relatively few who have as yet died in Norway are almost without exception buried in the local cemetery. In one case, however, the body was sent back to Vietnam for burial. This cost a fortune, which the family in Norway paid. On this occasion, Thuy told me that she thought most people could not afford this, although they would prefer to be buried in the family's soil, with the ancestors - because, as she explained it: 'Here, it is cold'. Hung held a different view. He told me that although he would like to be buried in China, his mother might want to be buried in Vietnam because her husband's grave is there. Dung said she would want to be buried in the South Vietnamese town

where she was born and grew up. But her parents, she said, should be buried - 'with their graves close together' - in Hanoi, where they lived until 1954. That these statements present ideals and should not be taken as absolute instructions for action, is indicated in that Hung and Thuy both, although in different cases, adamantly condemned the return of bodies for burial in Vietnam.[104]

> I: 'I heard that an old man's body was sent home, last year.' Hung: 'Yes, but many other people died here, they are buried here, old Mr. Loc for example. Silly to spend a lot of money to send the body - it is outrageously expensive - the money would have been better spent if the son had given it to build the temple here, like other people do. But they have a lot of money and he - the son, you understand, not the father, what could he do, he was already dead - wanted to be something - .' Me: 'Not humble?..' Hung: 'Exactly! not humble at all!' Dung said: '*La rung ve coi, la khi chet roi ho muon chon o que huong*' ("As the leaf falls it returns to the roots, that is, when people are dead they want to be buried in their home village"). I asked: 'How about *song goi, chet ve* ("life is your temporary lodging, death is your coming home")? Can you use that expression literally in this case?' Hung: 'Well - maybe, yes, if you like, in exile it could be used literally - but we normally understand it like an image, to console the dying and his or her family. Because we don't know where you go "back" to, we are not concerned with where we come from and where we go to, the important thing is to live your life so that society is a little bit better when you die than when you are born.'

Hung's pragmatic statement here shows that, although he and most other people seem to consider it optimal to return to the *que huong* in death, in practice other considerations may, and sometimes should, weigh more heavily. The construction of the temple in Norway is one such consideration. This temple brings with it an anchoring of the Norway *Viet kieu* - that is, the majority of non-Christians - to the new territory. So, very likely, do the tombs of those who are buried in Norway, to their surviving relatives.

In this light, it is suggestive that to Nhat, too, the problem of belonging to Norway was evidently more pressing than the question of burial in his native land. This was the fifth topic in our conversation, which was, one may note, also a return to the heart of the first and third topics - the constitution of new homes and new

[104] For reasons of discretion, I have decided not to include the case of which Thuy expresses her criticism.

homelands. But this time the image Nhat conveyed was not one of hopes of a future in the smooth, linear extension of past and present. Rather, it was one of broken lines and of obstacles to being at home, namely his sense of being alienated, denied belonging, in his daily life in Norway. Bauman gives a description of this sombre scenario:

'Though it effectively alienated its agents from their community of origin, assimilation did not lead therefore to a full and unconditional acceptance by the dominant nation. Much to their dismay, the assimilants found that they had in effect assimilated solely to the process of assimilation. Other assimilants were the only people around who shared their problems, anxieties and preoccupations. Having left behind their original community and lost their former social and spiritual affinities, the assimilants landed in another community, the "community of assimilants" - no less estranged and marginalized than the one from which they escaped.' (Bauman 1990:162)

I wish to underline at this point that my analysis should not be taken to imply that "they don't want to be integrated anyway" as if "we", or "the dominant nation" in Bauman's terms, were not responsible, and as if "they" were one person with one mind. Likewise, it should not be taken to imply that there be no need to let "them" inside if "they" seem to be happy enough in their new limbo homes - as if it were all turning out to the best for majority and minority alike. This relates to what I see as the dominant majority's attempt to wriggle out of the shared problem of integration (cf. chapter 3). Furthermore, as Malkki (1995:514) observes, 'belonging (identity, community) and not belonging (uprooting, exile) to a place are spiritualized in a broad sense of the word. And spiritualization can lead to dehistoricization and depoliticization'. This is supported by Clifford (1994:313): 'theories and discourses that diasporize or internationalize "minorities" can deflect attention from long-standing, structured inequalities of class and race'. In effect, a romantisation of diaspora may be another example of how 'the interchange of metaphors and their premises between scholars and politicians may lead to scholars' unforeseen legitimising of discrimination', as I pointed out in chapter 3 above.

