IN THE SACRED FOREST

Landscape, Livelihood and Spirit Beliefs among the Katu of Vietnam

Nikolas Arhem
To my Katu friends and the many officials in the Katu districts who selflessly work to promote the Katu way of being Vietnamese

To my mother
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The Katuic Ethnography Project

The Katuic Ethnography Project (2003-2005) – a Swedish-Vietnamese collaborative research project – involved anthropologists from Göteborg University (GU) and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME). The project was generously funded by a three-year research grant from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida/SAREC) and comprised six coordinated but independent ethnographic studies of three different Katuic groups: the Katu, Taoi and Bru Vankieu (spellings differ between sources). The research team included Prof Kaj Århem (GU, overall project coordinator), Dr Luu Hung (VME, Vietnamese project coordinator), Mr Nikolas Århem (GU), Mr Pham Van Loi (VME), Mr Nguyen Truong Giang (VME) and Ms Vu Phuong Nga (VME).

Fieldwork was mainly carried out between 2003 and 2005 (although some project members made additional follow-up visits to the field in 2006). Mr Loi worked among the Bru Vankieu in Huong Hoa district, Quang Tri province; Mr Giang worked among the Taoi in A Luoi district, Thua Thien-Hue province. The other four researchers worked among the Katu in Tay Giang and Dong Giang districts of Quang Nam province. The four Katu case studies were designed to explore complementary aspects of Katu society and culture and to cover a broad range of villages in the high mountains and midland areas of the Katu territory (approximately a dozen villages in eight communes). Dr Luu Hung and Prof. Århem addressed general and comparative issues relevant for the project as a whole (see below) while Mr N. Århem concentrated on cosmology and environment and Ms Nga addressed gender issues and local knowledge. In total, the researchers spent approximately 22 man-months in the field.

The overall purpose of the project was to produce a systematic, comparative ethnography of central social institutions and cultural

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1 The project was initially entitled “Reading material culture: the house as an interethnic idiom in Vietnam’s Central Highlands” and was intended as a comparative anthropological study of material culture (with a special focus on vernacular architecture) among Central Highland groups. However, due to the political instability in the region at the time, the project had to change its focus and location.
traditions of the three major Katuic groups in Vietnam (Katu, Taoi and Bru-Vankieu). Particular attention was paid to material culture and its symbolic dimensions – especially the significance of artefacts, crafts and vernacular architecture as expressions of collective identity and interethnic differentiation. The rather broad aim of the project should be viewed in light of the fact that very little was, at the time, known about the Katuic groups in Laos and Vietnam, and as yet no systematic comparative study of the different groups has been carried out. Ethnographic works published in Vietnamese are generally dedicated to quite specific aspects of Katuic culture and society.²

At the same time, ethnographic knowledge about the Katuic groups (and of Vietnamese ethnic minorities in general) is sorely needed. Major development programs and huge infrastructural investments are currently under way in the Central-Western Highlands of Vietnam backed by large international development agencies. Perhaps most consequential of these programs is the ongoing construction of the Ho Chi Minh Highway from Hanoi to Saigon, a new national highway which cuts through the heartland of Katuic territory. The social, economic and cultural effects of this mega-project will be enormous and are already becoming manifest in the region. The effects are far from unequivocally positive for the local ethnic communities along the road. A measured input of anthropological knowledge into this and other development programs could substantially improve their intended outputs and reduce their adverse impact on local communities.

In line with the overall purpose of the Katuic Ethnography Project, the research agenda covered a broad range of topics from material culture and livelihood practices to rituals and local religious beliefs. The general vision guiding data collection was to create a comparative body of data allowing systematic comparison and,

eventually, a systemic, holistic understanding of central aspects of Katuic society and culture – the kind of integral understanding of society which is usually lacking in narrowly focused consultancy reports and socio-economic studies. In addition to this common research agenda, the participant researchers were encouraged to pursue individual interests and topics that emerged as important in the course of their specific case studies. Accordingly, the case studies covered roughly the same thematic ground but developed different and specific topics that reflect both the social and cultural variations among the different communities studied and the specific interests of the researchers.

As of 2009, and apart from Nikolas Århem’s report presented here, one published monograph (Luu Hung, 2007) and five unpublished project reports have been produced, three in English and two in Vietnamese with an English translation (a list of reports is given at the end of the report). At least one additional report (K. Århem, forthcoming) is due to be published shortly. The ambition is eventually to produce a synthetic monograph which draws together the comparative data from all six case studies.

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Although the full results of the project are still to be published, the project has already attained substantive results in the form of a solid ethnographic data base which will, I hope, serve as a source of future comparative and interpretive analyses. In my view, some of the most interesting results emerging from our collaborative work have a significant bearing on key issues in regional anthropology as well as on more general issues in contemporary and classical anthropology. These issues include: the character and content of animism – ubiquitous among all Katuic groups – as a dominant and vital form of religious cosmology (a subject now vigorously debated in various international scholarly journals); the social and symbolic significance of the communal-house (“men’s-house”) tradition, widespread throughout the Southeast Asian uplands and central to Katu cultural identity; the prescriptive asymmetric marriage system as a fundamental and “total social phenomenon” (in Mauss’ sense); and the local livelihood system as an integral resource-management system characterised by a specific combination of rotational shifting cultivation, fishing and game trapping and associated religious beliefs and practices. Several of these topics are addressed in detail
in the present report by N. Århem but they all warrant further – ethnographic, theoretical and comparative – elucidation. The Katuic peoples today present some of the most intriguing instances of these widespread phenomena and practices, and provide a privileged opportunity to study them.

Göteborg, May 2009
Kaj Århem
Coordinator,
Katuic Ethnography Project
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I also want to thank my father and mother for constant encouragement and for helping me in the tedious work of copy editing and proofreading the final version of my report.

Let me also express my deep appreciation for the many government officials in Quảng Nam province – at all levels – who in their work to support local communities in Tây Giang and Đồng Giang districts show admirable sensitivity to Katu culture and ways of life. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to all Katu men and women in the villages I visited in the course of my work – for their generosity, patience and kindness, and for the many pleasant moments we had together. I dedicate this report to them.

Nikolas Århem
Vientiane, Laos
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A Note on Orthography

Katu pronunciation is quite different from that of the Vietnamese language; therefore, trying to transcribe Katu names and sounds into Vietnamese does not seem very fruitful. The “r” sound, for example, very pronounced and “rolling” in Katu language, differs strongly from the Vietnamese “r” (which is pronounced like an English “z”). The consonant sound that I will henceforth write as “dj” (like in “gigolo” or “jar”) is also non-existent in Vietnamese. Therefore I have devised my own amateur orthography. Most of the vowels and consonants are taken from Standard English, with a few exceptions, notably: a vowel sound which I have described as “ö”. The sound I want to convey is similar to the German “ö” (as in “zwölf”) and close to the Vietnamese “ơ”. Katu language also has a sound similar to the Vietnamese “ư” which I shall therefore indicate with this letter (ư).
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report
The Katu are one of Vietnam’s fifty-three officially recognised ethnic minorities. They live in the mountainous inland of central Vietnam, in the provinces of Quảng Nam and Thừa Thiên Huế along the border to Laos. Today, the Katu population in Vietnam numbers around 50,000 people.

Traditionally, the Katu survived as hunters and swidden farmers in an ecologically unique environment consisting of hilly rainforest interspersed with innumerable streams. During the Vietnam-American War, the Katu suffered devastating losses but survived as a people and managed to hold on to their ancestral territory. Today they are subject to momentous changes as a result of the Vietnamese government’s efforts to integrate them – along with other marginalised indigenous groups – into the national economy and society. Huge infrastructural projects – such as the recently completed Hồ Chí Minh Highway cutting through their homeland, and the many hydropower plants and dams now under construction – accelerate the process.

Against this background, the present report has several aims: One aim is to document important aspects of the sparsely known Katu cultural legacy as it is being engulfed by Vietnamese mainstream culture. In the process, the Katu livelihood system is undergoing dramatic changes. These changes have, in turn, a largely negative impact on the forest environment in the region. Another aim of the study, then, is to examine the changing indigenous livelihood system and its environmental impact.

The report also purports to show how Katu spirit beliefs relate to their livelihood activities – how these beliefs guide men and women in their practical endeavours of everyday subsistence. In this respect,

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3 Vietnamese people refer to the Vietnam War as the “American War” which, from their point of view of course is only natural. In this report we shall refer to it as the Vietnam-American War.
the report represents a modest effort to put on record some of the local knowledge still alive in Katu communities, and to document a number of customs and beliefs that are likely to disappear in the near future.

A still broader aim of the study is to highlight the systemic wholeness of Katu culture and society – the recursive links and connections between its multiple social, political, economic and spiritual dimensions. Finally, running through the entire report is a concern with social change, and an effort to relate past practices and traditional notions to contemporary realities on the double assumption that all aspects of culture – spirit beliefs, moral values and practical activities – are interconnected, and that it is necessary to look into the past (even though, as here, cursory) in order to understand the present.

Map showing Quảng Nam province in Vietnam. The Katu are to be found in the westernmost upland districts of this province
Close-up map showing the study districts and communes (Tây Giang and Đông Giang districts, in the centre of the map). The thick, black line is the newly constructed Ho Chi Minh Highway.

Although adeptly and creatively adapting to contemporary realities, the Katu are in many respects still leading a traditional way of life. In their apparent “conservatism” there is a great measure of environmental and existential wisdom. Having subsisted on swidden cultivation, hunting and fishing and the gathering of forest produce for centuries, they have accumulated an impressive amount of practical knowledge about how to make a living in their particular forest environment; without doubt, Katu men and women are expert hunters, fishermen and farmers.

However, Katu local knowledge is not only of a practical nature; it is intertwined with their religious and moral system. As has been documented in anthropological books and reports about indigenous peoples worldwide, local environmental knowledge tends to be both
practical and mystical – “coded”, as it were, in a religious language. Thus, the Katu hunter is as much guided by his spiritual understanding of nature – articulated in a series of hunting taboos – as by his practical knowledge of the habits and habitats of the animals he pursues. Such cultural coding of practical knowledge forms part of what anthropologists call “ecocosmology” (Croll and Parkin, 1992) – a religious cosmology that is closely attuned to the natural environment.

Katu religious activities and even many everyday practises are explicitly geared towards living in harmony with the spirits of nature. In essence, this mode of life translates into a respectful attitude towards nature which is quite clearly expressed in Katu culture: as concerns hunting, for example, every killed game animal is regarded as a gift from the female hunting deity, Komorbarr, and treated with respect and ritual care (see Chapter 8).

However, this environmental wisdom is not easily conveyed into modern, rational terms. The Vietnamese word for “environment” (môi trường) means little or nothing to the Katu (or other forest-dwelling minority groups in Vietnam for that matter – at least until recently). It is an alien term and cannot readily be translated into the local cosmology. The same can be said for most indigenous groups in Vietnam and elsewhere. Conversely, the Kinh majority population has generally little understanding for local indigenous notions of the environment. That is why we can find reports on ethnic communities – written by development experts – claiming that:4

“[people's] level of interest in and understanding of the environment varies between different regions: people living close to the provincial and district towns seem more interested in the environment because they have better access to mass media like TV, radio, newspapers etc. therefore they think that the environment is important.” (Ha Giang Participatory Poverty Assessment, Poverty Task Force, 2003)

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4 To most Vietnamese, the words “ethnic minorities” and “mountain people” (người miền núi) carry connotations of backwardness. Moreover, Vietnamese socialist anthropology is rather straightforward in subscribing to an evolutionist view on societies, dividing them into various stages or levels of cultural development. It may be true that the majority of Westerners subscribe to a similar view, but it is usually not so explicit.
In other words, we are given to understand that local people (in this case a minority community in the northern highlands of Vietnam) have little understanding of, and concern for, their natural environment because they do not have access to news media while people living in town do care about the environment because they watch TV, read newspapers and listen to radio. The statement is, of course, totally flawed; the environment certainly does matter to minority peoples and perhaps most of all to those minorities who, like the Katu, are dependent on their local environment for their living.

For the Katu, the spiritual world is so firmly anchored in the natural landscape which surrounds them that they must interact with this spirit world on a daily basis; virtually all the livelihood activities, be it hunting or farming, require them to negotiate with the spirits which they perceive as inhabiting the landscape. This is why the Katu may be regarded as living in a spiritually alive – a sacred – landscape. Moreover, until today, it is also these interactions with the surrounding spiritual landscape which imbue their life with religious and cosmological meaning.

This report is a modest attempt to introduce the reader to the Katu spirit world and how it relates to their livelihood system and the landscape in which they live.

Twilight of traditions
We have an elementary understanding of how the Katu lived in the past through the account “Les Chasseurs de Sang”, published in 1938 by Le Pichon, a French military officer who was in charge of the first “pacifying” mission into the Katu territory. Before that, virtually nothing was known about the Katu. Despite the fact that Le Pichon was a military officer with no obligation whatsoever to explore or document Katu culture, he was nonetheless a remarkably perceptive and sympathetic observer of Katu customs and traditions.

Moreover, until the start of the present project in 2003, Le Pichon’s text remained the most comprehensive account of the Katu people published in either English or French. At the time, Vietna-

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5 The Vietnamese ethnologist Ta Duc published a booklet on Katu culture in 2002 (in English, French and Vietnamese) in which he combines Vietnamese scholarship on the Katu with some of the older American and French accounts (Ta Duc 2002).
The research on the Katu was only available in Vietnamese language while the brief accounts written by American observers at the height of the Vietnam-American War (notably by the anthropologist Gerald Hickey) were sketchy and drew heavily on Le Pichon’s work. Therefore, Le Pichon’s text was vital for us to gain an initial understanding of Katu traditions. His text has also allowed us to compare pre-war and present-day Katu society and, thus, to better understand the changes that have taken place since the 1930s. In fact, one is struck by how much remains unchanged since Le Pichon’s days.

The continuing vitality of Katu traditions notwithstanding, this people are now entering a new phase of intensive cultural transformation; indeed, it seems that more changes have taken place during the last decade than in the twenty-five preceding years. For example, only ten years ago, many Katu lived in traditional multifamily houses and most communities lacked electricity, whereas today electricity reaches even remote villages. Families have been encouraged (and financially supported) by government programmes to build individual houses with tin roofs instead of the traditional wooden and thatched multifamily houses of the past.

In government and development jargon, traditional Katu houses are incorrectly described as “temporary houses” and not as the durable, finely built and utterly habitable houses that they really are. Their replacement by metal-roof, Kinh-style houses now take place in the name of “poverty reduction”. The traditional Katu houses were never regarded by the Katu themselves as temporary, and people could live in them for decades. When the thatched roof or other parts of the house were worn out, they were repaired or re-placed by materials obtained from the surrounding forest with the help of neighbours and friends. By contrast, the new “permanent houses” – built from purchased building materials (concrete, bricks and tin roofs etc.) – cost large amounts of money and require the assistance of professional Kinh carpenters.

Thus, it seems, the current modernisation urge, propelled by the government and international development agencies, although well-
intended, might finally eradicate a living architectural heritage that managed to survive the French colonial regime, the Vietnam-American War and the early post-war communist development frenzy. The technological novelties, TVs, electricity, and not least, the mighty road constructions that are now cutting through the landscape, show to the Katu the tremendous power of the Vietnamese state and the wonders of modern life (not the least as presented on the television screen). What is the value of their own culture when compared to all these novelties? The televised realities of the outside world and the promises of government officers and development workers fill the Katu with expectations of an affluent, comfortable and fully modern life in the near future. At the same time, these embellished visions of modernity also make villagers see their own culture and society as inferior and impoverished.  

As a matter of fact, government representatives, development agents and Kinh settlers seem to take every opportunity to remind Katu people how ”poor” and “backward” they are. The Katu form of shifting or swidden cultivation provides a case in point. In the eyes of the dominant Kinh population, this form of agriculture virtually embodies the notions of poverty and backwardness. However, in the international scientific community, there is a growing consensus about the adaptive advantages and sustainability of indigenous forms of rotational shifting cultivation (Fox 2000; Fox et al 2000). It has thus been shown that rotational shifting cultivation tends to be less destructive than more “modern”, commercial forms of agriculture in tropical upland forests. Yet there is little receptivity for this re-evaluation of swidden cultivation on the part of the Vietnamese government (nor, for that matter, by international development actors or ordinary Vietnamese citizens). For the Kinh, just as for the Han Chinese and the Tai majority people in Thailand, permanent wet-rice farming and – today – cash-crop production and “industrial agro-forestry” are the only “civilized” forms of agriculture.

Despite the dramatic changes they currently experience, and the challenges and uncertainties they face, most Katu look towards the

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7 Are the Katu not happy to have their lifestyle “improved” and “modernised”? Many are, but at least some maintain a healthy scepticism to the novelties. As one Katu man remarked: “To supply Katu villages with TVs is pointless; it just makes people lazy and tired from watching TV from moring to late evening”.

future with optimism. Much of this optimism stems from the large amount of resources which the Vietnamese government presently channels into Katu society – irrigation projects, schools, roads, electricity, health facilities, piped water etc. And yet, despite this impressive inflow of aid, it remains doubtful whether food will be more plentiful and prosperity more widespread and equitable in the near future than it is today – or was in the recent past. The current modernisation urge is perhaps best regarded as grand social and economic experiment, carried out at the expense of a traditional but dynamic and adaptable livelihood system that has proved remarkably resilient up to the present time.

A word on the structure of the report
The first four chapters of this report are intended to gradually introduce the reader to the Katu people while, at the same time, providing details about their lifestyle and society which are relevant for the ensuing chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the mobile character of Katu settlements in the past and how this mobility has a bearing on other aspects of Katu culture. Chapters 5 to 8 deal with the core topic of this report, namely how the Katu carry out cultivation and hunting in a spiritually charged landscape. These chapters purport to show how the Katu read the landscape around them as teeming with spiritual agents and forces, and how this worldview, by implication, also “ritualises” and “spiritualises” virtually all human interactions with the surrounding landscape. It also shows that this landscape cannot be regarded as purely “natural”, since it is charged with cultural memory and meanings. Moreover, the spiritual character of the landscape is not regarded by the Katu as fixed, but in a state of continuous change. Chapter 7 introduces the reader to the conception of death among the Katu, a crucial component of their cosmology and vitally important for understanding their livelihood system. The last two chapters, finally, explore Katu hunting and the complex belief system which traditionally accompanied this activity.

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The present report primarily presents results from four fieldwork trips to seven Katu villages over a two-year period (2004-6). Each trip lasted 4-6 weeks, totalling some five months in the field. The
villages visited were: Arek, A’ur, Areh, Azinh 3, Apat, Taghe and Aro, all located in Tây Giang and Đông Giang district in the mountainous inland of Quảng Nam province (cf. Appendix 1). Two additional spells of fieldwork were carried out in 2008 and 2009; however, data from these latter trips have only been included in footnotes or as corrections in the text.

Most of the information was gathered through interviews with the help of a Vietnamese interpreter. Towards the end of the study period my understanding of Vietnamese became sufficient to, at least partially, comprehend many of the conversations and accounts on which this report is based.
Chapter 2
THE KATU PEOPLE

The Katu people (Vietnamese: Cơ-tu or Ka Tu), are a Mon-Khmer speaking people living in the highlands of central Vietnam and southern Laos. Together with the Bru (Bru - Văn Kiều) and the Ta’oi (Tà Ôi - Pacô) – their neighbours to the north – they form the Katuic branch of the Mon-Khmer linguistic family in Vietnam. The Katu are also closely related to the Bahnaric-speaking Ve and Trieng peoples – their neighbours to the south – which also belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family.8

Some Vietnamese scholars associate the ancient origin of the Katu people with the coastal Champa kingdom in central and southern Vietnam (c.f. Nguyen Huu Thong 2004). It is clear from archaeological remains in the uplands of Quang Nam that the Katu has had close contact with the Cham civilisation (ibid).9 Another Vietnamese scholar, Dang Nghiem Van (cited in Luu Hung 2007:5), believes that the roots of Katu civilisation are to be found in the Plain of Jars civilisation in Laos. It might be worth pointing out here that post-war Vietnamese ethnology is “evolutionist” in the sense that it has been concerned with origins and the ranking cultures according to their level of “civilisation”, which might to some extent explain the interest in connecting the Katu to such “higher” civilisations (c.f. Evans 1992).

The Katu regard the peoples with whom they have had some contact as being divided into (1) “mountain people” (Vietnamese: người miền núi) such as themselves and (2) “lowland people” such as the Kinh (the ethnic majority group in Vietnam). In some sense, they thus extend “Katu-ness” to all mountain-dwelling minority peoples

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8 The Katu have many stories about the Ve people. The Ve are described as having similar traditions to the Katu but also as being more warlike than the latter. In fact, stories about past wars and blood-hunting raids involving Ve people are so common that it seems that even hostile Katu villages are sometimes referred to as “Ve” in these accounts (see Chapter 9).

9 Many Katu themselves believe that they used to live in lower areas close to the coast in the past.
in Vietnam (and elsewhere as well, for that matter: a Katu man asked me if there were Katu living in Sweden too!) This categorical division between “lowlanders” and “highlanders” is also reflected in Kinh cosmology (see below).

The meaning of the name Katu is debated, and most Katu people seem to be uncertain about its origins. Some elderly Katu we consulted argued that the name means “people of the headwaters” (*ka* indicating “people” and *tu* “headwaters”). The Katu have a belief that stream sources are the home of powerful spirits and the source of the fertility of their fields. Streams thus occupy a prominent place in their cosmology. Le Pichon, who visited the Katu in the 1930s, was clearly of the opinion that the name Katu was *not* an auto-denomination but rather a label given to “other people” living deeper into the forests or higher up the mountains. Le Pichon travelled all the way to the Laos border without finding any Katu who referred to themselves as “Katu”. Likewise, according to Hickey

“…there are indications that the Katu ethnic label and identity as an ethnic group are of relatively recent origin. Historically the Vietnamese knew the upland population of Quảng Nam province simply as *moi* (“slave” or “savage”), the generic designation for highland people.” (1993: 108-9)

Since then, however, the Katu have become accustomed to this name and today it is certainly an accepted autonym.

The Katu are accomplished swidden-farmers (dry rice being the staple with cassava and maize as the main supplementary crops) as well as proficient hunters and fishermen. Today Katu hunters are usually confined to trapping since they are not allowed to keep rifles and most of them no longer have crossbows or remember how to prepare the traditional hunting poison (see below). The Katu have an acute knowledge of their forest surroundings; besides hunting and fishing in the forest they also collect honey and wild forest fruits and gather a variety of building materials from it. Fish is today probably the main source of protein since the amount of game is in decline.

The Katu believe in a variety of spirits – spirits of the forest, land, hills and streams as well as spirits of the house (the ancestors) and the village. These agencies heavily influence humans and can make people ill or cause crops to fail. The Katu also have numerous rituals
to placate the spirits and, thus, to make them sympathetic toward humans.

The village is still at the centre of the Katu world. However, village life has changed a great deal during the last fifty years. Since the days of Le Pichon, and particularly during and after the Vietnam-American War, the Katu have been subject to massive external influences. They are now an integral part of the Vietnamese nation-state, and are rapidly changing their ways of life in the direction of the Vietnamese (Kinh) majority society.

“The Children of the Communist Party”

Katu recent history may, for our purposes, be divided into two distinct “eras”: the period before the Vietnam-American War and the period after the war. This war struck the Katu particularly hard since the Ho Chi Minh trail passed right through their heartland which, accordingly, was directly targeted by the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies. Thus, even if the Katu had wished to stay out of the conflict this would hardly have been a viable option. Many Katu were killed during the war and the lives of all Katu were severely affected by the conflict – not least by the destructive toxin (notably “agent orange”) spread by American aircrafts over their villages, fields and forests.

It is not entirely clear how the Katu were drawn into the war but it is evident that the North-Vietnamese Army (NVA) and communist cadres were more successful in penetrating the area and rallying the Katu to their cause than the South-Vietnamese Army and its American allies. One reason why the Katu were more susceptible to the propaganda of the North rather than that of the South was probably the decidedly negative impressions that the French had left in Katu lands. Le Pichon gives us the impression that he was loved and admired by the Katu; that might have been true in certain localities, but many much less sensitive colonial officers followed after him, and the Katu tell numerous stories about how the French treated them as inferior human beings though not specifically targeting them as enemies.

The Americans were apparently regarded as akin to the French and, in fact, old Katu often do not distinguish clearly between the
two nationalities when recollecting the war. Gerald Hickey, who visited the Katu in 1957, describes such an experience:

“In August 1957 I made a field trip into Katu country with reverend Gordon Smith, an American missionary, and Philip Hodgeson of the British Embassy. Having already visited the area, Reverend Smith knew that blood raids normally do not take place in August, at a time when villagers experienced food shortages. (…) Walking the better part of the day, we approached the village of A-To, surrounded by a high stockade. The gate was closed and along the path were freshly made bamboo symbols raising the question whether they were taboo signs. The wood vendor [a Kinh guide] went to the gate, where a young man informed him that the village was indeed taboo (diang). (…) The village was strangely still, doors were closed, and we could see eyes peering at us through cracks in the bamboo walls. In the semidarkness of the men’s house with its smell of smoke and walls covered with heads of buffalo that had been sacrificed, the headman sat on a mat. Around him was a group of long-haired young men garbed in very brief loin-cloths and clutching long hardwood spears with sharp blades that are used in blood raids. Talking through the wood vendor, the chief expressed dissatisfaction at having “Frenchmen” in the village, saying that the “Viet Minh” would not like it. He noted that there were Viet Minh in the forest, adding that his brother, who had “gone north,” was now with them. When the headman mentioned a food shortage, Reverend Smith said that if his men went to Thanh My they could get some rice from the boat. The chief, however, shook his head. “The Viet Minh would be angry if we took food from the French.” (Hickey 1993: 111-12).

Many Katu elders, however, when asked to explain why they early on had decided to side with the Viet Minh and the communist forces, stated that it was not so much because of any pronounced animosity against the French or Americans as it was due to the chauvinist policies of the South-Vietnamese regime:

“The soldiers from the South would come here and ask the Katu to carry their luggage. But after the Katu had finished helping them, instead of paying them, the soldiers would shoot them.” (Elder, Areh)

Much of the Southern army’s hostility towards the Katu stemmed, of course, from the fact that it already knew about the presence of the
NVA in the area, while being aware of its own inability to monitor the minority population. Attempts were made to resettle the Katu in large war camps but the Katu strongly resented such resettlement plans.

It appears, thus, that the Katu felt more fear and antipathy towards the South-Vietnamese regime than they ever had towards the French. The Southern regime’s policies towards the minorities were heavily laden with ethnic (Kinh) chauvinism and outright racism which translated into many hardships for the minorities. By contrast, the Northern regime “had a very sound policy towards the minorities even though the communist cadres entering Katu territory were poor” (in the words of a Katu elder). The NVA soldiers were, however, no strangers to using violence to coerce villages to loyalty.

One widespread Katu story tells how both the French and the Americans regarded them as “people with tails”, i.e. as wild beasts. This idea in fact predates both the French and the Americans and appears to have originated among mandarins in central Vietnam during the pre-colonial era as attested by French accounts from the 19th century:

“(…) many Vietnamese also thought of the highland people as being less than human. French visitors to Annam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were told of ‘savages with tails’ living in upland Quảng Nam. In 1928, Dr. Gaide, a French military physician posted in Annam, reported that articles in the 1896 issues of the *Revue Scientifique* and the *Bulletin de la Société de Geographie* in Paris claimed that Vietnamese had captured a *moi* with a tail-like appendage at the base of his spine. [During] his stay in the 1920s, Dr. Gaide was often told by Vietnamese mandarins, doctors, and civil servants that they had heard stories about men in the Quảng Nam mountains who had tails resembling those of monkeys.” (Hickey 1993: 109)

This sub-human imagery was also used by the southern regime during the war as propaganda against the communists (since the latter lived in the jungle and the mountains like “savages”). Whether this was a successful propaganda among the lowlanders we do not know, but it had the effect of further alienating the Katu and other highlanders who felt that they were the target of these insulting depictions. Thus, this originally pre-colonial and pre-communist Kinh imagery of the highland peoples as sub-human savages with
tails eventually – through the communist contra-propaganda and genuine mythological transformations – became attributed to the French and Americans. In any case, and despite very limited resources at their disposal, the pioneer communist cadres were able to gain considerable goodwill and support among the Katu.

Communist activists appear to have entered the region in the 1940s-50s, capitalising as it were on the resentment towards the French colonial authorities and, later, the terror provoked by the South Vietnamese Army. However, the communists also gained the sympathy of the Katu (and other ethnic minorities) by helping them in many ways, including accessing basic trade goods such as iron sickles, axes, bush knives, salt and blankets. The North Vietnamese cadres also supplied the Katu with a new type of fast-ripening rice seeds (the “three-moon rice”), significantly relieving the labour burden of Katu men and women during the harvest period. The adoption of this new rice variety might have implied a quite profound cultural transformation since the new seeds required changes also in the Katu ritual calendar. It seems, furthermore, that severe human epidemics had more or less disappeared among the Katu during the period preceding the Vietnam-American War. If this was due to improved health services provided by the communist cadres, it would further explain Katu sympathies towards the North-Vietnamese regime (not least because of the spiritual ideas the Katu have about diseases; see below).

In any case, it was largely due to the activities of this “first generation” of communist pioneers that the Katu joined the Northern forces. These early activists, and the goodwill they secured from the Katu, forever set the course for this people. It seems that neither the Ngô Đình Diệm regime nor its American allies even tried to rally the Katu to their cause – at least not until it was far too late. By the time the Americans started trying to gain some control over the highland minorities, the Northern forces were already firmly entrenched among all the Katuic groups (i.e. the Katu, Bru and Ta’oi). The Katu therefore never had their villages resettled to special war camps on any significant scale by the special forces – as was the case with many ethnic groups in the south (c.f. Condominas 1994: xi-xxiv). Instead, the Katu and other pro-communist groups were bombed by the Americans without prior warning or evacuation (c.f. Hickey 1993). This is how a Pierre Moock K’Briuh, now senior montagnard leader in the United States, describes the chaotic situation at the time:
“We were between the hammer and the anvil. The Communists tried to resettle us and use us, especially the Bru, Pacoh and Katu tribes who lived close to the border with Laos, as labor to construct the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Americans wanted to get free fire zones with the Montagnards close to the district capitals so they could control all the people. We only got a day or two warning to evacuate a village, sometimes not even that. They didn’t give us any time. We lost our houses, our buffaloes, jars with antiques, gongs and granaries with tons of rice. In the refugee camp we could not work in our fields or look after our animals. That’s how we lost our culture in the war.” (Condominas 1994: xiii)

Thus, when the Americans found out that it was too late for them to efficiently recruit the Katu to their cause, the area almost immediately turned into a “free fire zone” which naturally alienated all Katu who had managed to remain neutral up until then (i.e. those that were trying to avoid the conflict). Certainly, when the war reached its later stages (1970-1975), virtually all Katu had been brought into the folds of the Northern army and many resettled further north on communist orders while also serving in the local guerrilla forces – constituting one of the North’s most efficient forces (c.f. Luu Hung 2007).

K’Briuh and other anti-communist montagnards, now based in America, have denounced the calamities that befell the southern ethnic groups after the Communist’s take-over, in particular the repression of indigenous culture. Ironically, however, those groups which were most tightly in the Communists’ grip, among them the Katu, certainly did not have their culture destroyed. As we shall see in the following chapters, it is only now – in the wake of modernization and the penetration of global market forces – that their indigenous traditions and institutions are really beginning to fall apart. In sum, at least in terms of culture, those groups which where outside the American sphere of influence already from the outset, escaped the war more unscathed. We must, however, remember that the leniency towards these latter groups in post-war times is a direct consequence of their loyalty to the communist cause during the conflict.

According the information collected by Luu Hung (2007), a single Katu commune in Tay Giang district killed 300 American soldiers during the war. This would mean that a small group of perhaps less than a thousand Katu people (including elders, women
and children) accounted for about 0.6% of all the American casualties (ca 54,000) in the war. Considering that the population of a Katu commune is extremely small compared to the overall numbers of the North-Vietnamese armed forces, these figures suggest that the average Katu soldier was a very efficient fighter indeed. This should not surprise us given that the knowledge possessed by local, indigenous fighters (Katu and others) of the difficult jungle- and mountain terrain in their homelands was absolutely vital for the North-Vietnamese Army’s ability to control the mountainous inland and repel the combined efforts of American and South-Vietnamese forces. This remains a fact whether the numbers given in Luu Hung’s account have been inflated by his informants or not.

One might imagine the fear felt by this humble people as it had to face the most advanced weapons in the world, including bomb planes and military helicopters. Indeed, so utterly terrifying and destructive were the American and South Vietnamese military actions in the region that the war is still remembered with vivid horror. The Vietnam-American War is undoubtedly the main reason why the Katu today so enthusiastically embrace the post-war communist regime and its policies. In fact, Ho Chi Minh may well be more genuinely venerated among the Katu than among the Kinh (one should perhaps use the word “worshipped” in the case of the Katu, for Uncle Ho’s picture is found on the ritual altar in most Katu houses).

The war is also the reason why we could often hear the Katu sing songs in their own language in which they described themselves as “the children of the communist party”. A number of Vietnamese war songs have been translated into Katu language. Some of these songs have also been somewhat modified (“katuified”) – making them an interesting subject for further study. The Vietnam-American War seems closer in time and memory to Katu than to many urban Kinh; some villagers stated that they were still ready “to meet an American threat” at any time. Many Katu also expressed suspicions about the American teams that for over a decade now – according to an agreement with the Vietnamese government – have been searching their territory for the bodies of American soldiers “missing in action” (MIAs), and they could not understand why the government had allowed these teams to enter their territory. Other Katu blamed American MIA teams for pig epidemics and the occasional death of villagers (the victims were believed to have fallen ill and later died
due to the tampering with old Katu graves in the forest and other “strange” activities carried out by the Americans). Still others, working as local guides or trackers for such MIA missions were, on the contrary, quite happy with the salaries and gifts given them by the Americans.

A Katu man (Alang Chroo) proudly wearing a uniform from the Vietnam-American War.

Despite the fact that the Katu now form part of the modern Vietnamese nation, they did not have any deep-rooted sense of affinity with the Kinh before the onset of the Vietnam-American War. Today, however, as a result of the unifying force of the war and
the effective reach of the Vietnamese state apparatus and educational system, they are rapidly coming to regard themselves as culturally and historically related to the Kinh majority population. Ho Chi Minh’s policy towards the minorities always gave priority to fostering a feeling of shared citizenship and common roots between the minorities and the Kinh (which not only focussed on a shared socialist ideology). The post-war Vietnamese government has continued this nation-building strategy and has been highly successful in instilling in the Katu a sense of belonging to the Vietnamese nation.

In sum, the vast majority of the Katu sympathised with the North during the resistance war, and their contribution to its overall success is disproportionately large considering how small a fraction they constitute of Vietnam’s total population. Those who did not fight as regular soldiers helped the Northern forces in other ways – constructing traps for capturing and killing enemy soldiers, carrying weapons and supplying their allies with rice and other necessities. The very close links they formed with the North-Vietnamese government during the war also remained in place after the end of the war. The Katu became one of Vietnam’s fifty-three official ethnic minorities, and Ho Chi Minh became part of the Katu pantheon – a quasi-divine figure whose picture is seen on the family altar of most Katu houses.

Before the present unified Vietnamese nation-state, the Katu were never really subject to any “Vietnamese” authority as far back as we know or can conjecture (in fact the only sustained contact they had with the Kinh people was when they traded goods at a small number of markets halfway between the highland and the lowland). Now, however, the Katu are being drawn into the Vietnamese mainstream society very rapidly and their society is changing quickly. All Katu villages are now placed under the aegis of the Vietnamese government and follow a development path over which local people have little say. Nevertheless, most Katu appear grateful for the material benefits provided by the state and share a common pride with the Vietnamese majority population for having defeated the Americans during the resistance war.
Despite the fact that, today, both young and old Katu are fascinated by modern comforts such as electric light, TVs, VCDs, motorbikes and the like, and despite the fact that villagers nowadays quite often go to nearby towns and roadside markets to sell and buy things, when it comes to spirit beliefs virtually all Katu we spoke to were equally “traditional” in the sense that they took the omnipresence of spirits for granted and, indeed, granted them an important role in their everyday lives. Moreover, the vast majority of Katu still make their living from swidden agriculture, hunting and fishing. The new livelihood practices they have adopted in the form of wet-rice cultivation, cash-cropping, tree plantation and fish-breeding, constitute supplements (generally of marginal significance) to the aforementioned basic subsistence activities.

Accordingly, life in Katu villages essentially revolves around swidden farming and hunting. Using bamboo and other materials gathered in the forest, Katu men skilfully construct a range of efficient traps which they place around their fields or along particular “trap-ways” in the forest. Every year the agricultural work commences (in December-January) when all villagers clear their plots of land in the forests and then, a few months later, set them on fire and start sowing. Fish are caught by setting a series of “fish-traps” in the streams. All these activities, as we shall see in the coming chapters, are as much spiritual as practical activities; the Katu – young and old – still believe in the same host of spirits worshipped by their ancestors. Both men and women carry out a whole range of rituals related to agriculture and hunting. Further-more, they carefully attend to omens both in nature and in their dreams. In fact, even those young Katu men who speak Vietnamese, have carried out military service and frequently visit towns, continue to believe that malevolent spirits roam the forests and cause illness and misfortune.

Thus, the past is vitally present in Katu villages. Young and old people often prefer to consult local healers rather than the personnel
at dispensaries or health centres.\textsuperscript{10} Children go to school but almost without exception carry small medicine bags around their necks to protect them from the dangers posed by malevolent spirits. Adults are eager to learn about new seeds and agricultural techniques from agricultural extension workers; yet, virtually all households still perform agricultural rituals devoted to the “old” spirits.

Katu society is one where elders enjoy a very high degree of respect: not only are the elders seen as possessing deep knowledge (in particular about the spirits) but, because of this, they are also regarded as highly powerful individuals. Even elders with a reduced physical or mental capacity are still treated with full respect. Thus, elders – old parents and grandparents – greatly influence the lives of their adult and young children and grandchildren. Even today, when most Katu have started to live in nuclear family houses, they retain this important role in society.\textsuperscript{11}

In fact, it was with a certain surprise that we initially noted how little the Vietnamese state had intervened with Katu traditions and local religion. However, with the current “war on poverty” reaching its climax – and with more money from international donors being available to implement the various development programs – this situation is now rapidly changing. Thus, in recent years (2000-2004), the government has introduced both electricity and TVs (including parabolic antennas) to virtually every village in the two districts we

\textsuperscript{10} Nowadays, the Katu often go to Prao to buy medicines for what they regard as “normal diseases” (e.g. a cold/flu), but continue to consult healers (“blowers”: adaa ramaan) when they become ill from what they believe are malevolent spirits (this kind of disease is usually incurred while working in fields and forests). The Katu also believe that “Western medicine” is inefficient against diseases incurred as a consequence of being cursed by a malevolent “blower” (sorcerer). During my stay in Katu villages several people were believed to have died as a consequence of being “blown” by such sorcerers. If you fall ill due to blowing, your only hope is to consult a benevolent “blower” who can then lift the bad spell. We were told that “even high (Katu) officials at the commune office sometimes consult the healers”.

\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps this is why the government provides incentives for young couples to settle in new villages along the road – so called "youth villages". Such villages would indeed "modernize" much quicker than today's villages have, because village elders have doubtlessly contributed to conserve Katu traditions and thus to moderate the pace of "development".
visited. The government has also facilitated the clean water supply in most villages by providing water tanks and pipes. Moreover, schools have been built (albeit many cannot be open on a permanent basis), and health facilities been made available in every commune. A very brief development chronology of the government's efforts would roughly look something like this:

1950–75
- Enlistment of the Katu to the cause of the North Vietnam regime during the Vietnam-America War, including targeting them for political education and socialisation.
- Elimination of the most “backward and out-dated” cultural practices, such as “blood hunting”, inter-village warfare, and the custom of abandoning villages in cases of “bad death” as well as large-scale public celebrations – regarded by the communists as “wasteful” (notably ostentatious weddings and funerals).

1975–85
- Relocation and “stabilisation” of the villages; during this period the government sets out to sedentarise the population and relocate the villages in places chosen by the government – usually close to roads and market towns. A number of Katu villages move from Laos and resettle in Vietnam. It is made illegal for villages to move without government permission.

1985–95
- Modernisation of agriculture and the “development of culture”; the government enjoins the Katu to stop practising swidden agriculture and encourages them to grow wet rice. Furthermore, the government also encourages Katu to split-up their traditional multi-family units into smaller, nuclear households. It also begins to encourage the construction of the traditional Katu communal houses – i.e. guöl houses.

1995–2003
- Prohibition to cut and clear old forest and the confiscation of firearms; from the early 1990s, the government begins to tighten its control over Katu agriculture, and begins to enforce its unequivocal ban on swidden cultivation (although it still remains the primary form of agriculture among the Katu). A ban on hunting wild animals
was put in place during the late 1980s but its enforcement only becomes effective with the collection of firearms in the early 90s.
- In 1998 some villages start to get electricity and by 2004 most villages have received it. For the time being, the electricity is free and entire villages keep their lights on day and night.

