

# Indigeneity and Ecology in Vietnam: A Settler Colonial History

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## Abstract

This paper examines the complex nature of indigeneity in Vietnam within a broader settler colonial framework. While Vietnam’s 54 ethnic groups are officially recognized as minorities, the inhabitants of the Central Highlands—including the Co Tu, Jarai, Ede, and Cham peoples—are specifically identified here as Indigenous, owing to their status as original inhabitants of the southern mountainous regions. Drawing on chronological analyses of French colonialism, the U.S.-Vietnam War, and postwar Vietnamese government resettlement policies, I argue that Indigenous Vietnamese communities have faced overlapping and distinct forms of colonialism that have systematically disrupted their lands, livelihoods, and cultural histories. The concept of salt-water settler colonialism is used here to complicate the recognition of Indigenous identity in Southeast Asian contexts, where long-term European land occupation did not occur. Employing Espiritu’s method of critical juxtaposition, I compare the experiences of Co Tu women in Quang Nam Province with those of Pawnee and Lakota women in the United States. In both cases, Indigenous women emerge as central agents of ecological resilience, whose knowledge and practices offer essential models for contemporary climate justice. Centering Indigenous women’s narratives is crucial to understanding the entangled relationships between colonialism, Indigeneity, and the environment.

## Introduction

*“The land defends the Muong / Its belt of roots around our bellies / A strand of hair, cut square, holding to some / A grain of sand, cloven half, yielding to none.”*

Luong Quy Nhan, a poet from an ethnic minority community, wrote this poem in appreciation of the 1980s post-war Vietnam land. This rough English translation retains his central image: land compared to a strand of hair cut square—an almost impossible act, because land is not supposed to be divided in the first place. While ethnic minority populations have inhabited the land constituting the nation of Vietnam for centuries, their status as ethnic minorities alone does not account for their Indigenous identity.

This paper examines the complexity of indigeneity in the larger context of Southeast Asia, where there was no long-term European occupation of the land. In Vietnam specifically, there are non-Indigenous ethnic minorities in the North and Indigenous ethnic minorities who reside primarily in the Central Highlands and central regions of Vietnam. The inhabitants of the Central Highlands region are widely recognized as the original Indigenous people of the southern mountainous areas. By tracing the effects of French colonialism, the U.S.-Vietnam War, and subsequent Vietnamese government policies on these Indigenous communities, I argue that Indigenous Vietnamese face different forms of colonialism that disrupt their ways of living and cultural histories, and the erasure of their history is perpetuated systematically.

To ground my inquiry into how these Indigenous communities’ relationships with nature are affected by colonialism and war, I examine the Co Tu people in Quang Nam Province and

employ the method of critical juxtaposition to analyze them in parallel with the Pawnee and Lakota peoples. *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* by Karuka (2019) and *Climate Change, Gender Roles and Hierarchies: Socioeconomic Transformation in an Ethnic Minority Community in Vietnam* by Pham & Doane (2021) are two texts central to this paper's comparative analysis of Indigenous lived experience across distinct geographical spaces.

Despite being dispossessed of their ancestral lands, Indigenous communities maintain sustainable practices and an enduring connection to the natural world—practices most visibly carried forward by Indigenous women, who offer a model for collective climate action. The experiences of Indigenous communities in Vietnam and the United States underscore the ecological consequences of colonialism and the imperative of prioritizing Indigenous women's narratives in comprehending the intricate connections between Indigeneity and the environment.

### A Note on Positionality

I am a Kinh Vietnamese person who grew up in an urban city far from the Central Highlands communities I write about in this paper. As a member of Vietnam's ethnic majority, I occupy a settler position in relation to the Indigenous peoples I discuss here—one that carries its own responsibilities. I approached this research with the understanding that writing about communities other than my own requires care, critical humility, and a commitment to centering those communities' voices rather than speaking for them. I am drawn to this history precisely because it is one that Kinh-majority education and national narratives have systematically obscured. If there is a responsibility that comes with that position, it is to honor the land and its original stewards by making their histories visible, not to claim authority over them.

