

# ‘A Day in the Life’: Nation-building the Republic of Ngô Đình Diệm, 26 October 1956, symbolically\*

NGUYỄN THỊ ĐIỀU

Temple University  
Email: [dieunguy@temple.edu](mailto:dieunguy@temple.edu)

## Abstract

Most studies of Vietnam under the Diệm regime conceive it as a stepping stone of American nation-building efforts, citing Diệm’s political approach as being influenced by modern, Western, and specifically American democratic concepts and by his associations with American advisers. Such studies assumed that the regime existed within this bubble, isolated from the past and from the society that it aimed to rule and shape. By contrast, this study contends that the regime was more deeply rooted in the enduring Vietnamese pre- and colonial history and in the post-1954 socio-political milieu, the defining components of which were intrinsically woven into the fabric of the Ngô nation. In its early years, the Republic of Vietnam (1955–63), led by the Ngô family and supporters, attempted to define itself as a nation incontestably heir to its pre-colonial past, while being increasingly conditioned by anti-communist and pro-Catholic patrimonialism. The 1956 commemoration of its 26 October National Day, the focus of the present analysis, provides insights into the values that essentially defined the Ngô’s nation—an entity far different from what its American godfathers had envisioned.

## Introduction

Washington had too many theories for Vietnam and too little knowledge of it.<sup>1</sup>

\* The author wishes to thank the anonymous *MAS* reviewers for their constructive remarks as well as Dr Mark W. McLeod of University of Delaware for his careful readings and illuminating contributions. She is grateful to the Vietnamese Sub-Institute of Culture and Arts Studies in Huế, its director Dr Trần Đình Hằng, and its members for many enriching conversations on Việt Nam in general and on the cultural landscape of Huế, Central Việt Nam.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy’s Ambassador to Diem’s Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p. 31.

In the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as it became apparent to policy-makers and social scientists that the United States of America's efforts to foster Western-style, liberal democracies had failed, schools of interpretation emerged to compare the American nation-building experience in the Middle East to an earlier one in Asia, also deemed a fiasco: Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> The voluminous Vietnam War scholarship has explored the multiple facets of the United States of America's involvement, paying attention to its initial nation-building phase and commitment to Ngô Đình Diệm's Republic of Vietnam. Despite realizing from the inception the regime's many weaknesses (nepotism, corruption, inflexibility, and so on), the United States of America persisted in its support until the fateful 1963 coup. This denouement and the subsequent quagmire have provided a further impetus to reassess American understanding of the phenomenon, primarily to avert future American foreign policy failures, but also, for some, to justify its intervention in the eyes of history.

Early American knowledge regarding its Ngô ally was derived from encounters between Westerners (predominantly Americans) and those Vietnamese who worked for the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, a.k.a. First Republic) and from the countless hours listening to Diệm's monologues. It was fundamentally shaped by the works of Diệm's apologists and critics: Bouscaren, Fall, Scigliano, Shaplen, and so on.<sup>3</sup> The sum of this knowledge, disseminated through adroit manipulation of the mass media, forged a narrative built on faulty premises. As Seth Jacobs has demonstrated, the lobby known as the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) contributed to a wide-ranging 'gulling' of the American public opinion through its management of the Western press.<sup>4</sup> Most of the presumed 'Vietnamese' sources

<sup>2</sup> See M. T. Berger and J. Y. Reese, 'From Nation-states in Conflict to Conflict in Nation-states: The United States of America and Nation Building from South Vietnam to Afghanistan', *International Politics* 47.5 (2010), pp. 451–71; Christopher T. Fisher, 'Nation Building and the Vietnam War: A Historiography', *Pacific Historical Review* 74.3 (2005), pp. 441–56; Marc Jason Gilbert, 'Fatal Amnesia: American Nation-building in Viet Nam, Afghanistan and Iraq', *Journal of Third World Studies* 21.2 (2004), pp. 13–43.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony T. Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965); Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1968); Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964); Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The United States in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (London: Deutsch, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U. S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 229–35; James T. Fisher, "'A World Made Safe for Diversity": The Vietnam Lobby and the Politics of Pluralism, 1945–1963', in Christian G. Appy (ed.), *Cold War*