2003–5
- Government support for building “permanent” houses: the government hands out money to the “poorest households” in every village to enable them to construct “permanent” houses. The goal is to eventually replace all traditional houses (because they are regarded as “temporary”). This program is accompanied by tightening restrictions on the cutting of large trees in the forest: the Katu are now only allowed to cut trees in the context of this housing programme – not for any other purpose.
- Also, during this last period, the Ho Chi Minh Highway is completed in the area and, as a result, more Katu than previously start visiting the urban centres along the highway. Katu men, in particular, start visiting roadside bars and coffee shops whenever they have money. Illegal logging and hunting become the two main sources of cash. Kinh shop keepers and traders who buy wildlife from the Katu settle down permanently in the district centres, and Katu individuals from virtually all surrounding villages occasionally deal with them. Selling game meat to restaurants in town becomes widespread. This trade in wildlife constitutes a sharp break with tradition since it violates the customary prescription to share and consume game in the village of the hunter (see Chapter 8).

To summarise: Although the process of cultural change has escalated dramatically over the past few years, all villages in our study continue to rely on traditional subsistence strategies – swidden cultivation and hunting-and-trapping in the forest. Towards the completion of our study (2005), however, there were signs that greater changes were at hand.

It is possible to distinguish the various villages we visited in terms of their relative degree of “modernisation” – the extent to which they have adopted the practice of wet-rice farming, the degree of market dependence, the percentage of villagers that have built Kinh-style houses etc. If we use this type of modernity-indicators we find that the villages near district centres and along the Ho Chi Minh
Highway have a higher concentration of wet rice fields, Kinh-type houses, TVs, motorbikes and, generally, are increasingly dependent on food and goods obtained from the market. In other words, the people living in roadside villages and near district centres are considerably more market-oriented and cash-dependent but do not appear to have more money than the villagers in more remote villages. It is in this broad setting that our study was carried out – in the twilight zone between tradition and modernity.

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Below follows a brief description of each of the seven villages in which we worked:

**The “Apat villages”** (A Vương commune, Tây Giang district; Prao town, Đông Giang district)

(1) The village of *Apat* was recently divided into Apat I and II (Apat I with a population of ca 250 and Apat II with a population of ca 200 [2004]).\(^{12}\) The two Apat hamlets are located only a few hundred meters apart. This village appears to have been one of the most powerful villages in the A Vương area, and was involved in feuding with (previously) powerful villages such as Bolo near the Con River (Song Con). As opposed to many other Katu villages, present-day Apat is still located in the same general area where it was originally established more than hundred years ago, next to the holy mountain of Bol Legom (famous among all Katu).

Due to its strategic location on a high mountain and the early discovery of silver ore in its vicinity, a French military post was established in Apat in the late 1930s. However, its relative geographical inaccessibility has shielded it from more dramatic changes in recent decades, and it remains a comparatively traditional village.

(2) *Taghe* village, with a population of 175 people (2004) is located only 30 minutes walk from the Ho Chi Minh Highway – next to the

\(^{12}\) The name Apat is said to come from a stream called Apat located near Chagang Hill. People believe that Apat village was once located there. According to another account, the name comes from a kind of fish called *apat*. 
A Vườn River and at the foot of Bol Legom. This village has a common history with Apat, and some villagers count it as “one of the Apat villages” (together with Azinh 3 and the sub-villages of Apat itself). Despite the affinity with Apat, however, the Taghe lineages have not been residing in the same settlement as those of Apat for as long as the oldest men alive can remember. Nonetheless, Taghe villagers consider themselves as originating from Apat and the two villagers are closely linked through inter-marriage.

In the past, Apat controlled one side of the A Vườn River and the Mrang villages (see below) controlled the other side. Taghe means “horn” – after a legend about a boy who had to carry a girl up a mountain while blowing a horn in order to win her father’s approval to marry her. Taghe is the name of the mountain to which this legend refers.13

(3) The last – and the smallest – of the three “Apat” villages we visited is Azinh 3 (77 inhabitants [2003]). As opposed to Taghe and Apat, which now belong to A Vườn commune (Tây Giang district), Azinh 3 has been placed under the jurisdiction of Đống Giang district. Azinh 3 is a small village dominated by a Jörom lineage originating from Apat village. When we first arrived to Azinh 3, the village was located high up in the hills, in the midst of the swidden fields cultivated by its inhabitants. Since then, however, it has been

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13 The story about Taghe village goes as follows:

“There was a poor boy who wanted to marry a beautiful girl. The girl’s father told the boy that he had to pass a challenge: he had to climb a hill while carrying the old man’s daughter on his back while also blowing a buffaloe horn non-stop! If he stopped blowing, the girl’s father would kill him but if he passed the trial, he could marry her. The girl really loved the boy and took a bath before the challenge. She dipped her hair into a stream to keep water in her hair. After reaching the top of the hill, and having thus passed the ordeal, the boy fell down exhausted – almost dead. When all the other villagers left him there to die, the girl squeezed the water from her hair and let him drink it. Since then, the name of the village is taghe. In Katu taghe means horn.”

There is also a story about the hill adjacent to Taghe village where a small group of people of the Briu clan are living today:

“Once there was a famous killer who, when he travelled past Taghe, demonstrated his disrespect for the Taghe villagers by showing them his ass. The villagers became very angry and one of them shot the man with his crossbow and killed him. Since then, the place is known as Klung Brau (Flatland of Fighting); the hill next to it became Bol Brau (Hill of Fighting).”
relocated to a location next to Ho Chi Minh Highway where new houses have been built in a linear pattern (as opposed to the concentric layout of the original village). At least two NGOs have contributed money to the construction of the new village (with one allegedly promising to contribute 90 million VND towards the construction of a traditional guöl house (the Katu communal house).

Nonetheless, not all the villagers are happy about the “new” village: the swidden fields are still located near the old village site, thus making agricultural work harder than before – the available land near the new village is neither suitable for wet-rice cultivation nor large enough for making home gardens or even pit latrines. As a result, the villagers now have to walk up to an hour or more to get to their fields.

The Mrang villages (A Vương, commune, Tay Giang district)
The Mrang villages today include the villages of Arek and A’ur along the Mrang stream, a northern tributary to the A Vương River. In the past, this group of villages comprised some ten small settlements (kernaan) of which the present two villages are composed.

(4) Arek village is located about 20 minutes walk on dirt road from the A Vương commune office on the Ho Chi Minh Highway (some 15 km from Prao town). The population of Arek is around 350 people (315 in June 2003) and growing fast.

Modern Arek is a post-war creation in that it constitutes a merger between four separate older settlements; (Old) Arek, Raro, Adjuöng and Charr. Prior to the war, all these villages were located along the Mrang or along smaller streams that flow into the Mrang. According to villagers, the Ho Chi Minh trail followed the Mrang stream (rather than the A Vương River that the present highway follows today) – thus making this area heavily targeted by the American air force during the war. The villagers told us that there are several areas around the village where the ghosts of North-Vietnamese soldiers (abhuy adjuoc: literally meaning “Kinh ghosts”) sometimes make their presence known by wailing or other noises. These Kinh ghosts usually become particularly lively during the Tet period and, therefore, some villagers usually prepare a sacrifice for them during that period every year.
After the war, the four villages, all of which were closely allied by marriage, were fused into a single village and relocated by the district government near the present highway.\footnote{According to K. Århem (pers. comm.), two of the four villages, Adjuong and Charr, actually joined Old Arek before the war.} This site, however, was soon abandoned due to “bad deaths caused by malevolent spirits”. Subsequently, the composite village settled at the present location sometime in the late 1980s.

Of all study villages, Arek is the most socially “fragmented” in the sense that no lineage clearly dominates (numerically or politically) in the village. As a result, there is a notable rivalry among the various lineage heads and their descendants. Due to this rivalry, there is often wrangling over money for public sacrifices and other communal activities. There also appears to be a serious shortage of land in the village.

None of the villages that today constitute Arek appear in Le Pichon's account, perhaps indicating that they were less powerful in the past than Apat (and Bolo).
(5) A’ur village is a new village, established on its present site only in 2003. In order to agree to settle in the new village, its current inhabitants – originally coming from several other settlements – were given free metal roofs and money by the district government. The name “A’ur” derives from an older settlement that was established long ago on A’ur Hill nearby. The name itself means “termite nest” (a reference to the shape of the hill). Today’s inhabitants of A’ur village – although no longer living on the hill with that name – have retained the name of the original village as is customary among the Katu. Currently, the village is located on Perrlahh Hill. A’ur is the only village in our study that is located in the middle of a vast and otherwise uninhabited tract of forest.

A’ur village: The village layout and location conform to Katu tradition. Houses are arranged in a circular pattern on a hill top. Note, however, the metal roofs of the houses, supplied by the government. Today, the village also has electricity and a water pipe.
In the aftermath of the Vietnam-American War, the government encouraged the population on the upper Mrang, including the inhabitants of Old A’ur village, to resettle in Nam Dong district in Thừa Thiên Huế province, close to the populated lowlands. Many families heeded the call and moved, and some still live there today. Others returned to their ancestral lands in the 1980s after failing, in their own words, to make a comfortable living in Thừa Thiên Huế. Several of the lineages constituting the “re-established” A’ur village are returnees from the Nam Dong district.

Areh (Talu Commune, Dong Giang district)
(6) Areh village, with a population of approximately 150 people (120 in 2003), lies approximately 5 km east of Prao on the main road to Danang. A fusion of three smaller villages, Areh is nonetheless a very cohesive (composed of only one clan) and, despite its vicinity to Prao town, fairly traditional village that until 1975 was located in the highlands of Za Hung commune.

Aro (Lang Commune, Tay Giang district)
(7) Aro, with a population of about 250 individuals in 2005, is located away from the Ho Chi Minh Highway and near the Laos border. The remote location of the village at the time of our fieldwork seemed to translate into a gratifying willingness on the part of the villagers to talk freely about almost any topic related to Katu culture, as well as an unsurpassed conviviality and generosity. Spirit beliefs in Aro differed somewhat from those recorded in the previously mentioned villages. In fact, Aro and its neighbouring villages (which we did not visit) are geographically separated from the villages in the A Vương commune by an extensive tract of high hills. Like so many other villages, Aro derives its name from the hill on which it was originally located. A new road between the Đông Giang and Tây Giang district headquarters, presently under construction, is likely to produce significant changes in the village.
The most inclusive unit of Katu social organisation is – and has always been – the village (*kernaan, buöl*). In the past each Katu village was headed by a headman (*takah buöl*) chosen among the village elders (*takah tahal*). The *takah buöl* was usually elected from the largest or most powerful lineage in the village. If the village had more than one lineage, the other lineage heads – the *takah bu* – would also have important religious and political offices and enjoy high status. Together they were, and still are, referred to as *takah tahal*, the village elders.

Today, the office of village headman (*trưởng thôn*) is a function within the administrative system of the state; the headman – usually a young or middle-aged man well versed in the Vietnamese language – is elected by the villagers on an annual basis and confirmed in office by the commune and district authorities. Still, however, the village elders are highly respected and play an important role in village affairs.

The village headman of the past (*takah buöl*) wielded considerable power – particularly in the ritual and religious sphere. Yet, his authority was far from absolute; rather than ruling the village, the headman was considered its chief representative, especially when dealing with the spirits. He presided over important rituals and made sure that villagers co-operated properly when there was communal work to be done or village defences to be organised.

The main prerequisites for becoming a *takah buöl* were wealth, generosity, and – most importantly – extensive knowledge about the spirits and ritual procedures. Some *takah* could also be selected because of their prowess as “blood hunters” (Chapter 9). Wealth and ritual status were interconnected since – in the past – the wealthier and more prominent lineages in the village often sponsored all village sacrifices (i.e. contributed the sacrificial animals). The quotes below illustrate some of the main functions of the *takah buöl*: to organise the agricultural work and its attached rituals and to deal with funerals and other matters related to ancestors (*yang*) and ghosts (*abhuy*). Note that a *takah buöl* was always also a *takah tahal* (one of

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15 The institution of “village elders” (in Vietnamese: *ông già làng*) is still fundamental in rural Vietnam.
the village elders); in fact, the two concepts are often used interchangeably:

“In the past the takah buöl was not chosen by voting like today. The villagers would choose someone to be the takah tahal [buöl] who could speak well, was virtuous, generous and talented. In the past, old age was not a requirement for a takah tahal. If a person was young but had many virtues and was generous he could be chosen as takah and would be invited to participate in every village ceremony. When it was time to clear land or harvest the rice, the takah had to gather all villagers in the guöl house and ask people to follow the customary taboos, such as not to clear land in the areas inhabited by spirits and not to encroach on territory belonging to other villages. Secondly, the takah had to explain everything that villagers asked him about, such as how to bury a person who had died with the proper rituals and sacrifices or how to carry out the wedding rituals. He had to instruct people on the correct procedure because if they did anything incorrectly, especially in the funeral ritual, then the ghosts would make people sick. Thus, most importantly, he had to have extensive knowledge of how to deal with ghosts. If there was fighting in the village, and if others had tried but failed to solve the conflict, it was the takah’s duty to be the final arbiter of the conflict and to end it through mediation. The takah normally kept his position until he died, but if the takah himself broke the customary law, he would lose his position for one year. During that time another person would occupy the position. If, however, after a year or so – when people would come to his house to ask him about the ritual procedures for this or that –, if he could still inspire confidence in people, then he could be reinstated as the takah.” (Arek)

The term takah tahal (both in singular and plural) is still used today to refer either to old and respected men in the village or, curiously, to the often young elected village headman. Many contemporary headmen are only in their twenties. The reason why they are often so young is that young men are more likely than old men to be versatile in Vietnamese language and also that elders tend to shun the type of duties (collecting village statistics, consulting commune and district authorities etc.) which come with the office. Young men are believed to better “understand and implement the new policies” which is the headman’s primary function today. Basically, the headman acts as a link between the Vietnamese government and the village.
Besides the position of headman (*trưởng thôn*), the state has also created a number of other new positions and organisations which are represented in every Katu village (indeed, in every village in the country). Thus, every village has a village secretary, police man, a culture and information officer, a Party Branch, Women’s Association, a Senior-citizen’s Association, and so forth. As a result, power in contemporary villages has become more dispersed than in the villages of the past. Ultimate authority is now vested in the district officials, whom the Katu treat with utmost respect, and the petty government officials of the commune – the micro-level representatives of the Vietnamese state. Nonetheless, even district and commune officials have difficulties in enforcing decisions in the villages without the consent of the village elders.

* * *

The American anthropologist Mole, who gives a brief sketch of the Katu at the time of the Vietnam-American War, claims that “the clan is the most important component of Katu social structure” (Mole 1970). If the word “clan” here is understood in the conventional anthropological sense – as the members of a group claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor – this statement is probably incorrect. However, if we understand the word “clan” as meaning “lineage” (all members of a group claiming descent from a known ancestor), the statement does have some validity since, in the past, many settlements were in fact composed of a single lineage.

As noted above, despite lacking any formal authority in today’s villages, the lineage heads (and thereby the lineages themselves) retain weight in Katu society. Strangely, Le Pichon says virtually nothing about Katu clans or lineages – or, indeed, any other aspect of Katu social organisation except for that of the village. Nor does he speak of any leadership except for that of the *takah tahal*. In one passage, he describes his friend Go of Bolo village, as “Go, chief of the Bolos”, thus referring to the villagers as if they constituted a discrete social category.

Katu society appears to have been both more cohesive and stratified in the past. The village headman coordinated important

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16 Almost every Katu village has a communal rice field exclusively dedicated to growing rice “for government officials when they come on visit”. 
social and ritual activities to a much greater extent than today. Rituals that are today family matters were in the past often carried out as village rituals involving the entire community. In fact, coordinating these rituals was probably the headman’s most important duty.

The factional division of contemporary Katu villages is perhaps most evident in the notorious failure of even the largest and wealthiest villages to collect enough money for purchasing even a medium-sized pig – not to speak of a buffalo – for the occasional village-wide sacrificial rituals that are still performed (at the inauguration of a new communal house, for example). In the past, this kind of sacrifice would hardly have lead to squabbling over how the sacrificial animal should be procured. As a matter of fact, it is often easier today for a small village – inhabited by closely related families (e.g. Azinh 3) – to pool resources and organise a communal sacrifice. A case in point was when the villagers of Arek (a large village with a population of over 300), could not agree on how to get hold of a sacrificial pig for celebrating the completion of a new roof on their guöl house. In the end, they had to buy a very small pig in the nearest town (Prao). There are simply too many competing factions in larger, composite villages such as Arek.

Paradoxically, and as a matter of policy, the government sponsors the construction of communal houses (guöl houses) and their inauguration rituals while, at the same time, actively repressing the building of traditional multifamily longhouses. The government also makes every effort to abolish the traditional system of cross-cousin marriage (which it erroneously fears might lead to in-breeding); this active dismantling of the indigenous marriage institution, of course, also leads to reduced village cohesion. Another example of government interference in Katu kinship and family relations comes in the guise of “poverty reduction”: thus, government funds for building “new houses for poor families” are exclusively allocated for the construction of individual, nuclear-family houses. In other words, the presence of a multifamily house is seen by the authorities as a

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17 Through local radio programmes in Katu language, the district government tries to dissuade people from engaging in traditional marriages. The irony, which many Katu commented upon, was that the woman transmitting the message – a well-known figure in the region – was herself married according to customary law.
Another change that has taken place in Katu society is that the differences between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, have diminished in recent decades due to the progressive erosion of customary land rights (which are not recognised by the government)\(^\text{18}\). In the past, “poor” people and orphans sometimes had to live as “servants” of richer families. Traditionally, there was thus a more prominent social ranking of the lineages in a given village, with some being considered more powerful than others. Men of high rank and power were “richer” and owned more land than the less powerful, but high status could also be due to the charisma and military prowess of particular individuals (such as notorious “killers”, for example; c.f. Le Pichon 1938).

As mentioned above, the power of the richer families may also have been partly derived from a now waning concept of land ownership, where some families were regarded as the real owners of the land while others had only usage rights. It is also clear that the local concept of “poverty” has itself undergone changes. Many informants explained that, in terms of material possessions, the lives of the rich and the poor in the past were quite similar: people ate the same kind of food, wore the same kind of clothes and lived in similar houses, yet they were different in terms of status. The rich people sponsored the large sacrifices and were thus held in high esteem. When the animals were sacrificed, all villagers would share the meat equally between them. In other words, Katu people could, in the past, live very similar lives in terms of material conditions while nonetheless differ in status. Today, the situation is otherwise; there are indications that differences in the material standards between households are increasing and that status is becoming linked to the possession of consumer goods and money instead of spiritual power and ritual skills.

Despite the progressive imposition of the national land- and forest legislation, customary notions of land tenure are still in vigour. Only a fraction of the land used for agriculture has been officially recognised and allocated to households and villages. Yet, the customary system is losing its hold. The main reason for this is the fact that the government does not recognise shifting cultivation as a

\(^{18}\) The government claims ultimate ownership to all land.
legally valid form of land-use. Land which has lain fallow for more than five years is – according to the Vietnamese land laws – land “without owner” and, thus, free for anyone to use. This clause not only disowns the customary tenure practice but also leads to increasing environmental degradation since it makes people wary of allowing their fields to lay fallow at all (N. Århem & Binh 2006). People are thus facing the choice of either cultivating increasingly degraded land or losing their proprietary rights altogether.19

**Mobility and Sedentarisation**

Before the Vietnam-American War, Katu villages were quite different from today. Firstly, they were smaller – seldom populated by more than 100 people – and composed of a group of closely related lineages with a shared history and common origin. Secondly, as opposed to today's villages, the traditional Katu village regularly moved from place to place. More than describing a settlement in a particular location, the traditional Katu concept of “village” thus signified a mobile group of people related through kinship, marriage alliances and a common “history”.

Now that they have been sedentarised, however, the Katu increasingly perceive the village in accordance with the Vietnamese concept of a geographically fixed “village” (thôn). Today, it is quite common that the Katu use the Vietnamese word thôn to denote their village (even while speaking Katu) but reverting to the local term kernaan or buöl when speaking of the villages of the past. Thus, the word kernaan (or buöl) is often used when talking about the history of a village – its movements and the hardships of its members; as such, the term is more symbolically charged than the word thôn.

* * *

19 If a person wants to cultivate unused land belonging to someone else, and if he takes his request to the commune authorities, the commune will generally be obliged to accord him this right (against the claims of the “traditional” owner).
Although every Katu village has a history of settling in a number of places, it usually bears the name of the place – often referring to a hill or a stream – where it was first established as an independent community. In other words, most of today’s villages are not physically located in the place which has given them their name; rather, each village retains the name of its “place of origin”, thus referring back to the original village with that name. This naming practice suggests that the Katu perceive the village as, in some way, a constant, unchanging “spiritual” community. Indeed, several of our study villages had existed as named political and categorical units – but with varying social composition – for as long as anyone could remember.

Today, as a result of the government’s sedentarisation program, Katu villages no longer move from place to place as they did in the past. Nonetheless, most old men remember with clarity all the locations on which their villages have ever been settled. Interviews carried out in Taghe, Apat and elsewhere showed that, during the lifespan of old men, those villages had moved more than twenty times, often several times per decade, and only exceptionally staying in one location for more than ten years. For example, from a discussion with the takah bu (lineage head) of the Jörom clan in Apat, we gathered that, since his birth, Apat village had been located on at least nineteen different sites, all clearly remembered by the informant (see Table below).20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of place</th>
<th>Nr of yrs at the site</th>
<th>Important events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (ca 1925) Klung Adhorrr</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bol Abeck</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bol Kakonng</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Klung Apaak</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nang donng Bhil</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nang donng</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 People from Taghe village gave us a similar account of sites where their village had formerly been located (Appendix 2).
Each such location had its own name and sometimes also a story attached to it. Those locations could either be named after a hill (*bol*), a flatland area (*klung*), a stream source (*tu*), or a hill-top (*pick*), or they could simply be referred to as “old house” (*nang-donng*, literally meaning “house-yard”) indicating that the particular location had once been inhabited by members of Apat village. In general, it seems that all hills, forests and flatlands watered by a particular stream are regarded as being guarded by a principal spirit agent. In other words, the stream and the hill where it originates and any flatland watered by the stream will generally share the same name. Many Katu informants explained that the names of hills and streams were given to their ancestors by the spirit of the area. Ating Chön of Arek explained:

"Sometimes – when villagers cleared a piece of land which nobody (in living memory) had cleared before – it could happen that someone became possessed by a spirit from that area. While possessed, the person would say “I am the spirit of such and such place”
and thereafter all villagers would know the real name of that place, regardless of whatever name they had given the place prior to that event... This was how the name of Adjuongs village had come about and it was also how the villagers of Arek came to know the name of the powerful stone spirit of Gervakk [see below]."

According to the elders interviewed, the two most common causes for village movements in the past were (1) bad death (deaths due to homicide, accidents and epidemics), and (2) crop failure. Since homicide, accidents and epidemics were presumably common in the past, it was inevitable that there would be bad deaths in any given village (just as it would, now and then, be crop failure). If there were more than one bad death any given year, this would be considered a very bad omen indeed, and if there were three or more deaths, then the village definitely had to move to another site. Le Pichon tells us that the heroic chief Go of Bolo met a mysterious end, dying from a strange curse cast on him by his enemies. Thereafter, his village was permanently abandoned and all its livestock killed. Here is Le Pichon’s dramatic account of the exploits and demise of his Katu friend:

“He was my friend, young and agile, his eyes laughed and he wore proudly on his forehead the tattoo of “padilyaya” [the dancing woman]. Proud and boastful, he loved to tell me about his exploits: He had killed innumerable foes. (...) It is he who taught me the customs and the most beautiful songs of his country. I had confided to him my wish to pacify all Katu and, particularly, those of A-Taouat, who were so feared. One day he suddenly disappeared. The Moi [the common term for “natives”] of his village told me: “He has left on a blood-hunting expedition”. Twenty days later, I saw from my perch in Ben-Hien how a large caravan winded along the Se-Ka-Lam...

It was the fifteen chiefs from the Northern Sector of the A-Taouat and their partisan who he had gone to vanquish that now had come to submit themselves. Two months later, he brought [the people from] twelve more villages of the High A Vương and we all took blood-oaths. I congratulated him for his actions and offered him glass beads [verroteries]. He seemed happy, but some time afterwards he came and knocked on my door in a sad mood: “I am ill,” he told me, “the people of A-Taouat have cast a spell on me and I am going to die”. I mocked him and told him ‘You are wrong, those from the high areas have made the sacrifices and death is with me’. I
gave him alcohol and quinine but without succeeding to comfort him… The next day, the chief of the cac lái [Kinh traders] brought Go to me, death bound. He died without regaining conscience. His body was carried to the post of An-Diem. I wanted the funerary procedures of a great chief to be made but all the Moi, even those of his own family, refused: ‘His death was bad, we cannot take care of him’. We ourselves had to do his burial. He was interred in a grave by a few guards while some Sedang riflemen (...) did him honours. (...) A buffalo was sacrificed but nobody left any traditional offerings at his tomb. Some time after that I learnt that the village of Bo-Lo-Dao had been abandoned and that all its inhabitants – after pronouncing the interdiction – had taken refuge in the forest.” (Le Pichon 1938: 388-89; my translation).21

As we shall see below, only certain illnesses were seen as causing bad deaths whereas most diseases were regarded as causing normal

21 “Ce fut mon ami, il était jeune et souple, ses yeux riaient et il portait fièrement tatoué sur le front la “padil yaya” (la femme qui danse). Orgueilleux et vantard, il aimait me raconter ses exploits: Les ennemis qu’il avait tués étaient innombrables (...) C’est lui qui m’a fait connaître coutumes et les plus beaux chants de son pays. Je lui avais dit mon espoir de soumettre tous les Ka-Tu et surtout ceux de l’A-Taouat, si redoutés. Un beau jour, il disparut. Les Moi de son village me dirent: "Il est parti pour une expédition de sang". Vingt jours après, je vis de mon perchoir de Bên-Hiên une caravane nombreuse qui serpentait le long de la Se-Ka-Lam… C’étaient quinze chefs du secteur Nord de l’A-Taouat et leurs partisans, qu’il étaient quérir, et qui venaient faire leurs soumission. Deux mois plus tard, il m’amena encore douze autres villages du Haut-A-Vuong, nous fimes tous le serment de sang. Je le félicitai de son action et lui remis des verroteries. Il paraissait joyeux, mais quelques temps après il vint frapper tristement à ma porte: “Je suis malade, me dit-il, les gens de l’A-Taouat m’ont jeté un sort et je vais mourir”. Je me moquai de lui: “Tu as tort, ceux du haut ont fait les sacrifices et la mort est avec moi”. Je lui donnai de l’alcool, de la quinine, sans parvenir à le réconforter… Le lendemain, le chef cac-lái ramenait Go chez moi, moribund. Il mourut sans reprendre connaissance. Son corps fut porté au poste d’An-Diem. Je voulais qu’on lui fit des funérailles de grand chef, mais tous les Moi même ceux de sa famille, s’y opposèrent: “Sa mort est mauvaise, nous ne pouvons nous occuper de lui”. Nous dûmes faire nous-mêmes l’enterrement. Il fut déposé au fond de la fosse par quelques gardes, pendant que, des tirailleurs sédang (...) lui rendaient honneurs. (...) Le buffle fut sacrifié, mais nul ne voulut déposer sur sa tombe les offrandes traditionnelles. A quelques temps de là, j’appris que le village de Bo-Lo-Dao était abandonné et que ses habitants, après avoir prononcé l’interdit, s’étaient réfugiés dans la forêt.”
(“good”) deaths. In the past, Katu commonly attributed diseases and bad deaths to the activity of displeased spirits. Moreover, spirits were also believed to affect the fertility of the land and determine whether people could safely work on the land or not. Even today, Katu protect their bodies and faces thoroughly when working on the fields, in the belief that while carrying out such work they might be vulnerable to spirit-induced illnesses.

According to the Katu, the ghosts of the dead affect the lives and wellbeing of the living; thus the Katu believe (or at least did so until recently), that livestock that ate from the food offered at a tomb could cause death in the village by spreading the “filth” of the dead in the village. Moreover, any death that the Katu perceive as “bad” will, according to their beliefs, produce an angry ghost that will seek to kill more people to join the deceased in his/her misery. Therefore bad deaths are “contagious” and one angry ghost will call for others to join it (c.f. Le Pichon 1938).

The second reason for moving a settlement was poor or declining harvests. Katu are experienced farmers and know that a field’s yield depends on a number of factors, among them how long the field has lain fallow This practical understanding notwithstanding, they also believe that the quality of any particular harvest will also depend on the will of spirits. Thus a failed harvest – at least in the past – was often seen as an indication that the local spirits wanted people out of that area.

A third reason for moving a settlement was warfare and inter-village conflicts (although the Katu do not talk openly about this topic). During the “French” period and, in particular, the Vietnam-American War, the Katu were obliged to move even more frequently than in prewar times because of bombings, “mopping-up” operations and exposure to the relentless spraying of toxic agents (notably Agent Orange) on the part of the American air force.

Thus, not only where people killed and entire villages destroyed but huge tracts of land were also made totally infertile. We should bear in mind that the Ho Chi Minh trail, a prime target for American bombing operations, passed right through the Katu heartland. To survive, villages split up into smaller, mobile settlement units. Rice

22 Perhaps we may “read” a certain “health rationale” in the propensity to move a settlement in case of bad deaths. A parallel case occurs in pastoralist societies where settlement movements are triggered, among other things, by livestock disease.
fields were often located several hours away from the settlements in order to avoid detection by the enemy. The fact that the Katu were able to survive as a people, even as their homeland was turned into a battlefront, points to their remarkable resilience and adaptivity. Although they were forced to disperse into small and mobile settlements, and despite the destruction brought by the war, virtually all these communities managed to reconstitute themselves as functioning villages after the war.

* * *

As we have seen, the Katu villages of the past were small and mobile, often moving to a new location once or twice in a decade. Although Katu elders explicitly state that the main reasons for this past mobile settlement pattern were crop failure, intervillage violence and “bad deaths”, it is nevertheless instructive to consider other possible – causal or systemic – explanations. In this perspective, Katu spirit beliefs and taboos relating to land-use can be understood as a sort of functional “blueprint” for survival – an institutionalised means to regulate local resource exploitation. The “living standard” of Katu settlements in the past was directly dependent on the fertility of their fields and the availability of game. If too many people attempted to make a living out of a given area, the fallow periods of their fields would progressively shorten and game and fish would become scarce. Considering the fact that certain diseases were endemic to particular areas, there might also have been a health rationale for settlement mobility. Thus, in terms of their traditional practice of livestock breeding (mainly buffaloes and pigs) – with little or no access to veterinary medicines – it would certainly have made sense to keep settlements small, mobile and scattered. Today, increased inter-village contact seems to have made domestic livestock more prone to livestock diseases than in the past.

Thus, in order to maintain prosperity and wellbeing according to local standards, the Katu had to clear and cultivate land that had been fallow for at least 10-15 years. At regular intervals, every 5-10 years or so, they moved their villages to new locations, thereby securing

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23 The Katu also cultivated rice for the North-Vietnamese soldiers in the area.
24 According to Katu informants.
easy access to fertile swidden land and good hunting grounds. However, such forest land was not always available: every village jealously guarded large tracts of land, most of which was uncultivated or fallow. Land that had never been cultivated was believed to be owned and guarded by “unfamiliar” forest spirits, and required very complex auguries and rituals to be converted into land considered “safe” for cultivation. If the spirits of the land did not consent to cultivation, such forest land – no matter how fertile – would be left unused. It is also clear that the desire for fertile land and good hunting grounds were a common source of inter-village conflicts in the past.

The mobility of Katu settlements could take a number of different forms. The picture below shows one typical evolutionary trajectory: as the settlement grows in size, it divides and an off-shoot of the original settlement goes off to establish a new settlement. This is the process by which the “mytho-historical” dispersion of the Katu from an original homeland (described in myth and legends) might have taken place; as the original group grew, off-shoots claimed new land while the parental group remained in the ancestral area.25

When villagers felt that game animals were becoming hard to find in the vicinity of the village or that the fertility/productivity of the

25 Some researchers, notably Dang Nghiem Van, have proposed that the Katu originate in a location far removed from their present homeland. Dang Nghiem Van conjectures that they originate from the Plain of Jars civilisation in Laos. Many Katu themselves, claimed that they lived closer to the coast (close to present-day Danang city) in “ancient times”.

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swidden fields was decreasing, one or several families (lineages) would separate from the parental village and move into an area where conditions were more favourable. As a first option, the offshoot lineage/families would establish a new settlement within the village’s traditional territorial boundaries, but if the village territory was perceived as insufficient, they might move into an entirely new area.26

There is an evident political dimension to this mobile settlement pattern. Thus, when an off-shoot group decides to leave the main village, it will first try to find a place within the area traditionally belonging to the village. However, if the traditional land is not sufficient it will seek new land, either by taking possession of “virgin” – un-claimed – land or by conquering land from other villages or, as a less attractive option, by joining another village with sufficient land, thus giving up their present village identity and becoming members of the new village.

The “Apat villages” are an example of a settlement constellation that for the last eighty years or so seems to have relocated within the boundaries of a single, large village territory. We may conjecture that the reason why Apat and its satellite villages (Apat 2 and Taghe) have been able “to stay put” in one territory is because of the considerable power and prestige the village wielded in the past, permitting Apat to control sufficient land to move within its own territory. A weaker village, controlling less land, would have to move to unfamiliar terrain and, in the process, lose the territory it leaves behind.

The figure below shows possible settlement movements of a village powerful enough to defend a large territory. As the village moves from one location to another, the abandoned settlement site becomes an “old house” (nanng donng). Such places are regarded with special respect (“places with historical remains”, as they were described by an informant in Vietnamese) but may nevertheless be resettled after a certain period of time. The same informant claimed however that, although you may resettle on an old village site, you may not resettle directly on an old swidden field.

26 In the past, a village (kernaan) was not necessarily a single settlement but could consist of a group of related settlements sharing a single name and reckoning a common origin. The contemporary villages of Taghe and Apat (and, to some extent, also Azinh 3) constitute such a constellation.
Obviously any given Katu group would ideally be interested in keeping all the tracts of land that it has cultivated in the past, while, at the same time, accessing new lands in the present, but this was probably not an option for politically weak villages which would lose the land (and fallows) they left behind as they moved along. The traditional settlement patterns of the Katu go a long way in explaining the rivalries and conflicts that existed among the Katu in the past, and the need for villages to occasionally display their power vis-à-vis their neighbours. When conflicts did arise about land it is likely that they concerned access to either primal forest or old fallow land – previously cultivated forest land – rather than actual, cultivated fields.

As some Katu villages grew in size, dispersed and/or moved on to “new” land, they propelled territorial expansion and historical migrations. Whatever their historical and geographical point of origin, we can thus begin to understand the basic pattern and processes by which the Katu people gradually domesticated “the wilderness” and turned it into their present homeland.

* * *
New settlements might, in the past, have developed from “swidden groups” – groups of closely related families cultivating and cooperating on adjacent fields. Such groups are a typical feature of past and present Katu society (and of Southeast Asian upland societies in general). It has been noted (K. Århem 2005) that “swidden groups” are like miniature villages. They contain the “germ” from which an entire new settlement can grow. At first, the new settlement would not sever the ties with its “mother village” but as it moves further away it might do so.

If a new settlement was initiated by a swidden group, then it is also likely that it would be located near the old fields where its “field houses” (“nha djuong”) were located – i.e., the temporary settlement harbouring the swidden group and where families spent considerable time during planting and harvesting time (and still do). The periods that Katu families spend in these temporary field-houses – away from the noisy village – seem, for them, to be among the merriest of the year. Indeed, this is the only period of the year when a nuclear family can have some privacy.

The purpose of establishing a new village would thus be the same as the purpose of the temporary settlement – to facilitate access to both currently used (and prospective) fields and hunting grounds. Prospective, future swidden fields are usually identified years ahead and after careful deliberation. This was exactly the course of action contemplated by one Katu man (Ong T. in A’ur) who was reluctant to live in the village where the government wanted him to live; he and his family planned (2007) to move his permanent dwelling to where he currently had his temporary field-house.

In sum, Katu mobility in the past cannot be explained simply from a practical point of view; their historical settlement pattern was fundamentally influenced by their spiritual beliefs. However, the entire Katu belief system, with its many taboos and spirit places, might be seen as an adaptive cultural system that, over the centuries, evolved to reflect the very fundamental ecological necessity for Katu settlements to be mobile. Certainly, some of the traditional Katu beliefs and customs seem to have caused so much hardship that, when presented with alternatives – introduced by the communist cadres – most Katu indeed chose to abandon the old practises. But they only discarded some of the old customs, such as the violent practice of “blood hunting” and the custom of abandoning entire
villages in case of “bad deaths”, while adhering to others such as the rituals associated with rice cultivation and hunting.

Most Katu still seem to be convinced that the fertility of the land and the yields from the forest are related to the will of the spirits. Today, villages are permanently fixed, whether the villagers like it or not. However, although “sedentarisation” and agricultural intensification is at the core of both government and international development efforts, it is not a policy beyond critique. It might, in fact, prove a challenge for the Katu to maintain a decent living standard under the current market-oriented development- and modernisation regime (c.f. N. Århem & Binh 2006).

It is my impression – from observing the livelihood activities in a number of Katu villages over the past few years – that the food situation in more remote (“traditional”) villages tend to be considerably better (in terms of the level of consumption and the variety of the diet) than in the sedentarised and modernised villages relocated along roads and near market towns (c.f. Krahn 2005, N. Århem & Binh 2006). Recent data also contradict the notion that the traditional pattern of rotational shifting cultivation is environmentally destructive. Satellite images from Quang Nam province, covering the period from 1952 to 2003, show that the forest cover in the Katu areas has remained remarkably stable (Koy et al. 2007). The images also suggest that the entire Central Truong Son (Annamite Mountain) landscape in Laos and Vietnam has been inhabited and utilised by humans for centuries, perhaps millennia.

Nonetheless, it is obvious that the population increase of any given population – now as in the past – entails demand for more land. Thus, even if the traditional Katu settlement and land-use pattern would be deemed acceptable by the Vietnamese government, its sustainability would depend entirely on how much land (of the forest land originally belonging to the Katu) the government would be willing to concede to them. The limits of the indigenous Katu livelihood system are thus not so much set by the intrinsic efficiency of the system itself as by the political decisions and economic policies which frame and constrain its operation (c.f. N. Århem & Binh 2006).
Chapter 4
CLANS, TOTEMS AND TABOOS

The Katu are divided into patrilineal clans (*to*). In each village, there are normally a number of clans represented. All in all, there are about thirty different clans in Katu lands. Luu Hung (2007) has compiled the following (according to him incomplete) list of clan names for the Katu in Tay Giang district; the list corresponds well with my own data (Luu Hung’s spelling in parenthesis):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abing</th>
<th>Bling</th>
<th>Hieng</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alang</td>
<td>Bnuoch</td>
<td>Ploong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aral</td>
<td>Blup</td>
<td>Riahh (Ríah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arat</td>
<td>Kabu (Ca-bu)</td>
<td>Rapat (Ra-pát)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avo</td>
<td>Ker (Cêr)</td>
<td>Raruong (Ra-rưông)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviet</td>
<td>Koor (Coor)</td>
<td>Takoi (Ta-coi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ata</td>
<td>Kôlau (Clâu)</td>
<td>Redill (Zơ-dêl)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ating</td>
<td>Kôdah (Ca-dâh)</td>
<td>Rõngol (Zơ-ngol)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aghieng</td>
<td>Hoiih (Hôih)</td>
<td>Jôrom (Zơ-râm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briu</td>
<td></td>
<td>Etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the face of it, these clan names appear simply to function as surnames or family names prefixed to personal names. However, to each of these “family names” is attached a story of common descent from a mythical ancestor implying that all those who share a given clan name descend from this single ancestor. That the name refers to a mythical rather than actual ancestor is clear from the fact that many of these names refer to names of particular animals or plants. They may also, in some cases, refer to objects, or simply to some crucial part of the story about their ancestor – most often to the event that caused the ancestor’s death. Thus, by the word clan, we refer to a non-local (spatially dispersed) group or category of people sharing the same “surname”, whether its members are actually related to each other or not.
Another, important Katu kinship category is the lineage (\textit{bu}), usually with a maximal depth of four to five generations. As opposed to the people belonging to a common clan, the people of a \textit{bu} are factual relatives descending from a common – genealogically known and named – ancestor.

Katu, with the exception of the Jörom clan, can marry within the clan, but not within the lineage; to do so would be considered incestuous. In daily conversations, however, the word \textit{bu} might sometimes be used as a synonym for \textit{to}, and the Katu may thus talk about all the people with the name Jörom as “\textit{bu} Jörom”, the context nonetheless indicating that they are actually talking about the clan rather than a specific Jörom lineage.

Just like today, Katu villages in the past often contained more than one clan. However, in the smaller villages of the past (as opposed to the situation in the larger, composite and permanent villages of today), people with the same clan name were usually descendents of a single known ancestor and thus belonged to a single \textit{bu}. For this reason, marriages between people with the same family name in the same village were rare in the past. Today, however, with lineages from different villages having being relocated in a single large village, intermarriage between lineages of the same clan has become commonplace. Even today, however, such marriages are only possible if the intermarrying families belong to different lineages. The Jörom clan is an exception to this rule; Jörom people never marry within the clan. This proscription is related to the fact that the Jörom are considered the progenitors of all other clans.

In the past, although several clans and lineages might be represented in any one village, there was often one lineage that dominated and from which the village headman was chosen. For example, this seems to have been the case in Apat village where the Jörom clan was always the largest. However, the Apat case also shows us what could happen when a village became too populous: it separated into two parts, namely Apat Jörom and Apat Bling – each referred to by the name of the dominant clan. Later, after the Vietnam-American War, the two parts united again.