### **“Salt-Water Settler Colonialism”:** Conceptualizing Indigeneity in the United States and Southeast Asia

Merlan (2009) defines indigeneity (without capitalization) as “first-order connections at small scale of group and locality” (p. 5). Indigeneity takes different forms across regions, as the term distinguishes people who are native to a place from those who are not. The internationalization of this concept has brought Indigenous people from different geographical spaces together to form a collective of “Indigenous Peoples” who share global solidarity because of their historical similarities of settler colonialism, displacement, and genocides (Merlan, 2009). This paper consistently uses the capitalized term “Indigenous” and “Indigenous peoples” to signify a political category that centers “the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international area” (Smith, 2012, p. 6).

Wolfe (2006) defines settler colonialism as a distinct form of colonialism whose dominant feature is replacement and erasure. In the context of North America, the process of settler colonialism necessitates the elimination and genocide of the Native American population because the goal is land occupation, and Indigenous people's existence obstructs colonizers' wealth accumulation. Settler colonialism destroys in order to replace, and settler colonial studies focus on “invasion as a structure, not an event” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). In contrast, Indigenous identity in Southeast Asia is considerably more complex: regional governments acknowledge Indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world but fail to recognize them within their own borders, where all citizens are universally designated as indigenous to the country (Baird, 2016).

European colonialism in most of Asia did not take the form of long-term land occupation, and because citizens of these countries are of Asian descent, governments can claim that no

population is more “native” than any other. The argument that “Indigenous” is fundamentally inapplicable to parts of Asia that did not experience substantial European settlement is part of a larger thesis called “salt-water settler colonialism,” which emerged in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 637 (Keal, 2009). Under this framework, only colonizers who crossed salt-waters are considered settler colonizers. As a result, in post-colonial Southeast Asia, Indigenous peoples have struggled to establish their distinct identities in the face of prevalent narratives of ethnic unity and equality (Morton, 2017). While a notable movement is emerging in Myanmar among diverse ethnic groups to seek special recognition and rights, academic discourse on indigeneity remains largely absent in Vietnam. This silence is not incidental: Morton (2017) notes governmental efforts to suppress conversations on this topic due to fear of political uprisings.

This paper explores the entanglement of indigeneity and ethnic minorities in Vietnam through a gender lens, comparing Co Tu women’s experiences with those of Native American women in order to build shared futures of solidarity. My work draws on Gandhi (2022)’s emphasis on the decolonizing of land as a practice based on reciprocity and intimacy and water as a “salient medium and metaphor for diaspora and displacement” to trace the ecological significance of these two parallel histories (p. 11).

### **Ethnic Minorities in Central Highlands Vietnam and Chronological Forces of Colonialism**

Vietnam encompasses a diverse population comprising 54 distinct ethnic groups, among which the Kinh (or Viet) people represent the dominant ethnic majority. The remaining 53 groups are classified as ethnic minorities. It is important to note that this term does not exclusively denote indigeneity, as there exist non-Indigenous minority populations in the Northern Highlands who trace their origins to China. However, the inhabitants of the Central Highlands region are widely recognized as the original inhabitants of the southern mountainous areas—a status that marks them as Indigenous within the Vietnamese context. This section examines the Central Highlands communities with a focus on the ramifications of French colonialism, the U.S.-Vietnam War, and subsequent Vietnamese government policies.

The label “Montagnards,” which translates to “highlanders” in English, originates from the French colonial period and refers to ethnic minorities belonging to hill tribes who lived in the upland, highland, and mountainous regions of central Vietnam (Evans, 1992). The Central Highlands of Vietnam encompass Gia Lai-Kon Tum, Dac Lac, and Lam Dong. Different ethnic minorities—including Mon-Khmer speaking groups, Cham, Jarai, Mnong, and Ede—make up the majority of the region’s population. Academic research on this topic has difficulties clarifying the language around ethnic minorities like the Cham communities as Indigenous because of their varied residence in lowland and highland areas (Mostiller, 2021). A pan-ethnic highland identity emerged during the Indochina War with French colonialism during the 1946–1954 period.