regarding the RVN stemmed from the regime's Western-language, American-inspired propaganda organs, especially its Ministry of Information and Psychological Warfare.<sup>5</sup> As Edward Miller and Tuong Vu have observed, the 'America-centric quality of most Vietnam War scholarship' may have created an assessment gap in accurately appraising the regime and led to 'Orientalist' characterizations.<sup>6</sup> To redress the situation, a few American scholars with more sophisticated linguistic and cultural training have attempted to decipher Diệm by adopting a Vietnam-centred, culturally sensitive approach based on Vietnamese-language sources. They have repositioned him away from the Manichean dichotomy of either 'saviour of democracy' or 'mandarinal autocrat', from being viewed either as a 'Confucian mandarin' or as 'a Westernized, modernist' politician, and closer to a depiction of Diệm as an active agent of his destiny and as a man bridging two worlds. Ngô Đình Diệm—the president, his family, his Republic—has been recast in a more central, nuanced, and even positive light, as he was shown to be neither profoundly Confucian nor completely Westernized, but rather a politician who epitomized both. Philip Catton, for example, argues that Diệm was not 'an old-fashioned "Oriental" despot', but, along with his brother, Nhu, could be considered as 'conservative modernizers'.<sup>7</sup> Jessica Chapman, for her part, notes that Diệm 'navigated the country's transition from its traditional past and colonial administration to independence in the midst of an ongoing quest for modernization and national reunification', borrowing ideas about democracy from the West while still deeply committed to the ancient Confucian concept of *thiên mệnh/mandate of Heaven*.<sup>8</sup> Edward Miller contends that the Western, colonial, modern context of French Indochina should be taken into

*Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), pp. 217–37; Vũ Bằng, *Bốn Mươi Năm Nói Láo [Forty Years of Lies]* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See interview by Diane Johnstone of Nguyễn Văn Châu, former director of the Central Psychological War Service (1956–62) of the Republic of Vietnam. He spoke of the 1956 psychological campaign, which resorted to 'forged documents' and fake broadcastings by 'Radio Liberation' to convince the public about the veracity of 'the bloodbath in North Vietnam'. *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 September 1972, 2 A.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, 'The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4.3 (2009), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Jessica Chapman, 'Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai', *Diplomatic History* 30.4 (2006), pp. 680–1.

account, as Diệm's 'ideas about governance, politics and society were not holdovers from Vietnam's ancient past; rather, they were formed in his encounters with interwar European and Vietnamese discourses about modernity, progress, and revolution'.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, this newer, Diệm-centred scholarship tends to investigate the Ngô Đình Diệm phenomenon within a tightly constrained chronology of 1954–63, without recognizing the dysfunctionality of such a segmented timeline and the fact that the Ngô family's deep roots into an imperial and colonial past had bound the main characters lastingly together at the personal, symbolic, and political levels long before the United States of America's intervention.

Both the American nation-building practitioners such as Wesley Fishel and his Michigan State University Group (MSUG) as well as the cultural historians based their arguments on the denial of the centrality of *resilient historical experiences* in nation-building, 'all the old habits of thinking and acting, the set patterns which do not break down easily and which, however illogical, are a long time dying'.<sup>10</sup> In the Vietnamese case, these scholars have ignored the imperial residues and the colonial matrix that still gripped the First Republic's president. While the nation-builders castigated Vietnam's traditional framework and values as obsolete and irrelevant, the culturalists assumed that the nation that the Diệm regime attempted to build was that of modern formulation with roots into a *recent* past of events but several decades long. Both schools err in not considering the resilience of traditions as reflections of an enduring Vietnamese *mentalité*. Furthermore, these works fail to reveal the regime's internal thinking and convictions as to how it conceived the nation it was 'building' and how this entity may have diverged from its sponsor's views. Such cultural and political gaps had undermined the American foreign policy vis-à-vis this 'proving ground of democracy in Asia' from the outset and contributed to setbacks throughout Asia and the world.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Edward Garvey Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 32. See also John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998); James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President's Office Files, Special Events Through the Years, 'America's Stake in Vietnam' speech, 1 June 1956.

This article challenges the existing scholarship, arguing that our understanding of Ngô Đình Diệm or rather of the Ngô family and of its supporters understood as an entity must be based on a longer *durée* approach to comprehend the indelibility of the past in the construction of the Ngô Republic.<sup>12</sup> It contends that, since the Ngô and their followers had shaped the Republic into an entrenched bastion of patrimonial power, of personal, faith-based relationships, and of shared traditions, no Western-introduced concept of democracy or notions of freedom and rule of law could alter it fundamentally but could serve only as the ‘emperor’s new clothes’.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it will contest the notion of ‘modernity’ regarding the Diệm’s phenomenon, as it aims to demonstrate that Diệm was intrinsically of unbending Confucian tradition and deep religious convictions, who perceived himself as the *chí sĩ* (determined leader) of his people descended from the glorious heroes of past centuries.<sup>14</sup>