Moreover, the Katu in the past lived in large multifamily longhouses (dominated by a single \textit{bu}). The longhouses were much larger than today’s houses, and a number of nuclear families belonging to a single lineage would live in each longhouse – possibly the entire \textit{bu}. A settlement could consist of three or four such large
longhouses – plus a guöl (communal house). Some informants told us that, occasionally, men from two or three different lineages might live in one such longhouse. Today, however, Katu houses are rapidly becoming smaller as the concept of nuclear-family households – and houses – is becoming the norm. However, even if the bu is no longer as important as it used to be, and the nuclear family is becoming pre-eminent, people still know to which bu they and all other villagers belong. For example, in Apat village, we were told that the ratio between households (perrlong), lineage (bu) and clan (to) was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clan</th>
<th>Nr of Lineages</th>
<th>Nr of Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jörom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alang</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briu</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bnuöt</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoih</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aral</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, some of the lineages are quite large – e.g. the bu Bling with 14 households (ca 60-70 people). This is the Apat Bling group which now again has joined the other Apat lineages. Apat informants also told us that the original set of lineages in Apat village comprised two Jörom and one Aral lineage. The Bling lineage joined them in the 1920s and then again separated from the main Apat village at the Tjörnomm site (1940s). The Bnuöt joined in 1985 and the Bling (re-)joined in 1986.

An old villager, one of the takah bu (lineage heads) of the village, told us that, when he was born in Klung Addhor (about 78 years ago), there were four bu in the settlement belonging to the Aral, Alang, Jörom and Hoih clans. He said that there were around 60 people in the village at the time of his birth. The four bu were connected by a fixed system of intermarriage in which the Alang “gave” women to the Aral, the Aral to the Jörom, the Jörom to Hoih and the Hoih – finally – to men of other villages. In other words:

\[27\] The number of perrlong (households) in a multi-family house is typically indicated by the number of fire-places – one for each household.
Similarly there was a fixed system of marriage exchange between the to/bu pertaining to A’ur village. However, while each kernaan (village) appears to have had its own local system of seemingly fixed marriage exchange, there does not seem to have existed any general rule of marriage exchange between Katu clans, i.e., no system prescribing intermarriage between specific clans. The pattern of marriage exchange between Katu lineages indicates that they have what anthropologists call an “asymmetric marriage system”. In simple terms, this implies that if one group gives daughters in marriage to another group, then that other group is not allowed to give back daughters in marriage to the first group. This, in effect, precludes two lineages from intermarrying reciprocally with each other.

The system operates on the principle of one-way marriage exchange and requires at least three intermarrying lineages; in actual fact, it usually involves a whole array of groups related to each others as “wife-givers” and “wife-takers” – each local lineage receiving wives from one group and giving wives to another. As we can see from the open-ended nature of this system (exemplified by the chain of intermarriages in the case of the Apat lineages above), the marriage exchange will normally involve several villages, thus tying villages closer together to each other by means of enduring marriage alliances.

The Katu marriage system thus created a situation where several Katu villages would become “allied through marriage” and clearly functioned as an important mechanisms around which clusters of political alliances emerged. In fact, it was the norm (but not always the case) that all villages living close to each other were ”friends through marriage”. The Katu still follow an asymmetric marriage system and still do not marry within the same lineage. Nonetheless, exceptions can be made to the rule, if – for example – a couple has an illicit premarital sexual relationship. In such cases the couple might be forced to marry each other but certain ritual measures will be taken to counter the negative (cosmological) effects of the broken taboo: one informant claimed that in such cases the kuann ritual had to be performed before the formal wedding. At the kuann ritual, the offending families would have to sacrifice a pig and eat it.
During the ritual, the two families would also have to sit with their backs against each other. Significantly, there was traditionally another situation that required two groups of people to sit with their backs towards each other, namely when a man or family from another village came to visit a family in a village where a bad death had recently occurred.

**Totemic Clan Names**

Usually each clan name refers to a “totemic” animal, plant, or object. The name Jörom, for example, is that of a dog who a long time ago married a woman and had a child with her; Arat refers to a small lizard; Alang to a particular kind of tree; Riahh means root, and so forth. However, as some names show, and as became clear from interviewing elders on this topic, the main purpose of the names seems to be to remind those who bear them of how their particular ancestor died and the taboo they should therefore observe. Thus, it is not entirely clear to what extent the Katu identify with the creature or object to which their name makes reference. The term *bnuöt*, for example (as in the Bnuöt clan), was translated to me as “splashing water” in reference of an event which supposedly killed the clan’s ancestor. In some cases, however – as in the case of Jörom, Aral, Avo etc. – the animal in question is directly referred to as an ancestor (or “relative” in the cases of some of the other animals), and the people with that name should consequently not eat the eponymous (totemic) anima or object.

Only a few old men actually knew the story of their clan name, and each told his own version of the story, differing at least in the details from other stories about the origin of the same name. It is therefore impossible to give any absolute or correct version of a given clan story. Instead we should place emphasis on the recurring features of any given clan-name story: For example, the origin stories of the Jörom clan (see below) all involve the union of a dog and a woman, and a subsequent incestuous relationship between the woman and the male offspring of that original union; both the dog-father and his “son” were known by the name Jörom – the latter being the ancestor of the Jörom clan. We should try to understand the
logic of seemingly strange stories such as this one rather than expect to find one absolute or “correct” version of any given clan story.

The story about the Jörom clan stands out from other corresponding stories – recounted here in one typical version displaying the structure of all the varying versions we collected:

*The story of the Jörom Clan*

“The mother of Jörom [the ancestor of the Jörom clan] was human, the father was a dog. Their first-born male child was called Jörom [after his dog-father]. This is how he was born: the world was flooded and a woman and a dog climbed up a mandarin tree. When the water eventually drained away, the woman realised that only she and the dog had survived. They became a couple and she eventually gave birth to a boy. The boy then killed the dog. The mother became very sad and angry. She ran away. Many years later the two met and became a couple; they did not recognise each other. The mother found 100 eggs and hatched them. The eggs opened and 50 boys and 50 girls came out; some went to the lowland [and became the Kinh people], some stayed in the highland [and became the Katu people].”

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28 The narrator of this story then proceeded to tell us that “... Only Kinh people knew how to make textiles and cultivate wet rice. The Mountain People [i.e. the original Katu] could only use bark cloth and only knew how to cultivate on swidden fields, on which they only grew fruits. One day they found a small hole. There was some rice in the hole but they could not get it out. First they asked a bird named Achim A-ihh to take it out. But the bird’s beak quickly became worn down and disappeared. People then asked a leech to take it out for them. The leech carried the rice out one grain at a time. Then people had rice and planted it. The bird said: “My beak is now worn down and therefore I will eat rice now.” The leech said: “I do not eat rice so therefore I will drink your blood.” Then there was an earthquake and a storm and people saw a bolt of lightning touch a stone, thereby creating fire. The people took the fire to cook food because they noticed that the fire could make food much more delicious. When the Kinh people met them each group cooked a meal for the other group. After tasting the Kinh food they realised it was more delicious than their own because there was salt in it. Since then the Katu always wanted to have salt in their food. When the Katu population increased they decided to separate into smaller groups. People who wore shirts were called Shirt People; people who had knives were called Knife People; people who made houses were called House People. The “House People” are the Alang of today.”
The story of the Jörom clan differs from all the other clan stories in that it not only purports to explain the origin of the Jörom clan itself but that of all Katu people (or even – in some versions – all humanity).

Moreover, two of its main themes – that of a great flood killing all humanity (except the Woman) and that of the marriage between a dog and a woman – can be found among a number of other ethnic groups in Vietnam, Southern China and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The flood theme in particular can be found all over Southeast Asia (c.f. Dang Nghiêm Van 2001: p. 165-217). However, variants of the dog/girl theme are also to be found among many ethnic groups in the region: for example, not only is it very similar to the tale of the dog-dragon ancestor of the Yao (North Vietnam) but it also resonates closely with the origin myth of the Kinh (Vietnamese) – the legend about Âu Cơ and her offspring (although this legend speaks of a “dragon father” rather than a dog-father).

This is thus, most probably, an ancient Mon-Khmer origin myth (predating the oldest Vietnamese kingdom). The theme can also be found in Chinese legends such as the ancient legend of Pan-Hou (c.f. Moréchand G., 1968). Some versions of the dog-ancestor myth are, in fact, so similar to the Kinh myth of Âu Cơ and the Dragon Father that they might have been imported into Katu culture in recent years from the Kinh. This should not be regarded as surprising, since both Ho Chi Minh himself and the Vietnamese propaganda apparatus have used this myth to emphasize the unity between the minorities and the Kinh, and it is one of the first things taught to children all over Vietnam.

Mole (1970), in his brief account of the Katuic-speaking Bru people gives us a variant of the story that includes all the features of the Jörom story but which has a civet cat in the place of the dog. The universality of the dog/girl theme – and the fact that it tends to form part of a story of ethno-genesis – strongly suggests that the Jörom clan is conceived of as the original Katu clan. However, we have no evidence of any ranking of the other clans, nor of any specific birth-order between them.29

29 In Nam Đồng district, however, people jokingly told me that members of the Riahh clan (riahh meaning “root”) were actually “Dog people” but that they had changed their names from “Dog” (acha) to “Root” because “they
As for the stories about the other clan names, there are some recurrent features that should be noted: (1) almost all the stories are about a group of people (often children) that kill an animal or cut a plant/tree and thereafter die as a consequence of that action. (2) The descendants of the heroic “first people” who died then realise, from the nature of the deaths, that the animal or plant killed or cut was, in fact, their ancestor and that this it was because of killing their ancestor that the heroes died – the logic of the story being that you die if you eat/hurt your own ancestor. In Katu, this is called dahh-to, meaning to “eat one’s name” or “eat one’s ancestors”.30 Thus, each Katu clan has some sort of taboo, often an animal or a plant that they are prohibited from killing/cutting and/or eating lest they be severely punished by their ancestor. There are many stories about such punishments; for example, one Aral man told us how, during the war-time, his unit had managed to kill a “hog bear” but, because aral means hog bear, he did not dare to eat its meat together with the other soldiers despite being very hungry.

Here are the stories of some other clans and how they got their names:

**The Arat-Alang clan**

“There was a group of children playing in the field. They caught an animal called arat (a kind of edible gecko). Four of them took the arat and climbed up a tree, where one of them beheaded the gecko with the strike of a sword. However, the force of the strike was so strong that the branch of the tree that they were sitting on was cut off along with the head of the animal, and they all fell down and died. Since then, the family chose the name of that animal to be its [clan] name since they realised that the children had died because they had killed their own ancestor. Since then, they never eat arat lizards.”

Most Arat Katu in the A Vương area today actually refer to themselves as Alang rather than Arat. This is also the name commonly found on their identity cards and birth certificates. When asked, they felt embarrassed to be named after the dog”. This could perhaps be interpreted as the Riahh clan descending from the Jörom clan.

30 Dahh-to is also a common expression used to insult someone who is constantly "talking about the same thing" – to make him stop.
would explain that the two names are synonymous. However, there is a different story for the Alang name:

“As a matter of taboo, this clan does not eat the fruit from the lang tree. The legend says that a group of [people] went into the forest and climbed a tall lang tree to collect honey from a beehive at its top. One of them was bitten by a jungle leech; he caught the leech and threw it down on the ground. An orphan, who stood near the tree, saw the leech. He caught it, put it on the root of the tree and used a knife to cut the leech in pieces (to kill it). But the cut caused the entire tree to fall down and into a nearby river, and all the people drowned. From then on, the offspring of the dead men took the name of the tree as their family name and, thus, the Alang clan came into being” (adapted from Luu Hung 2007:13).

Despite the fact that the Arat story is about a gecko and the Alang story about a tree, the two stories are very similar in structure. Luu Hung (ibid) claims that, in some areas, the Arat and the Alang see each other as “brother clans” and respect not only their own particular taboo animal/plant, but that of their brother clan as well.

According to many of our informants the Arat and Alang were not only brother clans but in fact the same clan. For example, people who generally called themselves Alang could suddenly refer to themselves as Arat – especially when they talked about the past. One explanation for this could be that the Alang name refers to a “sub-group” of Arat and that Alang people refer to themselves simply by that name because there is no other Arat sub-group in their territory from which they have to differentiate themselves. In other words:

Arat splits into:

- Arat Alang
- Arat X
… but then, the Arat X leave the area or disappear for some other reason (war, epidemics etc.). As time has passes, and since there are no other Arat sub-clans in the A Vương area, the Arat-Alang people would have dropped their original clan name and started referring to themselves exclusively by their sub-clan name: Alang. This process could explain the tendency of the Alang people in A Vương to use the term Arat about themselves when referring to the past but Alang when talking about present time.

According to some informants, clans renamed themselves in this manner in order to formalise a certain division and thereby create “marriageability” between each other. This, however, would not appear to have been the result of any conscious decision; rather, as local groups moved apart from each other, they would over time start adding a sub-clanic name to their original name and, later, drop the original name entirely.

* * *

The Katu often refer to the stories about their clan ancestors as “the story of kakon Arat” or the story of “kakon Alang” etc. The term kakon means son/s or child/children. Here are summaries of, and extracts from, stories about “the children” of four additional clan ancestors:

**Bnuöt**

The legend about the Bnuöt clan tells how:

“… some children went down to a stream to take a bath and while they were washing themselves they splashed water at each other. Suddenly, one of the children died and because of this the parents of that child realised that they belonged to a race of water and that the boys had angered their ancestors by splashing water. Thereafter Bnuöt people always avoid doing this. *Bnuöt* means “to splash”.”

**Ploong**

“Some children went swimming. Suddenly, a flood came and they drowned. *Ploong* means “drowned”. The children who survived [or
their descendants] ever since avoid passing a river or stream when the water level is high.”

**Briu**

“All some people ate the fruits of the briu tree and then died. Another story tells about how some people ate the briu fruit and then used its seeds to throw at other people who immediately died. Since then the descendants of the dead people call themselves Briu.” (Aro)

**Ating**

“This clan has at least two different stories/taboos relating to its name: (1) It is taboo to use the ating (rush leaves) to envelop rice for cooking cakes and to contain food, as this would bring about illness to the person concerned. (2) Some persons always overcook their rice, and the overcooked food is called ting” (adapted from Luu Hung 2007:13). 31

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31 An informant in Areh village claimed to have witnessed how an Ating friend died [some time] after having eaten burnt rice. Other informants said that Ating was the name of a kind of small crab.

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**The Mytho-History of Clan Movements**

Sometimes Katu people not only identify themselves with their clan- (“family-”) and personal names but also add a qualifier to their clan name. Thus, a member of the Ating clan might tell you that he is an Ating Göyö whereas another might tell you he is an Ating Katiec. As opposed to the primary clan names, such “sub-clan” names often seem related not to a “totem” animal or object but rather to some mysterious event that caused the splitting or diaspora of their particular group from an original group or village to which they once belonged. One of the sub-clan myths that most clearly seems to indicate such a tendency is, precisely, that of the Ating Göyö “sub-clan”. Whereas Ating, the name of the clan as a whole, means either “overcooked food”, “rush leaves” or a species of crab, the sub-clanic
denominator göyö refers to a “poisonous” species of stinging honey-bee (and its produce – honey). This is the story of the Göyö people:

“Poisonous göyö bees built their hives in the houses of the ancestors of the Ating people, and some people died because of this. Therefore this group decided to abandon their village. That is how some Ating families came to be called Ating Göyö.”

Those Ating who are not Göyö, i.e., who did not flee from the “poisonous bees”, are called Ating Katiec. Katiec means “earth” or “soil”, and the first interpretation of this name would thus suggest Katiec people as “people who never fled their homeland” (as the Göyö people are supposed to have done). The event that supposedly caused the Göyö to flee is said to have occurred a long time ago. One old man in Arek (Ong Thua) shed some light on these puzzling names when he explained that in fact “all Katu clans can be divided into Göyö and Katiec”, implying that the Göyö/Katiec dichotomy refers to a conceptual division between the people (families, lineages) who, at one point in time and for one reason or another, were forced to move from a particular area and those who stayed put in the same area.

Considering that mobility is such a basic feature of the Katu civilization, one must situate this relative stability/mobility into its proper context: it is thus likely that a Katiec group may become reclassified as Göyö when forced to move into a new territory, and that a group which, at a particular point in time, is identified as Göyö will in due time turn into Katiec if it remains in a certain area for a considerable period of time. Such processes would explain the following statement of an elderly Katu man: “any Katu, regardless of his clan, may become Göyö”.

On this account, the story about the Ating Göyö branch seems to be a quasi-mythical reference to the separation and movement of a group away from its brethren. Perhaps it is even a metaphoric account of the specific event which caused the displacement – bad deaths, disease, malevolent spirits or warfare. One account, given in Luu Hung’s report (2007) about the Kölau, Riahh and Alang clan names, points in this direction; it claims that those three clans were split apart by ”poisonous bees” and ”epidemics”. Thus even groups who did not generally refer to themselves as Göyö (which generally
only the Ating clan does), could claim “poisonous bees” to be one reason for their separation from other groups.

Other accounts about other groups tell us how people had to leave their “home villages” due to either “spirits not allowing them to cultivate there” or “fighting”. One informant told us that: “after an enemy attack [or incursion of blood hunters], the surviving and fleeing villagers – when they arrived to a new place – would not tell anybody where they had come from for fear of attracting the evil that had caused them to flee”\(^{32}\). The name “Göyö” (stinging bees) should thus perhaps be regarded as a way for the Katu to both commemorate the calamity which caused a certain group to abandon its homeland, while at the same time veiling the cause for the displacement by covering it in a kind of mystical aura.

It would appear, then, that “sub-clan” names such as Göyö and Katiec carry a certain amount of information about real events in the past which the Katu consider it inappropriate to speak about in the open (epidemics, bad deaths, warfare and the like).

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**Aral sub-clans: Ariel, Addrohh and Aroo**

We recorded three divisions of the Aral clan: (Aral) Addrohh, the (Aral) Ariel, and the (Aral) Aroo – none of which is associated with any mythical ancestor but rather with a “characteristic feature”. Most Aral people of Taghe and Apat villages belong to the Ariel branch, and Aral Höp of Taghe told us that the Addrohh group was so called (presumably by others) because its members were “stupid, lazy and did not know how to follow the leaders policy”, whereas the Ariel (his own group) were “intelligent, diligent and knew how to follow the leader’s policy”. “Leader” here seems to refer to the *takah buöl* (headman) of olden days and “policy” probably refers to the correct ritual procedures as recommended by the headman. Let us recall

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\(^{32}\) Aral Trang from Arek explained that the Ating Göyö clan, just as the Aral Addrohh clan in the past had fled their home villages because of fighting and “because the spirits did not allow them to continue cultivating where they lived before”. He also told us that Old Arek used to be exclusively populated by Ating Göyö families and that the *takah tahal* (elders) of Old Arek were all Ating Göyö.
from the previous chapter that it was one of the takah’s most important tasks to advise other villagers on ritual matters:

“... because of [being, stupid, lazy etc.], the Addrohh people [of Taghe and Apat villages] have all died from disease and hardships. That is why all the Aral people of Apat and Taghe today are Ariel (and not Addroh).”

Aral Trang of Arek, who originated from the Adjuöng village (on which land the present Arek village is situated), gave a different account. He divided the Aral clan into Addrohh and Aroo people, implying that the name Addrohh refers to a wandering, restless breed of Aral people (i.e. originating from somewhere else), whereas the Aroo branch – his own – is indigenous to the Adjuöng-Arek area. We know very little about the name Aroo, but Aral Trang mentioned that there were two hills not far from Arek village. The larger of the two, about two hours away, is called Bol Aroo (Aroo Hill) and is associated with some sort of semi-mythical individual referred to as Takah Aroo (Chief Aroo or Old Aroo) whereas the smaller hill – slightly closer to Arek – is regarded as “the younger brother of Bol Aroo” and is called Bhuöp Ronng (“Grandfather Ronng”).

Hill tops referred to as older and younger brothers often appears in conversations with Katu. In some sense, it seems that hills and ancestors merge in the collective memory of Katu people since many hill spirits were said to have been “living people” a long time ago. It is thus difficult to know whether Aral Trang is referring “simply” to the name of a hill or to an ancestor associated with a particular place. It is also the case that Katu often refer to a spiritually important hill as abhuöp or bhuöp, meaning “grandfather”.33.

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Aral Trang also told us another story which perhaps should be understood in this context; the story was told to explain why particular groups moved from one place to another and, in that sense, resembles the Ating Göyö myth. Note, again, that the protagonists

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33 The highly feared tiger, who some Katu regard as a spirit, is also referred to as “grandfather” (abhuöp), as is also the case with the full moon.
are children playing – just as in the origin stories of the principal clans:

“Some children played that they were performing a buffalo sacrifice, one boy acting as the buffalo. An old woman said “kill the buffalo and cut its penis for me; I want to eat it”. The children then killed the boy [“buffalo”] and cut his penis and brought it to the woman. The old woman now became very worried [for what the children had done] and told them: “Run away or else the boy’s family will kill you!” The boys ran to the Adjuöng village. When they arrived there, the villagers asked them why they had come. They told them what had happened and asked the Adjuöng people to help [defend] them. The Adjuöng villagers agreed, and the children settled down in Adjuöng village. Since then, there are Arat, Aral and Ating Katiec people in Adjuöng village.”

While telling this story, Aral Trang suddenly stopped to sing a short hat li song in Katu, after which he asked me to write the English words “die” and “lose” in his notebook. Might this suggest that the story is related to violent conflicts in the past – and that this is the “real” meaning of the “buffalo-sacrifice story” and also the rationale for the division of the Aral clan into separate sub-clans (Aro and Addrohh)?

The following, almost identical, story was narrated by Alang G’rreng in A’ur village and describes why, a long time ago, the Bling and the Arat-Alang people (who lived together in Old A’ur village) became separated and later reunited:

“The children of Arat and Bling played together, and one day they pretended to make a buffalo sacrifice. One Bling boy played the buffalo. An old woman asked the children to give her the penis of the buffalo. They killed the Bling boy and brought his penis to the old woman. The Bling people in the village got scared and ran away. When all this happened, the villagers were away. When they came back to the village and realised what had happened they [the Arat people] ran after the Bling. Eventually, the two groups managed to solve the problem, recognising that the killing had been an act of irresponsible children. Moreover, the two clans were already closely related by marriage. [The Arat clan was traditionally “wife givers” to the Bling clan.] Thereafter the two groups lived together for ten years in the Huế province.”
This account differs from that about the Aral “children” who sought refuge in Adjuöng village in that the contending groups (Arat and Bling) in the latter story solved the problem and remained allies while the two parties in the first story did not. Yet, the two stories are structurally similar, suggesting that they, just like the göyö stories, are versions of a “coded” account of something else – presumably village warfare and/or spirit attacks.

What we have attempted here is to uncover the underlying logic of the stories of clan names, sub-clans and village movements. Why is it that they so often portray the ancestors as a group of children – as in the stories about the clan totems and the “buffalo-sacrifice” stories? And how do we explain the recurring theme of children “playing” buffalo sacrifice? What does the old woman who asks for the “buffalo’s” penis represent? Is she a spirit medium or, perhaps, a spirit herself?34 Was it common in the past that spirit mediums incited villagers to attack other villages? We do not know – but the questions are tantalising.

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34 We know from several sources – indeed, it is still the case today in certain Katu villages – that the most powerful and feared spirit mediums often are women (young or old).
Chapter 5
LAND, LIVELIHOOD AND RITUALS

This chapter addresses Katu livelihood activities – primarily their agricultural practices – in the wider context of their attitude towards the land and their ideas about spirits. To this end, we will first outline the relevant “material facts” as far as we have been able to record and establish them. However, it will progressively become clear that Katu agricultural activities are not only motivated by practical concerns but also very much by spiritual ones; thus, the Katu believe that they have to respect and comply with the wishes of a number of spiritual agencies in order to be successful farmers. As one Katu man put it: “Katu rituals are to the Katu what fertilisers are to Kinh people.” Moreover, being swidden farmers by tradition, their fields are actually patches of forest converted into cultivated “fields” which are later reclaimed by forest as they are left to fallow. The local beliefs reflect this process; in order for agriculture to be successful, the Katu farmer must carry out offerings not only to the rice spirit and the spirit of the swidden field but also to the spirits of the forest and of the wild animals.

Shifting Cultivation

The two main crops of the Katu are dry rice and cassava. They also plant a number of other crops and gather wild fruits and tubers in the forest. Traditionally, protein intake was mainly supplied through hunting and fishing; domestic animals (chicken, pigs, goats and buffaloes) were kept mainly for ritual occasions.  

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35 This holds true today as well, but while fishing nowadays yields far more protein than hunting (since game availability has declined sharply), there are also clear signs that the fish resources in local streams are severely depleted. Thus, Katu villages have increasingly become dependent on traders for their fish and meat provisions.
The ban on large-game hunting and the government drive to collect all fire-arms in the late 90s have had the effect of significantly reducing game-animal consumption in Katu villages. However, due to other factors, such as the expanding market for game meat and wild animal parts in recent years, overall hunting pressure has most probably increased even though wild animal meat is all but disappearing from the local Katu diet.

Katu people perceive themselves primarily as dry-rice farmers. Cassava, despite being vital for Katu subsistence, is considered culturally much less important than rice. Cassava provides nourishment for their domestic animals, but also food security when the rice harvest fails (which happens quite often) since it is a more stable and “resilient” crop than rice. Cassava is also one of the few crops that the Katu sell in the market. They also collect a great number of wild plants and fruits throughout the year which contribute substantially to their diet (for more information on their gathering activities, see Luu Hung [2007] and Krahn [2005]).

Paddy (wet) rice – introduced by Kinh people and promoted by the Vietnamese government – has only been grown by the Katu for the last few decades, notably since the end of the Vietnam-American War. The government consistently encourages the Katu to change from dry-rice to wet-rice. Overall, however, the Katu have been slow in doing so. In fact, in the study districts only a few heavily populated villages near the main road to Danang and the district centre were more dependent on paddy than dry-rice. In most villages the economic importance of paddy was marginal, paddy making up only a fraction of their total rice yields. This was particularly the case with Taghe, Azinh 3, Apat and A’ur. Nonetheless, every year the proportion of paddy fields is increasing.

This increase, however, is not due to any inherent qualities of paddy cultivation but rather a consequence of the government’s ban on shifting cultivation and its increasing control over people’s daily lives – in particular since the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Highway from 2000 and onwards. It is true that well-irrigated and fertilized rice fields under ideal circumstances can yield significantly more rice than swidden fields, but in the mountainous environment inhabited by the Katu, paddy cultivation cannot be considered a more efficient form of agriculture than swidden farming of dry-rice (c.f. Guérin et al 2003) because all the prerequisites for efficient lowland agriculture are missing. Moreover, only dry-rice cultivation has ritual
and symbolic significance to the Katu; it is therefore to swidden farming I refer when discussing “rice rituals” below.

The Katu generally divide their fields into two separate categories depending on whether dry-rice (*haro*) or cassava (*tan*) is the main cultivated crop. A number of secondary crops accompany these main crops: on the rice fields one finds plants with roughly similar ripening times as rice (3-4 months; e.g. corn, water melons, cucumbers, gourds and pumpkins), while plants requiring longer ripening cycles (e.g. banana, pineapple) are planted in the cassava fields – since cassava requires up to a year to ripen. The planting of rice and associated crops is carried out approximately at the same time – a few days after burning the swiddens in February-March.

After the rice harvest (in July-August), the field is usually converted into a cassava field since cassava requires less fertile soil. After another year or two of cassava cultivation, fields are permitted to lay fallow for at least five years (but fallow periods are constantly decreasing due to the government’s policy of land-use intensification; c.f. N. Århem & Binh 2006). As opposed to rice, cassava can basically be planted and harvested anytime of the year, but the Katu usually plant it during the periods of the year when they are not busy with the rice crop (and its rituals). Thus, they often plant cassava in January which they weed after planting the rice a couple of months later.

A Katu “field-work unit” (or “swidden group”) usually comprises two or more co-operating nuclear families (often brothers or brothers-in-law and their respective families). In some cases entire local lineages work their fields together but, as a rule, each field is owned by an individual household. On the other hand, and despite the increasing importance of the nuclear family in Katu society, they still adhere to the custom of keeping the bulk of the movable family property (jars, gongs and livestock) undivided until the family head is very old. Usually the youngest son stays with his aging parents until their death, thus also taking care of the family wealth.
Burning a swidden in the forest. Despite the popular misconception to the contrary, this type of fire very rarely spreads into the surrounding forest.
In very round figures, an average household of 4-5 people needs about 100 \textit{ang} (700 kg) of rice to cater for its needs during a normal year.\footnote{1 \textit{ang} corresponds to 7 kg of rice. The Katu also measure the size of rice fields in terms of \textit{ang} (calculated on the amount of rice seeds needed to plant a given field); thus 10 \textit{ang} corresponds to 1 ha).} Rice harvests vary considerable, in any given year, between households depending on the size and quality of the land, the size of the available workforce and the quality of the agricultural work carried out. Successful shifting cultivation requires not only land and labour but also extensive knowledge. The year 2004 was a very bad year with notoriously poor harvests for most households in the study villages. We were told that those who had planted at the wrong time, or had not dedicated enough energy to weeding, had suffered severe crop failure. Strong winds were also given as a reason for the 2004 crop failure.

\section*{Current Problems of Katu Subsistence}

The Katu know that even a small wet-rice field can potentially yield more than a large dry-rice field, and that wet-rice fields are less vulnerable to unfavourable weather conditions. Dry-rice harvests can fail completely due to small weather changes from one year to another. However, in most parts of the study area, there is simply no land suitable for wet-rice cultivation available; only those relatively few households with access to flat and well-watered strips of land will engage in wet-rice cultivation. Moreover, the Katu do not have any tradition of terrace cultivation, and converting a hill slope to a productive paddy field is often too laborious and costly a project for a family or local lineage to embark upon.

The growing importance of the nuclear family and the progressive erosion of the communal ethos have made the typical village a less cohesive social unit than in the past. Whereas Katu agroforestry activities in the past were largely communal in nature and went hand in hand with public rituals, today they have increasingly become the concern of individual households. As a result, most agricultural
rituals have gone from being village rituals to becoming family rituals.

The village elders, *takah tahal*, no longer have any real power to coordinate and mobilise villagers for work. To a certain extent, however, the lack of communal coordination of agricultural work is being made up for by the activities of numerous government projects and programmes in the villages. For example, as I could be observe on a return visit to the study villages in 2008, the government has made huge infrastructural investments in the A Vương commune – flattening large tracts of land and moving entire villages to make space for wet-rice fields. Many other changes also appeared to have taken place after 2006 but these will have to be dealt with in a later report.

* * *

The mountainous landscape and the fact that the Katu are not paddy cultivators by tradition make it hard for the Katu to comply with the government’s wish that they abandon shifting cultivation. At the same time, they are facing several threats that are making their dry-rice agriculture less and less sustainable. A growing problem is thus the escalating over-exploitation of the land in the vicinity of the permanent villages which are themselves a result of the government’s sedentarisation program. It is difficult not to see this program as an expression of a widespread prejudice towards shifting cultivation and a certain “Kinh-chauvinism” among policy makers and government agencies: state policies prescribe that agricultural development should follow the model of lowland (Kinh) wet-rice agriculture – carried out on a permanent basis in clearly demarcated fields (“agricultural land”) separated from land classified as “forest”. The official disregard for shifting cultivation not only manifests an evident ignorance about this form of land-use but also responds to an administrative necessity on the part of the government to control land-use in the remote highland areas of the country.

The problem, however, is that shifting agriculture needs to be extensive and carried out on a rotational basis with prolonged fallow periods to be efficient and sustainable. Swidden cultivation that is carried out year after year on the same plot of land is not only unsustainable (in the sense that it will permanently degrade the land) but also unfeasible – crops will simply not grow on such a plot after
a few years. However, the clearing of old forest (or regenerated forest older than five years) is categorically forbidden by current forestry law.

A Katu family planting dry-rice. Note the steep inclination of the field.

In this light, it is interesting to note that the Katu only in exceptional cases clear “virgin” forest (i.e. forests that has not been cleared before). Even villagers who ignored the government’s ban on clearing forest, or who were allowed to clear specific patches of old forests, nonetheless never cleared hitherto uncultivated forest. I did not come across any Katu farmer who cleared forest older than 25-30 years and, in the hypothetical cases that 30-year old forest patches were cleared, it would only be in forest previously cleared by close relatives (i.e. on “lineage land”).

It is important to understand that, for the Katu, forests and hills form part of a cultural landscape; people know exactly how, when and by whom a patch of forest was last cultivated or where a
settlement was previously located. Only rarely is there a totally “white spot” (previously uncultivated patch of forest) on this cultural map – and when there is, it is often because the Katu fear the area for spiritual reasons (see below). An important principle guiding Katu shifting cultivation is the notion that areas which have previously been cultivated by a particular lineage are “safe” to use again (by any of its members) because the proper rituals for cultivating the place have once been performed. Conversely, it can be extremely dangerous to clear primary – unfamiliar and previously “undomesticated” – forest.

* * *

The one village in our study (A’ur), where 30 year old forest had been cleared for agriculture, gave considerably higher rice yields than any of the other study villages, particularly in comparison to the over-crowded roadside villages. The average input/output ratio of dry-rice fields in A’ur in the period 2003-2004 was 1/40; in other words, for each planted ang of rice, farmers in this village were able to harvest 40 ang. In the villages near the highway (Areh, Ading 3 and Arek), the corresponding input/output ratio ranged between 1/5 and 1/10 for the same two-year period. In other words, the productivity in the remote village of A’ur was four to eight times higher than in the more accessible and “modern” villages.

A’ur village had been allowed to clear old forest land because the village had recently relocated in an area surrounded by such forest. Otherwise, the clearing of old fallows is today only allowed under exceptional circumstances. The traditional system of rotational shifting cultivation – with cycles allowing fallow periods of 10-20 years – has thus been aborted. However, it is only in recent years that the government really has become able to monitor – and, to a certain extent, prevent – shifting cultivation in the area. And though shifting cultivation has decreased in the villages, other forms of forest exploitation have increased, notably illegal logging and commercial hunting, along the highway.

* * *

The comparison of the rice-yields in A’ur with those of the “modernised” roadside villages contradict the widely held but erroneous view that ethnic minorities until recently have eked out a
miserable existence in the forest and that only with government help have they been able to “lift themselves” out of poverty and misery (for a discussion on this topic see N. Århem & Binh 2006; CPRGS 2004; and Bui Minh Dao 2002). The alleged poverty of the ethnic minorities is a complex issue which cannot be dealt with here, but we should point out that there are several problems with the current poverty-reduction strategy in Vietnam as regards ethnic minorities; not only is it highly problematic to apply conventional income-based poverty indicators to subsistence-oriented populations such as the Katu, but there is also the politically sensitive issue of what causes this poverty in the first place (c.f. Chamberlain 2002). It is our contention that current development policies in Vietnam produce as much as reduce poverty among ethnic-minority populations.

Our study suggests an inverse and apparently paradoxical relationship between monetary income and household food consumption so that, in the more remote villages (exemplified by A’ur), households consumed more high-quality foods (including game meat and fish) while possessing less money than in roadside villages (exemplified by Areh), whereas the opposite was true for roadside villages (cf. Krahn 2005). However, as some of the remoter villages are now starting to sell wild animals for the market (while nonetheless sharing a significant portion of the wild animal meat within the village) they might well soon become richer both in terms of food and cash (since selling wild animals tends to yield far more money than agriculture).

In A’ur we were told that a single household could reap an annual dry-rice harvest of 400-600 ang (2400-4200 kg) – an amount exceeding the household needs to such an extent that families sometimes do not know what to do with all the surplus rice (because the village is far from any market) except storing it in the family granary. It is quite natural for Katu households to store surplus rice in their granaries, thus bridging the gap between lean and fat years. The villagers of A’ur also explained that, when they had a bumper harvest in a given year, they could content themselves with sowing just a little rice the following year (hence the large variations in harvest yields between years).

In stark contrast to remote villages such as A’ur, there were households in Areh village near Prao district town which in 2004 reaped less than 50 ang of dry-rice (insufficient to cover any family's
needs). However, here – as opposed to the situation in A’ur – paddy fields supplied the families with necessary supplementary rice.

For dry rice to yield a substantial harvest, farmers need to have access to forests that have been left fallow for a long time (more than five years; the longer the better). However, due to the factors already outlined above – principally forced sedentarisation and an official ban on shifting cultivation – a growing number of villagers do not have access to forest land with fertile soil. Furthermore, clearing older forest, even if such is available, also requires more work than clearing short-fallow fields; accordingly, families lacking sufficient labour force to clear old forest therefore prefer to clear less fertile but more easily cleared secondary forest.

In the past, the Katu generally had easier access to vital resources from the forest (game animals, fish, frogs, forest fruits etc.) and obtained higher yields from their swidden fields than today. Yet, life was in many respects harder than today: if the fields did not yield, or if hunting failed, there was nowhere to turn for help. In addition, agricultural tools, salt and other vital products were difficult to obtain. Many Katu thus expressed the seemingly contradictory opinion that “although we had more food in the past we had to work harder than today”. For example, just to get hold of salt they had to travel for several days through sometimes extremely dangerous territories. Moreover, there was also the constant threat of internecine warfare and the potential outbreaks of epidemics. And yet, despite all the difficulties the Katu faced in the past and the absence of modern medicine, Jutta Krahn – a nutritionist who spent years researching Katu food security in Laos – points out that many of her Katu informants stated that they had more and better food and were healthier in the past (Krahn 2005).37

It is our contention that national development policies in ethnic minority areas are misguided: it is unrealistic to expect indigenous highland groups dependent on swidden cultivation – such as the Katu – to be able to replace their dry rice farming with intensive wet-rice farming. Suitable land for paddy cultivation is insufficient, the current forms of short-cycle shifting cultivation unsustainable and

37 One reason why “food poverty” is consistently reported as decreasing in minority areas is precisely the fact that it is mainly measured in monetary rather than nutritional terms (cf. CPRGS 2004).
efforts to introduce cash-crop production and commercial tree-plantations, either failing or environmentally questionable.

However, there are few prospects that the government will change its policies. The abolishment of shifting cultivation is one of the primary objectives of the rural development model in Vietnam. This objective the Vietnamese state shares with other Southeast Asian states: all across the region, shifting cultivation carries strong connotations of backwardness and stagnation. The larger, more centralized, wet-rice farming civilizations in the lowlands have always conceptualized their cultural superiority vis-à-vis indigenous peoples in terms of their more advanced farming activities.

Thus, the same attitudes towards shifting cultivation and ethnic minorities are held by majority populations in China, Thailand, Indonesia and many other Asian nations. The ethnic majority peoples in all these states perceive their own cultural superiority in terms of this opposition between “civilised” paddy farming in the lowlands and “primitive” shifting cultivation in the highlands:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civilization</th>
<th>Barbarism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paddy farming</td>
<td>Shifting cultivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food sufficiency</td>
<td>Starvation and poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Ignorance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Vietnam, the issue of shifting cultivation is not open for discussion: wet-rice farming is a prerequisite for development and modernisation. Therefore, shifting cultivation must disappear. Paddy cultivation is seen not only as the first and necessary step to rational land-use but also towards civilised life at large. The Vietnamese government sees it as its duty towards the countries ethnic minorities to raise their cultural and technological level, primarily by abolishing their “archaic” forms of agriculture (c.f. CPRGS 2004).

In sum, the traditional subsistence system of the Katu required both scattered, small settlements and mobility in order to function

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38 The Katu largely regard the Vietnamese government as a benevolent force in their lives. One reason why the government’s land-use policies – particularly the ban on shifting cultivation – have not alienated the Katu is that the policies have been implemented in a fairly lax manner, thus allowing the continuous functioning of local institutions and traditions.
properly. The Vietnamese government allows neither. At the present time, Katu subsistence is largely dependent on the ample assistance in terms of money, livestock and technical knowledge provided by the government. As an example, the villages in A Vương commune on average received around 100 million VND/month and village in government loans and grants (given to individual households) – cash in hand, as it were. Although this would be a small sum in an urban context, to the Katu this sum represents a significant proportion of their disposable cash. On top of this comes frequent “emergency aid” in the form of rice and livestock as well as technical extension services, road construction and so forth. The list can be made much longer. It appears that such loans and grants also, to some extent, account for the statistical poverty reduction that can be observed among Vietnam’s ethnic minorities in general.

Livestock Raising, Cash Crops and Income

Today, most Katu households have a “home garden” adjacent to their houses. In these gardens they cultivate a variety of plants and vegetables including cajeput, cinnamon, banana, papaya, sugar cane, sweet potato, chayote, carambole, grapefruit, mango and others. Tending home gardens is almost certainly a new practise; there does not seem to be any indigenous term for these gardens. Instead, they are referred to by the Vietnamese word vườn. In the past, the Katu appear to have had a variety of “gardens” in the forest while the space around the village was reserved for freely grazing livestock. The forest around the village was also used for “growing firewood”. Today, the space adjacent to the village is usually reserved for wet rice, domestic livestock and new varieties of vegetables (imported from the Kinh). Forest-gardens, referred to as tan, still surround the villages and continue to play an important role in Katu agriculture.