Before the war broke out, Catholic missionaries under French colonial rule from 1867 converted many Montagnards to Christianity, establishing a degree of local autonomy in these areas (Baulch et. al., 2007). Religion was also used as a political tool to turn Central Highlanders and Vietnamese lowlanders against each other. As Baulch et. al. (2007) explain:

At the same time, the French expropriated land, exacted forced (‘corvee’) labor and imposed heavy taxes on both the ethnic minorities and the Kinh leading to a

number of rebellions, notably by the Hmong, in the early twentieth century. When war broke out between the French colonial government and the Viet Minh in 1946, the ethnic minorities were split between supporting the two sides. In the interest of preserving their independence, Hickey suggests that the ethnic minorities were often simply anti-Vietnamese. (p. 1158)

The French also established “Montagnard battalions,” leading to the emergence of a small intellectual elite from the highland regions (Hickey, 1982). Exposed to contemporary nationalism, they established the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO), which later fought against both sides of the Vietnam War.

During the Indochina War, the U.S. sided with the French colonial government. The buildup of the U.S.-Vietnam War was rooted in the failure to hold elections for the reunification of North and South Vietnam. A fraudulent 1955 referendum removed Bao Dai from power, with Ngo Dinh Diem consolidating control of South Vietnam by 1956 (Evans, 1992). Under Diem’s assimilationist policies, which were backed by the U.S. government, minority communities became primary targets (Noseworthy, 2013). The Republic of Vietnam (RVN), also known as South Vietnam, explicitly supported the migration of predominantly Viet-Kinh Catholics into regions inhabited by highland and Cham minorities in 1957. As Noseworthy (2013) notes, “In this period, all peoples in the South who were not Viet-Kinh were reclassified as Dong Bao Thuong or ‘ethnic minorities’ that, in the words of Diem, ‘needed to assimilate’” (p. 8).

By contrast, in northern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh promised to create “autonomous zones” for ethnic minorities (Scupin, 1995, as cited in Noseworthy, 2013, p. 315). The repercussions of the U.S.-Vietnam War were devastating for the Central Highlands, where some of the most intense fighting, bombing campaigns, and chemical warfare use of Agent Orange occurred (Evans, 1992). In fact, an estimated 200,000 highlanders died during the Vietnam War, and approximately 85% of villages were forced into displacement on their own lands (Hickey, 1982).

Mass relocation of Vietnamese ethnicity into the Central Highlands exacerbated this erasure of Indigeneity and was reinforced by the Vietnamese government to dilute the concentration of minorities in the region and reduce Indigenous claims for autonomous areas (Evans, 1992). The government’s relocation programs during the post-war period were framed as moving people from overcrowded cities into rural areas, including the Central Highlands, and aimed to settle millions of people, including approximately 700,000 members of Central Highland nomadic hill tribes. These movements resulted in the dislocation of ethnic minority communities from their ancestral lands and a loss of cultural heritage. The creation of New Economic Zones (NEZs) facilitated increased land use by settlers, exacerbating the dispossession of Indigenous communities (Evans, 1992).

The erasure of Cham indigeneity is one present-day example of settler colonialism in Vietnam. Even though Cham are officially recognized as one of the 54 ethnic groups, there is little public acknowledgment of their ancestral lands. Mostiller (2021), who identifies as Cham American, argues that the lack of recognition of Cham peoples’ indigeneity denies them a platform for self-identification and perpetuates the erasure of their physical and cultural presence, leading to the dispossession of ancestral lands, histories, and traditions.

## **Parallel Indigenous Relationships with Ecology: A Comparison of Pawnee and Lakota People in the United States and Co Tu People in Vietnam**

In this section, I examine the ecological effects of colonialism on Indigenous communities in

Vietnam and the United States by employing Espiritu (2014)'s method of "critical juxtaposing": the "bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire" (p. 21). I analyze Karuka (2019) and Pham & Doane (2021) side by side, with an emphasis on women's narratives in Indigenous communities.