From one painful issue, Nhat passed on to the final topic, which was the problem of repatriation after an extended period of exile. Said's question (1986:33):

'is there any place that fits us, together with our accumulated memories and experiences?' seems to be answered by Nhat: for those who have had the time to create new homes, new belongings, going back is difficult indeed.

AFTER EXILE: TOWARDS TRANSNATIONALISM AND DIASPORA?

'The irony (...) is that as actual places and localities become even more blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient. It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities [Anderson 1983] come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands (...) "Homeland" in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples (...) With meaning making understood as a practice, how are spatial meanings established? Who has the power to make places of spaces? Who contests this? What is at stake?' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:10-11)

The exiles' constructions of home and homeland may be sorted analytically into two main versions. One revolves around the concept of what I above called the "(home-as-) homeland". This version conforms to the categories of the national order. The emphasis is on 'thereness' (Said 1986:28) and 'homeward orientation' (Foner, in Watson 1977:138), directing attention towards Vietnam, "there": at present the Communist-ruled, corrupted state; in the mythical past and future an idealised, free Vietnam. This is the explaining and legitimising basis for the heroisation of the refugee identity, and corresponds to what Longva (1987) called the Vietnamese refugees' "social biography". It also has much in common with the social biographies of other refugee communities, such as the "mythico-history" narrated by Hutu refugees in a refugee camp in Tanzania (Malkki 1990).

The alternative version, on the other hand, turns upon the "(homeland-as-) home", and the *Viet kieu* community represents an exiled Vietnam "here". This version of the home and homeland has a vague, fluid contour, and the members of this transnational community - which transcends the categories of the national order - have hybrid, hyphenated identities. In this, it resembles the "flexible, pragmatic management of identities" that Malkki describes in the case of Hutu refugees who have settled in a town in Tanzania, which she contrasts to the camp

refugees' rigid "mythico-history" (ibid.). However, where the Hutu refugees were assimilated into the Tanzanian community to the extent that they were indistinguishable as a category from its other inhabitants, *Viet kieu* are categorised as different, and as separate, from their "hosts". They are left to forming their own community in exile.

The two versions are closely interconnected. Indeed, until the implementation of *doi moi*, the former version was hegemonic, and the other version remained its invisible basis and source of appeal. Only as the political changes in Vietnam made it difficult to sustain the clear-cut categories of their social biography did the home emerge as a value of its own. In practice, going home gained importance over consolidating the collective, politically defined refugee identity.

Increasingly, those who have little or nothing to gain from the national order seem to set it aside in their daily lives and decisions - Buddhism, and possibly other unlocalised ideologies taking over, opening for transnational or multilocal identification. As we have seen, the dissonance in the perception of the new signals from the Communists brought with it corresponding dissonance in the definition of opposition to the Communists, and of the right conduct. Many, especially among the young who had no personal experience with Communism, see no indisputable reason to distrust the present signals of change, and are tired of past conflicts. They want to live their lives now, and to plan their futures, be it in exile or in the rebuilding of Vietnam:

> I asked Van if she thought people choose their educational training according to what Vietnam needs - it sounds like they do, from they way they often talk about it? She replied: 'There are so many words, maybe it is a way of legitimising the choice of education but I don't think people are really planning to use it in Vietnam. People don't do anything, they just talk.'