Besides cassava and dry-rice, many of the cultivated crops today appear to be new cultigens previously not available among the Katu. However, these new crops, some exclusively cultivated for sale (e.g. cinnamon), seem to bring very little income to the households.
Katu farming- and forest terminology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Katu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice field</td>
<td><em>Hare (Hare Haro)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassava field</td>
<td><em>Nannng-tan</em> (lit. cassava yard)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last year’s rice field now converted to cassava field</td>
<td><em>Trua</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden-field near stream</td>
<td><em>Halai</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swidden</td>
<td><em>Arruih</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old swidden</td>
<td><em>Arruih tih</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old forest</td>
<td><em>Kakong krung</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surplus rice is sold during good years. The Katu also sell cassava but still on a small scale. Rice is considered the main crop as well as the ritual crop par excellence. Cassava does not hold any significant symbolic role in Katu culture but is vital for subsistence, supplementing the rice diet when the rice harvest fails. To Kinh people, resorting to eating cassava is all but regarded as a sign of hunger” – which appears to be the reason why some Vietnamese researchers (and international consultants) have exaggerated the gravity of the food situation in Katu villages: villages which have to eat cassava for a few months, or mix rice with cassava, have been reported as “facing severe food shortages”, even “hunger” and “starvation” (c.f. N. Århem & Binh 2006 for a discussion of this topic). However, interviews with elders revealed that cassava was, in fact, a staple food in the olden days, whereas rice was often reserved for rituals and for treating important guests. Rather than taking this statement as evidence that people were “starving” in the past, it suggests that cassava formed part of the regular local diet in the past.39

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The Katu keep buffaloes, cows, pigs and – rarely – goats as livestock. They also keep chicken and ducks as poultry. In addition, many nowadays also have fishponds. Livestock-raising appears to

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39 Note, however, that cassava was brought to South East Asia by the Europeans, probably in the 17th century. Nutritionally, cassava is arguably as good a food rice
have changed a great deal in recent decades, mainly due to government policy. The proportion of buffaloes in the livestock herds has decreased whereas the number of cows has increased. Cows are a new introduction. Moreover, the original varieties of “Katu pigs” (which looks very much like wild pigs) are rapidly being replaced by “Kinh pigs” (pig breeds introduced by the Kinh). The changes to the livestock-raising practises are closely related to the changes in Katu settlement patterns: the Katu in the past kept livestock roaming freely close to the village whereas the fields were at some distance from the village. Nowadays, when fields have been “moved” closer to the village, livestock has to be fenced in. The new varieties of livestock are potentially more lucrative to breed but also require much more veterinary care than the traditional varieties (i.e., buffaloes and Katu pigs). The Kinh pigs have to be hand-fed with boiled cassava and require considerable care; in return, they breed faster than the Katu varieties. The downside to raising Kinh pigs, however, is – for the Katu – that the local Kinh population is much better at it. In some roadside villages it was not unusual to find that half of the total pig population would belong to a couple of Kinh families.40

Many Katu households have planted cinnamon trees in or near their settlements – largely in response to the government’s urge for cash-crop production beginning in the 1990s. However, few households seem to have been able to sell any cinnamon since “the cinnamon traders don’t like this kind; they prefer the southern variety”. Accordingly, most families are now dismantling their gardens. On the whole, cash-crop cultivation has not been successfully undertaken by the Katu. Generally, the only produce they sell are, as noted, cassava and surplus rice (seldom giving an average household more than a million VND /year).

The main sources of income seem to be certain “forest products” that grow naturally or are gathered rather than cultivated, including honey from wild bees, rattan and (for a select few Katu) hunting. We will deal with hunting in a later chapter. Suffice here to mention that hunting and trapping is a significant source of cash income.

40 Since Katu pigs sell for the same prices as wild pigs (and, thus, at a much higher price than Kinh pigs of the ordinary breeds), this source of revenue should be further explored.
Our household survey suggests that the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes is a significant expense in Katu households. Even though most liquor is produced locally in the form of rice- and cassava wine and sold at about 4000 VND/bottle (2005), the quite profuse consumption nevertheless adds up to a major expense for most households. Villagers state that the consumption – almost exclusively by men – of bottled alcohol and cigarettes has increased dramatically during the past few decades. The need for money is generally felt more strongly by younger people – and more intensely the closer one gets to district towns and other urban centres. Elderly people, or people living in more isolated places, “don’t know how to farm money” (as one man put it) – nor do they experience this as a problem.

Another major – traditional as well as contemporary – expense for every Katu household is weddings: a man has to pay bridewealth to his bride’s family. This obligatory bridewealth may require an expense of up to 20,000,000 VND in the form cash and “traditional” family wealth such as livestock, jars and gongs.

Customary Land Tenure

Vietnamese land and forestry laws have yet to arrive in full to Katu villages. Currently, the legal status of the forest land in Katu territory seems very unclear indeed. Whereas some Katu believe that the government owns all forest land, others believe that they themselves have entitlement to their land. The fact of the matter is that the government does not recognise traditional land tenure, except for cultivated land in the immediate vicinity of the village settlements. Moreover, land left uncultivated for more than three years is considered “unused” and may, according to the national land legislation, be cultivated by anyone. National land legislation is thus in sharp conflict with customary land tenure. Yet it is the traditional system which guides the villagers and which keeps the local agricultural system functioning. Without it, there would be constant land conflicts.
To indicate the difficulties and the level of confusion regarding land allocation, we can mention the case of a Katu man who believed that a government handout sheet (about the “proper” marriage procedures according to Vietnamese law) was in fact a legal document proving his rightful ownership of forest land! Another villager had a seemingly authentic certificate indicating that he was the owner of 18.6 square km of forest land (bigger than the total territory of the village in which he lived). Whereas agricultural land is never bought or sold, residential land inside a village’s settlement area may occasionally be transferred between villagers for money or other valuables. However, even such transactions are rare.

The fact is that the Vietnamese government has so far done little to interfere directly with the traditional property laws of the Katu. Yet, in the wake of expanding cash-crop cultivation and the accelerating desire for road-side fields, conflicts over land are increasing dramatically. The government is struggling to device a solution. However, allocating land rights to individual households (in accordance with the 1993 land reform) is probably far from an ideal solution in the Katu context and, in any case, would be far too expensive and technically difficult to carry out. The main obstacle though, I believe, is that it is “ideologically” inconceivable for the government to allocate enough forest land to villages in order to make rotational shifting cultivation sustainable.

Against this backdrop it is easier to understand why Katu customary land-tenure practices are still followed in the study area. As a general rule, it is the first family that cultivates a particular piece of land that becomes its “permanent” owner. Thus, the “old families” of a particular area will usually be the “land owners” whereas newcomers will “borrow” land from them. Most villagers seem to know who the traditional owner of any – even remote – part of the forest is. Today, however, it is the village headman that has the final say as to how a plot of land may be used.

In practice, a village headman alone cannot go against customary law. But the contradictions between national and customary tenure systems are creating new uncertainties, and authorities are obliged to favour the national legislation. Ultimately, it is the commune and district authorities that are the final arbitrators in any conflict regarding land and, thus, contributing to the gradual erosion of the customary system.
How land rights might be transferred between families according to customary law warrants further study. Since family ownership is established the first time a “village” settles in a new place, it is also understandable that villagers in the past had to carefully negotiate the division of land among villagers. Often a particular hill was “shared” by many families in the village so that several or all families had parcels on each and every cultivated hill surrounding the settlement (this is still the case in some villages). One reason for this practice was formulated by the headman of Azinh 3 village: “how can we otherwise know which hill will make us sick.” This seemingly incomprehensive statement points to the importance of the Katu belief system, still very much alive today: some hills are not suitable for cultivation due to malevolent or unwilling spirits and will make people sick if fields are cleared on their slopes. Therefore, due to the communal nature of Katu society, it is regarded as fair that all families share the risks as well as the benefits of any particular site. We will discuss this theme more fully below.

Agricultural Rituals and Auguries

Having thus summarised some of the practical aspects of Katu agriculture, we must now explore its religious and cosmological connotations. In this context it is vital for us to remember that, for the Katu, “fields” are in fact “forest”, or a piece of land that was previously forest and will turn into forest again. Moreover, fields are not necessarily located close to the village; they can sometimes be located several hours’ walking distance from the village. Thus, Katu fields (hare) are ”created” from the forest (krung), and the two concepts – which to us (and ordinary Vietnamese) would seem to be two totally separated – are to the Katu intimately connected. Nor is the notion of field opposed to that of forest as “culture” to “nature” since, as we have seen, many areas in the forest might be known as places where there were once human settlements, and these places might have all types of cultural and spiritual connotations (one interlocutor referred to such places in the forest as “places with

41 Personal communication, K. Århem; cf. also K. Århem 2005
historical remains”). Much of the descriptive landscape terminology in Katu language also reflects this conjunction between “nature” and “culture”: for example, what to an outsider appears to be virgin or very old forest may to a Katu be referred to as “old fallow” (arruih).

Likewise, reflecting the fact that field and forests are not, for the Katu, categorically separate entities, there is a very close interaction in the spiritual domain between the spirits of the forest (abhuy Krung), the spirits of the field (abhuy hare), the house- or ancestor spirits (abhuy yang) and even Komorbarr (the Animal Guardian). In fact, virtually all Katu spirits might have a bearing on how the agricultural work fares.

The “Rice Grandmother” (Ayikk Avi) is worshipped in connection with the harvest rituals and when the harvested rice is stored in the granary. Equally important are the ancestor spirits, who are invoked during virtually every agricultural ritual and are seen as having a strong influence on how the harvest will turn out. They thus act as intermediaries between the villagers and the other spiritual entities. Moreover, the forest is also populated by a host of hill-, stone- and tree spirits. The land might also be inhabited – or “poisoned” – by the ghosts of dead people. A more detailed discussion of these and other spirits will follow in the next chapter. In summary, it is by honouring all of these spirit agents – and seeking their “opinion” and support – that the Katu hope to succeed in their agricultural enterprises.

Extensive ritual procedures are undertaken when the Katu move to a new area. Before they clear new forest land they must inform themselves carefully about the disposition of the spirits in the area, asking them for permission to clear the forest and work the land. To this end, Katu farmers perform a series of divinatory procedures, and only if all of them indicate that the spirits of the area agree, will they clear the forest for cultivation. Thereafter the family does not repeat these particular rituals anymore (since the spirits are now acquainted with the family and its descendants). However, the disposition of spirits might change over time and the adult family members must pay continuous attention to their dreams before and during the annual clearing of forest land.

In addition to the practices related to clearing forest, the household head carries out a series of agricultural rituals on an annual basis to ensure an abundant harvest and the sustained goodwill of the spirits. These rituals include the planting ritual (palitt
chuatt), the harvest ritual (pei cha avi tame; “the eating of the new rice”) and certain customary procedures when the harvested rice is entered into (and, later, taken out of) the granary. The agricultural work starts in November or December when the Katu begin clearing their forest fields. The felled trunks and cleared bushes are left to dry for several months until late February-March when the men set fire to the debris. Planting commences almost immediately after burning the swidden field. Harvesting takes place in July and August, after which the bulk of the harvested rice is carried to the granary while the rest is stored in the house for immediate consumption.

Note that in this and the following chapter I use the term “ghost” when referring to all manner of Katu spirits (abhuy) – except for the house- or ancestor spirits (yang). This is against contemporary English usage of the word since in English a ”ghost” usually only denominates the spirit of a dead person and not spirits in trees, hills, stream etc. The Katu, however, use the single word abhuy to denominate all of these entities and do not regard the spirits of dead people as fundamentally different from the spirits dwelling in the landscape. When speaking Vietnamese they invariably use the term “ma” (ghost/spirit) to denote all classes of spirits (including the spirit of the sky and other spirits that the Kinh-Vietnamese themselves would call “thần” (“saint” or god) or “thần linh” rather than “ma”.42

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42 Vietnamese people have similar ideas about ghosts, spirits and gods, but there are also differences. This is worth remembering since I worked with a Kinh interpreter. The following list of “spirit genera” in popular Kinh folk imagination was given to me by a young Kinh woman in Hanoi:

1. “Ma” is the most commonly used Vietnamese word denoting both spirit and ghost. “Ma” are usually malevolent and not worshipped. They are present in trees, rivers, mountains, corners of houses and anything “that last for very long time (e.g. a very old cup or chair). “A ‘ma’ can also be the (unhappy) spirit of a dead person which comes back to the house to say it is hungry or cold etc.”

2. The Kinh “Sky God” is referred to as “Ống Trời” (“Grandfather Sky”). However, when Kinh people refer to the beliefs of the dân tộc (ethnic minorities) they will use the term “Giang” for this deity.

3. A “thần linh” is a benevolent spirit/god of trees, the sea, rivers or mountains. As opposed to the “ma”, the “thần linh” are often worshipped.

4. Ancestor spirits are usually called “tọ tiên”. Virtually all Kinh today, rural and urban alike, still perform some form of worship for their ancestors.

5. “Thần Sông” is a kind of river spirit about which the following is said: “If a person dies in a river, the people that live there will think that the “Thần Sông” wants them to make a sacrifice for his benefit. People that live on boats never help a
Curiously, Katu sometimes – perhaps knowing that their beliefs are regarded by Kinh people as backward and superstitions – refer to their own spirits as “ma quỷ”, a word which would probably best be translated to English as “devils”.

Land auguries

The first steps in the traditional pattern of Katu agricultural work included: (a) identifying a prospective field; (b) clearing the forest and undergrowth of the selected site (starting with a small piece of land as a “test field”) and (c) finally – after having allowed the cleared area to dry for a couple of months – setting it on fire and sowing the rice seeds (and associated crops) in the newly burnt field. If an area is cleared for the first time, or after a very long fallow period, usually as a consequence of the relocation of an entire village, then an extensive series of rituals and divinations must be carried out. I outline these procedures below. However, since entirely “new” areas are seldom (or never) cleared today, many of these ritual procedures are no longer considered to be necessary. Nonetheless, some elements of the new land rituals and auguries are still performed.

Moreover, even when the proper set of rituals and divinations are not carried out, the knowledge about these procedures remains important; it represents a “ritual ideal” towards which Katu farmers still strive. When a Katu farmer looks for a place to clear and cultivate, he needs to consider a number of factors: whether the soil is good (katiec liem) or bad (katiec mop); whether the land has been cleared before or not and, above all, whether the local spirits are benevolent or not. If an area is cleared for the first time by a particular family, divinations as well as sacrifices are absolutely mandatory in order “to introduce the new family to the spirits” and to secure the goodwill of these spirits towards the family. Even if the land has been cultivated before, these rituals may nevertheless have to be carried out again (at least if some time has passed since a place was last cleared) since nothing in the Katu spirit landscape is
considered entirely stable; the spirits in a given place might have changed their disposition.

There are signs that the ritual procedures outlined below are presently receding in importance. But they have certainly not disappeared. The following account, narrated by Ating Chôn, describes the ritual steps necessary in order for a village to settle in a new area. Note how the spirits hold the villagers collectively responsible for moral transgressions by individuals. Villagers will sometimes force the guilty individual or individuals to pay for all, or part of, the rituals required to normalise relationships with the spirits:

“Spirits exist everywhere; if people want to live in a particular place they have to be friendly with the spirits there. The spirits care about how the humans live and behave: For example, if a man and a woman in the village have an illegal relationship, the spirits will be annoyed and cause someone in the village to become sick that year. To placate the spirits, the villagers must worship them and offer them food according to their means.43

If a particular village wanted to move from one location to another, the villagers had to perform certain rituals and divinations in order to receive permission from the spirits of the new place to settle. They had to sacrifice – consecutively and in this order – a dog, a chicken, a pig and finally a goat. The takah tahal [elder/headman] performed the first ritual as follows: together with a group of villagers he walked to the new area and caught two snails. He then cut a banana leaf and placed the two snails on each side of it. He would then pour some water on both sides of the leaf. This divination is called Ngô shaah. While putting the snails on the leaf, the takah tahal says: “we want to live here; if you [the ghost] don’t allow us to live here, show us your will”. If the snail from the far side of the leaf crosses over the middle of the leaf [passes the “spine of the leaf”], it means that the ghost does not allow the people to settle there. The side of the leaf closest to the person performing the divination is thus the “side of the humans” and the other side is the “side of the spirits”. If the snail from the spirit side of the leaf moves away from the human side it means that it is alright to settle in the area.

43 The reference to illicit relationships as “illegal”, even though they are not illegal according to Vietnamese law, shows that Katu people still largely live under “spirit law”. It is the customary law – which is believed to be enforced by the spirits themselves – that to a significant extent maintains the moral order in Katu villages.
If the spirit allows them to live in that place the takah tahal starts to sacrifice the aforementioned animals one by one. Each day, the takah tahal kills a sacrificial animal, starting with the dog. They kill a dog because it can cure sick spirits (because among the spirits there are sick too). The spirits only need the liver and blood of the dog. While the dog’s neck is cut and starts to bleed, the ritual officiants say “if you have sick spirits among you, they will recover. My people have to recover too”. After that they cook the dog, take the liver and a piece of meat, put it on banana leaves and give it to the spirits. The people must eat all the rest. There has to be enough people in the group to finish eating the dog completely. After eating it they go back to their village and stay there three days before again returning to the new place to kill a chicken. While killing the chicken they say “please allow us to live here. We want to live here permanently, to settle here. Don’t harm us”. They use three parts of the chicken: the liver, blood and legs (but only the right leg). They must check the leg before cutting the chicken’s neck (it has to be well-shaped). Then they cook the leg and read it to know their future. They check which of claw 1 and 2 is higher [longer?] than the other (see figure below). If claw 2 is the higher one it is a good omen. If claw 2 is lower, then it is a bad sign. It is good if claw 2 bends towards claw 3. Claw 3 must always stay fixed [and straight] in the middle. It is good if claw 3 moves towards claw 1. However, it is very bad if the “people” claw (4) reaches or touches 3. Instead, claw 4 should stay between claw 2 and 3. If this augury does not give a positive result, people will not dare move to the new location.”

The informant then clarifies the procedure further:

“It is possible that, when we made the test with the snail and killed the dog, many spirits were absent and now, after coming back and observing the next ritual, those spirits decide not to let us stay in that particular place. If that is the case, people will not dare move to that place. If the test is passed, however, villagers will continue by killing a pig three days later and offer its blood and head to the spirits. Then, finally, three days later, they will kill a goat because this is the animal that spirits like to eat most of all. Another important thing to consider during this period is dreams: if the ritual officiant, in his dream, sees a buffalo being killed, or infighting within the village – this also means that the spirits of that locality are hostile and would cause death and disease among the villagers [if they were to settle at the site]. However, if the officiant dreams that people are talking,
drinking and eating merrily with friends or receiving gifts, then this is a good omen.” (Ating Chön, Arek)

Finger 1: forest spirits; Finger 2: house spirits (ancestors); Finger 3: Pleng; Finger 4: living people (villagers).

In other villages we were told about other kinds of divinatory procedures. The following procedure, told by the villagers of A’ur, includes the same “snail divination” as above (ngö shaah), but is then followed by a different sequence of divinations. Thus, after doing the ngö shaah, the villagers should:

“… throw some rice and say: “Pleng (the spirit of the sky), Katiec (spirit of the earth), Krung (spirit of the forest), come here, come here and listen to me, I want to live here. Do you agree?” After that the villagers should use three bamboo sticks (roughly the size of chopsticks) to form a sort of small, hourglass-shaped pot stand and put an egg in it. They use a stick to make a hole in the egg and then
set fire to another stick under the egg to heat it while saying “if you allow us to live here, the yoke will not rise up through the hole; if you do not allow it, the yoke will burst out in all directions”. They do these two divinations [the snail- and egg-divinations] three times.”

The egg-divination is interesting since nothing symbolises vitality and life better than the egg. It seems that the egg in this divination represents the earth/land: just like the land is burnt before planting, so the egg, too, is burnt. If it is correct to interpret the egg as the land, it is very interesting to note that despite its connotations of fertility, the “rising up” and emergence of its contents represents danger. In other words, the spirits of the land “must not rise up [and burst out]”.

Katu farmers say that old forests have the best soil because “the rotten leaves of the old forest make the soil good (katiec liem)”. This formulation may express influence from foresters or agricultural extension officers, but I believe that the preference for old-forest soils is a traditional notion. Places with plenty of earth worms in the soil are also considered very good for swidden cultivation. Interestingly, this notion perhaps explains why dreaming of “maggots in a stomach” after having begun clearing a parcel of land is considered a good omen. Moreover, Katu “have always preferred flat areas among the hills to sloping areas” [because they are watered by the streams]. One very old woman from Areh village told us:

“A good piece of land [katiec liem] is a place that has a lot of trees. If a place does not have many trees, it is not good. Before deciding whether to cultivate in a given place, a family will usually dream about it. If they dream of a beautiful landscape, or if – in the dream – the atmosphere of the land is clean, then it means that the place will make a good field. But if they dream of a flood or a child that is captured by a ghost, then it is a bad field. The Katu do not have to worship before choosing a plot of land, but we (the women) have to wait for our husband to come back and eat an egg [… before we too can work on the land?]. After choosing a field the family can begin to clear it for cultivation. On the first day, they will only work on a small area to know if it's a good field, then they wait for their dreams during the following night. If anybody in the household has a bad dream, they will abandon that plot and choose another place to clear.”
According to Katu beliefs, if the spirits do not consent to clearing a plot of forest land, the soil might not yield well no matter how good and fertile it seems. Moreover, the spirits might make the prospective cultivator and/or his family members ill. The logic of these beliefs is as follows: when a Katu man clears a parcel of land for cultivation, i.e. cuts the trees and undergrowth, and eventually sets fire to the forest, he believes that he might be causing the spirits of that forest/hill disturbances since the land and the forest are seen as the abode of the spirits. The farmer must thus know if his farming activities will be tolerated by the spirits of a particular place or not. However, he does not passively await the spirits’ decision but actively tries to influence them. The rituals serve to sway their opinion; food-offerings are a kind of pre-payment to the spirits – a pre-emptive compensation for the inconvenience the farmer will cause them.

As we have noted, there are two ways for the Katu to know the will of these spirits; one is through a series of divinatory procedures, the other is through dreaming. If a man dreams “bad dreams” (such as the ones described above) or if he has an accident during the first few days of clearing work – he will abandon that plot and look for another area to clear. The young headman of one village told us:

“(…) If I dream [during the night after the first day of clearing] that someone offers me rice and meat from a domestic animal, then that means that the crop will fail. However, if I am offered the meat of a wild animal, it means my crop will grow well. If in the dream I have to fight with a ghost or with other people – that also indicates that my crop will fail. If I dream that someone kills some domestic animals, for example a pig or a cow, this also means that the crop will fail. Also, if I see a stream with green water in my dream, it means that my field will be full of weeds and I will have a bad harvest.”

Another account about dreams (Taghe village):

“If, in the dream [after the first day of clearing land], people see bad things, they don’t continue clearing that field. Bad things are big floods, strong winds and trees falling down. Good things are, for example, clear stream water and women carrying children. Such good dreams indicate that the rice will grow well there.”
Dreaming is thus important during several critical periods of the agricultural calendar (and also before hunting), but most of all it is critical to heed dreams before cutting trees and before burning fields. Through dreams, the spirit inhabitants of a particular place warn the person that he is trespassing into their domain. If he does not heed these warnings, he will hurt the spirits and anger them. Their subsequent revenge may be lethal and afflict him personally or a member of his family.

Therefore, there is a kind of mutual obligation on behalf of both spirits and humans to warn each other: it is the farmer's duty to inform the spirits of his intentions to burn the field or cut the trees, and it is the spirit's obligation (through dreams and by inducing minor illnesses or causing small accidents) to inform the farmer that it lives in such and such place. This process can almost become like a "wrestling match" between people and spirits; thus, we were told that if the farmer fights the spirit in his dream and wins, it means that he may clear and/or burn that tree or area, but only after having given the spirit another year to relocate! Dreams not only reveal the will of the spirit of a prospective swidden field (abhuy hare) but might also indicate the presence of spirits in particular trees in the selected area. Some trees might have innate spirits, others might become possessed by spirits and all such trees can potentially be extremely harmful to a person or his family if he cuts or burns them.44

However, if all the clearing work goes well, in March, almost at a given command, all villagers start to burn their plots. Just as in the case of tree-cutting, before setting fire to the field "they tell the

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44 A tree-cutting ritual resembles most other Katu rituals in that it contains several steps: The first step is to inform the spirit of the tree/s that the man wants to cut the tree/s but also to let the spirits know that a larger sacrifice/offering will take place later at the man’s house. The spirits are informed of this by a small offering of cooked rice placed in a cut made in the bark of the tree. After the rice has been put in the incision, the cutting can begin. During the second step, a somewhat larger sacrifice takes place in the man’s (cutter’s) house or, sometimes, in the guöl. This ritual includes the sacrifice of a chicken, wine and the burning of incense. The chicken’s liver is then thrown to the spirits. Another interesting notion concerning trees is that trees ought to be cut at a certain time of the day. In particular, the time between 5 and 6 in the morning should be avoided since this is the time when the spirits inspect their domains. If a person cuts a tree at this time, he risks getting sick.
spirits of the field” (*abhuy hare*, *abhuy kakong* etc.) to run away from the field in order to avoid being burnt by the fire. “If people see a snake or a weasel\(^{45}\) while clearing the field it is a bad omen; there will be problems in their family”. Moreover, “if you have certain kinds of trees on your field and you don’t worship them before burning the field, you will get ill when you burn the field.” Trees commonly considered to be inhabited by spirits are: *lepaang, rerey, belut, anyrr, rrlonng*, and *avaang*. Some trees may be cut but not burnt and vice versa:

“When people get ill from the *lepaang* and *avaang* [trees], they will use the bark from the same kind of tree that caused the illness – they thrash the bark to squeeze out its liquid and make a healing potion from it. As concerns illness from *belut, rerey* and *anyirr* trees, people usually try to cure such afflictions by sacrificing a small chicken, taking its blood and putting it into a small basket together with rice and moving it around the head of the sick person and saying: “spirits, don’t make him ill, go back home”. Usually you can burn these trees if they stand on your family's land, but if your fire by mistake travels to land belonging to another family you will fall ill…”

Sometimes, in order to protect one’s family from angry spirits, leaves from a particular plant are placed in a circle around the house after burning the field. This is done by an elderly woman in the family. No major (public) ritual, however, is necessary before or during the burning.

*Planting and harvest rituals*

It is not always clear exactly to what spirit or spirits (or even what kind of spirit) a certain plot of land “belongs”. Therefore, our informants explained, Katu farmers often direct their prayers and offering to an array of spirits. According to one old woman in Apat village, a number of spirits, including *abhuy krung* (spirit/ghost of the forest), *abhuy hare* (spirit of the field), *abhuy yang* (ancestors) and even Pleng (the Sky Spirit), all influence the growing rice and decide whether it will grow well or not. But it appears that *abhuy*

\(^{45}\) Yellow-throated marten.
*hare* is considered the most important spirit during the planting-growing period since it is “the spirit that manages the area”. Thus, considering that spirits are invisible and that it is difficult to identify their exact nature and intentions, it is perhaps not so strange that the Katu to en-list the support of all manner of spirits at once.

Before sowing rice, Katu men perform a ritual in which they offer pig, wine, fish and rats to the spirits for the rice to grow better. In this ritual they primarily address their ancestors (*yang dong*; literally “house spirits”), asking them to act as their representatives and to deal, on the family’s behalf, with the spirits of the swidden field (*abhuy hare*). If the ancestors do not help as intermediaries, there is a risk that the rice will not grow well. This ritual is called *pajrom paoihh* and is carried out in the house. After finishing sowing, the Katu customarily carry out another ritual which they call *palitt chuatt*, in which they again kill a pig and chicken as well as offer fish and the meat of (bamboo) rat.
*Buoihh ravi* is another rice ritual. However, it is only performed by some families in any given village and not every year (“this ritual is performed by those families who have not worshipped properly for many years”). It is intended to boost rice growth if harvests have been bad for several years. *Buoihh ravi* is carried out when the rice has already grown to a height of 10-15 cm, and all offerings are usually placed in the field itself. Offerings may include pig, fish and rat cooked in a bamboo tube, chicken, one *ang* of rice and one jar of wine.

In the village of Azinh 3 the sequence of agricultural work and rituals carried out during the planting period was described as follows:

“Nowadays we usually start planting on the first half of the second lunar month [in March according to the Gregorian calendar]. The 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th and 7th days of this month are usually considered most auspicious for planting. They can also choose to wait and instead plant on one of those days also in the 3rd lunar month. Katu people look at the moon, and if the sky is bright the night before the intended planting-day, they prefer not to plant. This is so since such a sky is regarded as a bad omen and could lead to the rice being damaged by squirrels, birds or wild pigs. If the rice is planted on the 4th lunar month, the rice will not grow well due to sunlight, wind and lack of rain.

When planting rice, farmers draw experience from the planting of previous years. They have to perform a ritual before planting even if they have chosen a good day. The rice will not grow well without a ritual. By carrying out the ritual, they ask for good luck from spirits and ghosts. Katu use farming rituals in the same way Kinh people use fertilisers. Before planting rice they perform a ritual in which they offer frogs, rats, fish, pig and chicken. First they kill a chicken, and after that they cook the chicken and prepare an offering tray with other animals (frogs, forest mice, fish). After that they kill the sacrificial pig. As always, they will start addressing the spirits before killing the chicken and perform auguries after the chicken has been sacrificed and cooked.

Usually two or three men perform the ritual. After killing the chicken they will try to divine how the rice will grow by observing the shape of the boiled chicken’s foot. They then throw rice around the worshipping place in order to inform the spirit of the house that they will soon plant rice. The spirit will then bring good luck to that family. After that they throw *gnarr* (small pieces of bamboo used in most
rituals) up towards the top of the woman’s cloth hung above the family altar. They try to make the *gnarr* “stick”, and if the *gnarr* fall down they have to throw them again and again until one sticks. While they throw the *gnarr*, they usually talk to the house spirits and the spirits of specific deceased family members to get good luck. They use wine, small pieces of pig’s liver and a small piece from the pig’s nose, and toes, and then mix all these things together in a bowl and pour the mixture on the threshold and in front of the house entrance. By doing this the rice will grow well and all the members of the family will be healthy.

Thereafter, those who perform the ritual drink one or two cups of wine and eat some food. They have to eat the food from the offering tray and then the other people, who also partook in the ritual, drink and eat. A person whose wife is pregnant is not allowed to drink and eat with those who perform the ritual.

Bad weather can destroy the harvest even though all the rituals are carried out properly. However, if the weather is fine and the rice seems to be growing well but the harvest still fails, it will almost certainly be because of the spirits. Spirits will destroy the crops in this manner if you do not carry out the rituals or if you don’t do it properly.”

Nowadays, harvesting usually takes place in July-August. It is also preceded by rituals carried out by individual families. Just as was the case with planting, the Katu must choose a “good day” for carrying out this important work:46

“The harvest ritual, which we call *peí cha avi tame* (“eating the new rice”), is similar to the planting ritual. Normally, we harvest the rice at the beginning of July but it is up to each family to decide the exact date. Harvesting must also begin on a good day, normally a day at the beginning of a month. A family will invite all their relatives in the village to participate in the feast. They will prepare food offerings to the spirits and also food to share with the guests. If a family doesn’t have enough forest mice, frogs, chicken and pigs, the ritual can be postponed while the harvesting goes on. However, the ritual should be carried out before the harvesting has been completed. If not, the rice will later be damaged in the granary.”47

46 For more information about the significance of good and bad days, see Luu Hung (2007).
Chapter 6
THE SPIRIT LANDSCAPE

“There are many spirits in places with strange stones high up on hills and mountains and in other places that are hard to come across for humans. There are also spirits at the sources of mountain streams.”
(Ating Chih, Taghe)

The Animist Pantheon

The Katu people might be described as typical “animists”, since – as we have seen – they believe that spirits are found virtually everywhere, in the landscape, in houses, in the sky, on the fields etc. Moreover, as Luu Hung (2007: 157) points out, “their spirits usually have no specific features, and do not, as a rule, comprise married couples”, indicating that their religion has not been canonised or formalised and that their spirits have not become as “humanised” (personified or anthropomorphosised) as in supposedly “higher”, religions such as those of the peoples in Vietnam’s Central Highlands (or, to take a more familiar historical example, the Greco-Roman religions). Nonetheless, Katu often picture spirits as living in villages and working on the fields just like themselves. Spirits are thus seen as somehow populating a parallel world in the very same landscape in which the Katu themselves live and work.

Sometimes manifest, sometimes hidden, spirits are supposed to live lives which are not so different from those of humans; they eat, sleep, cultivate and hunt etc. This is why there is always a risk that there might be a conflict with the spirits: humans and spirits compete for the same resources; they both need timber, agricultural land and so on. Nonetheless, the Katu spirit world also appears to be an inversion of the human world; spirits work when humans sleep and vice-versa, the voices of spirits are the echoes of human voices etc.

It is difficult to categorise the spirits of the Katu cosmos, since they are so diverse and manifold. One informant commented that the
Katu spirits were hierarchically organised “just like the government”. This spirit hierarchy sheds some light on Katu cosmology:

(1) The Sky Spirit (Pleng) and the Earth Spirit (Katiec) – who are often mentioned together – belong to the highest order in the hierarchy. However, since Pleng has the power to “order people to live or die” it might be that Pleng is ultimately regarded as the most powerful spirit (from a human perspective). Some Katu also argue that Pleng should be the first to be called when a sacrifice is performed and thus the first to eat from the sacrificial food.

(2) The second level is reserved for the “nature-“ or “outside spirits”, the _abhuë_ – spirits inhabiting realms beyond the social domain of the village. These spirits include all forms of spirits which dwell in the hills, streams and mountains, and spirit agents such as the hunting deity Komorbarr, and possibly even roaming “bad-death” spirits (see below). Most _abhuë_, with the exception of Komorbarr, are considered potentially dangerous and harmful.

(3) The third and lowest level in the hierarchy is reserved for the ancestors (_abo yang, yang dong, abhuöp amo ame_). The fact that the ancestor spirits are regarded as the “weakest” or lowest category in the spirit hierarchy is very interesting in light of the fact that they are actually the only spirits which the Katu consider as truly benevolent. As we shall see below, the ancestor spirits are regularly asked to act as intermediaries between the humans and the more powerful spirits.

To give a coherent and structured picture of the vast number and diverse body of “nature spirits”, _abhuë_, which constitute the bulk of the Katu spirit pantheon, is more difficult. If, however, one would nevertheless try to do so, one would probably need to distinguish between, on the one hand, the spirits of the forest (forest spirits, stone spirits, tree spirits, stream spirits), spirits of the swidden and the Animal Guardian (Komorbarr-Avua) and, on the other, the spirits of large rivers and the underground “cave-worlds” (A’ul, the _redill_

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48 Komorbarr is also a benevolent spirit, but she is only invoked when working in the forest – for example, whilst hunting or seeking honey. The ancestors, on the other hand, help the living with all aspects of their lives.
and the böyö). However, such a distinction remains dubious since the Katu rarely or never worship the latter spirits (which are all considered dangerous).\(^{49}\) As mentioned, the Katu instead seem to stress the distinction between the “inside” (house/village/ancestor) spirits and the “outside” spirits (basically comprising all “nature” spirits).

As concerns the “spirit of the dead”, there is a very sharp separation between, on the one hand, “the souls of those who died a good or natural death” (rövai liem) and which, after death, transform into benevolent ancestor spirits who “live in the house” (yang dong) and, on the other, the highly dangerous wandering souls of those who died a “bad death” (mrieng) and roam the wilderness in search for (more) people to kill.

Thus, the landscape is, to the Katu, a spiritual landscape – a landscape populated by a multiplicity of spirits. Each hill and patch of forest may have its own legion of abhuy krung (forest spirits). Only Pleng, the Sky Spirit, (and perhaps Katiec, the Earth Spirit) appears to be conceived of as a singular spiritual agent. However, Katu today have very little to say about Pleng and some informants even claimed that “Pleng does not exist anymore” or “Pleng is not important anymore”. We do not know if Pleng worship is on the decline or if this Being has always been an otiose type of deity. It seems, however, that Pleng in the past was closely related to warfare and the practise of raiding other villages for human victims. Pleng has also been described as “only feeding on blood and raw flesh”.\(^{50}\)

Moreover, the names of most spirits, such as abhuy krung, should perhaps be regarded as categories of spirits – as generic labels for a multitude of spirits – rather than names of personalised spirits. On the whole, Katu spirit terminology does not seem to emphasise categorical distinctions between spirits. Komorbarr, the “female” Animal Guardian, however, stands out in the Katu pantheon as a very distinct and personalised abhuy. For one thing, she is one of the few wholly benevolent spirits whose home is in the deep forest. Otherwise, the benevolent spirits are confined to the village and the family houses. By contrast, the forces of the forests are generally regarded as chaotic, dangerous and often deadly.

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\(^{49}\) A’ul and the böyö are never asked for favours. However, once A’ul has stricken someone with disease, ritual offerings might be performed to try to save the person.

\(^{50}\) See “The Story about the Cruel Sun” in Appendix 3.
Significantly, the Katu landscape is also seen as being populated by the souls of the dead. This is a theme that we will return to below and one which we have already touched upon when discussing how and why villages moved in the past. The souls of people who died good deaths usually stay for a while in the graves and tomb houses before eventually "going back" to the village to live in the houses of their living relatives as house spirits or ancestors (*yang dong, abo yang*). The souls of those who died bad deaths, on the other hand, will stay in the wilderness indefinitely, infesting certain areas or possessing wild animals. These bad-death souls or spirits are the *mrieng*, posing a significant danger to the living.

**Spirit Topography**

The Katu landscape is dominated by forested hills separated by countless streams. Hills are usually referred to by the Katu as *bol* (also *konng* or *kakong*) while streams are usually referred to as *tamm*. Significantly, a hill normally has the same name as the stream that has its source on that particular hill. Any forest (*krung*) on or around a particular hill, and any flatland (*klung*) watered by the stream originating from the same hill, will also bear the name of that hill-stream. Moreover, any village established on (or at the foot of) that hill will also usually bear the same name as the hill-stream-forest. Hills without a stream source are usually named after a special event or feature characterising the hill in question – such as, for example, "Bol A’ur" (A’ur Hill) which means “Hill of the Ant Nest” and refers to its conspicuous conical shape.

There are many examples of villages named after hills, including our research villages Arek, Apat, Dövill and Areh. However, the hills after which these villages have been named are not necessarily located close to the villages’ present location; rather, the name refers to the hill (and, by implication, stream) where the particular village was first established. In some cases, as noted above, the names of certain hills are “revealed” to Katu men and women through dreams and during spirit possessions – when a villager becomes possessed by the spirit of a particular hill.
Evidently, there is a close cosmological connection between the spirits of a given hill, its forest and its primary stream. This close cosmological connection between hills and streams is perhaps also reflected in the Katu belief that “angry spirits can follow villagers across streams but not across rivers (karung).” As distinct from streams and forests, which are inhabited by nature spirits (abhuy), rivers are ruled by a different category of spirits, namely that of the “water spirits” and their personalised Master – A’ul (see below).

Furthermore, the nominal identification between a particular hill, the stream which flows from it and the patch of forest it waters, suggests that each hill-, forest- and stream “unit” forms a separate “ghost domain” – a domain dominated by a distinct ghost or host of ghosts/spirits (as in the case of Konng Dhư below) – with which the humans must negotiate if they wish to establish a settlement and cultivate in that particular place. We may describe the Katu landscape as a “ghost-” or “spirit landscape” with categories of ghosts zealously guarding their particular domains – the domains being divided into a grid-like pattern by larger streams and rivers (karung), the latter constituting “absolute” boundaries between the various domains.

The distinction between various ghost domains separated by large streams and rivers, and the belief that spirits cannot cross rivers, suggest a conceptual division between “land spirits” (“local spirits”) and “water spirits”. The water spirits are rarely worshipped and, indeed, only so when they are believed to have caused somebody to fall ill. Water spirits, then, appear removed from the human realm of the village and its rice fields, something that cannot be said about “hill” spirits which are even seen as monitoring the moral behaviour of the villagers (see below).

Water spirits are never regarded as “benevolent”; they can only harm or, at best, leave humans alone. They never help humans. Note, moreover, that since rivers – as opposed to small streams – do not appear to originate from any specific hill, dangerous water spirits are not associated with any specific locality or stretch of the river. Rather, they are generally associated with the underworld and, as such, with the sinister spirits of the dead.
“Poisonous Places”

In trying to elicit Katu spirit beliefs we started by approaching them directly on the topic, asking them questions such as “what kind of spirits are there in the forest?” etc. The Katu would answer such questions quite openly and, indeed, this was how we first learnt about the forest spirit (abhuy krung, the Master of the water spirits (A’ul) and Komorbarr (the guardian spirit of the game animals). Eventually we also learnt that Katu classified numerous areas in the forest as “dangerous areas” or “spirit places”. Soon it became clear that many of the areas deemed dangerous were also places where people did not cut trees, burn swiddens, or even hunt. When asked about such matters, our informants immediately indicated such areas in the forest and volunteered detailed information about them. Thus, we were shown a host of places that villagers feared to clear and, with this as a starting point, we could explore further the various types of spirit places that existed.

In this way we gradually came to realise that an intricate set of place-based proscriptions guided Katu agricultural and hunting activities. The prohibitions varied; some areas were dangerous merely to enter whereas other areas were off-limits for hunting and cultivation. In still other cases, certain tree species, while not dangerous if left untouched, could be extremely dangerous if cut or burnt because of their “poison” (mabuy). This could mean that certain tall trees on the top of a hill would be left untouched while the rest of the hill would be cleared and burned. It soon became clear that it was more the rule than the exception to refer to the “dangerous” places in the landscape as “poisonous” (mabuy) places. The Katu use the word mabuy to describe this kind of poison (which they translated to me into the Vietnamese word for poison, “độc”).

However, the term mabuy does not refer to ordinary poison such as that of snakes or certain plants but exclusively to poison pertaining to, and exerted by, harmful spirit agents. In other words, mabuy can only be radiated by malevolent spirits. This powerful poison, however, is seen as capable of making both people and livestock lethally ill (or mad, see below). Mabuy poison could emanate from places such as particular burial grounds (particularly places where people had died “bad deaths”) and from dangerous
trees (sometimes considered inhabited by spirits), but also from
certain wild animals regarded as possessed by bad spirits.