Karuka (2019) situates the experiences of the Lakota and Pawnee peoples within the white settlers' imposition of commercial farming and compulsory English education. These practices sought to sever Pawnee women's ongoing relationships of cultivation, relationships enacted in agricultural fields and in the intergenerational connections between Pawnee grandmothers and their grandchildren. By attempting to undermine and erase Pawnee women's historical knowledge of the land and their pride in their "market-oriented" farming methods, white settlers constructed a white supremacist system that justified colonialism as a form of civilization (Karuka, 2019, p. 109). Karuka (2019) also focuses on Lakota women's relationship with horses—not as one of extracting labor but of care—as central to the community and to their expansive relationships with the land. He writes:

Lakota modes of relationship provided the strongest obstacle to the expansion of capitalism and U.S. sovereignty on the Plains in the second half of the nineteenth century, where machines of colonial expansion fueled by relationships of control met Indigenous modes of relationship between people, animals, plants, and places, shaped by an expansiveness that reflected the expansiveness of the place itself. (Karuka, 2019, p. 62)

Pham & Doane (2021) similarly center Indigenous women—in this case, Co Tu women—as central agents defying modes of neocolonialism. They argue against treating "men" and "women" as internally uniform categories that experience climate change in monolithic ways, emphasizing instead how gender intersects with ethnicity, class, and age to produce varied experiences within each group. Poor rural women in developing countries like Vietnam are most vulnerable to climate-related effects because their designated gender roles are directly linked to the natural environment through avenues such as agricultural production.

Pham & Doane (2021) focus closely on a community in Ca Dy Commune, Quang Nam Province, in central Vietnam—an area dominated by the Co Tu Indigenous group, one of the oldest ethnic groups in the region, who were also directly affected by the French and American wars. Local Co Tu interviewees reported being treated as "savages" by colonial forces, and some areas of the province suffered intense damage from Agent Orange due to their proximity to the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Pham & Doane, 2021, p. 35). During the war periods, men's livelihood activities were eliminated, burdening women and gender-expansive people with ensuring family survival. As a consequence, women's ecological knowledge—deeply rooted in their connection to the land—was simultaneously undervalued and exploited as a source of agricultural labor. Pham & Doane (2021) also claim that climate change damages generational knowledge of critical environmental phenomena such as forest transitions, seed varieties, and animal behaviors.

The Co Tu people have faced significant ecological disruptions linked to toxic chemicals used by the U.S. Army and socioeconomic changes in the post-war period, including the construction of a new national road through their territory (Pham & Doane, 2021). Rapid regulatory policy changes, including measures to protect forests, have inadvertently caused food and livelihood insecurity among the Co Tu community. As Co Tu women are socially assigned

as the primary food providers and agricultural laborers, they have been the first to notice and respond to this food insecurity. As Pham & Doane (2021) document:

The Co Tu women experienced the most difficulties created by crop losses due to a dry spell coming earlier than expected or to prolonged periods of heavy rain or flash floods that came before the harvest was finished...Co Tu women were also the first and most active agents in responding to food insecurity ... [they] developed several strategies to meet their food needs and, in some cases, to sustain their families through periods of hunger. (pp. 91–92)

This case study demonstrates how colonial practices have not only disrupted Indigenous communities but also reshaped their gender roles and hierarchies, reconfiguring their relationships with the environment. Similar to Karuka (2019)'s analysis, the resilience of Indigenous women sustains communities not only through colonial disruptions but also through capitalistic damages to the environment.

The parallel between Pawnee women's seed knowledge and Co Tu women's food insecurity responses is worth slowing down to examine carefully, as it is here that the critical juxtaposition becomes most illuminating. Karuka (2019) documents how Pawnee women's agricultural labor was not simply subsistence farming but also a sophisticated, intergenerational system of cultivation—specific seed varieties were selected, saved, and exchanged between grandmothers and granddaughters as a practice that bound community, land, and time together. When white settlers imposed commercial farming and compulsory English education, they did not merely change crop practices—they severed the living transmission of ecological knowledge embedded in such relationships.