This is a contest which the "nation's cult keepers" at the moment seem to be losing. This is not to say that anti-Communism as an absolute value is no longer important. Rather, people have found it possible to claim continued commitment to this value precisely by defining their visits as visits to their personal *nha* and the eternal *que huong*, not as visits to the Socialist Republic. The visits were de-politicised, for

instance through the recurring arguments that "it is easy to say that people who go to Vietnam are all Communists, if your whole family is with you here. It is not that simple for those who still have all of their family in Vietnam." (Cf. chapter 6.)

I have in the above used the terms "refugee(ness)", "exile", and "diaspora" as if they were interchangeable. Malkki (1995:513) argues that studies of "refugeeness" and "exile" represent two distinct discursive domains, the former of the national order, and the latter of the literary domain:

'(...) contemporary refugees as a mass phenomenon are subject to different representational conventions than are individual exilic figures. Into the contrast between "refugees" and "those in exile" is built a whole history of differences, (...) of different people's very different entanglements with the state and international bureaucracies that characterize the national order of things. (...) "Exile" connotes a readily aestheticizable realm, whereas the label "refugees" connotes a bureaucratic and international humanitarian realm.'

The aesthetic aspects inherent in this role of the "exile" as a heroically suffering figure are also apparent in the self-definition of Vietnamese refugees in Norway (cf. Longva 1987:124). In their construction of a social biography, they transformed the victimising "national order refugeeness" ascribed to them into an identity of meritorious, anti-Communist refugeeness. In this process of self-representation, they attempted to rid themselves of the "mass refugee" label and became a group formed by individuals with a common goal, namely freedom. The resulting political refugee identity appears to correspond closely to the exilic figures drawn by Malkki above. Exile in this sense is defined as a temporary loss of homeland to the Communists, and the end of their exile is equated with the final return to a non-Communist Vietnam.

However, they were far from being literary figures. Acting and living within the domain of the national order, they strove to preserve their nation abroad, in safety from the corrupting influences of Communism which temporarily occupied the nation's rightful territory. Yet any idea of categorical "purity" in the national order was greatly complicated by the important fact that the corrupters, too, were *Viet*. The Communists are Vietnamese supporting the wrong version of anti-

colonial nationalism, but as *nguoi Viet* they, too, have legitimate claims to the Vietnamese territory.

From the relation between being "refugees" and being "in exile", let us turn to the comparison of the notions of being "in exile" and being "in diaspora". Clifford (1994:311) argues that:

'Whatever their eschatological longings, diaspora communities are "not-here" to stay. Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place. (...) Diasporist discourses reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity.'

It seems to me that this describes the current tendency among my informants: from holding an ideologically hegemonic, one-dimensional homeward orientation, they are in the process of re-orienting themselves in many directions. The end of exile can no longer be clearly and unanimously defined as the return to a free homeland. Clifford continues (ibid.:321) that he is

'worried about the extent to which diaspora, defined as dispersal, presupposed a center. If this center becomes associated with an actual "national" territory - rather than with a reinvented "tradition", "a book", a portable eschatology - it may devalue what I called the lateral axes of diaspora.'

This statement seems to be reflected in the present shifting of *Viet kieu* orientations from "exile", as defined in contrast to the lost, national territory, towards "diaspora", defined in connection to other parts of the transnational community. Although this community defines its existence in relation to the national territory, it is not bounded to this territory.

What binds them together is their "portable eschatology", based on ideas of belonging to, and maintaining, a non-Communist Vietnamese, exiled nation. So far, to most of them it has smacked of a betrayal of this very eschatology to admit that the exile is no temporary state - in Clifford's terms, that they are "not-here" to stay. Even more problematic is the notion of calling anywhere but Vietnam, or one's own particular locality in Vietnam, *que huong*. Lurking in the shadows of

such re-definitions is the threat of the disintegration of the *Viet kieu* community itself, founded as it is on the shared notions of home and homeland. They construct Vietnamese diasporic homes which do not depend on rootedness in any one territory - rather, their links are to multiple localities. They do this in many different ways because they are different and have varying resources and interests, but they are still linked and they still need each other as parts of a greater Vietnamese whole - the *Viet kieu* community.