Understanding the concept of *mabuy* is central to understanding
the Katu world view. Not only do Katu often regard *mabuy* as the
reason why people fall ill from certain diseases, but it is also, by
implication, the reason why people avoid clearing certain places in
the forest and eating certain animals. Clearly, the concept of *mabuy*
is related to the complex system of taboos intrinsic to the traditional
Katu way of life as well as to their ideas about how dead people
(independent of their manner of death) can “pollute” the world of the
living.

The places that are considered dangerous could roughly be
assigned to the following categories:

(1) Dangerous hills – places (like Konng Dhr Hill, described below)
”ruled” by particularly malevolent master spirits that seek to gather
and “enslave” more spirits by slaying villagers, particularly those
that ”do something wrong” on the particular hill in question.

(2) Stones – sometimes considered as being petrified humans or the
tombs of (legendary) people from the remote past. In some cases
these stones would be large and strangely shaped and have stories
attached to them, but smaller stones could also be considered highly
potent and dangerous spirit agencies.

(3) Places where people who had died “bad deaths” lie buried. Note,
that bad-death burial grounds are usually located far away from
villages and have nothing to do with the ordinary cemeteries (which
are also found in the forest but closer to human settlements). Regular
cemeteries would sometimes be placed on hill-tops, sometimes on
lower ground and the Katu usually left at least 30-50 m of uncleared
ground around such areas. Abandoned, old village sites also appear
to be left uncleared. However, this might perhaps depend on the
reasons for which the village had been abandoned in the first place
(for example, epidemics and/or bad deaths). One informant claimed
that a village could be resettled on the same site as that of an old
village “but not on the fields of an abandoned village”.

During walks in the forest, Katu guides pointed out old
graveyards which to us were indistinguishable from primary forests;
they also showed us old, abandoned village grounds which were
transformed into dense rattan and thorn “forests”. In the vicinity of the village of Arek, virtually all seemingly old forest patches were described as areas were people had died bad deaths in the past.

(4) Particular tree species are not cut for fear that their spirit inhabitants might unleash *mabuy* on the fields, thus destroying the crops or making people ill – even lethally ill. There are other plant species which are not cut – such as a type of liana (called *devönn*) – which are seen as having “their roots connected to tombs”. This again points to the recurring association between spirits of dead people, the underground and the danger of clearing and burning a particular area.

(6) Finally, water spirits could cause harm to people, and certain riparian forests near large water-courses are generally avoided and not cleared. The mere sight of a water spirit could, we were assured, kill a person.

The most common reason for an area to be considered dangerous is that it is somehow associated with malevolent spirits of dead people (who were either buried there, or had died in a strange or unnatural manner in that particular location). However, although the reference to death was usually present in every story explaining why a place would be dangerous, such stories often appeared to refer to mythical rather than factual events (c.f. the story of Konng Dhư Hill below). Nonetheless, some of these “taboo” places were actual burial sites of people who had suffered from epidemics and other forms of bad deaths.

Villagers in the Azinh 3 village, now relocated along the Ho Chi Minh Highway, provided very detailed examples of why they did not clear or enter particular, often named, patches of forest. The reasons included the following:

- People do not dare to cut the trees in a particular place because such and such person, who once lived there, had tuberculosis, spat in bamboo tubes and threw the tubes into that part of the forest.

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51 These latter observations were made in Nam Dong district together with biologist Nicholas Wilkinson in 2009.
- A person, who was travelling through a certain area, suddenly died in the area (bad death).

- A newborn baby died and was buried in a particular place (bad death).

- After a villager had cleared and burnt a part of the forest, he discovered a mysterious, tomb-like stone there (this had happened twenty years ago). Soon after, the man became seriously ill and only recovered after a ritual had been performed to placate the spirits of this place.

To summarise, it is often the presence of the ghosts of dead people that make it dangerous for villagers to cut and burn trees, hunt or even enter particular areas. But the association between bad death and dangerous areas also implies that the “spirit presence” in the landscape is never permanent or fixed, but contingent and ever-changing. New “poisonous” places are added while old ones fall into oblivion. Moreover, if a group moves into an entirely new area, there will not initially be any forbidden areas at all; rather it is the long-term presence of a particular group in a particular area that creates the taboos in the landscape. The prohibited and “poisonous” places tell the history of particular groups and villages.

Ghosts of Forests, Swiddens and Streams

*Abhuy krung* – forest spirits – are a vaguely defined but important category of spirits that are sometimes described as looking like human beings covered with dark fur, not unlike the hunting deity Avua (see below). There was even a story about a man that had shot a “forest spirit” because he thought it was a monkey. On close inspection, we were told, it turned out that the slain creature was “human on one side and covered with plants on the other”. Generally regarded as “male”, forest spirits are called on before clearing forest for swiddens and for good harvests and hunting luck. Rituals specifically dedicated to *abhuy krung* are usually carried out in the field rather than in the forest. Sometimes benevolent, sometimes
malevolent, *abhuy krung* may make villagers ill if ignored or angered.

If somebody gets “fever” while clearing a field in the forest, this is usually regarded as a spirit-induced illness, and the person in question will seek assistance from a traditional healer in the village rather than visit the dispensary or buy “modern medicine” (as they would otherwise do in case of a “natural” illness).

There is an intimate connection between forest spirits and human beings: humans offer domestic animals – mainly pigs, dogs and goats – to the spirits in the hope of gaining their support and protection. Since the forest is so important to the Katu, it is hardly surprising that *abhuy krung* is a spirit of paramount importance to them, worshipped on a number of occasions. Some Katu informants stated that these spirits live in villages and have a social life not unlike that of humans. Thus Ating Chön of Arek recounted a dream he had had the night after passing through an unknown patch of forest:

> “I found myself lost in a strange village which had a *guöl* house and houses on stilts just like ordinary Katu houses. I then realized that it was the village of the spirits and that they were working in their rice fields...”

The narrator concluded that since “the spirits work in the same way as we [humans] do, they will be displeased if we work on their fields and we will have bad dreams [bad omens] if we do so”. He also said that other men who had passed the same area in the forest had had similar dreams.

**Pandil Krung – the “Forest Girl”:** In one village, people claimed that when they asked for permission to clear forest for farming they had to direct themselves not to *abhuy krung* but to Pandil Krung – literally “Forest Girl”. Interestingly, this avatar of the forest spirit is described as very similar in appearance to Komorbarr – the female spirit who gives hunters their prey (see below). In fact, some interlocutors identified Pandil Krung with Komorbarr (Chapter 8).

*Abhuy hare* is the spirit of the swidden field, the area cleared and burned for cultivation. Again, the Katu can not give any precise description of this spirit’s form or appearance but it is invoked during agricultural rituals. One old woman explained that it was
crucial to placate this spirit during agricultural rituals since it “managed the area”, thus controlling the various other spirits that are present in any given locality. *Abhuy hare* appears to be mostly invoked during the planting rituals whereas *abhuy krung* is more relevant during the initial clearing of the forest.

**Ayikk Avi – the Grandmother of the Rice** – is the rice spirit, of vital importance during the final stages of the annual agricultural cycle. *Ayikk (ayech)* is a Katu kinship term signifying “grandmother”; *avi* means “rice”. This female spirit is perceived as inhabiting the last stalks of rice that are harvested in the field and brought into the granary to “protect” the harvested rice until it is eventually consumed and a new cultivation cycle begins. The rice spirit is believed to ensure that the rice stored in the granary will last, and that the life-force in the rice is preserved from year to year.

**Komorbarr-Avua**: Komorbarr is the female guardian and protector of wild animals (including stream fish), but also the spirit that enables the hunter to catch his prey. (We will deal more with Komorbarr and her male consort, Avua, in Chapter 8). Komorbarr often appears to the hunter in dreams before the hunt, notifying him that an animal has been caught in his trap or that he will have good hunting luck. Komorbarr must be placated and pampered by the use of magical leaves which the hunter carries with him. As opposed to other spirits, Komorbarr is usually seen as constantly moving from place to place. She only dwells in old forest, and the Katu landscape is regarded as being divided into “Komorbarr areas” (*karchall* Komorbarr). Each such area is controlled by one or two Komorbarr (and sometimes a male Avua). The headwaters of streams are regarded as the preferred domain of Komorbarr. Since Komorbarr is “nomadic”, she seldom prevents people from clearing land in the forest. On rare occasions, however, she may do so by possessing a villager and claiming a sacrifice as compensation. There was one such case recently in Arek village: on that occasion the possessed person claimed to be Komorbarr and demanded the sacrifice of a goat.

Komorbarr is said to use “roads” through the forest which the Katu will notice only if a buffalo grazing in the forest is suddenly struck down and immobilised. The owner then knows that he has stumbled upon the path of Komorbarr. In order to save the buffalo’s
life he must perform a ritual on the spot, asking Komorbarr to spare the buffalo’s life and accept a smaller sacrifice in its place. According to one informant this (mock) sacrifice is fairly simple and consists of “burning some wood and then throwing some rice on the ground.” The man doing this must implore Komorbarr not to catch his buffalo because “he has not done anything wrong”. After that, “Komorbarr will release the buffalo, and the owner has to run away from the place quickly with his animal”.

As opposed to more malevolent spirits, Komorbarr may only kill buffaloes, never humans. When a wild animal has been caught and killed, it must be taken to the communal house where the soul of the killed game animal is “returned” to Komorbarr (K. Århem 2005, 2008). Future hunting luck will depend on how this ritual is carried out.

Komorbarr is one of the most complex spirit beings in the Katu pantheon. She is connected not only to the wild animals, but also to the forest itself and to the souls of deceased humans. Many of her features are related to the habits of wild game and perhaps to the old forest itself: thus, her “roads” through the forest should be understood in light of the fact that Katu hunters clear barely noticeable trails in the forest along which they place traps (these “trap-paths” are owned by particular families). One Katu man intimated that Komorbarr only “lived” in the crowns of tall and old lepaang trees.

Another informant explained that, when hunters address Komorbarr following a successful hunt, they refer to the game animals as “the lice in Komorbarr’s hair”. The informant added that the “hair” in the incantation alluded to the forests. Perhaps these metaphorical references are simply part of the very peculiar and poetic nature of these incantations, but we should not exclude the possibility that Komorbarr might actually be perceived not only as a female Animal Guardian but also as an incarnation of the old forest itself.

Thus, we begin to see the complexities of the Katu belief system: Komorbarr – whose name means “the two maidens” – can also appear as the powerful “soul” of the old forest itself. Katu people also said that “as the old forest disappears” or “moves away”, so will Komorbarr – and, with her, the wild animals. Furthermore, Komorbarr shuns loud noises, such as the sound of transistor radios,

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52 C.f. the incantation to protect oneself from bad-death spirits in Chapter 7.
53 Personal communication, K. Århem.
TV sets and the traffic noise from the recently constructed Ho Chi Minh Highway. I was even told to walk silently in the forest lest I be infested with leeches.

The beliefs surrounding Komorbarr may be seen as a reflection of the important role the environment plays in shaping Katu culture. According to tradition, each group of villages along a particular stream or in a single catchment area – forming a single political territory – “share” a single (pair of) Komorbarr. The relationship between a given village territory and “its” Komorbarr is close and ritually manifested in the communal hunting rituals following every successful hunt (K. Århem 2008). In any given “Komorbarr area” (karchali Komorbarr), it is she who supplies the village with game, fish and honey. This fact suggests another, religious dimension to the mobile settlement pattern of the Katu in the past: people moved to stay near Komorbarr in her preferred realm – old forest replete with game and fish.

Spirit Hills

The case of Konng Dht Hill

According to the Katu, all hills have spirits. In their view, whether a hill is suitable for agriculture or good hunting ground depends on the nature and disposition of its spirits. Thus, on some hills, hunting, clearing and burning forest is safe; on others it might be lethal.

Particularly dangerous hill spirits are described as “aggressive”. This is the case with Konng Dht Hill not far from the village of Arek. Konng Dht Hill plays a pivotal role in the life of the villagers since many of the diseases and illnesses and even deaths in the village are attributed to the wrath of this spirit. In fact, this highly feared hill spirit is believed to have caused multiple deaths in the village. Therefore, despite the fact that Konng Dht Hill is one of the few hills still covered by old forest in the otherwise over-exploited surroundings of Arek, villagers do not dare to clear trees nor hunt there.

According to village mediums and common villagers alike, the stern spirit of Konng Dht Hill is constantly monitoring the behaviour
of the people in the village. Whenever they misbehave, even if they
do not do anything wrong on the hill itself, the spirit will punish
someone in the village (but not necessarily the wrongdoer). It falls
upon the elders and wise men and women of the village to identify
the reason why the spirit has been angered and by whom. The most
important behavioural restriction is the ban on hunting on the hill
itself; disobeying this restriction is regarded as extremely dangerous
to the village as a whole. Any person disregarding this taboo is
required – if discovered – to carry out a sacrifice to the offended
spirit and to pay a fine to the village.

It is unclear why the spirit of the Konng Dhư Hill is aggressive in
the first place. One story suggests that the forest on Konng Dhư Hill
– like so many other places where villagers are not allowed to clear
forest – was once inhabited by people, some of whom died
mysteriously on the hill. Curiously, the master spirit of Konng Dhư
is called Grandfather Pangolin (Bhuopération Krohh) due to its
pangolin-like appearance.54 This is one story about the hill:

“There is a ghost on that hill. Every hill has a ghost but that hill’s
ghost is aggressive. The spirit of the forest on that hill has always
been bad. The spirit takes care of the wild animals on the hill. We are
not allowed to kill those animals. The person who kills an animal
there will die and all villagers will get bad luck. Therefore the village
has to punish the individuals who do something wrong on Konng
Dhư Hill. Besides not being allowed to kill animals on the hill, the
villagers are also prohibited from cutting the chőlan tree there but may
cut other trees. Katu use this tree to make houses so we think the
ghosts also use it to make houses.”

Another account explained that there were several spirits on the hill
and that Grandfather Pangolin had caught the souls of Katu people
who, in the past, lived on the hill:

“On Konng Dhư Hill there are several spirits. As all hills, it has an
ordinary spirit, but on the higher peak of the hill dwells another
spirit. This is Grandfather Pangolin. He is the master spirit of the hill.
He has two servants: Bhuopération Lua and Bhuopération Manao [Bhuopération
means grandfather]. These two servant ghosts were once two living brothers;

54 In Katu “pangolin” is song krohh.
now they have the mission to catch human souls and take them to Grandfather Pangolin.
In the past, the two ghosts were Katu people. They lived and cultivated on Konng Dhr Hill. Bhuöp Lua brought a gong to the stream to clean and while carrying it back, the rope broke and the gong fell down and cracked. He was very angry and cursed loudly and thus made the hill spirit very angry. The spirit caught his daughter whose name was Mat Me. Bhuöp Lua then became even more furious and continued cursing the spirit, and his brother Bhuöp Manao joined him [cursing the spirit too]. Therefore, they both became ghosts and the servants of Grandfather Pangolin. Grandfather Pangolin cannot hear (he is deaf) and is very cruel and evil. People who go through Konng Dhr area don’t dare to urinate or defecate there. There are no leeches on Konng Dhr Hill because Grandfather Pangolin is a very “clean” spirit. People who defecate there will lose their souls and become the slaves of the master spirit. Arek and Raro are the two villages that have lost most people on that hill. All in all, about 50-60 people have died because of those spirits.
If a hunter shoots an animal which manages to enter the Konng Dhr area, the animal will heal immediately and escape from the hunter. During the Vietnam-American War, however, so many bombs were dropped on the hill that most of the hill’s ghosts ran away and some villagers started cultivating on the hill again in 1967. But after some villagers became sick and died they decided to stop cultivating there. In 2003, when Ating Bo started to cultivate there, the spirit was angered and caught his son’s wife (who became seriously ill) and he had to sacrifice a buffalo to save her life.”

Despite their fear for the spirit of Konng Dhr, the villagers seem to maintain a stable relationship with this hill spirit. Thus, when they built a new roof on their guöl house in 2004, they fetched the roof leaves from the summit of Konng Dhr Hill. However, they were required (by the village elders) to work quietly and silently, not to shout or in any way insult the spirit of the hill. After collecting the leaves, and again after the completion of the guöl roof, appropriate rituals were carried out – and nothing bad happened to the villagers.
However, the fact that villagers collected the roof leaves specifically from the top of Konng Dhr Hill is, in all likelihood, not a coincidence. Later interviews revealed that although Konng Dhr was a very stern and aggressive spirit, it had in the past acted as a magical guardian of all the settlements that constitute the present village of Arek, saving their inhabitants when they were at war with
villages from the north (Nam Dong). At that time, in the distant past, the villagers believe that it was Konng Dhr who gave them a final victory over their enemies and enabled them to continue living and cultivating in this area.

In fact, Konng Dhr Hill was never seen as causing harm in a random or unjustified way – despite the fact that its punishments could strike anybody in the village rather than only the transgressor and his family. In other words, though certainly a dangerous spirit, it acts as an “enforcer” of the local moral code by punishing all kinds of moral transgressions in the village. According to the villagers, the spirit of Konng Dhr could be angered if, for example, there were sexual relations between unmarried people in the village, if villagers fought each other, or even if they watched “bad films”.55

The large forest on and around Konng Dhr Hill remains uncut despite being located relatively close to several populated villages along the Ho Chi Minh Highway. Clearly, the fear and respect Konng Dhr inspires in local people thus work as a bulwark against excessive hunting, clearing and illegal logging in this particular area.

Bol Legom: a sacred mountain

Konng Dhr Hill, although feared and respected by the villagers of Arek, is fairly unknown in other villages – even in the same commune. The spirit of Konng Dhr thus only affects Arek village. However, there are a handful of mountains in the Đông Giang and Tây Giang districts, whose names and magical powers are known to virtually all Katu living in Vietnam. This is the case with Bol Legom of Apat, the twin peaks of Ralaang and Radönng 56 (near the Con River in Song Con commune) and the Boho Mountain (Nam Dong district).

Through interviews with villagers in Apat and Taghe, we learnt that Legom was a benevolent mountain with two peaks; the higher being the older brother and the lower being the younger brother.

55 Pornographic films or films with sexually charged images.
56 Ralang – the higher peak – was regarded as the “husband” and Radönng his “wife”. According to one story “a powerful man died in the village. His widow said that whoever would carry her dead husband to the top of the high mountain near the village would become her new husband”.

Legom was also called “Abhuöp” or “Bol Abhuöp” (“Grandfather” or “Grandfather Hill”). Inhabitants of both Apat and Taghe villages invoked Bol Legom during a number of important rituals, such as, for example the dahual hunting ritual performed after successfully completing a hunt. Thus, in addition to asking Komorbarr, the female Animal Guardian, for future hunting luck, they also invoked Bol Legom. The dahual ritual has connotations of a fertility ritual; it is said to ensure the reproduction of the game animals in the surrounding forests. To the villagers living in its vicinity, Bol Legom appears to be the male counterpart (consort?) of Komorbarr.

Moreover, Legom and other spirit hills were believed to “talk” and “discuss” with each other. For example, if (the spirit of) a lower hill would “catch” a villager (possessing him and thereby threatening his life), it would often consult with Bol Legom about what to do with the villager. The possessed person would claim to be the spirit of such and such a hill, and from listening to the talk of such possessed people, the villagers of Apat had learnt that Legom was a “good” hill (often releasing captured souls), whereas spirits of many of the smaller hills were considered more aggressive (often capturing and keeping peoples’ souls and, thus, causing their death).

**Spirit Trees**

“There are two kinds of trees that ghosts want to keep [for themselves] and which must not be cut: cheyel and chölaar. If a person cuts a cheyel tree, usually only his own family will be harmed. However, if you cut a chölaar tree and carry it to a village and burn it, then that entire village will be ill. The only way to recover is to move the whole village to another location. In the past, this tree was sometimes used to harm other villages."

Certain trees would thus be left untouched for fear of angering their spirits. Among the trees considered poisonous (i.e., inhabited by powerful and potentially harmful spirits), are the cheyel, prao, kamlai, cherun, belut and rerey trees, as well as (some-times) the lepaang tree and the devönn liane. The chapörr tree – from which hunting poison is extracted – also possesses a spirit which can pose a
significant danger. Most dangerous of all, however, is the *chōłaar* tree, whose spirit – according to our informants – could cause the entire population of a village to die.

The wood of the *cheyel* tree, for example, was considered poisonous enough to cause sickness among villagers if brought into the village; if it was left lying on a swidden field it would poison the crops and the people working there. *Cheyel, prao, kamlai, cherun* (mango), *belut* and *rerey* (banyan), although not always “poisonous”, were more likely to “host” spirits than other trees. The presence of a spirit in a tree could be noticed through “…a noise as if a wind blowing”, or from the fact that the person cutting the tree (or another tree in the vicinity of the “possessed” tree) would suffer a headache.

About the *cheyel* and *prao* tree, Alang J’rreng of A’ur gave us the following account:

“(…) We do not cut any vegetation within about a twenty-meter radius from a *cheyel* tree. This tree has poison and a person that cuts a *cheyel* will die. Even to cut a small *cheyel* tree is extremely dangerous. It is the spirit inside the *cheyel* that makes it so “poisonous” (*mabuy*). All *cheyel* have spirits. Whereas *cheyel* trees have their own *abhuy* [ghost], some other trees – such as, for example, the *prao* tree – are possessed by migrating spirits; only after being possessed, the tree becomes poisonous. We don’t know where these spirits originally come from, but they are some kind of forest spirits. Some *prao* trees are alright to cut, others not. Tall and big *prao* trees – with a trunk of more than 1,5m in circumference – should not be cut because they most definitely have an *abhuy*. If a person wants to cut a *prao* tree, he has to check whether it has an *abhuy* by first clearing the undergrowth around it and then returning home and waiting to see if he begins to feel ill. If he gets sick, it means that the *prao* tree has a spirit and that he cannot cut it.

If there are many *prao* trees in one area, the spirit only possesses one of the trees and people can cut the others… Once, when my younger brother was cutting trees, he made one cut in a *prao* tree. After coming back home he slept and in his dream saw a person who told him that, if he cut the tree down, the spirit would not have anywhere to live. He decided not to clear land on that hill. However, if you really want to cut down a *prao* tree, there is a kind of medicine that you can use. It has to be applied on the tree that you want to cut. Later, after returning home and falling asleep, you will fight with the spirit in your dream. If you lose (in the dream), that means the spirit
keeps the tree. However, if you win, the spirit leaves the tree to you. Nonetheless, you still have to wait one year before cutting the tree to give the spirit enough time to settle down somewhere else.”

The Chōlaar and Kalurr tree

“If you hate [some people in] a village you can cut a piece of chōlaar tree and take it to that village and burn it in that village. While burning it you say: “now I burn the chōlaar tree, you [ghost of the tree] have to make [people in] this village become ill”. People will die and cows and pigs will also die. No matter how much people pray and worship and sacrifice, they will still become ill and die. When this happened, a person in the afflicted village would become possessed by a spirit and say “this village was harmed by the ghost of the chōlaar tree” [or rather, the chōlaar spirit itself would be the agent possessing the villager in question and, speaking through her/him, reveal to all the reason behind the calamity]. The only way to escape this predicament was for the whole village to move to another location at the far side of a river lest the ghost would be able to follow the villagers to the new place and continue afflicting the villagers. This is because spirits cannot pass rivers (karung) but they can pass small streams (tamm).”

Besides the chōlaar tree, there was also another important plant that allegedly would help villages achieve victory in a conflict – the kalurr. Note that, although kalurr is referred to as a tree, it is rather described as a small, strange-looking red plant. Others described it as a kind of “mute” areca nut tree.57 One informant claimed that from a distance:

“the kalurr looks like a banana tree or some other tree but when you come closer, it suddenly transforms into a kalurr.”

People used this tree in the past to become brave and strong when going to fight or kill people from other villages (see Chapter 9 on “blood hunting”).

57 “Mute” here refers to the idea that the tree is barren – it does not yield fruit
Spirit Stones

Stones have a very special role in Katu cosmology. Firstly, there are many accounts about particular hill tops which are littered with large stones considered to have powerful spirits. In the vicinity of Apat village there is a large number of big stones, some of which have a specific story to tell. Among others, there is the “dog-boulder”, that has the shape of a dog, and a formation of standing stones that forms a circle which – if entered – “will cause you to get lost”. Secondly, particular stones or stone formations are spoken of as the “tombs” or “coffins” of certain ancestral beings or, indeed, as petrified humans.

When we asked about this topic in Aro village, I realised that the landscape surrounding the village was littered with such stones with magical properties, often of modest size and in pairs or triads – each representing what village legends claimed had once been a married couple or a couple with a child. Here is one account:

“Two children were once on their way to Döll Dill Hill, the first one was carrying a sickle, the second was wearing a basket. The spirit of the hill appeared and asked them “where are you going?” and the children answered (laughing and singing): we are going to Döll Dill to play. Then the spirit transformed them into two stones.”

Another account is about Ayunng Hill:

“There are three big stones, big as houses, on that hill top. These stones were once humans, a married couple and a child. When the wife was about to give birth, her husband had to stay with her and asked the child to fetch water from the stream. But the child refused and instead told them: “I don’t want to go, do it yourself”. Then the couple went to fetch water themselves. Halfway to the stream they felt tired, sat down to rest and were transformed into stones. The child was also transformed into a stone.”

Some light might perhaps be shed on the above story when we consider that “spirits feel sick if pregnant women go near their abodes”. The following account is about the stone spirit Gervakk, near the Arek village:
“In the past there were many old forests with powerful spirits; on the other side of the Mrang stream there is one such place with a big stone that is shaped like stairs. There is a spirit there. When a pregnant woman gives birth to a child [in the vicinity of that area] that spirit will become sick. If there were problems in the village, villagers were not allowed to go near that place. If a villager would nonetheless go near that place, his soul would be caught. Once, when this happened, the spirit possessed a medium and said “I am Gervakk”. That is how we came to know the name of that spirit [and that place].”

Also, as was the case with the spirit of Konng Dhu Hill, the spirits of some magical stones are very “clean” and would harm people if anyone would defecate near them. One such magical stone is a crystalline formation called Döl Promm that is hidden behind a waterfall in Tabieng stream (Ating commune). In fact, the villagers thought it better not to take us there even though we had asked them to do so (as they later confessed to us). According to the villagers, no defecation is allowed near that stone lest someone would get sick in the village. It is also dangerous to touch the stone.

Petrification was thus believed to be the capital punishment for transgressions against any of the many behavioural taboos. There are legends about entire villages turning into stone after celebrating the capture of a muntjak deer with merry song and dance – an animal surrounded by a number of taboos (see Chapter 7). But there were also a smaller variety of potent and spirit-possessed stones: In fact, the most potent magical object in Katu villages in the past appears to have been a small stone called the “White Dog Stone” (djerriel acha baak). The White Dog Stone enabled villagers to be victorious in violent conflicts with other villages, but it had a voracious appetite for blood and could demand the sacrifice of a buffalo or even human blood at any time. When placated it would help the village, but if not, it could harm the village – which is why all Katu villages threw away these stones when they joined ranks with the North-Vietnamese soldiers and communist cadres (who were strongly opposed the old blood-hunting practices) in their struggle against the French and, later, the American and South Vietnamese armies.

Even today, however, Katu villagers often keep less dangerous crystalline djerriel stones such as the djerriel göyô (“honey djerriel”, found in bee-hives) or djerriel addah (“game-animal djerriel”, found
in the stomach of game animals). These stones are believed to bring both hunting luck and ample rice harvests while posing no danger to the people who find and keep them.

A’ul and his Minions

The River Spirit – the Master Spirit of all water-, river- and stream spirits – bears many different names, including abhuy karung (literally “river spirit”), abhuy dakk (water spirit) and Abhuy A’ul. Although this spirit is considered the spirit of rivers and water, it actually resides in an underground cavernal abode and only uses rivers and large streams as “roads”.

Abhuy A’ul (usually simply A’ul) is described as a grey-haired, white-skinned and blue-eyed male being which sometimes enters villages in search of women whom he kidnaps and/or makes pregnant. He afflicts these women simply by “blowing” on them, whereafter “their bellies swell and they become pregnant”. This powerful, mostly malevolent, spirit is only worshipped when one has unwittingly offended him; he never helps humans. This spirit is thus only remotely connected to the world of humans, and the only contacts it has with humans is when it (1) kidnaps young females, (2) kills people who have offended him and (3) drops gongs and jars into streams that maybe be picked up and used by humans.

When A’ul hurts humans, it is usually through making them sick. He must then be placated by a sacrifices involving the killing of a pig and the placing of one “fake jar” and two “fake gongs” – one of which with a knob – in the stream where A’ul’s “way” has supposedly been crossed (i.e., where the offence of A’ul took place). The “jar” and the “gongs” should be made from the stem of a banana plant. A’ul is then asked respectfully not to harm the person that offended him. A’ul loves gong music and is a skilled musician himself; therefore he sometimes leaves some of his gongs for people to find in streams and rivers.

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58 The act of “blowing” may also refer to one of the ways that Katu sorcerers cast magic. While “blowing”, the sorcerer utters certain magical formulas.
Interestingly, A’ul is not alone, and some informants seem to regard the A’ul more as a race of underground/water beings which, like the gnome-like redill (another kind of underground people) with whom A’ul cooperates, eat by smelling. A’ul is said to be exceedingly wealthy; he owns large numbers of jars and gongs and lives in majestic underground houses of stone. Humans might sometimes also find A’ul jars in rivers and streams.

As mentioned, A’ul is described as a kind of “womanising” spirit. Accounts given in the village of Apat present him as extremely handsome and indeed irresistible to women, and as wanting to “marry” (capture) the prettiest girls of the village. Stories about A’ul stealing women are common. We were even told that there are some Katu women who claim to have been kidnapped by A’ul and taken to his underground lair. Other stories tell about women who disappeared and never came back and that spirit mediums and other knowledgeable people were convinced that they had been taken by A’ul. Here follow some accounts of such abductions:

(1) “Every big hole is abhuy dakk’s house. Abhuy dakk looks like a human being but with white hair and green eyes. There is a girl in Bung village that had a relationship with abhuy dakk and after that gave birth to a child with silver white hair. The child could not see nor play during day-time but only at night. The child is about ten years old today.”

(2) “Another girl in Gung village disappeared for two months because she was kidnapped and seduced by A’ul. When she came back she told people everything she had seen in the underground house of A’ul.”

(3) “A girl in Xa commune got married. However, while she was sleeping on her bed, A’ul came to her and later she gave birth to a girl. Her daughter had white hair and white skin and had strange white eyes. This girl then married a boy from another commune. When I [the informant] worked there as a commune official, I was asked to gather some information about the villagers and I had to speak to her – but after asking her a few questions I felt so scared that I had to run away from her!” (Arek)
(4) “There was a handsome boy that once disappeared when he went swimming. His parents asked a medium (abo) in Lang Commune what had happened to their son. The medium said that the boy had been caught by A’ul and that if they wanted to get him back they would have to give a buffalo to a “healer” (habru ramaan). But the family was too poor and could not afford buying a buffalo. Thus, they never got back their son. This happened twenty years ago but the parents of the boy and all the villagers still believe that the boy lives underground with A’ul.”

Clearly, the accounts of white, strange-eyed children refer to albino children; the A’ul stories explain the strange appearance of these children with reference to a supernatural being magically seducing Katu women. One might also speculate as to whether some men use the story of A’ul to “cover up”, as it were, the fact that certain women have had extramarital or prohibited sexual relationships (or that women use the story to justify such a relationship which have become public). Katu themselves certainly speculate along these lines, sometimes claiming that the “children of A’ul” are, in fact, the off-spring between Katu women and French or American men. Thus there seems to be, in Katu folk understanding, a curious connection between A’ul and the French: One account tells how “ten thousand French soldiers went underground to the world of A’ul because they did not want to return to their own country”!

Thus, even though some local men believe that women may make up stories about A’ul to hide the truth about illicit relation-ships, it appears that many Katu still find the stories of women being abducted by A’ul credible. In the small town of Prao, in 2005, when a young girl (who had come from another province looking for work) was discovered dead on the banks of the A Vương River, many Katu in the surrounding villages suspected the foul work of A’ul.

Böyö

Abhuy A’ul also has a breed of river monsters at his disposal, referred to as his “dogs”. These monsters are called böyö in Katu, and when trying to explain the nature of these creatures in Vietnamese, the Katu use the word cá sấu (crocodile) to describe them. Furthermore, the dragons depicted on the Chinese jars placed
on the house altars – an important indicator of wealth and prestige among the Katu – are also considered by the Katu as böyö. However, since there are no real crocodiles in the area, we must infer that böyö is a spiritual rather than factual creature which just happens to resemble crocodiles (which the Katu have become familiar with through books and media).

The böyö are dangerous creatures and are believed to sometimes cause people to drown in rivers or die from illness. Many Katu claim that merely seeing a böyö can cause lethal illness. River fish are said to be A’ul’s “chicken” which he breeds in “water farms”. The böyö appear to “herd” these fish for A’ul.

“The böyö live in the water and are very “thiêng” [sacred, in Vietnamese]. When you travel by raft it can pull you into the water. You have to use a knife or spear to fight with it because the böyö fear steel and iron. They live in the stream, but during floods they sometimes come up on land to collect leaves which they use to build their nests. The böyö control the fish in the river and if people can catch a lot of fish in the stream it means that böyö is away and therefore unable to protect their “poultry”. If böyö is present you can’t catch a single fish even though you see them swimming around you.” (A’ur)

According to informants in Aro village there are three kinds of böyö: (1) one kind looks like a buffalo (or a “buffalo head floating in the river”); (2) another looks like [a specific design/motif on] Katu traditional decorated textile, and (3) a third kind looks like a pangolin. It appears that the last type of böyö is considered the most dangerous. One story relates how

“…a man went to check his traps. After returning home he told his wife that a pangolin had been caught in his trap and asked her to come and see it. She too saw the pangolin. After they came back to the village they told the villagers not to go to that place, and after that they died.”

Another account tells of a böyö that looked like a buffalo:

“Crocodiles can only be seen in A Vướng commune because there is a big river there. I [the narrator] only heard about them. Crocodiles can change their bodies into many shapes including buffalo, chicken
and rat. If an individual crosses a stream and sees a crocodile, he will die. I heard a story about a person who saw a buffalo’s head in the river. When he came closer, however, he realised that it was a crocodile’s head. After he came back to his house, he told his family about what he had seen and died soon thereafter.” (Ong The, Areh)

Even though these water spirits are not worshipped, their assumed presence in a certain locality implies that people avoid cultivating in that locality – out of fear for the böyö. In general, the Katu avoid clearing forests near rivers and large water courses due to their belief that such areas may be inhabited by malevolent water spirits. The following account from Taghe explains why the villagers do not cut trees on the hill called Silver Hill (adjacent to A Vương River and close to the village itself):

“People don’t cut trees there because in the middle of that forest there is a big and very beautiful lake. The bottom of the lake looks like a mirror and in the lake there are many crocodiles. So if anyone dares to go into that forest they will be killed. Before, there was a man who died when he cut and burned trees there for cultivation. If anyone sees a crocodile [i.e. böyö] in the lake, he/she will die after two, three days. My father saw a crocodile in that [lake] and after coming back home he had to kill a pig to offer to the crocodile in order to prevent death. My father told me this story and taught me never to go near that lake. He also told me that in the past many people died in the forest near the lake.”

Government, Ghosts and Agriculture

As a matter of government policy, swidden farmers are no longer allowed to clear old forest nor forest that has lain fallow for more than five years. Not only has the concentration of the villages made it easier for government officials to monitor the agricultural activities but it has also led to over-exploitation of the land surrounding the villages, with the consequence that really old forests nowadays can only be found far away from villages. Since the soil is more fertile and productive the longer a given plot of land has been allowed to lie fallow, the consequence of sedentarisation and agricultural intensi-
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fication is that the fertility of the land in the vicinity of villages has declined dramatically over past decades. However, the government’s agricultural and forest policies have also had another, curious consequence which highlights the vitality of Katu land-use traditions.

When visiting the village of Arek in December 2005 – during the season of forest clearing – we could see that virtually every hill within 20 minutes walk from the village, often as far as the eye could see, had been cleared. This had not been the case even the year before and, thus, points to a dramatic – and unsustainable – change in agricultural practice. Interestingly, however, there were still some parts of the landscape that had not been cleared despite the intense demand for land. Virtually all those places which had not been cleared for cultivation were places considered to be inhabited by potent, aggressive spirits (like Konng Dhu and Gervakk) – places that, according to villagers, had repeatedly caused illness in the village.

Moreover, the forest surrounding well-known family tombs were left untouched. A third type of area that remained uncleared was the

Riparian forest.
“bad-death areas”, i.e. areas were people that had suffered from some kind of lethal disease (or died accidentally) had been buried in the past. We have mentioned all these types of places above; what I want to emphasise here is, first, that over-population and excessive land-clearing in many villages have made these places more visible and, secondly, that the land taboos are still adhered to despite the severe lack of adequate agricultural land today. The lack of fertile land was a common topic in virtually all villages visited, both before and after 2005. The only exception was A’ur village, which also was the only village located far away from any road and, in accordance with the traditional settlement practise, on a hill top surrounded by dense forests.

In sum, except for the forbidden areas, it was generally the case that every hill in the vicinity of Katu villages had been cleared or was being cultivated in one way or another. Essentially, this situation is the result of current government policies. The implementation of the sedentarisation policy goes hand in hand with a policy that prohibits villagers from clearing old forest. However, not until very recently has the government had the resources to demarcate which areas were to be counted as “old forests”. The result is that many Katu interpret the government’s interdiction as referring precisely to these “spiritually dangerous” forests and hills. Thus, traditional “no-go areas” – the areas that the Katu have always avoided, e.g., cemeteries, bad-death areas and so forth – now became the places that, in their view, “the government has told them not to cut”. Due precisely to the spiritual dangers they supposedly pose to people, these places have not been cleared and therefore contain “older” forest than the surrounding landscape. Thus, in every village you can now get two kinds of explanations as to why any given area has not been cleared: “because the government told us not to cut the forest” and/or “because there are some tombs or dangerous spirits there”.

One should perhaps not exaggerate the “conservationist” ethos of the Katu, especially not in view of the new demands for land and cash increasingly pressed on them by the expanding market economy. Government policies to some extent do serve to control rampant resource exploitation. Thus, the ban on cutting wood, which is today more vigorously enforced than in the past, certainly has the effect of discouraging (though not abolishing) illegal logging – otherwise an attractive option for some of the more cash-hungry, young Katu men. One man in Areh village explained:
“Since 1994 the government told us to stop cutting forest. We were told that if we continued cutting old forest our descendants would not be able to see any old forests and would not have wood to build houses. Before, because we cut the forests too quickly, we had to walk further and further to get to the old forests. One day district officials came here to tell us to stop cutting forest and nobody continued after that. Nowadays, people cut old trees only for building houses, but they have to ask permission from the headman of the village. We know what an old forest is, so we do not need to ask government to show it to us.”

However, another man ironically remarked that “it was only when the government put signboards along the roads [in the early 1990s] with Ho Chi Minh’s famous slogan ‘Forest is gold if we know how to take care of it’ that we became aware of the fact that we could receive ‘gold’ (money) from cutting trees and selling the wood”.59

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59 In Vietnamese, the slogan reads: “Rừng là vàng, nếu mình biết bảo vệ, xây dựng thì rừng rất quý”
Chapter 7

SOULS OF THE DEAD

Katu people classify the souls of dead people into good and bad souls (rövai liem and rövai mop) depending on the way the person dies i.e., whether he/she died a good death (chet liem) or a bad death (chet mop). Le Pichon noted the Katu obsession with death:

“It is impossible to understand Katu life without grasping the important role that death plays. Death is the great spirit that prowls the forest. It lurks most often at the bottom of the precipices, leaving there from time to time on the wings of the wind to roam the villages. Death is an unreal thing that assumes unexpected forms. It is a tiger lying silently in wait as night falls for the Katu coming from the fields, or it may be a cobra rising to hiss in the sultry noon. It is in a mad torrent whose waters sweep away the unwary. Yes, death stalks everywhere.” (Le Pichon 1938: 385; my translation).

For Le Pichon, it was only natural to perceive the Katu attitude towards death as one of fear of a personified “Death” (similar to the prowling Death figuring in medieval art and literature). In Katu cosmology, the souls of the dead inhabit the landscape and may possess wild animals. The Katu variously refer to the souls of people who have died a “bad death” as rövai mop (bad souls) or mrieng (perhaps best translated as “vampires” or “un-dead”). The concept of mrieng is extremely complex and at the heart of the Katu world view. The mrieng roam in the forest, sucking blood from people, causing people to fall ill and commit suicide (often by making them eat “poisonous leaves”). Sometimes they possess specific wild animals or control whole herds of animals. But the mrieng are also connected to the rainbow (and perhaps to the Sky Spirit, Pleng). The connection between the mrieng and the rainbow (mrieng literally means “rainbow”) is interesting from the perspective of comparative ethnography; the “rainbow bridge” seems to be connected to death in many cultures.

I have referred to mrieng here as “vampires” since one of their most prominent features is their constant craving for blood and their
need to slay living people to satisfy this need and, thus, to swell their ranks with more blood-hungry souls. The good souls (ròvai liem) – the souls of those who have died a “good death” – usually pose no danger to the living but may in some situations punish villagers who “do bad things” and disobey customary laws.

The above observations highlight the similarities between Katu beliefs regarding the souls of the dead and corresponding notions existing elsewhere in the world; we are reminded, for example, of European folk beliefs and, in particular, of Slavic ideas on vampires. The similarities between Kinh and Katu ideas about death are, of course, even more evident to the point of indicating a common cultural heritage. Kinh folk tradition also makes a categorical distinction between good and bad deaths, and prescribe two consecutive burials and regular offerings to dead ancestors.