In Ca Dy Commune, Pham & Doane (2021) describe an almost structurally identical rupture: Co Tu women—who long held the responsibility of reading forest transitions, identifying which seed varieties to plant based on rainfall patterns, and adjusting planting schedules in response to seasonal animal behavior—found their inherited knowledge suddenly misaligned with a landscape altered by Agent Orange, forest protection regulations, and new road infrastructure. Their strategies for responding to food insecurity were themselves a form of preserved ecological literacy: women foraged in secondary forests outside the protected zones, exchanged seeds and labor within the Co Tu community rather than through state-approved channels, and adjusted planting calendars to accommodate unpredictable dry spells arriving earlier than historical norms. These were not improvisations born of desperation; they were applications of deep environmental knowledge under conditions of colonial disruption—precisely what Karuka (2019) means when he describes Indigenous women's relationships with the land as a form of expansiveness that resists containment by colonial categories.

It is important, however, not to overstate the symmetry between these two cases. The juxtaposition reveals solidarity, not equivalence. The scale of colonial violence against Lakota and Pawnee peoples—including the near-total physical elimination that Wolfe (2006) identifies as the defining logic of U.S. settler colonialism—has no direct parallel in the Vietnamese context. Hickey (1982) estimates that 200,000 Central Highlands people died during the Vietnam War—a devastating toll, but one distinct from the demographic collapse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Plains nations, some estimates of which place population loss at over 90% within decades. The form of colonial formation also differs: Pawnee and Lakota peoples faced a U.S. settler colonial structure explicitly organized around permanent land replacement, while Co Tu communities

experienced successive, overlapping colonial regimes—French extraction, American warfare, and postwar internal Vietnamese state colonialism—each with different logics and intensities. Moreover, the Vietnamese state today officially recognizes the Co Tu as one of 54 ethnic groups, albeit inadequately, while U.S. federal recognition remains a politically contested and often weaponized process. These differences matter for the kinds of political claims and remedies available to each community. What my juxtaposition illuminates is not that these histories are interchangeable, but that the specific mechanism by which colonialism attacks ecological knowledge through the erasure of women’s relational labor operates across these otherwise very different colonial formations.

In both Vietnam and the United States, colonial practices have resulted in the erasure of Indigenous ecological knowledge and the exploitation of natural resources. The state and new settlers in central Vietnam have prioritized narrow economic development, disregarding the social dimensions of development, leading to the destruction of forests and the exploitation of ethnic minority communities. However, Indigenous women in both contexts demonstrate sustainable practices and a deep connection with the natural world, providing a tangible model for collective efforts to address climate change.

## Conclusion

The concept of Indigeneity in Vietnam is complicated by settler colonialism occurring within different ethnic groups inside the same national border. The recognition of Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, faces challenges due to the limited definition of colonization that requires colonizers to cross “salt-water” to assert their forces. Expanding this definition to understand colonization in its different forms—both extractive and settler—is crucial in advocating for national recognition of Indigenous identities and histories in Vietnam.

Indigenous communities in Vietnam’s Central Highlands have been disproportionately impacted by French imperialism and the U.S.-Vietnam War due to their subordinate position in society and their geographic location near war zones. A framework of critical juxtaposition helps illuminate the ecological and community harm done to Vietnamese Indigenous communities. The language of “modes of relationship” and care toward nature developed by Karuka (2019) in his analysis of Lakota and Pawnee women in the United States sheds light on Co Tu women’s climate resilience as rooted in similar principles of care.

Ultimately, understanding indigeneity in Vietnam requires acknowledging both the influence of settler colonialism and the erasure of Indigenous cultures. The experiences of Indigenous communities in Vietnam and the United States highlight the ecological ramifications of colonialism and the importance of centering Indigenous women’s narratives in understanding the relationships between Indigeneity and the environment. Recognizing and respecting Indigenous rights, land tenure, and ecological knowledge is crucial for promoting environmental justice and creating sustainable futures for Indigenous communities in a global context.

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