The legend of Tu Thuc as a narrative of exile dilemmas.

Nhat used the old legend of Tu Thuc as a metaphor for the fate of the *Viet kieu*: Centuries ago, Tu Thuc was a young mandarin who had won people's hearts due to his generous and just character. Near his home was a temple which was famous for the beauty of its flowers. One day, while he was visiting the temple, a young lady unintentionally broke off the most beautiful flower in the temple. The temple guards arrested her, but, seeing her distress, Tu Thuc gave the guards his silken cloak in return for her release. She bowed to him and quickly left. After this incident, Tu Thuc fell to gazing at the moon and reading poetry. He resigned from his post and became a wanderer. One day he was rowing in a small boat near the mouth of a river. A cloud, shaped like a lotus flower, hovered low over the water's surface. As he approached in curiosity, a mountain range suddenly appeared in front of his boat. He descended, and as he did so, a wall opened and revealed a cave inside the mountain. Tu Thuc entered, and the wall shut closed behind him. Following a wide road into the mountain, he saw before him a shining palace. Fragrant perfumes filled the air. In the palace, he was welcomed as a bridegroom. It turned out that his bride, the daughter of the *ba tien* ("lady of the *tien*") to whom the palace belonged, was no other than the young lady he had rescued at the temple of flowers. They lived together blissfully for many days. One day Tu Thuc led his bride to the top of the mountain and pointed at the water surrounding it, saying: 'While I have been living here in happiness, my old mother has no one to serve her. I had better return home (*ve que huong*) and arrange things for her. Then

I shall come back, and we shall live together for ever.' Weeping, his wife gave in to this, and they parted. But as Tu Thuc approached his old village, he recognised nothing except for an old mulberry tree by the river, and nobody knew him there. He asked the old people of his mother's whereabouts, and one of them told him: 'My great-grandfather told me that once upon a time there was a gentleman by the name of Tu Thuc who left this village. This was over five hundred years ago.' Sadly, Tu Thuc realised that a day in the world of the *tien* is a year in the world of men. Filled with endless grief, he turned to his boat to return to the world of the *tien*, but his boat had been transformed to a bird and was disappearing into the skies. Losing all hopes of seeing his young bride again, Tu Thuc set out for the mountains, leaving no trace behind him. (Nguyen Dong Chi 1993, my re-telling)

Nhat used this legend to illustrate the refugee's dilemma and pain of not belonging in either world. Here is a different world, and you do not belong. When you go back to the *que huong*, time has passed, and there is no home for you there either: the people do not know you, and you do not know them. We are left without knowing the end of the story.

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APPENDIX I

Abbreviations:

ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CPA - Comprehensive Plan of Action
DRV - Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam, 1945-1976)
IRAP - International Research and Advisory Panel (of the RSP)
NRK - *Norsk Rikskringkasting*; the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (the national radio and television company)
ODP - Orderly Departure Programme. Also used to denote persons who have left Vietnam through this programme.
RSP - Refugee Studies Programme, Oxford University
RVN - Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam, 1955 - 1975)
SRVN - Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VCP - Vietnamese Communist Party

Vietnamese terms used in the text, with diacritical marks:

Âm - yin, the female principle
An - to eat, also celebrate etc.
Com - boiled rice
Bánh - parcel, cake
Dôi moi - new change, economic reform, perestrojka
Duong - yang, the male principle
Hiêú - filial piety, based on the moral debt to one's parents for the gift of life
Ho - 1) patrilineage, family name/patronym. 2) extended, bilateral family. 3) they
Huong - 1) perfume, fragrance, incense. 2) village, countryside
Làng - village
Lê - ceremony, ritual, formal conduct
Mòi - request: as in the formal duty of the youngest/lowest person at table to invite or request each of his/her seniors to take part in the meal, beginning with the oldest/highest. Generally more elaborate in the North than in the South.
Na-Uy or Na Uy - Norway, Norwegian, Norwegians
Nghia - meaning, righteousness, loyalty, love, etc.
Nguòi - people, person
Nhà - house, home, household, bilateral family. Also wife, as in nhà tôi (my wife)
Non - mountain
Nuóc - water, liquid. Also - as in non nuóc - country, nation.
Nuóc mam - fish sauce
Phao - firecrackers
Pho - wide-rice-noodle soup
Quê - country(side)
Quê huong - homeland
Quê nhà - place of origin

Quôc - nation
(Tam) giao - (three) doctrines
Têt (Nguyên Dán) - Lunar New Year festival
Thân - (tutelary) spirit or deity
Tiên - immortal fairy, female spirit of the mountains and the heavens
Tình - sentiment, feeling
Trung - loyalty
Vê (tham) - go back, return (to visit)
Viêt Công (short for Viêt Nam Công San) - Vietnamese Communists
Viêt kiêu - overseas Vietnamese
Vuot biên - escape past the borders, flight, exodus

Kinship Terms, used as general Person Reference Terms (PRTs):

Anh - elder brother (also male cousin in a senior line)
Bác - father's elder brother
Cháu - niece, nephew or grandchild
Chi - elder sister (also female cousin in a senior line)
Chú - father's younger brother
Cô - father's younger sister
Con - son or daughter
Em - younger sibling (also cousin in a junior line)
Ông - grandfather (on both sides)

Non-kinship terms, used as PRTs (the three first are proper personal pronouns):

Mày - You, thou
Nó - He, she, it - from superior to inferior, or derogatory
Tao - I
Tôi - I, subject of the King
Mình - self, body, spouse, we (husband and wife)

APPENDIX II

Vietnamese (variously defined), by country of residence:

Country of residence	Number of residents from Vietnam.[105]	Number of resident Vietnamese speakers[106]	My own tentative estimates, where they diverge from the preceding, and based on various sources:
Australia	4,000		80,000
Cambodia		300,000 (1985)	
Canada	12,000		100,000 (source: Hitchcox 1990)
China		6,000 (1990)	
Côte d'Ivoire		not specified	
Denmark			5-10,000
France	80,000	10,000 (1975)	
Germany	12,000		
Hong Kong	56,000		mostly repatriated or resettled, about 19,000 left in camps
Indonesia	7,300		mostly repatriated or resettled
Japan	110		
Laos		70,000 (1984)	
Malaysia			mostly repatriated or resettled
New Caledonia		5,000 (1984)	
New Zealand			2,000
Netherlands			10,000

[105] Source to this column, unless otherwise specified: Segal 1993, end of 1989 estimates.

[106] Source to this column, unless otherwise specified: Ethnologue database 1992.

(continued)

Country of residence	Number of residents from Vietnam.[107]	Number of resident Vietnamese speakers[108]	My own tentative estimates, where they diverge from the preceding, and based on various sources:
Norway	12,700 (1994) (Source:SSB 1995)		
Philippines	26,000		mostly repatriated or resettled
Senegal		not specified	
Singapore	320		
South Korea	230		
Sweden	9,300 (1993) (Source: SCB 1995)		
Taiwan	170		
Thailand	13,600		mostly repatriated or resettled
United Kingdom			18,000 (source: Hitchcox 1990)
USA	615,000	more than 600,000 (1990)	
Vanuatu		360 (1982)	
Vietnam		54,450,000 (1986)	total population (including minorities): 71,000,000

[107] Source to this column, unless otherwise specified: Segal 1993, end of 1989 estimates.

[108] Source to this column, unless otherwise specified: Ethnologue database 1992.