In sum, the fates of good and bad souls are viewed, among the Katu, as radically different, yet both of them occupy very prominent places in Katu cosmology. The connection between bad-death spirits and wild animals is particularly intriguing, as explored in Chapter 9. There is also, among Katu people, a belief in the existence of lycanthropes (humans that periodically turn into animals; in this case tigers) – a phenomenon which they relate to the spirits of the dead.

The Bad-Death Souls

A “bad death” is any death of a violent or premature nature, including deaths caused by accidents, as a result of fighting or warfare, by wild animals (including being bitten by poisonous snakes) and, in the case of women, death incurred as a result of childbirth – in short, any kind of “abnormal”, unnatural or premature death. Many lethal epidemics are also regarded as causing bad death.

As noted, the Katu generally speak of the bad-death spirits or souls as mrieng; however, some interlocutors emphasised that “only deaths involving profuse bleeding” were caused by (and produced) mrieng:

60 See, for example, Perkowski 1989.
“Mrieng are the souls of people who died when they were young, died by accident, died from their wounds, died while giving birth or because they committed suicide [hypnotised to do so by other mrieng]. Mrieng can possess people and require them to eat poisonous leaves. If you are wounded, and the wound does not heal, that means that mrieng is around you and you will keep bleeding until you die – because the mrieng feed on blood.”

Thus, most bad deaths, but not all, will produce mrieng, a kind of dangerous wandering spirit that, in its turn, will try to kill still other humans to increase its ranks. Therefore, since bad deaths are contagious (as opposed to good deaths), individuals who have died bad deaths do not receive any proper funeral, and such spirits/souls are considered forever separated from their families and the villages to which they once belonged. Villagers make every effort to prevent these spirits from entering the village or returning to the houses where they used to live. As a result, these unhappy souls are believed to roam the wilderness in the company of other such cast-out spirits.

The presence of mrieng in the forest may be indicated by a noise “as if a chicken running past the trail, but you can’t see any living creature around you”. This noise, we were told, sounds something like “toc-toc-toc…”. It is the sound of “the mrieng spirit of a young girl that died while giving birth”.

Though usually associated with death caused by bleeding, some informants explained (as noted above) that “mrieng may make people ill or even commit suicide by forcing them to eat poisonous leaves”. Mrieng may also cause people to have severe headache and to lose consciousness or to lose their direction while wandering in the forest. Becoming ill due to mrieng is regarded as fairly common even today, and dreams considered to involve mrieng – i.e. dreaming about a red cock or, in the case of a male dreamer, a beautiful girl clad in red that embraces or has intercourse with the dreamer – are still commonplace. These dreams are believed to be omens of accidents to come – one might, for example, cut oneself seriously. Therefore, after having such a dream, Katu often avoid working in the fields or in the forest the following day, and may consult a knowledgeable “dreamer” (adaa pampaa, someone who knows how to interpret dreams) or a “blower” (adaa ramaan) – a person who knows how to heal through “blowing” and chanting.
If you have already incurred illness by *mrieng* you may either be cured by such a knowledgeable “blower”, or alternatively, through using special magical leaves (*djeneu genaang mrieng*). To prevent the *mrieng* from attacking them, or to be able to quickly access the cure in case of encountering *mrieng*, many Katu carry such magical leaves (stuck into their back-baskets) while wandering in the forest. Once Aral Trang in Arek was almost possessed by such spirits when he went to clear land:

“I saw two girls walking on the rainbow and then I was possessed and lost consciousness, but after a moment I regained consciousness and realised I had taken a leaf and eaten it and thus escaped from this dangerous situation.”

Parents also give amulets (a small bag containing magical leaves) to their children to wear around their necks at all times as a protection from bad-death souls. One informant explained that “when people have headache, it is because *mrieng* is sitting on their head. People, he continued, have to call a healer-blower who will chew ginger and talk to *mrieng*:

“Redden your mouth [while saying this you should make your mouth red by eating betel];
Brighten your mouth; eat mechejj [a kind of plant];
There’s a stream near your grave,
Your first tomb was near the rattan bush;
Consider me as the mother of burnt wood,
not as the mother of the land…”

While saying this, the healer/blower spits on the sick person six times. The *mrieng* will then run away and the patient has to give the healer money, jars or mats or else the *mrieng* will come back and possess the person once again… Thus, the informant explained, you “blow” *mrieng* by chewing ginger, talking to the *mrieng* (that has possessed the sick person) and spitting out the ginger on the person. The knowledge of such chants, murmured while blowing over the ginger, are said to be passed on from powerful healers and dreamers to their apprentices through dreams – “a person appears in your dream and tells you (teaches you) the healing sentences”. This type of knowledge can only be transferred during the full moon period every month.
The association between *mrieng* and blood explains why, for example, a death caused by tuberculosis (causing people to cough blood) is considered a bad death, whereas death through certain other diseases is not. Whether *mrieng* or not, all forms of highly contagious diseases are considered as causing bad deaths, including:

(1) Tuberculosis (Katu: *kata aham*, Vietnamese: *bệnh lao*)
(2) “Leprosy” (Katu: *kan jipp/shroom*, Vietnamese: *bệnh hủi*). Note, however, that although Vietnamese-speaking Katu refer to this disease as “leprosy” it may actually be some other disease; it is described as producing black ulcers on the victim of the body.
(3) “Nerve disease” or “nerve madness” (*chet brii/chuöl*): a disease causing madness in the subject so that he/she eventually dies from a “strong fit of madness” or from not being able to eat.
(4) *Chet mamong*: a kind of death causing the person to first die, then to revive, then to die again.
(5) Malaria (Vietnamese: *bệnh sốt rét*).

All these afflictions and diseases are regarded as contagious to varying degrees. This is why victims of *mrieng* (and, thus, bad death) have to be buried in separate graveyards away from the village, and also why it is dangerous for living, healthy people to enter those areas in the forest. Our Katu interlocutors explained – in the vocabulary used by most Vietnamese-speaking Katu – that the “bad-death bacteria” or “spirit poison” of dead people have contaminated the trees and the vegetation in such an area. They also regard the soil in such areas to be extremely filthy (*anyuhh*: vile, slimy). No-one would knowingly cultivate in such a place. However, the level of danger posed by the place depends on how long ago the bad-death people were buried there. Note, however, that people from other villages, entirely unrelated to the persons buried in the area, may – according to our interlocutors – cultivate in such a place without consequences.

*The mrieng and the muntjak*

“*Mrieng exists in every animal. However, the *mrieng* in the muntjak is the most harmful; that is why some people cannot eat muntjak.*”
We were told that certain individuals must be extra careful not to attract the attention of *mrieng* spirits, including people who had killed other people (notably “blood hunters”; cf. Chapter 9), people who have “cut their teeth”\(^{61}\) and people who had recently engaged in sexual relations (and newly married couples). The food taboos for the above categories of people indicate that these people were either already pursued by the *mrieng* (as in the case of blood hunters) or a prospective “prey” due to their bleeding.

Due to their vulnerable and exposed condition, all the aforementioned categories of people must thus carefully observe the prohibition on eating any animal associated with *mrieng*. In general, all red animals are associated with *mrieng*. Blood hunters – in the past – were, in fact, considered so vulnerable to *mrieng* that they did not eat meat at all for a period of a year following a successful killing.\(^{62}\)

Most food taboos are related to the concept of *mrieng* and, of all wild animals, the muntjak is considered most closely associated with *mrieng*. Indeed, it is conceived of as an incarnation of *mrieng* itself. Despite this, the Katu hunt muntjak which is one of their most common (large) prey animals, second only to wild pig. Although not every muntjak is dangerous, it must be treated with caution since it is “the preferred animal of *mrieng*” (in part due to its red colour). There are numerous accounts dealing with the danger posed by muntjak, stories narrating how people who “laughed at” the muntjak were slaughtered on the spot by the *mrieng* or even turned into stone, or explaining why the hunters “don’t play drums and gongs and sing when they have caught muntjak” (but do so in connection with the capture and killing of all other animals). One story tells of an entire village turning into stone after having dis obeyed this taboo on eating the meat of muntjak.

The Katu, who normally use bones of killed game animals to divine what sort of game they will catch next, also refrain from doing

\(^{61}\) A painful and bloody operation that was common among the Katu in the past. Young men modified their teeth in this manner “to become attractive to women”.

\(^{62}\) There are also some food taboos that appear to be unrelated to the concept of *mrieng* such as, for example, the taboo prohibiting pregnant women from eating the meat of pangolin for fear that their children might “look like pangolins”. Pangolins are not associated with *mrieng*, but rather with A’ul (the River Spirit.)
so with muntjak bones for fear of mistakenly divining the deaths of humans instead (i.e., they do not want the muntjak bones to indicate impending deaths among villagers).

Mrieng, the rainbow and Komorbar

Although mrieng is said to possess wild animals, or stalk and kill humans who wander through the forest, many Katu actually claimed that the principal abode of mrieng is the sky, and that the rainbow “is the mrieng people washing themselves”. As mentioned, the word mrieng itself means rainbow in Katu language; some people claimed that a small rainbow is mrieng addah (rainbow of/for the souls of wild animals) and a large one is mrieng mannuih – a rainbow of/for human souls.

Thus, as opposed to other souls – which eventually go to a place that some Katu refer to as kacha ching prrning oihh (a place “that looks like burning firewood and charcoal” and which, when translated to Vietnamese and then to English, becomes “Hell”) – the mrieng souls never go there. Instead they seem to roam the earth for a while in search for blood before eventually moving to the “place where the sky meets earth and water” (pleng katiec karung) – which is also the Katu word for “horizon” – or simply to live in the sky next to the Sky Spirit, Pleng. In another account, the mrieng live in the sky and only occasionally descend to the earth to prey on people. A noteworthy detail in this context is that the sun itself has some similarities with the mrieng in that it, too, only eats blood and raw meat.63 Pleng – the Sky Spirit – thus also appears to be associated with the concept of mrieng.64

There is also an interesting affinity between the benevolent Animal Guardian, Komorbar, and the mrieng, which we will discuss in Chapter 8. As a matter of fact, one could argue that Komorbar might be seen as a “sanctified” pair of mrieng who help humans in

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63 See “The Story about the Cruel Sun”; Appendix 3.
64 The rainbow has similar connotations in other cultures. Katu ideas about the mrieng (rainbow) as a place where bad death spirits wash themselves, for example, bring to mind the bridge Bifrost in Norse mythology on which the souls of those who had fallen in battle travel to the sky/realm of the gods (to continue fighting there forever).
their interaction with the bloodthirsty plethora of spirits roaming the wild. The fact that some Katu associate a small rainbow with the death spirits of wild animals points to the fact that it is not only human deaths which release mrieng; every successful hunting expedition risks releasing such angered ghosts. It is perhaps in this context that the covenant between Komorbarr, the hunter (village) and the mrieng should be understood.

* * *

In sum, mrieng are a type of wandering spirits – roaming the wilds and possessing wild animals – which sometimes also dwell in the sky and “wash themselves in the rainbow”, forever banished from the human realm of the village. Mrieng are always dangerous and never worshipped. Komorbarr, the Animal Guardian, occupies a unique position in the Katu spirit pantheon in that it is, by some Katu, considered as a “kind of mrieng” (or as somehow akin to mrieng) while nonetheless remaining a benevolent spirit. However, the overall pattern of beliefs suggests an almost antithetical relationship between the “good souls” which live in the house and protect the family, and the “bad-death souls” that roam the wilderness and possess wild animals.

Yet, despite all the danger posed by the mrieng, it might perhaps be wrong to regard them as evil. Rather, like wild animals, they follow their nature; as such, it is in their nature to attack humans that come in their way. And, although knowing that a child afflicted by certain diseases might die and turn into a mrieng spirit after death, parents will show no less affection and love for that unfortunate child, nor less grief and despair at his or her death. In fact, just as the muntjak is the “archetypical” mrieng animal, many Katu believe that the “archetypical” mrieng death is the sudden death of a “young beautiful maiden” (which is precisely why mrieng are often described as young, beautiful maidens dressed in red), or the tragic death of young lovers:

“Two lovers could not marry each other because their families would not allow them. Later the girl died in an accident. She became a mrieng and tried to lure her lover’s spirit to her so that they could continue to be together. Finally, she managed to kill him, and his soul joined her (becoming a mrieng too).”


_Mrieng_ souls pose a terrific danger to living humans, and the fate of a person dying a bad death is tragic but, nonetheless, the _mrieng_ are not regarded as evil in the way we would understand this word. Katu fear them but do not deplore or despise them; rather they deem it best to avoid them.

The Good-Death Souls

As opposed to the _rövai mop_, the _rövai liem_ – the good souls – stay in the graveyard where the dead person is buried and then, after the expiration of some time and the execution of the appropriate rituals, return to the house where he/she used to live and join the already existing ancestor spirits living in the house. These spirits, called _abhuy yang_ or _yang dong_ (literally “house spirits”), are usually referred to in Vietnamese as “_ma minh_” (“our spirits”) or “_ma nha_” (“house spirits”). The Katu thus emphasise the familiar character of these latter spirits as opposed to the otherness and dangerous nature of virtually all other spirits (generically referred to simply as _abhuy_), including all the spirits in the surrounding landscape.

As we have seen, the largely benevolent ancestors (_abhuy yang_) have the very important function of acting as intermediaries between people and other, more potent and potentially harmful spirits. Therefore, although there is no ritual specifically directed towards _abhuy yang_ alone, they are nonetheless invoked at virtually every ritual occasion, including all agricultural and hunting rituals. However, it should be noted that – if displeased – the _abhuy yang_, too, can be dangerous to the living; they can, for example, give a person’s soul to the forest spirit, thereby killing him or causing him to become a tiger-man (see below).

It appears that _abhuy yang_ have their abode in one or several of the big jars that the Katu line-up on the shelf (altar) at the back-wall of every traditional-style house. Considering, the mobility of the Katu in the past, this might be an important detail, enabling the “family spirits” to follow the Katu when they moved to a new location. Sometimes, when a village had to be abandoned very quickly (e.g. during the Vietnam-America War), jars were instead
buried in the ground and left behind. The jars serve as the “house” of the spirits. This explains why – if a person falls ill – spirit mediums will sometimes claim that somebody in the village has inadvertently “burnt an old jar” while setting fire to the family fields. The victim will then be instructed by the medium to make a sacrifice to the spirit of that jar (and perhaps to avoid continued cultivation on that spot). Note that it is not necessary for the medium to see (find) the jar in question to know that such a jar lays buried in a particular place.

Tiger-men and the hunger of abhuy yang

Despite their general benevolence, abhuy yang can also be extremely dangerous if angered. Abhuy yang may become offended if a living relative breaks Katu customary law or if people neglect to offer them the food they crave:

“If the spirits of the house ask you for a buffalo, but neither you, nor any of your in-laws, have one to offer, they will take the soul of the youngest adult male in your family and carry it away. There are many stories about this situation among the Katu; the abhuy yang will appear in a dream and ask for a buffalo. If you are too poor to buy it, the yang will take your youngest brother’s soul instead and give it to abhuy krung who, in turn, may give it to the tiger. When this happens, the victim will be possessed by the tiger. Whenever the tiger comes to him [in the forest] and licks him, he will be transformed into a tiger. But later, when he returns to his village, he will become human again. When the tiger wants the person to follow it, it will come very near your house and call him and the person will follow it. When a tiger catches a muntjak, wild pig or any other animal, it eats the animal raw but will cook the meat for the tiger-man who is hunting together with him – because tiger-men cannot eat raw meat despite their tiger shape. If the tiger-man’s family eventually manages to buy or raise a buffalo (to offer to abhuy yang), the deal between abhuy yang and abhuy krung will be terminated and the tiger-person’s curse will be lifted. He becomes an ordinary human again, but only if he has avoided eating the meat of human beings. Tiger-men don’t have agjer [see below]. But the longer they remain tiger-people, the more likely it is that they will turn into real tigers, and if (while in the tiger state) they eat raw meat or kill humans, or if their family still – after twenty years or so – have not bought and offered a buffalo to the yang, then they will become tigers perma-
nently and never return to their human state. People call this affliction *porroih*, which is a reference to the duty to find a buffalo to give to *yang*. Sometimes, in the past, when people had died after suffering from the *porroih* disease and their family members came to their tombs to rebury them, they would open the tomb and to their great shock discover that the corpses hand not decomposed at all. Instead, they would see that the dead person’s features had transformed into those of a tiger! They then had to use a wooden arrow with *chapörr* poison and push it into the heart of the corpse in order to permanently kill the person. If not, they feared that the corpse would eventually turn into a tiger that would come back to hunt people. Only *yang* can cause this *porroih* affliction."

The “demand for a buffalo” attributed to *abhuy yang* may perhaps be related to Katu marriage obligations since it is during the wedding ritual that the *yang* eat buffalo. Without a buffalo, it was very difficult for a Katu man to marry in the past. (Today, however, “pig weddings” are becoming more and more common; the bridegroom’s family is expected to offer a buffalo – or several pigs – to the bride’s family as part of the customary bridewealth payment.) That is perhaps one reason why buffalo raids were so common in the past, even though they might lead to blood-shed and outright warfare between villages. Men who engaged in buffalo-raiding would often be away for days or weeks at a time. Since they might have been driven to engage in this activity to pay their debts to *abhuy yang*, there might be a link between the predicament of these men and the concept of shape-shifters, *porroih*.65

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65 Note the similarity with the European phenomenon of werewolves (which was once a part of folk religions all across Europe) and vampires. Interestingly, considering the fact that the *porroih* of the Katu remind us both of vampires and of werewolves, Perkowski (1989) argues that the Slavic concepts of “vampires” (*vampire*) and werewolves (*vukodlak*; “wolfskins”) were originally denoted by the same term and that both these creatures of Slavic folklore derive from a single spiritual creature (c.f. Perkowski, ibid: 37-53).
Funerary Rituals and the Tomb House

The funerary rituals vary depending on whether the death was good or bad. The funeral for an individual who dies a good death is elaborate and costly; it serves to gradually conduce the deceased person’s soul into the house of the living where it joins the ancestors (“house spirits”) and, in the future, contributes to his/her living relatives’ wellbeing. The rituals in connection with a bad death are considerably less elaborate and have the opposite function – namely to insure that the soul does not return to the village of the living or to the house to which the deceased once belonged.

Here follows an account of the traditional funerary procedures in the case of a good death:

“When a person [man] dies, his family will clean his body, dress it in new clothes and use a thread “to connect the dead man’s limbs”: starting from the toes of one foot, they will tie this thread around the dead man’s head and then to the second foot. They do this for the dead person “to know which way to walk” [to the otherworld?]. Moreover, in the next world he can use the thread to lead his buffalo/cow [if he has received such a sacrificial animal at the funeral]. The size of the funeral usually depends on how old the dead individual was. A buffalo will usually only be sacrificed if the deceased is an old person. The string/thread also makes sure that the dead person accepts the buffalo sacrificed by his sons, and guarantees that he will help his children in the future...

After “measuring” the dead person with the thread from head to toe they then put some rice in his hands and under his armpits; by offering him this rice, Katu believe that he will repay them by making their crops plentiful. After that people start mourning and crying. Then, yet another sacrifice is prepared in which the children/relatives offer a pig, a chicken and a bottle of wine to the deceased. They cook the food and put it on a plate and also burn some wax (nowadays people use incense instead). If the person was old when he died, they will also play gongs and drums.

When a person dies and is buried, his family will continue to give him food for several days (one day if he was young, and six if he was very old) since it takes some time for his soul to “realise that it has died”. However, the food offered to the dead person is put on the “back-side” of [banana] leaves whereas the living usually eat food from the “top-side” (the top-side of a leaf is the side facing up-ward
on the living plant). They put the food where the dead person usually sat and ate. This is done twice per day, at sunrise and sunset. However, if the dead is a young person, they only give him food once. The reason why old people’s souls are treated with special care is that they are considered to be more powerful than those of the young.”

If the dead person was a so called grrö krrä – a hero (literally “big and strong”) – he received special treatment during the funeral. Some informants claimed that a man would become a grrö krrä “if he had caught and killed many animals” but others, more outspoken people, explained that only by killing humans could you become grrö krrä. Today, as might be expected, the living grrö krrä are quite old people but, due to the heavy involvement of the Katu in the Vietnam-American War, they are not rare (every village still claims to have a number of living grrö krrä). However, very few living Katu appear to have participated in traditional feuds between Katu villages or in “blood hunts” (see Chapter 9) since these had disappeared entirely by the early 1950s, well before the onset of the war.

”If the dead man was a grrö krrä, or if he participated in many buffalo raids [usually implying fighting and killing], people would honour him by making an aghal cross next to his grave.”

An aghal is a kind of miniature “triumphal arch” made of two crossed wooden sticks. I use this comparison to allude to van Gennep’s classic theory about rites de passage (van Gennep 1909). Van Gennep saw the triumphal arch of the Romans as fulfilling a function very similar to that of the aghal crosses among the Katu. Although the Roman triumphal arches served as a symbol of victory, it was no coincidence that the victorious army on its return had to pass through them before entering the capital: the arches served to ritually purify the blood-soaked soldiers from the dangerous spiritual forces unleashed during the fighting. As we shall see, the aghal cross is a recurring and symbolically charged object in Katu culture; thus, in certain situations, men had to pass under and through them precisely to avoid being pursued by dangerous spirits.

“(…) Bamboo headbands – drnukk – are hung on the stick extended between the aghal crosses. These head-bands are of the same kind as those previously worn by warriors after successfully completing a
blood-hunt. Thus, when people carry the corpse of a hero to his grave, the behaviour differs somewhat from the burial of an ordinary person; someone in the funerary procession will impersonate the dead hero and, with spear or gun in hand, enact some of his heroic (and lethal) feats. If this drama is not enacted, the powerful spirit of the deceased hero will be angry and cause people to fall ill…”

Every village seems to have several such “hero-graves” and, in fact, a number of “Kinhisized” such tombs may be seen today along the Ho Chih Minh Highway in Quang Nam Province. It appears that when the Highway passed straight through such graves, the road builders offered to move the tombs a short distance and sponsor their reconstruction and “renovation”. The result is a series of tombs of the same shape as prescribed by tradition but made of red and white ceramic tiles (reminiscent of modern-day Vietnamese tombs). Despite their apparent “modern” shape and materials (which the Katu surely believe please their spirit inhabitants), they are surrounded by the trappings of tradition: next to the tomb stand the aghal crosses, and the skulls of sacrificed buffaloes hang from stakes planted in the ground. From the inner roof of the tomb-house hang the symbols of a prominent hunter (and “killer”): the tripartite back-basket (salek) and arrow quiver.

**Burial procedures in the case of bad death**

Burial procedures for those who died a “bad” death were, as noted, very different from those carried out for persons dying a “good” death. It appears that those who died a bad death – if they happened to die somewhere in the forest – were often buried on the spot. Thereafter, that particular place and the forest near it would be considered “prohibited” land (*katiec mop*; literally: “bad land”).

If a person died in the village, he/she would usually be taken to a place where others who had died a bad death were buried. Traditionally, the bodies of those who had died a bad death were never buried together with those who had died a normal death (i.e. they were never buried in the “lineage cemeteries”). How dangerous the bad-death grave or “graveyard” is will depend on the nature of the bad death. Deaths from accidents, for example, appear to be
considered far less “contagious” than deaths from “leprosy” (bihh, sheroom):

“The bihh or sheroom disease was hereditary and passed down from fathers to sons. Its symptoms were black and bloated skin with water filled ulcers. This disease was contagious. Therefore, the infected person would be taken by his relatives (no children, however) to an isolated small house at some distance from the village and given food by his relatives until he died. After dying, he would be buried close to that place, and the house would thereafter be burnt.

About one hour’s walk away from Arek there is a place of such ‘infected’ bad land. The places where lepers have been buried are still considered infected even five years after burial has taken place: the “bacteria” [as our Katu informant called it] can still come up from under the ground and ‘stick’ to the leaves of the trees near the tomb, thus transmitting the disease to people who pass by this place. It is particularly dangerous to walk through such an area when it is raining and the vegetation is wet.

There is a kind of tree whose leaves can prevent this disease (leprosy) from contaminating. The people who took the leper to his little house had to rub these leaves on their bodies. These leaves had to be grinded and the moist which could be extracted from them would be rubbed onto the body. The disease could be transmitted from father to son when the father gave the son food. Villagers protected themselves by not drinking from the same cup as a leper. His relatives brought food to him each day until he died (and continued to feed him for several days after he died). After he died they put him in a coffin and buried him. They did not build a tomb house. The grave site is thereafter considered dieng (taboo)

Leprosy has now disappeared because the Katu people have followed these rules carefully; however, if someone today would again go to such a place while the area is still infected, the disease would break out again. Usually, it is safe to walk through such an area after three years but cultivation should be avoided for at least thirty years after the burial.

People used to choose a ‘bad forest’ (krung anyuhh; slimy forest) to bury lepers because such forest is not suitable for agriculture. This kind of forest usually has small trees (an indication of poor soil, katiec mop). Lepers and other people who had died a bad death were also often buried in places where ‘bad-death persons had been buried before; the soil in such places might be good but would nevertheless be considered anyuhh or katiec mop because of the presence of bad-death spirits.”
The Death of Ong Lam

When we arrived to Areh village in December 2004 we were told that our good friend Ong Lam (literally “Mr Lam”; “ong” is a respectful term of address in Vietnamese), whom we knew from earlier visits in the village, had died. He had died only a couple of months earlier. Ong Lam was a man who had lived a varied and quite exceptional life: as a young man he had been enlisted to work for the French military that was present in Katu lands at the time. Later, during the brief period of Japanese occupation, he had been kidnapped by Japanese soldiers and forced to work for them. Finally, during the Vietnam-American War, he fought – in the capacity of a “special force” soldier and “sapper” – on the side of the North Vietnamese army against the Americans and their South-Vietnamese allies. Once, a North Vietnamese general of notoriety had come to visit him in the small village where he lived, after having made great efforts to find out his whereabouts. But there were also mysteries surrounding Ong Lam’s person; in fact, it was not really clear whether he was born a Katu or whether he had been ”adopted” by Katu villagers under unknown circumstances. In any case, he was not from the local area in which he had finally chosen to settle. His Vietnamese was excellent and, apparently, he had once spoken French – and insisted on speaking French with me. However, since so many years had passed without him practicing it, his French was now virtually impossible to understand. (Mr Lam, by the way, was not the only elderly Katu whom we met who “knew” how to speak French).

When we visited Mr Lam’s house, his widow was still in grief and implored us not to ask any questions about her husband’s death “lest he would want to come back and drink with you because he liked you. And if he comes, someone in the family might be possessed or become ill”.

Out of courtesy we did not ask any questions about the circumstances of his death; however, although his death had happened two months earlier, the villagers still appeared to be speculating about the exact nature of his demise. Some villagers dropped hints
and others made passing comments from which a relatively coherent story could be reconstructed. This, then, is the story I was gradually able to piece together about Ong Lam’s death:

“Mr Lam had been clearing and burning a particular plot of land when, one night, he had a dream in which a snake in his swidden field asked him not to continue clearing and burning there… Despite the fact that all Katu believe strongly in their dreams, Mr Lam had decided to proceed with the clearing and cultivation of that field. Shortly after finishing clearing the field, his back started to hurt, and the affliction gradually became more serious until one day several months later, shortly after harvesting, he died. Before he died, a number of mediums were called to the village to try to save his life. Three of the four mediums had reached the same conclusion: Mr Lam was sick because, when burning his field, he had burnt the back of a snake. This snake was the same snake that Mr Lam had met in his dreams. In fact, this creature ‘was a representative of the people [spirits] who live underground’. The mediums said that ‘when Mr Lam burnt the trees, he burnt the snake spirit’, and that is how the snake’s back was burnt. The mediums had explained that when the underground people come up to the surface [of the earth], they become snakes. This particular snake spirit was on its way to visit relatives. After returning to the underground, the snake will again retake its real shape but people do not know exactly what kind of shape that is. One of the mediums had said that if the snake would die, Mr Lam would die too. In fact, the medium had explained that if the snake was already dead it would not be possible to save Mr Lam’s life even if taking him to the hospital of Danang. The villagers went searching for the snake but could not find it anywhere. Mr Lam died soon afterwards.”

The logic of the story is clear: by burning a field that was the abode of spirits, he had inadvertently burnt the back of a snake66 (which, in fact, was a spirit person). As a consequence of this mishap he himself had fallen ill from an ailment of the back. It would seem then that by burning the snake’s back, he had in some metaphysical sense burnt himself. (Perhaps we should also in this context remember one of the salient themes of the clan stories reviewed in Chapter 4, that of people who die because they mistakenly hurt their ancestors).

66 Kasheng katiec – earth snake.
Some villagers intimated that Mr Lam's death was a bad death since his illness was a kind of “nerve disease” (see above) and, according to custom, he should have been buried in the forest away from the village. However, those villagers kept quiet about this matter since this custom is no longer politically correct in Vietnamese society at large (of which the Katu perceive themselves as a part). Today, it is not possible to forbid a family from burying their deceased member wherever they see fit – at least not on the grounds of “old and backward beliefs”. Thus, Mr Lam’s sons buried their father at the place he had wished for himself: close to his son’s house inside the village settlement. He was therefore not buried in the village’s collective burial yard on the slope of a nearby hill. He also received a full funeral with many of the participating elders wearing military uniforms from the Vietnam-American War (as Katu elders like to do during important rituals).

Later, we also learnt from other villagers that the place where Mr Lam had cultivated just before getting ill was a place which had once been considered “dangerous” (prohibited) but which, in recent years, had been put under cultivation (implying that the villagers had stopped fearing the spirits inhabiting the area). The valley was called Rabuot after the Rabuot stream. One villager explained that:

“… In the past there were many places around the village where people weren't allowed to cut trees. The Rabuot Valley was one such place. They knew that those places had powerful spirits because people could sometimes hear their own voices talking fifteen minutes after they had said something. However, during the last twenty years people have stopped believing in the dangers of those places and started to hunt and cut trees there. There were many banned places like that before, but because Vietnamese soldiers stayed in those hills for long periods during the Vietnam-American War, local people gradually came to stop fearing those places. The Vietnamese soldiers did all the things that we had been forbidden to do in these places; they chopped trees, hunted, defecated etc. After observing that nothing happened to the soldiers, we stopped fearing the spirits of those places.”

But there was more to it. Rabuot was a subsidiary stream to Mrtukk stream and there was an old story about Mrtukkk stream telling how:
“(…) a long time ago a girl had lived there who was the daughter of an old man. The man had told everybody that only the person who could make a coffin of rock would be allowed to marry his daughter. One man who was travelling along the stream saw a big rock – as big as a house – and shaped it into a giant coffin. Seeing this, the old man offered him his daughter in marriage. The coffin of rock still lies next to the stream. It is said that if a stranger goes there and pour water on the stone coffin, it will start to rain.”

The aftermath of Ong Lam's death was that the mediums instructed his surviving relatives not to cultivate for another two years on the spot where the old man died. The logic of the local explanations was similar to that of other accounts of spirit incidents among the Katu: humans become sick if they make the spirits sick. Curiously, there appears to be a notion that the ghosts of bad-death people will not be angered if strangers burn and cultivate the place where they are buried. Only when local villagers abuse their graveyard do the spirits react with fury – as if the spirits would reason that “these people know our fate and yet they come here and disrespect us.” Thus, there was another place near Areh village where many bad-death victims – people who had died from some form of epidemic – had been buried. The local villagers carefully avoided this place but nonetheless allowed people from other areas to cultivate there, and the newcomers did not experience any harm by doing so.

Though Katu mourning traditions forbade Mr Lam’s sons from doing any agricultural work during the period following his death, one of his sons continued to hunt in the forest as usual and, in fact, had conspicuous luck in hunting during the days after his father’s death. Indeed, the Katu believe that a hunter will have good hunting luck during the period immediately following the death of a relative, apparently on the assumption that a cosmological exchange is taking place between the living and the dead and, thus, between the village and the forest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Forest</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Souls of dead villagers</td>
<td>Spirits of the forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human beings</td>
<td>Game animals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

67 Note the similarity with the precautions that Katu take before clearing and burning land (see Chapter 5 above).
Village Taboos

In the past, the Katu closed their villages to outsiders during certain periods of time following important public rituals. Though this practice no longer survives, a closer look at these abolished but not forgotten collective taboos – as they are described and remembered by contemporary villagers – sheds light on the religious thinking of the Katu today.

The most important reasons for ritually isolating the village (according to Aral Trang, Arek) were the following:

(1) When villagers were preparing to plant. On this occasion they would have a communal taboo period of one day.

(2) During the period when the so called “village ritual” was carried out. This (now seemingly abolished) ritual was organised in the past to wish for good health and an abundant harvest for the entire village. Some informants claimed that this was the biggest and most important of all rituals in the past. The taboo period while this ritual was carried out lasted for three days. The ritual included the sacrifice of buffaloes, pigs, chicken and other small animals.

(3) When a villager said or did something wrong while in the forest, the ghosts of the forest would come to the village to punish any villager (not necessarily a person related to the offender); someone in the village would suddenly become sick or suffer some other affliction. From this, village elders would infer that a nearby forest- or hill spirit had been offended and that a ritual would be required to placate it. It would also be necessary to close the village for a period of six days. The size of the ritual would depend on the seriousness of the transgression as well as the severity of the offended spirit’s punishment. As we have seen repeatedly in this report, the village as a whole was (and is) collectively responsible for the actions of its members, at least vis-à-vis certain spirits: a breach of customary rules by one villager may cause the death of another through the wrath of the spirits. In the event of such a calamity, the collective
prohibition to enter or exit a village might, even today, be recommended by village elders and mediums, and villagers still believe strongly that they might be punished for doing something wrong to the forest spirits.

(4) When someone in the village died a bad or unnatural death, there would be a taboo period that could last for two months or even longer. Le Pichon (1938) observes that it was not uncommon that a whole village was permanently abandoned and all the livestock killed in such a situation. If a villager, soon after a bad death in the village, would leave the village and meet a stranger, he would have to turn his back on that person while talking to him/her.

(5) While a blood hunt was taking place and immediately afterwards, people would also ritually close the village. During this period, villagers were not allowed to leave the village nor engage in any kind of work (see Chapter 9).

In order to inform other people of a village taboo, villagers would make aghal crosses and place them outside the village gates. This particular type of aghal cross was called cheroom (a variation of the typical aghal found near tombs) and warned people that they were not allowed to enter the village and that they had to turn back immediately – using a different trail than the one they had arrived on.

“...If a village had several trails leading to it, people would put up a cheroom at each one of its entrances. For example, if it were decided that the village should be ritually “closed” from tomorrow, then the villagers would have to make and raise a cheroom very early the following morning. In case a visitor would come the evening before the taboo period (i.e., before they had made the cheroom), then the family hosting him would allow him to sleep for one night, but around 4 or 5 o’clock in the morning the guest would have to go out of the house. After that the guest could go back to sleep or do whatever he wanted – but outside the house. When the breakfast was ready the house-owner would invite him back into house to enjoy breakfast. After the breakfast, however, the guest would have to leave the village, but before leaving it was essential that he spit on the

68 Can this be related to the period when the spirits “have their forest inspection rounds” that we mentioned in Chapter 5?
granary (!); by doing so, the rice would grow fast and last long [in the granary].”

One informant explained that the reason for having these taboo periods was to protect villagers from evil or harmful influences during particularly critical periods:

“If a family or a village had some important work to do, they did not want other people to come to their village during that period for fear of the influence strangers might have on the pending work. According to the Katu, you can never really know if a person from another village has good or bad intentions, and a person with bad intentions might thus have a very negative influence on a village if allowed to enter during a “critical” period – for example just before or during the rice-planting period. This could result in bad luck or disease in the village.”

Taboos Associated with Death

As noted, the most prolonged and extreme taboo periods were those that followed upon a bad death. Such a death included death by accident, murder, or from attacks by wild animals, or by any other “violent or unnatural” means:

“… If somebody died because a tree suddenly fell down on him while he was working, or because of any other accident, or if a mother died after giving birth, then the villagers would have to kill all livestock and poultry in the village except buffaloes and goats.”

However, times are changing. Thus, in the past:

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69 It is unclear whether other, even more serious, cases of bad death would entail the slaughtering of those animals (buffaloes and goats) too. Moreover, the animals required for the ensuing rituals would need to be bought from other villages, as if – so to speak – the animals of their own village had already been “polluted” by the bad death.
“...people who died a bad death were buried far from any forest trail and far from where people live, but nowadays villagers bury their relatives wherever they like.”

In the case of a good or “normal” death no taboo period was necessary. If an old person died, the villagers would clean all their jars and other utensils – bowls, pots, kettles etc. – but they did not have to kill the village’s livestock as in the case of a bad death – except for the obligatory sacrificial animal:

“When a person dies, his clothes have to be changed to new ones. Moreover, a small sacrificial offering is prepared on a tray. On the tray is placed the blood of a small chicken, a bowl of rice with a boiled egg on top of it, as well as one cup of wine and one cup of water. The wine is made from sticky rice. After the tray has been prepared, the deceased is offered food. Then the dead is placed in a coffin. After the dead person has been put in the coffin there is again worshipping, and the food offered to the dead is eventually consumed by the deceased’s close relatives.

If a buffalo or, nowadays, a cow is sacrificed (the buffalo being the ideal sacrificial animal), a sacrificial pole will be erected. If, for example, a person dies today, then the buffalo would be killed early tomorrow morning at around three or four o’clock. After burying the dead person, the living relatives will worship again for a third time, now with new water, wine and rice. If an old person dies they will build a tomb-house after five years, but if a young person dies they will erect it after only two years.” (Arek)

Nowadays, however, the collective village taboo has been long abolished. The biggest single factor that led to its abolishment was the onset of the Vietnam-American War when “at least one person died every day, making it impossible to continue carrying out these rituals.” Evidently, death afflicted the Katu on such an unprecedented scale that funerary traditions could not be upheld: indeed, as noted, tradition prescribed that if a number of people died from bad deaths in a village, all livestock and poultry in the village would have to be killed (or according to other informants: all livestock of a certain colour). Many other taboos would also have to be observed after such deaths, isolating and restricting the mobility of the village in question. Considering how frequent the “bad deaths” were during the war-time period (“in each village a person would die almost
every day…”), it was impossible for them to zealously adhere to the taboos surrounding bad deaths.

Moreover, the communist cadres in the region strongly – and effectively – opposed these traditional Katu practices, not only during the Vietnam-American War but also well before and after it. They finally convinced the Katu to abandon the practice of village taboos since – as one Katu war veteran put it – “if we would have slaughtered all animals after each instance of a bad death [during this time], there would have be nothing left for us to eat; this custom was very bad.”

One final remark regarding the traditional practice of abandoning a village in the case of a bad death: clearly bad deaths would frequently occur even before the war. When the custom was in force, villages were compelled to move accordingly; this practice was thus presumably one of the main driving factors behind the mobile settlement pattern of the Katu, forcing them to repeatedly look for new land while leaving abandoned settlements behind. Since the settlements in the past were small and the forest land controlled by a village vast – this “semi-nomadism” might well have contributed to make their swidden agriculture environmentally sustainable. In a sense, then, the sustainability and environmental soundness of this mobile livelihood system was guaranteed precisely by the “backward” and “irrational” beliefs sustaining it – the beliefs in potentially lethal forest spirits and the dangerous powers of bad-death souls. The abandoned area would turn into a dangerous “spirit forest”, off-limits for cultivation, while old “ghost-ridden” forests would eventually fall into oblivion, and places once considered bad or prohibited again cleared and cultivated.

In sum, this belief system – with more than thirty-year long bans on cultivation prescribed for “bad-death land” – produced a pattern of rotational shifting cultivation that, according to all available evidence, succeeded in maintaining a high and stable level of forest cover for long periods of time (Koy et al, 2007; see also Chapter 5). A fundamental element of this complex “spiritual ecology” was – it is worth reiterating – the fact that the assumed spiritual forces in the landscape were constantly changing over time; the Katu spiritual landscape was not static and frozen in time, it developed and changed with the specific history of the communities inhabiting it.
Chapter 8
HUNTERS, SPIRITS AND ANIMALS

Hunting: An Overview

Officially the Katu are not allowed to hunt large animals nor, as we have seen in previous chapters, to clear “old forest” for swidden cultivation (or, indeed, any purpose). Both these activities were traditionally vital to Katu subsistence. However, these decrees seem to have had an opposite effect on hunting pressure by circumscribing traditional livelihood options without providing tenable new ones. There is every indication that hunting is on the increase – notably as a result of the intensified wildlife trade along the Ho Chi Minh Highway and the growing penetration of Kinh settlers and entrepreneurs. It should also be noted that the government lacks the resources to exercise any other form of efficient control over hunting. It is still the local belief system and religious proscriptions that regulate Katu hunting activities.

However, this traditional “hunting culture” is clearly deteriorating as more and more villagers feel compelled to sell game meat and animal parts for money. The commercialisation of hunting is, in turn, reducing village solidarity and local protein intake as less and less game animals are shared within the villages (see below). There is also emerging a category of younger, semi-professional or even professional Katu hunters which dedicate themselves almost exclusively to commercial hunting.

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70 But note that Katu prefer not to clear entirely virgin forest.
71 K. Århem (2005) refers to the elaborate system of beliefs and practices related to hunting as the Katu “hunting complex”.
72 There is a small but significant number of full-time Katu hunters, that have managed to hold on to their guns; these hunters have made hunting and selling game their prime subsistence activity. Such hunters, although not rich, can stop working their fields and instead buy rice from their neighbours (or nearby markets) from their hunting gains.
Katu agricultural practices have always gone hand in hand with their hunting activities. In the Katu conceptual world, to leave a forest field to fallow means to enable both the forest and its wildlife to regenerate. When Katu settlements moved to new land in the past, it was not only to gain access to more fertile fields but also better hunting grounds. The female Guardian Spirit of wild animals, generally referred to as Komorbarr (literally “two maidens”), is closely connected to the communal house and, as such, to the village itself. The fate of the Animal Guardian and that of the village are thus inextricably linked. It is the Animal Guardian which supplies a village with all its game food.

Katu informants stress that the Animal Guardian does not live in the communal house (she only comes there occasionally to visit); Komorbarr actually stays in “old forest and at stream sources”. Therefore, in Katu understanding, there can be no wild game where there is no old forest – because the Animal Guardian would have nowhere to stay.

Unbeknownst to most government officials and conservationists alike, Katu spiritual beliefs prescribe a high level of modesty and caution when dealing with their forest surroundings; the traditional Katu way of farming and hunting is non-intrusive and thus has a modest impact on the natural environment. With the progressive modernisation and commodification of their livelihood system and the erosion of their cultural traditions, this “forest-friendly” way of life is now irrevocably changing (c.f., N. Århem & Binh 2006).

* * *

In the past – before the Vietnam-American War – the Katu hunted by means of crossbow and poisoned darts, spears and hunting dogs. They also used a large array of intricate traps. During the war and immediately after, Katu hunters started using rifles (sometimes even machine guns), thereby gradually replacing the crossbow as the principal hunting weapon. In 2004-5, when we first visited the study villages, the use of crossbows for hunting had already become very rare, reserved only for occasional bird hunts. The knowledge to prepare the arrow-poison is now all but forgotten by most villagers; only a few old men still remember how to prepare it. Most informants also claim that the poison trees are very difficult or impossible to find these days (c.f. Chapter 6).
A decade ago, in the late 1990s, the government prohibited the Katu from possessing guns, and it has now virtually completed the collection of all the guns in the area. The result is that the majority of Katu hunters today rely exclusively on their elaborate trap technology, carrying spears only to finish off game animals that have been caught in their traps (cf. Luu Hung 2007). The use of traps, however, is rapidly changing. Most young hunters today are not skilled enough in using the indigenous traps and are instead replacing them with trapping techniques they have learnt from Kinh hunters.

Whereas in the past hunters generally to set fairly few traps but with great precision, contemporary Katu hunters have adopted trapping techniques which require less skill and experience but large numbers – sometimes hundreds – of wire traps set in long lines (trap lines) in the forest. The wires and break-cables from bicycles that are used are now readily available in local stores at the commune or district centres. Successful hunting has thus changed from being a matter of skill and technique to a matter of capital investment.

The traditional trap technology now rapidly passing into disuse was also one of the Katu people’s primary weapons against American and South-Vietnamese soldiers during the war. Katu elders told us that spear traps and other forms of traps were prepared in the order of tens of thousands during the war.

Hunting: Magic and Rituals

In the view of Katu hunters, success in hunting, just like success in agriculture, depends on the benevolence of the spirits and, in particular, whether the hunter and his village have the sympathy of the enigmatic female spirit being referred to as Komorbarr. Whether the hunter succeeds in gaining her sympathy or not depends on how well he and his fellow villagers perform their ritual duties – in this case, the rituals related to hunting. Hunting success is also dependent on the knowledge and usage of “magical leaves” – also referred to as “poisonous leaves” or “medicine” (djeneu). Although rice cultivation is more important than hunting in terms of sheer survival, the latter activity is of fundamental significance for Katu social identity and
cultural reproduction. Arguably, hunting is at the core of male self-identity.

Furthermore, hunting and rice cultivation are, to the Katu, closely interconnected and largely interdependent. Komorbarr, the provider of game and fish, also directly influence the fertility of the land. The magical stones called *djerriel* (vitally important in the past) were believed to bring luck in both hunting and rice cultivation (as well as in warfare and “blood hunting”). There are many kinds of *djerriel* but the spirit of the most powerful and dangerous type, the *Djerriel Acha Baak* (“White Dog Stone”) seems to have been invoked during both agricultural and hunting rituals.

Although hunting is an exclusive male activity, and agriculture predominantly a female activity, the gendered nature of the two activities also point to their inter-connectedness; thus, we were told that if men did not stay away from women during the preparation of the hunting poison, the poison would not work (see below). Similarly, if men hunted certain animals during the harvest season of rice, “the crop would fail or be eaten by insects”.

The hunting rituals include (a) the *drrang guöl* rite at the beginning of the hunting season to ensure hunting luck and (b), the *buoihh addah* ritual after each successful kill. The former ritual might be repeated several times during the hunting season to improve hunting luck. Another vital spiritual activity related to hunting is the aforementioned use of “medicine leaves” which the hunters carry along on hunting-trapping expeditions. Some Katu also spoke of “special gardens” in the forest which skilful hunters planted with *djeneu* (“hunting medicine”) and through which they caught animals: “If an animal walks through such a garden, it will subsequently be caught by the hunter who owns that garden”. As we shall see, the preparation of the hunting poison – which is very rare today – was also a highly ritualised activity. It should be noted in this context that Katu hunters also rely on their dreams to know when and where to hunt and check their traps. A few Katu also claimed they knew how to “blow” to catch animals.
Magical leaves

“If a hunter uses leaves for hunting, the animal spirit [Komorbarr] will like him more and he will be able to catch more animals... Ong Lipp [in the Galai settlement] is a good example. He always uses the leaves to hunt animals and therefore he is a very good hunter, but I [the informant] have never been able to catch so many animals because I rarely use the leaves.” (Ating Chih, Taghe)

The Katu use many different kinds of magical leaves to obtain hunting luck. There is a wide variety of such hunting medicine and each kind of leaf produces different effects on both the game animal and the hunter. However, all the leaves appear to have the effect of making Komorbarr like (perhaps even desire) the hunter who uses these leaves. Moreover, virtually all leaves appear to have certain side effects on women which require hunters to follow certain taboos as regards their interaction with women:

"When the hunter sets out on his trek, he puts the leaves into his salec [hunting back-basket]. The spirit of the leaves will cause the animals to come his way and, thus, become easy prey. When the hunter brings those leaves he has to avoid meeting females. If the hunter sees a female, he has to change to a different trail because if he passes her on the trail she would be attracted to him and the leaves would lose their power over the wild animals. If he goes to hunt with leaves he must stay in the forest from very early morning until late at night.”

Here is another account:

“A hunter will normally use the kind of leaves that are called maphap because these are the easiest to find and use. When he goes hunting he takes only one particular type of leaves with him. While he is picking the leaves he usually says some words, asking for good luck in hunting. However, if a hunter equipped with such leaves goes hunting in the morning and on his way to the hunting grounds meets a girl he must run to the forest immediately and try to find a kind of rat and smear the blood of that rat on his magical leaves. Only after that can he return to the village and nothing will happen between him and the girl. (This kind of rat lives in an underground hole and is called avarr. It is also possible to use a small kind of bird called kamprang for the same purpose)."
Only the blood of those animals is used; the animals themselves are thrown away. The blood is put on the “poisonous” leaves. He should then put the blood-smeared leaves on the ground near the root of the tree with poisonous leaves and place a stone to cover the leaves. The hunter has to stay in the forest until he can catch the rat or the bird. When smearing the leaves with blood he says: “I have done the wrong thing. Now I am doing the right thing. Now I am doing this so as to be able to catch animals in the forest…” But he has to avoid using the word “animal” (chetreng) lest they run away from him. He must carry out this ritual in secret and not let anybody see him. If another person knows that he is doing the ritual it will not be good for him.

Normally, a hunter will collect leaves twice a year. If he then catches a big animal he has to perform a ritual by offering a chicken and wine.” (Azinh 3)

What can we infer from the above accounts? It seems that the magic that was intended to please Komorbarr can also, by accident, work as a powerful aphrodisiac on women. We can only conjecture as to why the magic of the leaves is believed to fail if the hunter encounters a woman. The reason would seem to be that the power of the “poisonous” leaves is spent, as it were, on the human female and, therefore, no longer works on the animals. Whatever the reason, there appears to be an erotic charge in the relationship between hunter and prey which is activated by the magic leaves (cf. K. Århem 2008).

Another property of many (but not all) of the magical leaves is that they are so potent that the spirit inherent in the leaves will actually demand the hunter to hunt and kill. Should a hunter, using the leaves, fail to kill, his predatory powers may turn inwards on himself and his family, and he may inadvertently become aggressive towards his wife and children. This is why the hunter also has to follow a number of taboos (dieng) during the entire period that he uses hunting djeneu:

“If you don’t go hunting often you should not use these leaves because you – or your children – might get scabies or become infested with blisters. While hunting with leaves you have to avoid meeting females and you are not allowed to laugh and smile with a girl [because if you do, you will find it difficult to catch animals – since you will be obsessed by that girl]. Therefore, if you want the magical leaves to become “active” again, you have to sleep in the forest one night [after meeting that girl]. Another way to solve the problem is by
doubling your hunting efforts until you finally catch some game. People who use hunting medicine have to stay in the guöl house. The mother of the hunter has to ask her daughter-in-law to take care of the medicine plant [in the forest garden]. If not, the hunter may easily fall in love with another girl.”

The following is a list of different plants supplying magical leaves or “hunting medicine”, djeneu:

Achupp: “causes animals to come to the hunter”; “when the prey sees him walking in the forest, it does not run away but comes to his traps.”

Ahonn: “the hunter will not think about anything else; he will only think about how to catch animals.”

Achehh: “…the prey will be hypnotized and easier for the hunter to catch.”

Malaak: “the hunter will not feel tired and will think of nothing but pursuing his prey.”

Chörvîrr: “the hunter will encounter animals everywhere.”

Javîrr: “will cause the prey to fall into a coma-like state so that it is easily trapped.”

Ka-ooot: “…the leaf makes it easier for the hunter to encounter his prey and when an animal has been caught in a trap its meat will not rot.”

Maphap: “If an animal is encountered, it will be caught for sure.”

Puyy: “When the hunter meets an animal, it cannot run away.”

A-bhî: “…the strongest of the medicines. When a hunter uses this medicine, only he will be able to catch animals (in that area). Other hunters in the same forest cannot catch anything. However, the other hunters can use:

A-huuh which “cancels the effects of A-bhî”:

“They use a piece of ginger (a-huuh) and put it into a hole in the trunk of any tree in the forest. Then they have to say: “Whoever is using a-bhî, this [leaf/medicine] will counter your spell so that I and other hunters may catch animals again in this area”. After this, the person who used a-bhî will become thin and, eventually, die. Thus, if two people hate each other, one person can use this method against the other if he knows that the other is using a-bhî. However, there is a method to counter the effects of the a-huuh medicine too: the hunter that used a-bhî has to find the hole where the other hunter put the a-huuh and remove it from the hole. Then he will be able to recover.
But if the other hunter placed the *a-huhh* on an arrow-head and fired it up in a tree, nobody will be able to find it and the *a-bhi* hunter will die.”

**Arrow poison**

In the past, when hunting with crossbow, the Katu used a strong arrow-poison called *chapörr* or *bihh*. Today, however, virtually no Katu continue the practise of crossbow-hunting, and the knowledge to prepare arrow poison is therefore rapidly disappearing. Interestingly, various interlocutors claim that Katu people no longer use the crossbow “because they have forgotten how to prepare the poison” or “cannot find the poison-trees anymore”. However, there are some villages (including Aro village in Lang commune) where the elders still know how to prepare this poison, and it appears that these villages sometimes sell the arrow-poison to villages which have forgotten how to prepare it. The extremely high price of the arrow-poison indicates that perhaps its spiritual value supersedes its practical importance for hunting; we were told that you would have to “pay a small pig just to get hold of enough poison for five arrows”. As was the case with the magical hunting leaves, there are many taboos surrounding the preparation and usage of the arrow-poison. It is a strictly male activity which must be carried out in seclusion, away from women and children:

“(We) use the skin [bark] of the *ha-möd* tree to make the poison (*bihh*). After thrashing the bark it becomes softer and we tie it around the tree and cut some “wounds” in the bark to get some “blood” from the tree. We soake the bark in the blood and then squeeze it and pour the blood into a bamboo tube. This work is carried out in the forest. The blood is poured from the bamboo tube into a “cooker”. Then a kind of liane (*aungonn*) is cut, and one of its ends burnt until some liquid comes out which is poured into the cooker and becomes mixed with blood of the *ha-möd* tree.

We use two fireplaces placed near each other when preparing the poison; in one we cook the paste of the poison tree, in the other we

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73 It appears that the bark of the *ha-möd* tree was also used for making bark-cloth shirts in the past; the poison from this bark is also said to have served as a powerful repellent against mosquitos.
boil water. When the poison paste has dried up we get hot water from the water cooker and pour it into the poison paste (and then we continue boiling the substance). We repeat this process five times. The poison only becomes active when you are wounded and it enters your blood because this kind of poison follows the blood. If the poison does not enter the blood stream it is not dangerous – in fact you can even eat it. After cooking the poison you absolutely must catch an animal with it. Otherwise the poison will cause problems [sickness, misfortune] for you instead. We used to cook the poison at the beginning of the hunting season in September and October, when the women were harvesting the rice (…)

Komorbarr, the Animal Guardian

Even “semi-professional” Katu hunters, who today live by selling game meat or animal parts to shops and wildlife traders appear to hold on to the belief in the female spirit being known as Komorbarr – the Guardian Spirit of wild animals (sometimes also referred to as Pandil Krung, the Forest Girl)74. As Luu Hung notes:

“In accordance with Katu religious beliefs, the spirits consider the head, tail, four legs, heart and liver of the slain animal used in food offerings, as representing the whole animal. Therefore when at present game is sold to Kinh traders, Katu hunters make it a rule to retain the head, tail, four legs, the heart, liver and intestines of the animal in order to present them as offerings to [Komorbarr].” (Luu Hung 2007: 99)

In other words, the hunter keeps a part of the killed animal, thereby concealing, as it were, from the Animal Guardian the fact that he has sold the main part of the animal actually belonging to her. As noted above, not only do hunters have to pamper and please Komorbarr by using magical leaves while hunting but, more importantly, they must also perform a ritual every time they kill or catch a big or medium-sized animal. In this public ritual, the hunters ask Komorbarr to

74 Although some Katu equate Pandil Krung with Komorbarr, others do not, claiming instead that Pandil Krung is a forest spirit akin to abhuy krung (see Chapter 6).
forgive them for having killed the animal (which rightfully belongs to her) and to bless villagers with good hunting luck even in the future. This communal ritual, called buoihh addah, ideally involves the entire village (if the animal is large enough to be shared within the village; the ritual will not be carried out when hunters catch small animals – such as birds, rats and squirrels – even though these are important components of the Katu diet):

“When a Katu hunter has managed to catch a large animal he will share the meat of that animal with all households in his village. The Katu measure the size of animals by hand spans, and while preparing the mandatory ritual that precedes the sharing of the meat, they will play gongs in a manner indicating the size of the animal. Thereafter, during the evening, they will dance around the central pillar in the guöl house. The dance will again indicate the size of the animal; the men will dance [around the central pillar] as many times as the animal is large (measured in hand spans). The rhythm/melody of the music will also tell villagers and surrounding communities exactly what kind of animal was caught. After having killed an animal you sacrifice a chicken and carry out worship in honour of Komorbarr and Avua as well as the abhuy addah (the souls of the dead animals; their souls stay in the skulls that are stuck in the ceiling of the communal house). Avua looks like a human but has black fur and red fur on his chest. Komorbarr controls all classes of wild animals and decides whether you succeed in hunting or not. When an animal is trapped and you do not know about it, Komorbarr will come to you in your dreams and let you know that you have caught an animal. After having caught an animal you must carry out a ritual in the guöl house and invite Komorbarr to come there while you perform the ritual (buoihh addah). When you bring the dead animal into the guöl house, the abhuy addah (the spirits in the skulls stuck in the ceiling) will feel very happy that they have received a new friend and “jump down to the floor” of the guöl house. Komorbarr then informs the abhuy addah that the villagers have caught and killed an animal. When you carry the dead animal to the guöl house, Komorbarr will come after you to the guöl house to see what kind of ritual you will do and how well the ritual is performed. If you say anything wrong, Komorbarr will be angry and in the future it will be very hard for you (and other villagers too) to catch any animals.

Avua, the male partner of Komorbarr, sits on a wooden log near the fireplace and puts his penis on the log. At one point during the ritual, you offer the roasted heart and liver of the killed animal to the abhuy
addah and to Komorbarr, and you ask Komorbarr to give you more animals in the future. At this particular moment, Komorbarr is present in the guöl house. This part of the ritual is called dahual (meaning something like “introducing the newcomer”).

Here is another account from Taghe:

“When someone has caught a large animal, a ritual will be carried out [in the guöl] to thank Komorbarr for her gift to the villagers, and to ask her to give them more animals in the future. The offerings to Komorbarr include a small jar of wine, chicken, a plate of fish, rat-meat and two bowls of rice. A traditional female dress (cloth) is also hung on the wall. After that they cut open the animal and put its liver, heart and kidney into a bamboo tube and start cooking it. At the same time, they put the head and the rest of the animal's meat in a pot and cook it all together. The content of the bamboo tube [heart, liver and kidney] may not be eaten by people whose wives are pregnant. When all the meat is ready, they put some of it on a plate which they place on the altar. In the evening, the ritual officiant performs an important ritual with the bamboo tube; he puts it in the smoulder of the fireplace and cooks it and then holds it up, first on the left side of the altar, then on the right side and says “please let me catch animals from afar (left side) and near (right side). This action is repeated three times.

Then he cleaves the bamboo tube in the middle and some people eat the meat inside. The ritual officiant holds the two pieces of the tube in his hands and says “will I be able to catch an animal tomorrow?” and then drops the pieces on floor. If the piece of split bamboo tube closest to the officiant has its inside facing upward and the other piece its inside facing downward, it is a good omen; otherwise it is a bad omen. They drop the tube three times. This divination act is addressed to several kinds of spirits: Komorbarr, abhuy addah, abhuy yang (the ancestors) and Bol Legom (the holy mountain of Apat). In the past, when Taghe was located on Bol Ganning, we also had a magical stone called Djerriel Acha Baak [White Dog Stone] which was also addressed in this ritual [the stone was kept in the guöl house].”

As the reader might have noticed, the various accounts of Komorbarr produce an ambiguous and somewhat confusing picture: some informants describe Komorbarr as “a pair of beautiful (naked) maidens” who roam the forest whereas others speak of a “man
covered with hair all over his body”. Still others describe Komorbarr as an old couple. According to most informants, the name Komorbarr derives from the two Katu words *kamaar* (“maiden” or “unmarried young woman”) and *barr*, meaning “two”. On this account, the name thus denotes “a pair of maidens” – which, perhaps, also is the most common apparition of the deity.

Luu Hung (2007) has proposed another interpretation of the name Komorbarr, suggesting that the suffix *barr* (“two”) is rather to be regarded as indicating a distinction between a human and a spirit maiden (implying that the human *kamaar* would be “the first maiden”, and Komorbarr, the Spirit Guardian of animals, “the second maiden”). When, on the other hand, Katu speak about Komorbarr as a “hairy monkey-like man”, it seems that they refer to Avua (*avua* literally means “great great-grandfather”) or Cherying Krung, which is a male spirit being inextricably connected to Komorbarr (in her “apparition” as two maidens).

Thus, in the final analysis we must perhaps regard Komorbarr rather as a spirit triad composed of two maidens and the hairy beast-man (Avua), with Avua acting as the male counterpart – the husband or consort – of the female spirit-duo.

“Avua is sometimes called Cherying Krung, but although he looks very similar to *abhuy krung* (the spirit of the forest), he is different because *abhuy krung* can make people sick whereas Cherying Krung does not. You are not allowed to call Cherying Krung when you are performing the ritual for *abhuy addah* and Komorbarr in the guol. Avua/Cherying Krung can only be called when you are in the forest.”

Interestingly, Nancy Costello, who worked with the Katu in Vietnam in the 1950s and later in Laos, writes about a spirit being she calls “Sayiing Krung” which, I believe, is the same Cherying Krung:

“A particularly fearsome deity is Sayiing Krung, described as having an enormous stomach and grotesquely matted body hair. Among other things, he tries to steal the bodies of the newly dead, so corpses must be carefully guarded while awaiting burial.” (Quoted in Hickey, 1993: 114).
Before sharing the meat of a wild animal, some of the meat is placed in a bamboo tube and offered to the animal spirits in the *guōl* house.

Avua thus appears to be a “wilder”, male aspect of Komorbarr, not usually approached by the villagers:

“If you meet Avua in the forest it usually means there have been some problems in your village, e.g. that a person has died in the village, and Avua is very displeased with the fact that you went to the forest [i.e. you should have observed the taboo of staying inside the village a certain number of days following the death of a villager].”

75 “In the past a man went to catch a frog but couldn’t catch anything. Then suddenly he saw Cherying Krung in front of him. At that time Cherying Krung was catching frogs. The man lit his torch and struck Cherying Krung with it so that the spirit fell down in the stream but didn’t die. Then the man ran back to the village and entered the *guōl* house. He used soot to blot his feet and those of all the other villagers so that he would not to be recognized by the spirit if it would come looking for him. He also put one frog in every villager's basket. (In the past, people often slept in the guōl house, each with a basket by his head.) Then he lied down. Cherying Krung soon came and checked all the villagers’ feet and baskets but could not make out who had assaulted him since there was soot on all feets and a frog in each basket.
However, we were told that there are men in some villages who make offerings to Avua, but always in the forest. One Katu man, who very rarely visited town, always made sure to buy sweets for Avua on the few occasions that he went to the district town.

Komorbarr, on the other hand, is directly approached by villagers. She is the spirit that decides not only how many animals hunters may catch but also how much fish people can catch in the streams. Moreover, as the stories in the next section suggest, Komorbarr appears to act as a sort of intermediary between the humans and certain other, dangerous spirits that roam the wilderness.

Komorbarr, mrieng and agjer

In one village (Aro), all the elders interviewed told us variations of a basically identical story about the origin of Komorbarr which, interestingly, implied that Komorbarr was a sort of mrieng (bad-death spirit, see above). People of other villages did not seem to share that notion but their stories about Komorbarr nonetheless resembled the remarkable stories from Aro. The origin of Komorbarr, as narrated by one of the village elders in Aro, was as follows:

“In the past, two young sisters and their older brother went hunting in the forest. When they [the brother] caught a muntjak the girls started laughing because the muntjak had a short tail and a curved back. At that very moment they became stuck to [mystically transformed into?] a big (lepaang) tree and couldn’t escape from there. When people cut that tree to release the two girls, the tree started bleeding. The mother in law of one of the girls brought food to them three times. After that they couldn’t eat anymore and then they died. You can still hear their laughter in a full moon night. All of this happened at the top of Ayunng hill [the highest and most potent hill in the area].

Since then, people don’t play gongs and sing anymore after they have caught a muntjak. After the two girls died on the top of the hill, stuck

Therefore Cherying Krung returned to the forest without being able to punish the man who had hit him.”
to the lepaang tree, people often hear their laughter at night during the days of the lunar month corresponding to the days of their suffering and death – which was during the full moon period (abhuöp).”

There are several interesting features in this brief story: one is the fact that it was a muntjak that the two maidens (and their brother) caught in the trap. As we have seen, the muntjak is the symbol and animal incarnation par excellence of mrieng, i.e. the souls of people that have died a violent and premature (bad) death. Secondly, the two girls were punished for laughing at the unfortunate game animal that had been caught. (Note that the prohibition to laugh at animals caught or killed by a hunter seems to be a common taboo existing among “hunting peoples” across the world.) Thirdly, the girls were stuck to, or transformed into, a lepaang tree at the top of the highest hill in the vicinity of the village, suggesting that the hill spirit was involved in punishing the two girls. Finally, we need to note that, by the nature of their death, the two girls not only became a kind of mrieng themselves, but they were also forever merged and absorbed into the hill/lepaang tree – implying an identification with the hill/tree spirits.

Now let us look at a similar story from Arek village:

“Two girls were pounding rice. At that time, some villagers had caught a bear and a monkey (sava) which they brought to the village. When the two girls saw the bagged game animals, they laughed because the bear had a very short stump instead of a tail, while the monkey, although smaller, had a long tail. The two girls kept on laughing until they suddenly died. When they were buried, Avua – who now became their husband – gave them the task of controlling and guarding the game animals in the forest. This is how the two young women became Komorbarr.

Therefore, when villagers perform the hunting ritual at the guöl house, there are two spirit beings present: one is Komorbarr and the other is Avua. Avua is present but not addressed directly. Komorbarr is standing on the altar while Avua sits near the fireplace at the left-hand side of the guöl [a guöl house usually has two fireplaces]. Avua puts his huge penis on one of the logs in the fire. No-one dares to come near the fireplace for fear of stepping on his penis. When you carry out the ritual, you throw some rice first in the direction of Komorbarr and then in the direction of Avua.”
When this ritual is completed, it is believed that both Avua and Komorbarr go back to the forest:

“Thus, both Komorbarr and Avua together control wild animals but Komorbarr has more direct power over the game animals [pursued by humans for their meat] because Avua gave Komorbarr that responsibility. It is Komorbarr that gives a hunter his prey.”

In both these stories we see that two human maidens are punished by spirits for laughing at animals caught and killed by human hunters. The animals killed in both these accounts are of symbolic significance, the muntjak (appearing in the first account) as an incarnation of bad-death spirits (*mrieng*) and the two animals in the second account (bear and monkey) are *agjer* animals. *Agjer* is a kind of dangerous force possessed by only a few “powerful” animal species, including humanlike primates such as the gibbon and certain other monkey species, and carnivores such as tigers and bears. Elephants have *agjer* too, due both to their power and intelligence. All these *agjer* animals are regarded as intelligent, but perhaps even more importantly, “as capable of killing humans”. The ability to kill humans is also regarded as a prime characteristic of spirits in general (cf. K. Århem 2005).

The *agjer* and *mrieng* spirits are sometimes equated with each other. When, for example, an “abnormal” or exceptional wild animal has been caught – a monkey wearing a human ring or a wild pig with its fur aligned in the “wrong direction” – the animal is sometimes described as *agjer*, sometimes as *mrieng*. Other examples of such exceptional animals are the normally harmless (non-carnivorous) animals which are found with something human in their stomach (human hair, nails or teeth...); such animals are believed to have killed and eaten humans – something which Katu believe only “spirit animals” can do. Note, in this context, that a man-eating tiger will be considered categorically different from other tigers: it is believed to possess a different kind of soul from that of “normal” tigers.

Moreover, one informant said that *mrieng* spirits often *talked* to gibbons, the *mrieng* thereby making the gibbons crazy: “that is why one can sometimes see gibbons walking like humans”. In fact, as was pointed out to me by biologist Nicholas Wilkinson, it is extremely rare to see gibbons walking since they are totally adapted to a life in the trees.
When one listens to Komorbarr stories such as those recounted above, one is struck by the similarity in “appearance” between Komorbarr and mrieng: although the spirit-manifestation of a mrieng can be everything from the noise of an “invisible chicken” (see above) to strangely possessed wild animals, it is somehow the bad death of a young virgin (or a young woman who dies in child labour) that most typically represents and produces such ghosts. In dreams, therefore, mrieng will appear as an extraordinarily beautiful girl dressed in red. Komorbarr’s dream appearance seems to be virtually indistinguishable from such mrieng maidens, except for the fact that the latter are dressed in red rather than black. The mrieng also seems to play a prominent role in the interaction between the hunter and wild game: one informant explained that the magic hunting leaves (which, in other accounts, are said to be “pleasing” to Komorbarr) serve to make the Animal Guardian sick or bewildered, thereby scaring her away and thus making it possible for the hunter to catch “her” animals (cf. K. Århem 2008).

Below follows another interesting account in which there is a certain resemblance between the appearance of two mrieng and the typical dual form ascribed to Komorbarr:

“How two brothers went hunting. They caught and killed a red weasel. It fell down dead on a spot where people had previously died from mrieng. The younger brother went there to pick up the animal. When he touched the weasel he suddenly fell down dead. His older brother brought him back to the village and used [anti-]mrieng medicine to blow on him. After he had blown over his younger brother two times the younger brother came back to life. When the older brother asked him why he had died, the younger brother answered that at the place where the weasel was lying he had seen two plants fall down from the sky and transform into two young girls dressed in red cloth. Then he fainted and could not remember anything more.”

* * *

As regards the concept of agjer, another elderly informant explained to us that:

“The tiger (abhuy abhuōp), monkey [Vietnamese: “khi”, Katu: sava], gibbon [Vietnamese: “vượn”, Katu: avo] and elephant are all animals that have a very powerful agjer. Bear has it too, but the agjer of bear is
not lethal. In the past, when people managed to kill a whole group of monkeys, they had to burn their fur far away from the village. If you only caught one or two monkeys, their *agjer* would not be strong enough to harm you, but if you caught more than three monkeys, their combined *agjer* could harm you.\(^\text{76}\)

You are not allowed to step over a fireplace while burning the fur of monkey. If you have caught ten or more monkeys you can only place one skull inside the *guöl* house. People who become ill because of the *agjer* of monkeys cannot be cured. A few years ago in Yayay village in Nam Đông, a person played with some monkey skulls, burning them with fire. The *agjer* of the monkeys caused him to become mad. Death by *agjer* is a bad death. In the past, when people were controlled by *agjer*, other villagers would take them to the forest and make a fence around them and leave them there until they died [note the symbolic significance of the “fence” as a means to control spiritual forces]. The place where the crazy person was left to die was called *ngöö jerow*.

People don’t dare to burn and cultivate a place where *agjer* skulls have been buried but it is not dangerous to walk through such an area. However, if you walk through a *ngöö jerow* area, you risk being afflicted by the *agjer* madness.”

As can be seen from the above account, *agjer* is a potent and dangerous force that only certain animals possess and one which can cause considerable harm to human beings. Clearly the identity of *agjer* animals is not coincidental; they are all predators (e.g. tiger) or humanoids (e.g. gibbon) or very large (elephants, which are also considered very intelligent animals). Moreover, many of the *agjer* animals appear to be addressed by Katu kinship terms that indicate a high level of respect – and, presumably, a degree of “humanity”. The tiger, for example, the most powerful of all the *agjer* animals, is referred to by the term *abhuöp* (grandfather), whereas, *avo*, the Katu word for gibbon, is very similar to the kinship term *avo* (the latter word only having a slightly different tone, and meaning “great grandfather”). In the past, there were also many food taboos prohibiting or limiting the consumption of the meat of these animals (monkeys, gibbons, large predators etc.) – especially for women and children.

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\(^\text{76}\) Today monkeys and gibbons are rare but the belief in *agjer* is still intact.
As stated, it was not considered dangerous to hunt individual gibbons and monkeys but very much so to kill a whole group of them. This may perhaps be regarded as an example of how “Katu hunting beliefs” put a “limit” on the amount of animals they were allowed to kill: too many killed animals would release a deadly force upon the villagers. It is also significant that monkeys and gibbons are considered dangerous at all, for they pose little danger to humans; this perceived “danger” is undoubtedly due to their physical similarity to humans – a fact which, in itself, appears to be considered unnatural. As we have seen, abnormalities in nature are often regarded as indicative of spirit agency at work.\footnote{Both gibbon and “monkeys” often appear in Katu legends.}

**Tiger hunting**

Tiger is the most feared of all agjer animals, and is called *Abhuy Abhuöp* by the Katu; literally meaning “Ghost Grandfather”. Tiger hunts were rare in the past, and are virtually non-existent today. Usually, a tiger hunt would only take place if a tiger came to a particular village’s territory and started eating livestock and endangering the villagers’ lives. Yet, even then, a small village would never carry out a tiger hunt (at least not before the Vietnam-American War). Even after being killed, the tiger’s spirit was considered powerful enough to kill the hunter(s) or even the inhabitants of a whole village. Therefore it was essential to carry out certain ritual procedures following a successful tiger hunt:

“When a hunter caught a tiger he had to quickly return to the village to ask some other villagers to come back with him to the place of the kill and help him. He (the killer) needed to cover his own body with soot. At the site of kill, the hunter and his helpers cut up the carcass. They had to build six small and consecutive “huts” (möram) extending at equal intervals from the place where the tiger had died to the village. In each möram they had to build a pabhuot [cross made of sticks]. They would then drag the tiger from the place of the kill to the first pabhuot [closest to the place of kill] and cut some meat there, then to the second pabhuot, cut some meat there and so on, until they reached the village gate. Near the village gate they built a slightly larger möram hut in which they made two more pabhuot. A
bar connected the two *pabhuot*. People who carried the tiger’s meat had to wear bamboo rings on their heads. When they reached the *môram* near the village gate, they took off the bamboo head-bands and hung them on the bar connecting the two *pabhuot*. After passing under the last two *pabhuot* crosses, the hunters entered the village and went straight to the *guöl* house with the remaining meat and finished eating the last pieces of meat there. The next day they brought the bones of the tiger to the *môram* [near the gate?] and left it there.”

Here follows another account of past tiger hunting:

”If a tiger was caught, one had had to invite guests from several other villages to come to the feast in the *guöl* house. At least one pig would be sacrificed during the ritual, and people would play gongs, drums, sing and dance for many hours. The playing of gongs and drums were not allowed to stop until the entire tiger had been consumed. If the music would stop, *then the tiger would himself play the large village drum* – and that would kill all the inhabitants of the village! People from other villages were requested to help playing the drum and keep the dance and music going for a whole night. During the ritual, the *takah tahal* (village headman or oldest and most respected man in the village) had to impersonate the tiger, covering his face with charcoal. The villagers held the tiger carcass in front of him saying: ‘This tiger is accused of killing our buffaloes and cows.’ After that, they severed the tiger’s head from its body, ate its meat and threw the head away. Komorbarr cannot control the tiger.”

**Hunting: Modern Transformations**

The Katu are all aware of the governments ban on hunting. However, it seems that nobody really knows the extent or scope of the ban, i.e. which animals are illegal to hunt. Today, most Katu believe – as do most local government officials we have talked to – that it is illegal to hunt large game animals such as deer (Vietnamese: *nai*), muntjak, antelope (Vietnamese: *son duong*), tiger, gibbon, bear and so on, but not smaller animals such as rodents, rabbits and bats. However, as Barney Long, the former Quảng Nam coordinator of WWF, pointed out: “If all animals were to be illegal to hunt, what would be the
point of having certain species branded as ‘protected’?” It thus appears that the hunting legislation is not clear, neither to the local people, nor to the local government officials.

For many Katu, the wild pig seems to occupy an ambiguous position somewhere between legal and illegal prey; local hunters believe that they are entitled to trap wild pigs since they ravage their fields and destroy their crops. Katu feel that they have the right to protect their own fields. Wild pigs are thus frequently caught in traps set around the fields.

As we have seen, when a Katu hunter has managed to catch a large animal, weighing 10-15 kg or more, he would share the meat of that animal with all households in his village. Even today, though game today is much scarcer than in the past, this custom is still practised in many villages including our study villages. However, in other villages, people have started to break this tradition of communal meat-feasting. Yet, the sale of entire game animals to people outside the village is still quite rare, and all the instances I heard of involved villages located close to, or even inside, district towns.

People living in villages located at some distance from urban centres (even if only a few kilometres) appear unwilling to take game outside the village. They still prefer to share game meat with their fellow villagers. One villager said that “the villagers are too poor to buy meat, so they continue sharing game meat as prescribed by tradition”. Yet, one might ask: why would a hunter not walk a few kilometres and sell the meat in town? Perhaps for fear of being apprehended by the authorities, but equally plausible, I suggest, because of the old taboo on taking game outside the hunter’s own village. This possibility seems to be confirmed by Luu Hung (2007) who tells us that even those Katu who sell game to Kinh traders keep certain body parts of the animal to avoid making Komorbarr angry (since any killed game animal is considered to belong to her even after being killed).

Wild game meat is an important source of protein since domestic animals are generally not used for ordinary consumption; the Katu will only eat the meat of domestic animals in connection with rituals (although chicken, ducks or the occasional dog may be slaughtered for a guest). Such sacrificial rituals include some of the ritual events that we have described in preceding chapters – planting rituals, harvest rituals, weddings and funerals. All of these rituals, except funerals, are concentrated to a few months of the year (late summer
and autumn), and thus do not provide meat for the rest of the year. Notably, the Katu hunting season (November to February) is a period with few or no sacrificial events. During this period (when it is too cold to go fishing), game meat is a vital source of meat.

Due to the sedentary settlement pattern imposed upon them by the state, and the strictly enforced prohibition on clearing old forests, Katu today find themselves forced to over-exploit the agricultural land surrounding their settlements. Old forests are today only to be found at a significant distance from the villages. Not only does this fact entail decreasing dry-rice yields but it also makes it considerably harder for the Katu to hunt wild animals – since wild animals seem to concentrate in old-forest areas. Overpopulated settlements also tend to exhaust the fish resources in local streams so that fish, too, is notoriously scarcer than in the past.

If, then, Katu hunters today increasingly deplete the game animals around their settlements, this may also have been true in the past. One of the reasons why settlements frequently moved in the past may thus have been to gain access to better hunting ground and more fertile agricultural land (old forest, by definition, also being good hunting ground. Meanwhile, the temporary abandoned forest land would have been left fallow to ensure the regeneration of the forest – but also the principal prey animals thriving in old forest. However, the present reality is different: commercial hunting and the illegal trade in animal parts have intensified considerably. Wildlife traders and smugglers have established themselves in the district towns on a permanent basis and made virtually every Katu in the region aware of their presence. These traders regularly buy game animals or animal parts (for folk-medical use) from almost every village in the region, thus constituting a major source of income for the local population. (According to some informants, this is by far the “best” way for a Katu to earn money today, much more lucrative than any other job or activity).

The wildlife trade is particularly harmful to the local fauna since, almost by definition, the most endangered animal species fetch the highest prices and are therefore most coveted by traders. The global wildlife trade is a major cause of the decline and all but extinction of a number of animal species, not only in Asia, but also in Africa and elsewhere. In recent years, one of the most sought-after animals on the wildlife market is the pangolin. Many Katu hunters thus dedicate considerable time trying to capture live pangolins to sell (the price
for a live pangolin can vary between 700,000-2,000,000 VND/kg. Other animals that have parts (e.g. ears, horns, scales etc.) that might be sold to wildlife traders are bears and deer. These animals, including the pangolin (its tail and scales can be sold if the animal happens to die), have the advantage that certain parts of the animal can be sold for a considerable amount of money while the meat can still be shared among villagers according to tradition.

There is also a growing local market for game meat catering for an almost exclusively Kinh clientele. The radically increased commercialisation of hunting and the increase in the wildlife trade in the study area are clearly a direct consequence of the recently completed highway and the rapidly growing population of Kinh immigrants following in its wake. The Katu only figure at the lowest end of this supply chain and never reap any significant proportion of the profits. Nonetheless, the rewards they can get from illegal hunting are far higher than they can get from virtually any type of agricultural endeavour.

If the erosion of Katu traditions accelerates and if local communities become further entangled in the cash economy without finding alternative sources of income, then the wildlife in the region is likely to suffer increasing depletion. Indeed, this is the most likely scenario in the proximate future if current development- and modernisation policies – with their strong emphasis on commercialisation and economic growth – prevail. In fact, it can already be observed that illegal (commercial) hunting is most prevalent in precisely those districts where local people engage in industrial agroforestry (rubber extraction, tree planting for the furniture industry etc), and where they have abandoned swidden farming altogether (as in Nam Đông district to the north) – despite the fact that the per capita income in such districts are statistically higher than in more remote and “traditional” highland districts. There is thus no correlation between increased monetary income and reduced hunting pressure. Hunting for the market – alongside with commercial logging – remains the quickest way for Katu to earn substantial amounts of cash.

78 Live pangolins are mainly exported to China for use in traditional medicine (c.f. Ellis 2005).
Chapter 9
BLOOD HUNTING

The title of Le Pichon’s 1938 account of the Katu – “Les Chasseurs de Sang” – suggests that the so-called “blood hunts” were an important feature of Katu culture. What he refers to is the long since abolished practice of killing human victims in distant villages for ritual purposes. Through this horrendous practice, Katu men believed they could ensure prosperity and good harvests in the killers’ own village as well as confer power and prestige on the killers themselves.

Later observers visiting Katu communities shortly before and during the Vietnam-American War (Hickey, Mole, Costello) make brief reference to the subject whereas Vietnamese scholars downplay or ignore it entirely. Although the Katu today are reluctant to expand on the topic, they openly admit that there was “fighting between the villages” and that this fighting was often motivated by circumstances related to their spirit beliefs and ritual practices.

Le Pichon notes that blood raids were called for when certain spirits needed to be appeased – as “when there have been bad deaths in the village, a shaman has died or a poor harvest has been suffered” (quoted in Hickey, 1993: 117). After drinking and performing divinations to know the will of the spirits, the blood hunters set out on their expedition:

“After talking, drinking, and singing all night, the blood-hunt party leaves at dawn. Wearing blue mantles over their shoulders, they clutch spears with sharpened blades and crossbows with arrows smeared with a poison (…) [that is like] curare derived from the strychonose tree. (…) [They] march all day, avoiding the beaten path, slashing their way through the brush to cross the mountain. (…) [The Katu] never attack directly, preferring to lay an ambush at nightfall.

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79 Obviously, even the recollection of a custom like “blood hunting” is not befitting the self-image of this rapidly developing nation. Also, some Vietnamese scholars fear that mentioning this practice would further stigmatise the Katu in the eyes of Vietnamese majority population.
by hiding in foliage near a trail used by their intended victims. Whoever comes along the path is felled by a poisoned arrow, and the raiders quickly emerge to spear the victim. Blood must flow profusely to satisfy the spirits so each member of the party spears the fallen victim” (ibid).

As far back as we can trace it, Katu history has been a history of turmoil. In the late 1930s – the earliest period from which we have any real knowledge about them – they seem to be engaged in inter-village conflicts and perpetual blood-feuds. We know almost nothing about the Katu from before the period when the French entered their territory, but we can safely assume – despite what the French considered a “civilizing” labour – that the French presence hardly made the inter-village conflicts less prevalent. The accounts of past blood hunts we managed to gather in the field suggest that the French – by toppling the fragile tribal balance of power – increased rather than diminished the intensity of these inter-village conflicts.

Indeed, when talking to old men in the study villages, we gathered that Bolo village – the village of Le Pichon’s Katu friend and ally, chief Go – seems to have been a major actor in the past blood-hunting rivalries in the region. Various interlocutors in the villages of A Vuong commune, for example, remember this village (Bolo) as a source of blood-hunting conflicts.80 We cannot claim to give any “fair” account of these conflicts since we never visited Bolo village – now apparently a rather dull, semi-urban townlet along the main road to Danang. Also, it appears that very few or none of its original inhabitants (or their descendants) currently live there. However, we do know something about the villages towards which Le Pichon’s bellicose friend directed his deadly attacks. These villages include Apat, Taghe, Old A’ur and Arek – all in A Vuong commune. Le Pichon tells us that chief Go of Bolo eventually met a pitiful end as he died from a strange disease allegedly caused by the sorcery of his enemies. Afterwards, his village was abandoned and all its livestock killed.

Most villagers in our study were reluctant to talk about warfare and ritual killings in the past. Nonetheless, despite this reluctance, it is clear that virtually no adult Katu today is ignorant about the past

80 But note that the Katu of Nam Dong district claim that the A Vuong Katu were dangerous and blood-thirsty people in the past…
“blood-hunting” exploits of their ancestors. In fact, there are still a few elderly blood hunters alive in the villages in which we worked. The reason why they did not easily assent to talk about this topic was, I believe, the fear of being considered “savage” or “backward”. Thus, in most cases, our interlocutors would say that “yes, there was fighting between villages in the past, but always over land or women.”

However, despite this general atmosphere of hush-hush about the blood hunts, a few informants did give detailed accounts of ritualised violence in the past. Here is one account by the takah buöl of Apat Bling:

“During my grandfather’s time there was fighting between our village and some other villages. A long time ago, villagers from my father’s and grandfather’s villages went to what is now Song Con commune to kill people in Acha village. Once, they killed seven people in a single attack. Later, people from that area returned to my grandfather’s village and killed my great grandfather and great-grandmother. The enemies also took blood and some heads from the people they killed [in our village]. The conflict continued and our people went back to that [Acha] village again to kill more people. A raiding party would normally attack at night when people were sleeping, but sometimes an attack could happen in broad daylight.

After killing a person from another village, our village would feel great happiness and hold a big ritual – sacrificing both buffalo and pigs. During this ritual we would use blood from one or several of the slain enemies to offer to the ghost of our village. The villagers would dance and play gongs and drums for several days. Usually, the war-party would only take some blood from the dead person and leave the dead body untouched. But in rare cases heads would be brought as well. The main reason for fighting was to get blood to offer to the “ghost of the village” (abhuy buöl). When the village ghost needed human blood, the villagers had to kill people from other villages. In the village there were some spirit mediums who knew when the ghost craved blood. The ghost told the villagers they were not allowed to kill someone from their own village; they had to kill people from other villages, or Kinh people. If they refused to draw [“hunt”] blood, all the people in the village would risk dying from diseases or other causes. If the village had human blood to offer to the ghost, the villagers would become rich and have plenty to eat. This kind of killing was called vôy pei aham [“going to find blood”].
If, during the [Vietnam-American] War, we managed to kill an American soldier, we would take the blood from that soldier and do everything in the same way as we had done with our Katu enemies in the past; by taking blood from the soldiers we believed that our rice would grow well and that we would become strong and healthy.”

However, it also appears that villages in the past often *did* fight over land and women, and the question whether all fights involving the killing of other humans were seen as “blood hunts” or not remains open. The account above, as well as other similar accounts, tells us that the blood hunters would go very far away from their home villages in order to find victims; sometimes, we were told, they would walk almost non-stop for a week. If the purpose of the blood hunt was to obtain land they would hardly travel so far, thus suggesting that blood hunting and fighting for land were two different matters. But other accounts suggest that any killing of a human being – an American soldier, for example – was a ritual event – or, by virtue of its cosmological implications, became one. Villages seem to have made great efforts in the past to build up alliances with neighbouring villages so that they could live with a minimum of violence. Such alliances were also forged to resist enemy- and blood-hunting attacks.

There were many rituals that served to mark and preserve the peace between villages. Thus, the demarcation of the boundary between two previously feuding villages that had agreed to make peace was an important ritual event. Here follows an account of such a “peace-making ritual” (from an informant in Arek). The account explains one of Le Pichon’s photos (Planche LXI), namely that of a special kind of statue (called *ko krung* in Le Pichon’s text):

“On the main trail between two villages that had been fighting with each other, a kind of statue would be raised by people from the two villages when they had agreed to make peace. The place where the statue was raised marked the “border” between the two villages. Before erecting this *kabey* (statue), a ritual involving the killing and eating of a pig and a small dog would be performed. Before starting the worshipping, blood would be taken from the pig and dog and mixed with rice and soot and put on the feet of representatives from both villages. For example: if four people carried out the ritual, two men would be from one of the villages and two from the other. The blood-mixture would be put first on the left foot and thereafter on the
right foot. One person from one village would place the mixture on the feet of one person from the other village and vice versa.”

A ko krung statue (from Le Pichon 1938, Planche LXI).

Another account by the same informant explains another of Le Pichon’s photos (Planche LXVIII), namely that of a kind of sinur (or xnur) pole with a human skull in it.  

“This kind of sinur is called ravang. If two villages were at war with each other, and one village found out that the other was planning to attack it, then the warriors of this [the former] village would attempt a rapid pre-emptive strike at their enemies. The best strategy would be to immediately kill a person from the other village, bring his head back and place it inside a ritual pole which they placed at the border between the two villages (or along a path in the direction of the enemy village). This kind of sacrificial pole was called ravang. Basically, the ravang looks like a normal sinur but when a human skull is placed in it [inside a cavity in the pole], it becomes ravang.  

81 The sinur is a wooden pole which is set up in the middle of the village, in front of the guöl house, during buffalo sacrifices. The sacrificial buffalo or cow is tied to the sinur and walks around it before eventually being killed.
There is a ritual before the ravang is raised in which a buffalo, a pig, a dog, a chicken and a goat are sacrificed, and wine is offered to the soul of the slain person. While the pole was erected, the ritual officiant would implore the soul of the dead person to accept the offerings and assist the killers’ village. After this ritual, the soul of the killed person [now transformed into a powerful ally] would help the killers by warning them through a “whistling sound” [a particular sound characteristic of the souls of dead people] if any enemies would try to approach the village. After worshipping in the forest there was another ritual in the guöl house. Similar to the first ritual, this second ritual served to inform Pleng, Katiec and abhuy krung that the villagers had killed a person.”

A sinur pole (Le Pichon 1938, Planche LXVIII)
Though a horrid – and long since vanished – feature of Katu culture, blood hunting may not have been the most dreaded form of violence. Many interlocutors stated that the most devastating form of inter-village violence in the past was something which they called “medicine (djeneu) wars”. A medicine war involved the burning of wood from the magical chōlaar tree (c.f. “Spirit Trees”, Chapter 6) in an enemy village, thus – we were told – wiping out every living soul in that village.

* * *

The accounts of blood hunts that we managed to collect suggest that the rituals associated with them were in many ways similar to present-day hunting rituals, in particular those (until recently) performed in connection with tiger hunting. In fact, the Katu themselves draw an explicit parallel between tiger hunting and past blood-hunting.

Let us compare a description of a tiger hunt (as told by a man in Areh village) with one of a blood hunt:

“[After having caught a tiger] the hunter/s would scream three times close to the village in order to notify the villagers that they had caught a tiger. This is the same cry that people used when coming back to the village after having killed people. Then they would grill the meat of the tiger [in the forest] and leave the head of the tiger in the forest.”

Eventually, the meat of the tiger would be brought into the village but only after a special structure had been constructed (outside the village gate) on which the meat was hung. The structure was built in such a manner as to scare away the “angry” soul of the tiger. It contained two mortar-like wooden poles on which snail shell necklaces were hung (because the tiger is afraid of snails).

Moreover:

“The owner of the trap that had caught the tiger applied soot to his face and body. He would also make a kind of walking stick on which he leaned as he went up to the guöl house. He stopped before the entrance of the guöl and asked the people inside: “what kind of meat do you have there,” whereupon they would answer: “this is not meat, this is just bamboo shoots. It is nothing special but please take some
to your home.” Then the owner of the trap would go to his house and take a bath before returning to the guöl house. Children were not allowed near the guöl at this time. After finishing eating the meat they [the villagers] held a ceremony in the forest to scare away the spirit of the tiger [note that the head of the tiger was never brought into the village].”

Now, let us look at a description of a blood hunt:

“If a group of Katu men went to another village to kill people they would not normally bring the heads of the victims back to their village. [Sometimes they would bring live captives back to their village]. If they killed a captive in their own village, they would take the corpse far away into the forest and put the head on the top of the highest hill. [Before a blood-hunting expedition] they would select five people to do the killing. Each of these men had to give a woman a handful of rice for her to cook. The woman had to be pure and not pregnant, but she could be married. She would divide the rice into five parts, put each part into a banana leaf, and then give the leaves with rice to each of the five men. Each man would then fold the leaf with the rice into a package and give it to an old man. This took place in the guöl house. The old man would then open the folded leaves and look at the portions: if the rice was sticky, the old man knew that the man to whom the portion belonged would survive; if not, he would die. However, he would not tell the young men what he had found out. During the eight or nine days that the men would be away, nobody was allowed to leave the village or carry out any work. [The village was subject to a collective village taboo]. Before returning to their home village, the men [killers] would stop and wait outside the village gate and scream to announce their return, and those inside the village would respond [c.f. the tiger hunt]. While the five men waited outside the village gate, those inside would immediately start preparing the rituals to take place in the village. The five men would also change their clothes and throw away their back-baskets outside the village gate. In addition, they would make special headbands and “gauntlets” of bamboo. When they were finally allowed to enter the village, they had to pass through three pairs of crossed spears, forming a kind of gate in front of the entrance to the guöl house.”

Both the account of the tiger hunt and that of the blood hunt bring to mind theories of “rites de passage”. It is clear that the hunters pose a danger to the village in that they have unleashed powerful spiritual
forces; in the first case, the spirit of the tiger is feared; in the second, it is the spirits of the human victims that are feared. In my interpretation, this is why the hunters/killers have to change clothes outside the village and throw away their back-baskets, and also why the “tiger-killer” (or, in this particular story, the owner of the trap) has to pretend to be a stranger – an anonymous old man who could not possibly be the mighty tiger’s killer. In both the blood-hunting and the tiger-hunting stories, the “killers” obviously try to make themselves “invisible” or “unrecognisable” to the angry spirits.

We were also told that the participants in blood hunts had to:

“Drink water through a bamboo tube, at the bottom of which there was a hole through which they would let half of the water pour out. Moreover, they were not allowed to eat any “red” food (meat from red coloured animals such as red cows, red chickens, squirrels, deer etc.).” [Areh]

Furthermore:

“In the past, whoever had participated in a fight with another village should not eat squirrel or any kind of [large-game?] meat. He should only eat a small quantity of rice and avoid drinking wine. He had to cook rice in a bamboo tube instead of a pot. During six days [after blood hunting] he was not allowed to sleep with his wife or eat with his wife and children. He had to sleep in the guöl house and cook for himself. He was also not allowed to drink tea and should eat as little as possible. If he ate too much he would get sick and die. Only by eating very little would he survive.” (Ong Lipp, Galai)

In fact, this “danger” that blood hunters posed to others even followed them to their tomb: graves of blood hunters – or anyone who has once killed a human (and there are still many such men alive today) – have to be marked by hanging a bamboo headband (one for each person killed) on the bar connecting the two crosses usually found beside Katu tombs. These headbands – called dunö – are similar to those worn by blood hunters after returning to their village (as described above).

In sum, long after a blood hunt or tiger hunt had taken place, the participants of such an expedition were vulnerable to the revenge of angered spirits and, therefore, had to pretend to be weak (c.f. the
tiger hunter) or, in the case of the blood hunters, de facto become weak (by not eating meat etc.). The “gate” of three crossed spears mentioned in one of the accounts seem to be a Katu version of the “arc de triomphe” that Van Gennep discusses in his “Rites de Passage” (1960 [1909]) – a structure built to “purify” the killers before they could enter the village. In the case of the tiger hunt, villagers built a structure with this explicit purpose in mind after the kill. Moreover, they erected another structure (in the forest) with the purpose of scaring away the spirit of the dead tiger. Finally, a small altar was built outside the guöl house to try to placate Komorbarr. (According to one account, the tiger was even addressed as “Komorbarr”.)

Here is yet another account of past inter-village killings:

“My grandfather fought with the people of the Bolo village. Two men from A’ur went to sell [arrow] poison in Bolo (now in Kieng, Trong Man Slope). At that time, people from another village had just killed some villagers in Bolo. For this reason, a group of Bolo men were out looking for revenge. When they met the two men from A’ur, they mistook them for the people they were looking for and killed them.
The two victims from A’ur belonged to the Arat clan but the Arat people in A’ur did not dare to take revenge and asked a group of Bling people to go to Bolo to seek revenge. Four Bling men from Devill [A’ur] went and killed two Bolo villagers. However, after they had killed the two Bolo people, a spirit possessed a woman in Bolo, saying: “Do not cry, I kept their [the enemies’] souls – now run after them”. Two days later, the pursuers from Bolo came across two of the Bling men near the Ayay stream and killed them. The other two had escaped to Nam Dong, and the Bolo villagers went after them. After two more days they encountered them and killed them too.”

The White Dog Stone and the Kalurr Tree

“When you went to kill people, you had to put a Djerriel stone in your salec back-basket. But before going you had to sacrifice a chicken and tell Djerriel your exact destination. After you killed people you had to do another sacrifice and put the stone [back] in the
Whether a village felt that it had the power to carry out blood hunts, or take revenge for another village’s incursions, depended much on whether it possessed a powerful White Dog Stone (*Djerriel Acha Baak*) or not.

Hickey, quoting his informant Kmeet, tells us about what Kmeet referred to as the Dog Stone Spirit and Black Cobra Spirit. According to Kmeet:

“A person walking in the woods who hears a dog barking should look for a white stone that bears the likeness of a dog. Such stones, manifestations of the Dog-Stone Spirit, are believed to have fallen from the sky. The finder has the option of leaving the stone in place or taking it home after declaring that he will follow the spirit. If one should encounter a black cobra he should club it to death and bury its head. If a plant grows on that spot, the person must decide whether to follow the Black Cobra Spirit manifest in the plant. Anyone who elects to follow either spirit will be rewarded with success in farming, hunting, and fishing. But the time will come when the spirit will let it be known that it craves the human blood of a speared victim. Barking of a dog at night brings the message of the Dog-Stone Spirit, and the Black Cobra Spirit relays its will through the “snake plant.” If the follower does not provide human blood of a speared victim, the consequences can be grave.” (Hickey 1993: 118)

Furthermore, Kmeet explained that the bond between the “Dog-Stone Spirit” and his human servant is “irrevocable” and “is passed on to succeeding generations through the male line” (Hickey ibid.).

My informants explained that, in the past, any village of consequence would keep such a stone in the *guöl* house. This stone, it was believed, would help villagers obtain abundant rice harvests and good hunting luck, and would also “keep the villages ‘clean’ from disease and misfortune”. However, the stone could – at any time – demand villagers to sacrifice a buffalo, or even humans (i.e. through a blood hunt). For this reason, a small and weak village – not prepared to make war with other villages – would avoid keeping a White Dog Stone even if someone in the village would find one. Similarly, inhabitants of a formerly powerful village would divest themselves of such a stone if they felt unable to “feed” it. The mere
possession of a White Dog Stone would make other villages fear and respect the village that kept one. This stone and the spiritual agency it embodied was probably the single most important factor that triggered blood hunts in the past. In fact, the “ghost of the village” – referred to in one of the previous accounts – was most likely the spirit of this stone. According to our interlocutors, all other spirits demanded – and still demand – blood sacrifices, but they normally content themselves with chickens, dogs, pigs or, at most, a buffalo.

Eventually, as a direct consequence of the presence of communist cadres in Katu territory, virtually all Katu villages “threw away” their Djerriel Acha Baak some time between 1957 and 1959. The manner in which they did so is significant; they actually abandoned the entire settlements in which the stones were kept. Such abandoned village sites are still remembered and many have been renamed “Dog-Stone Hill”, “Dog-Stone Depression” or the like – a reminder of the powerful magic buried at these sites. Other places associated with these stones are not spoken of at all.

* * *

The kalurr was a plant which could be used for protection and which was believed to enhance fighting prowess during blood hunting expeditions and inter-village warfare. As one elderly informant put it, kalurr was used “when heroes needed to express themselves”. Note that, traditionally, only blood hunters were called grrö krä – the Katu word for “hero” (Vietnamese: “anh hung”). Descriptions of the kalurr plant, however, vary a great deal; some describe it as being planted in special forest gardens, inherited from fathers to sons, others describe it as a strange plant which one could come across by chance in the forest. One informant explained that the spirit of kalurr would be put in a bottle with the bark and leaves of the plant. Just as was the case with the Djerriel Acha Baak, the kalurr plant was so potent that it should not be used by the faint-hearted or meek: it possessed its own will and was extremely bellicose – it demanded blood. Moreover, the kalurr planted in the forest brings to mind the “hunting gardens” described by other informants – the garden planted with magic medicine plants used for hunting. If wild animals

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82 There is a story of a Vietnamese soldier who tied himself to a village gate to stop a group of blood hunters from entering the village.
walked through such a garden, they would become easy prey for the hunter who owned the garden:

“Katu only used the Kalurr tree for fighting (brau). When a man wanted to kill someone, he would throw rice and say: ‘Now I go to kill people. Please let me be victorious’. The Kalurr spirit would then make him strong and invulnerable to the enemies’ weapons. However, the [Kalurr] spirit would follow the killer even after fighting. Therefore, after having killed a person, the killer had to leave the Kalurr spirit at the door of his house by saying ‘thank you Kalurr. I am safe now’. While saying those words he threw rice again. If he did not say goodbye to Kalurr it would follow him forever, requiring him to kill more people and even make him aggressive towards friends and family members.

The Kalurr plant often grows on stones in old forests. If you pass through such a place you should not say anything [bad?] about Kalurr [or mention his name]. If you do, you will be caught by the Kalurr spirit and become mad. Kalurr often appears as a mirage of something else: when you are far away from it, it might look like a banana tree or sugar cane on a stone but if you come closer, you will see it change into its real shape. From that you can know that the plant is Kalurr.”

It is my impression that the Black Cobra Spirit mentioned by Kmeet (quoted by Hickey above) is in fact this same Kalurr, a spirit which still eludes our understanding. However, even today, Katu people fear and respect the kalurr spirit. While doing fieldwork in Nam Đong district in 2008, we were informed that there were several streams named Kalurr (cf. Map in Appendix 4):

“The Kalurr stream is a forbidden place in the high area near the border to Quang Nam. An old man said that people shouldn’t go there because there is a special kind of tree there. People who see that kind of tree will become murderers. The entire area around the stream is dangerous: when a person visits that area, he will see other humans as if they were wild animals and be compelled to kill them. Even today people try to avoid that area.”

Finally, before leaving the subject of blood hunts and inter-village warfare, we need to mention again the practise of burning chölaar wood to make entire enemy villages succumb to disease (c.f. Chapter 6; “Spirit Trees”). Another method enabling the blood hunter to
perform stealthy and efficient attacks on enemy villages was to smear the blood of a pregnant muntjac on one’s body. The man who did so would become invisible to the enemy. This belief is suggestive in light of the Katu notion of the muntjac as a mrieng animal.

How Spirits are Angered

The informant from Apat village, who gave us the detailed account above of the blood hunt of his grandfather, finished his story by telling us why people no longer continue this practice:

“Now we don’t kill other people anymore and the ghost doesn’t force us to take blood from other people any longer because we know how to live like the Kinh people. We don’t do bad things: if we want to cut down trees we just go to the forest and cut. We are not allowed to say bad things in the forest but if we want to hunt and kill, f. ex. a wild pig, we are allowed to do so, and we are allowed to take it home and eat it – provided we don’t say bad things. If we do not comply with this rule, the ghost of the forest will punish us. For example: recently two young men went to catch fish in the stream but they quarrelled with each other and got so angry that one man cut the fish in two parts and threw the pieces away. Later one of the men – the older one – went to the forest and ate a kind of very poisonous leaf and died soon afterwards. We believe that the ghost forced the man to kill himself as a punishment for what he and the other man had done with the fish -- as a punishment for their inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour. The ghosts of the forest and the streams had been angered by this and they punished the older man because he bore the responsibility for the two men’s actions. In other words, if we go to the forest, we may kill an animal, take it home, cook and eat it; we may also cut trees. But we are not allowed to shout, or quarrel over animals, lest we anger the spirits. Thus, when we catch a fish, we are not allowed to do anything wrong to the fish or we will be punished by the ghost of the stream. Normally the ghosts of the stream and the forest will discuss with each other how to punish the wrongdoer.”

A girl from Taghe village told us the story of her mother’s death with almost identical sense morale:
“Some women had gone to the forest to collect rattan. One woman stole some of the rattan collected by one of the other women. A quarrel ensued in which the first woman became so angry that she cut the rattan to pieces. This quarrel and the destruction of the rattan angered the spirits. My mother was the oldest woman in the group and should have stopped the quarrel. Some time after this event my mother became sick and died.”
Chapter 10

CONCLUSIONS

Of all benefits the Vietnamese government has given to the Katu since the end of the Vietnam-American War, the biggest is peace. Elderly Katu are happy to be free from their forefathers’ spiritual obligations to raid other villages in search of human victims for blood sacrifices and the fear and uncertainty brought by the frequent feuds between villages. Everybody, of course, is well aware that these warlike customs were abandoned because they were banned by the government. Even the most conservative elders remember the tragic consequences of past blood feuds with grief and rage, and do not want them back. Elders also describe other, now long abandoned, practices, such as the custom of Katu men to sharpen their teeth, as “stupid, painful and senseless”. This, however, does not mean that they appreciate all the changes they have experienced – many of them imposed upon them from above – since the end of the Vietnam-American War.

When we first visited the Katu in 2003 their lifestyle appeared to be hanging in the balance. Although the Katu were clearly not isolated from Vietnamese mainstream society, they were nonetheless still adhering to a largely traditional lifestyle. Despite the fact that it generates little or no monetary income, the subsistence-oriented local livelihood system, as suggested by this study, is capable of producing adequate yields in terms of food – and, in all likelihood, actually did so until the recent past. Moreover, the traditional lifestyle and the rituals which accompany it clearly fill Katu individuals with a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Our research also indicates that the Katu were probably far less “nomadic” in the past than previous observers have made them out to be. The village histories we collected thus show that many contemporary Katu communities have been located in the same general areas for centuries. This contention, in turn, strongly suggests that the traditional Katu lifestyle was remarkably well adapted to the natural surroundings and far less environmentally destructive than
many of the agricultural and forestry practices introduced by the state and international development agencies in recent decades.

These new development initiatives are being promoted in the name of poverty reduction and hunger eradication. However, many of them seem half-baked, short-sighted and ethnocentric, and already show signs of unsustainability. Moreover, these typically one-size-fit-all schemes tend to weaken local culture and social institutions rather than empower local communities and enhance individual wellbeing – thus implying “culture-reduction” rather than “poverty alleviation” (c.f. N. Århem & Binh 2006).

The problem with such well-intended but flawed aid programmes is that they do not take into consideration the systemic interconnectedness of local norms, values and institutional practices – their integration into a complex and indivisible, functioning whole. For example, individual and collective taboos on hunting and swidden cultivation until recently guided local forest use. As the belief system underpinning these taboos and cultural practices erodes, so do the social controls and regulative mechanisms related to local land- and forest use, leading to increased hunting pressure and overexploitation of forest areas in the vicinity of towns and villages – a development which is conspicuously manifest in the present.

Moreover, if Katu culture – as a functioning and reasonably coherent body of values and social practices – eventually collapses under the pressure of the state’s efforts towards modernisation and national integration, then the Katu along with other ethnic minorities in the country risk becoming the disenfranchised and impoverished people they were erroneously made out to be from the outset. Signs of this bleak prospect are already becoming evident: some Katu are already now migrating to Danang and Ho Chi Minh City to do menial factory jobs that urban residents are unwilling to do for the salaries offered. Meanwhile, the various agents of modernisation in the region – be they government officers, Kinh settlers or traders – are reaping the benefits of the transformative process. They are, furthermore, the people buying and selling the wild animals and the timber of the Katu homeland – the ones who know how to make profits from the emerging market economy. The benefits to the Katu are ambiguous at best (and always only a fraction of the profits made by the outsiders).
Two important concepts have continuously justified the development policies which have been implemented; “poverty alleviation” and “environmental protection”. It is in the name of these two concepts that the Katu are required to abandon their traditional lifeways and to engage in more “rational” and “efficient” production activities. For the Vietnamese government and its local agents, productivity is the keyword in their efforts to induce modernisation. Increasing the productivity of agriculture and agroforestry clearly takes precedence over concerns about environmental sustainability, increased wellbeing and the preservation of local culture. And, since poverty and well-being tend to be measured in monetary terms (basically “income”), increased production for the market is regarded as the solution not only to the poverty problem, but also to the perceived backwardness of local communities. However, a number of negative effects of ill-conceived agroforestry policies can already be observed in the study area as well as in other highland areas of Vietnam (N. Århem & Binh 2006).

The other issue – that of environmental protection – centres on the “problem” of shifting cultivation. Evidence from across the globe shows that the type of rotational, long-fallow shifting cultivation which the Katu traditionally practiced is energy-efficient and sustainable over long periods of time; however, it also shows that such systems become unsustainable once they mutate to accommodate external market forces. Large-scale modernization schemes almost always produce destructive environmental effects. Our research suggests that environmental deterioration in the study area is largely a result of current market-oriented development policies – including the government’s sedentarisation and relocation program, the ban on shifting cultivation and the corresponding push for cash-crop production. Yet, the environmental destruction in the study area is relatively minor compared to the huge deforestation produced by industrial coffee-production and other large-scale cash-crop schemes (mostly in the hands of immigrant Kinh farmers) in the Central Highlands further to the south. Nonetheless, it is usually ethnic minorities which are blamed for all forms of environmental destruction.83

83 In the Central Highlands, government-sponsored mass migration and modernization programmes over the past decades have reduced the forest cover by half (c.f. Guérin et al 2003). Despite the government’s public
The Katu landscape is a landscape populated by spirits as much as by humans, animals and plants. People’s conduct is motivated by their beliefs in these spirit agencies. Until this day Katu people firmly believe that their ancestors or the various “nature spirits” will punish them should they transgress the customary rules which guide their behaviour inside and outside their villages. Adhering to this customary moral code entails, for the Katu, not only avoiding bad behaviour in the village (violent or illicit relationships etc.) but also carefully monitoring the use of the local forest environment and respecting its spirit owners and inhabitants. This is why they do not hunt where the spirits have forbidden it, nor cultivate in places where spirits have announced their presence, and why hunters must account for every single wild animal they kill by ritually offering it up to its spirit owner – Komorbarr, the Animal Guardian. Without these entrenched spirit beliefs and practices, without this moral code, the Katu – although remaining efficient hunters – would lose their “conservationist” stance towards the natural environment in which they live.

However, this local – and specifically Katu – moral concern for their forest environment is crumbling under current pressures for economic change and modernisation. Wild animals are increasingly sold in the market rather than shared with the villagers. Such cultural changes do not happen inevitably but are the direct result of the government’s cultural and socio-economic development policies, increasingly enforced in local communities.

The local livelihood system, previously revolving around subsistence activities and geared to the seasonal cycles of crops and wild animals, is now moving towards an economy where commodities and modern consumer goods are rapidly gaining importance (not least as status symbols), and where the individual nuclear family comes to the fore as the principal economic actor (particularly the male household head) at the expense of the village as a collective social and economic unit. This process is more often than not leading recognition that shifting cultivation is not the cause of this environmental destruction (Salemink 2000b), the majority of the Vietnamese public (and local government officials) seem to be convinced that shifting cultivation is the main cause of forest destruction in the highlands.
to increased environmental destruction, social inequality and a loss of food security (including a falling level of nutrition; c.f. Krahn 2005; N. Århem & Binh 2006).

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Katu people believe that forests and hills are filled with spirits of numerous kinds, and that these spirits not only affect hunting, fishing and agricultural endeavours but also people’s immediate health and wellbeing. The relationship between humans and spirits is a complex one; from one point of view the worlds of spirits and humans appear as each others’ opposites but, from another point of view, they seem to constitute parallel worlds co-existing at the same time and in the same place. Katu say that the spirits – in their world – live the way humans live, that they have houses and fields just like humans. However, the places that spirits inhabit are precisely the places that humans must avoid or leave alone. When humans and spirits share the same living space and use the same natural resources (forests, fields and streams), humans must respectfully back down on their own claims on land and resources.

Death plays an important role in Katu ecocosmology; factual as well as mythical burial grounds are places where the Katu do not clear forest and carry out agriculture. The Katu particularly fear places where people who died bad deaths are buried or rumoured to be buried. Dreams remain a major vehicle of spiritual knowledge in Katu society; spirits communicate with humans and, conversely, humans know the will of the spirits through dreams. Every Katu has the ability to interpret dreams – and still do so (even young Katu). Spirit mediums are consulted only for more detailed explanations of dreams, usually after a person has ignored an ominous dream and, consequently, been struck by illness.

Although the Katu belief system might appear irrational to an outsider, it constitutes precisely the moral basis and motivating force underpinning the local resource-use system. In the past, these beliefs effectively guaranteed a rational form of shifting cultivation that has been environmentally sustainable until very recently. Preliminary readings of satellite images of the Katu landscape from the 1970s onwards confirm this conclusion (Koy et al. 2007).

The Katu ecocosmology is flexible, adaptable and resilient. No sacred or forbidden area of forest is permanently or absolutely
identified as such. New forbidden places are progressively created in the landscape, and old ones fall into oblivion and are eventually erased from collective memory. Katu farmers continuously “test” (and presumably did so also in the past) the mood and disposition of the spirits of the land – and if nothing bad happens, more farmers will follow the example. Individuals with “powerful medicine” may also bend the will of the spirits to their benefit. Yet, remarkably large tracts of forest (even adjacent to villages) are still today left uncleared for spiritual reasons. If anything negative would happen to a villager who has cleared land in a “prohibited forest”, the consensual view would be that the negative incident was due to his transgression of the local moral code – in this case relating to the proper use of the land.

* * *

The Katu know every stream, hill and trail of their land. What might seem to an outsider as “just a forest” is something infinitely more to the Katu; every place has a story to tell, known to each and every villager – the patch of old forest is an ancient graveyard, the rattan forest an abandoned (but not forgotten) settlements, and so forth.

There is a clear division in the Katu cosmology between, on the one hand, living people and their benevolent ancestors and, on the other, the alien and potentially harmful ghosts of the forest and the bad-death spirits roaming the wilderness. However, over time the dividing line between the “inside” spirits of the house and the village (abo yang) and the “outside” spirits of the forest (abhuy) begins to fade. Thus, many of the Katu “spirit hills” – both good and evil – are said to have once been “living people”, the names of the hills being derived from the people who once used to live there.

Thus, in the sacred forests of the Katu homeland, both humans and spirits exert influence on each other. Humans and spirits even compete for the same resources. Life in Katu villages is thus a continuous bargaining, conversation and exchange with the ghosts of the village and the forest: by offering domestic animals to the spirits, humans plead for, and expect to receive, abundant crops and plenty of game – a reciprocal exchange which is continuously made palpable in people’s dreams.
APPENDICES

1. List of communes and villages visited:

- Prao town, Đồng Giang district:
  Azinh 3 village
- Talu commune, Đồng Giang district
  Areh village
- Lang commune, Tây Giang district
  Aro village
- A Vương commune, Tây Giang district
  Arek, Aʻur, Taghe and Apat villages

All study villages, except Aro (near the Laos border) were located rather close to each other in terms of geographical distance but nonetheless displayed several significant differences depending on distance from the district centre. Thus, some of the study villages (i.e. Areh and Azinh 3) were located close to the district town, whereas others (such as Aʻur and Apat) could only be reached by several hours of walking through the forest from the nearest paved road.
2. Movements of Taghe village

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bol Tabhieng</th>
<th>Many people died</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(ca 1925)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bol Arek</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bol Alanh</td>
<td>Many people died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Klung Dhal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Klung Xörieng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Klung Trang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Klung Chönhir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bol Gahirr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Klung Loa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Klung Makempack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pick Dhöl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bol Ganning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bol Paddung</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Konng Mata</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Pick Tahirr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tamm Dihh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Klung Gung</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Klung Ngä</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Konng Abo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bol Kraam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Klung Dhat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Klung Brau</td>
<td>Present location</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. The story of the cruel Sun

Long long time ago, there was a boy whose parents had died early. He didn’t have any brothers or relatives, so he lived alone. In the past, the sky and the earth were very close to each other. One day, the boy ascended to the sky and asked the Sun: “Can I follow you?” The Sun answered: “Sure, but can you stand me? It will be very hot beside me, and you can’t eat my food, I only eat raw meat”. The boy said to the Sun: “I don’t care, bring me with you because I don’t know where to go now”. The Sun agreed. At noon, the Sun rested and had lunch. The boy saw that the Sun only ate the meat and blood of dead people. The Sun said: “I only eat raw meat, you can’t eat it. You are very hungry, aren’t you?”

Then he showed the boy a tree, and asked him to “follow” [sic] the tree. The Sun told the boy to look down [below/under the tree] and asked him if he could see anybody. “Yes”, the boy answered, “I see a person who is chopping wood”. “At home or on the rice field?” the Sun asked. “On the rice field” the boy answered. Then the Sun told the boy to spit on that person. The woman who was chopping wood suddenly chopped off her leg, and started bleeding so much that she died immediately. The villagers waited for her for a long time in the village but finally decided to go to the field to check. After arriving at the field they saw her lying dead on the ground and brought her body back to the village. They killed a chicken and a pig for her. After having completed the ritual, the woman suddenly woke up again. In fact, the Sun received the villagers’ offerings and brought her back to life again. In the past, when somebody died and people performed the proper funerary ritual, the Sun would receive the offerings and allow the person to live again. But if, for example, A’ul stole the offerings – as sometimes happened – then that person died permanently.

The Sun wanted to find food for the boy; this was why he killed the woman and also why he received the villagers’ offerings. After eating and drinking, the boy said to the Sun: “I have to go, I can’t stand living here”. The Sun let the boy go, but he warned the boy: “When you come back to the earth, don’t tell the villagers that I received their offerings, and don’t tell anybody that I eat dead
bodies; if you do, you will die”. The boy went to the tree, looked down and saw that the earth was very close. He jumped down and sunk into the ground up to his stomach. He then saw several women on their way to collect mushrooms and bamboo shoots. They suddenly discovered him stuck in the ground and asked him: “Where are you from?” The boy answered: “I am from the Sky. Can you help me to get out of here?” He was a handsome boy so the women agreed to help him. They used a big kitchen knife to dig around him and lifted him up. Then they took him to their house. They asked him: “How is the Sky [Sun]?” The young man did not take the Sun’s warning seriously, and so he answered: “It’s very hot there, I could not stand it. The Sun eats human blood and raw meat only. Once, there was a woman who cut her leg and died, but the Sun received the people’s offerings and resurrected her. Therefore, when someone dies and her relatives carry out the proper ritual, the Sun receives their offerings and makes the dead come alive again. But if the Sun does not receive the appropriate offerings, or if someone else consumes them, then the dead person will not return to life again”. After finishing telling this story, the boy died.
4. Map of the Marai Stream (Nam Đông)

The map shows the names of streams*, important hills (shown as “islands”), pools on hill tops (triangles), dangerous/spirit areas (squares), prohibited areas (squares with small crosses) and abandoned villages (nang-donng; large crosses X).

The map was made together with Nicholas Wilkinson and a group of Katu men during a field trip in 2008 to various villages in Thượng Nhật commune, Nam Đông district, Thừa Thiên Huế province. Wilkinson is a Ph D candidate in biology at Kent University with ample experience of community-based mapping. Although this map was made outside the scope of the Katuic Ethnography Project, it illustrates well many of the topics discussed in this report.

*Note the Kalurr stream (bottom of map); the significance of the name Kalurr is discussed in Chapter 9 in this report.
5. Aral Trang’s wartime memories

Aral Trang was an uncommonly open and friendly old man who made our stay in the village of Arek very pleasant. As we asked him about Katu customs and recorded his stories, he would, likewise, take out his own small notebook and ask us how to say things in English and Swedish (and then carefully write down our answers and explanations in his notebook). It was a pleasure working with him since he always enthusiastically shared his knowledge about Katu traditions with us, a knowledge which is rapidly disappearing as old people of his generation die away. In 2003, Aral Trang was about 78 years old. The last time we met him, in 2008, he had recently returned from a hospital in Danang city where he had been operated for severe problems in his urinary bladder. A plastic conducer – one end of which stuck out from his belly – had been inserted in his abdomen through which he now had to urinate. However, he had been left without instructions as to how manage this, to him, utterly strange device and how to live under these new conditions. His condition therefore rapidly deteriorated and he eventually died in early 2009. Below are some extracts from an account, in his own words, of his life and some of his wartime experiences.

Aral Trang (“trăng” in Vietnamese means “white”) was born and lived part of his childhood on Chôla Hill about one hours walk from present-day Arek village. Later his family moved to Old Arek (on Arek Hill). Eventually, in 1958, his family moved to a lower place. The 1950s were a chaotic and unstable period and people dispersed into smaller villages and moved from place to place. Prior to this period – during the French colonial epoch – people were, according to Aral Trang, often harassed by the French military:

“[During these years] life was very difficult and we had to cultivate very far from our homes, sometimes more than an hour's walk away from our village -- and also use secret trails -- for fear that the French would destroy our fields. In fact, virtually no Katu wanted to help the French but we were sometimes forced to build roads and transport goods for them. Mostly, however, only those who went to town to
buy mats or salt would -- if caught -- be forced to build roads. If they refused to do so they could be put in prison. The French military would sometimes come to the villages and stay in the houses of the villagers or in tents outside. The French inspired fear in the villagers. However, they were not trying to kill us, they only wanted our chicken, pigs and rice or to make us carry their backpacks.”

The late Aral Trang with his notebook in which he would write down English and Swedish words while explaining about Katu customs.

It is quite difficult to understand the relations the Katu had with the French, the South Vietnamese government and the Americans during the years preceding the war and the eventual victory of the North Vietnamese regime in 1975. As noted above, in the early days, the Katu tended to identify all people from Europe or America with the French. It is unlikely that the French really had many officers and foot soldiers in Katu territory (this part of Quàng Nam was far more inaccessible then than it is today), especially between 1943-1945 when the French were expelled by invading Japanese forces (who
also passed through Katu lands). Gradually – for reasons which must have seemed incomprehensible to the Katu – the tensions increased as the Vietnam-American War approached. The communist cadres stationed in the forests of upland Quảng Nam, and the North-Vietnamese soldiers who passed through the area did their best to explain to the Katu what was at stake and to mobilise them for their cause. The distinctions between indigenous regiments under the French, the South Vietnamese and the Americans eventually blurred, and it became increasingly hard for local people to know who was who and what was what.

“All the villagers hated the French, so we eventually began to help the Vietnamese fight against them. During this period I started to work as a post official for the Vietnamese, bringing letters and transmitting information between all the villages in the area. During both the French and the “American” wars, all Katu lived high up on hills and we did not use clothes for fear that the military would spot us and shoot us. At one stage of the American War, the Americans started spreading poisonous chemicals over the forests and hills so that the trees died. This made life even harder but we still tried to cultivate cassava and rice; most of the cassava died but by locating our rice fields several hours away from the most exposed areas, we still managed to harvest enough rice. Every time our fields died, we had to go to other villages to buy rice seeds and cassava stalks and start planting anew. Those who cultivated too close to the areas “poisoned” [by toxins] ended up with nothing to eat. During the war we still built houses, albeit smaller and not as beautiful as today. We also had to cover the roofs with special leaves to avoid being detected by the American air-planes dropping bombs on us.”

Like many other Katu villages, Aral Trang’s home village helped the North Vietnamese Army but he himself was never a regular soldier. During the war, NVA soldiers often came to his village and stayed nearby. He gradually learnt Vietnamese from fraternising with them. However, not all Katu learnt to speak Vietnamese as fast and well as Aral Trang:

“Most of the villagers, however, were still very backward and could not speak Vietnamese at all. Since I had worked as a courier for the Vietnamese earlier on, I became appointed to join a special “team of the commune”. It was a position of responsibility. At this time, my father had already died, so our family now only consisted of me, my
mother, a younger brother and a younger sister. We and the other villagers all worked to help the North Vietnamese soldiers: we collected bamboo from the forest to make sharp stakes, countless traps and dug tunnels and assisted the Vietnamese in every way possible. In fact, all the villagers participated in this work and formed a village militia... Many of us also carried weapons even though we were not in the regular army. If anyone would ask us how many NVA soldiers there were in the area, we answered as Uncle Ho once said: “There are five million soldiers because every villager is a soldier”. We all worked extremely hard to help the soldiers and felt very strongly for this cause.”
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