Even if the West had been a passing inspiration, even if Diệm’s American handlers may have suggested some of the publicly espoused political formulations, in the end, Diệm, his family, and loyal retainers made their own present following an internal rationale reflective of their history, society, and culture. In the early days of the Republic, not only the Ngô, but also their supporters, had their own understanding of how ‘to build a nation’ (*kiến thiết quốc gia*), which did not necessarily concur and indeed often conflicted with their American patrons’ visions. As the Ngô family affirmed its power in what critics called *gia đình trị* (family rule), their original supporters, one by one, were to be shed along the road to omnipotence, to be replaced by an all-encompassing patrimonial entity—the Ngô nation—in which the

<sup>12</sup> David Armitage, ‘What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée’, *History of European Ideas* 38:4 (2012), 498, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2012.714635> (accessed 8 November 2018); ‘Les historiens ont-ils les idées courtes? Entretien avec David Armitage’, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Les-historiens-ont-ils-les-idees.html> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>13</sup> This bastion centred on Ngô Đình Diệm, radiating power out through Diệm’s brothers, particularly Thục and Cấn, Nhu, and his wife, each with his/her own power centre rooted either regionally (for example, Central Vietnam in the case of Thục and Cấn), politically (for example, the *Cần Lao* Party for Nhu) or religiously (the Vietnamese Catholic Church for Thục).

<sup>14</sup> For a more nuanced understanding away from an all-encompassing ‘Confucian Vietnam’ under the Nguyễn dynasty, see Anthony Reid, *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750–1900* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997).

actors not directly related to the Family were rendered powerless and banished to the antipodes.

This article introduces another dimension that differs from but builds on previous Diệm's scholarship by focusing on symbols, rituals, and ceremonies. As Gabriella Elgenius remarks, 'symbols and ceremonies are markers of nation building'. They 'are introduced, adopted, altered, ..., contested, abolished and re-established during pivotal times of nation-making'.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the First Republic, they marked a Ngô nation that appeared outwardly 'republican' and 'modern', but at heart carried core values and practices inherited from a deeply rooted dynastic and Confucian legacy. It will examine the practice of public commemorations in Vietnamese history within a longer timeframe, moving from 'these two poles of time, the instant and the *longue durée*', from the pre-colonial and colonial past to the First Republic's present, with, as its point of reference, its National Day: 26 October 1956. It will focus on the preparations and organization—what historian Maurice Agulhon called the 'folklore of a regime'—of the first anniversary of this freshly invented entity as a reflection of Diệm's intentions.<sup>16</sup> It will follow the decisions made at the level of the presidency as they radiated to the ministries that implemented them. Eventually, the ensuing commemorations—'modern' in their manifestations but traditional in their symbolic messages—were early portents of the nature of the nation that Diệm and his followers intended to construct, as they staked their claim of 'successor territory', inheritor of the Vietnamese millennial legacy in opposition to the 'falsehood' created north of the 17th parallel.<sup>17</sup>

This article will open a window into the *quốc gia*/nation as envisioned by the Ngô and will demonstrate how starkly 'traditional' their core

<sup>15</sup> Gabriella Eugénus, *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> According to Agulhon, 'folklore of a regime' includes all 'the rituals, customs, and ceremonies to which it gives rise, ranging from ... grandiose national funeral rites and from inaugural ceremonies for memorial monuments'. Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France: 1789–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 4–5.

<sup>17</sup> The Democratic Republic of Vietnam also reformulated its past, stressing its millennial roots through historiographical rewriting and building Hồ Chí Minh into a 'new hero'. See Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Daniel Hemery, 'Hồ Chí Minh: Vie singulière et nationalisation des esprits', in Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (eds.), *Naissance d'un Etat-parti: le Viêt Nam depuis 1945/The Birth of a Party-state: Vietnam since 1945* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), pp. 135–57.

conceptions were. It will do so by turning to scores of Vietnamese archival documents that have been neglected by scholars, who may have considered them as inconsequential, pertaining as they did to the domain of ceremonies—and thus may have permitted themselves—in the words of Sean Wilentz—to ‘interpret power in mechanistic and reductionist ways’.<sup>18</sup> It is hardly the first to examine Asian societies in terms of ritual politics. Catherine Bell, for instance, has shown that, within the context of ancient China, public ritual performances held a pivotal role, combining politics with cosmology, performance with sacredness. For his part, Takashi Fujitani has demonstrated the centrality of political rituals in the creation of the modern Japanese state.<sup>19</sup> Thus, political rituals, ceremonies, commemorations, and pageantry form the foundation of deeply ritualistic civilizations such as those of China, Japan, and Korea. Vietnam, gravitating in the Sinic world, carried a long-standing ritualistic patrimony that merged, on the one hand, ‘the conventional folklore of the populace—that is, [with] the rites, symbols, customs, beliefs, and practices, that made up the life of the common people’ and, on the other hand, ‘the homogenized, official culture fostered by the state’.<sup>20</sup>

### The ancient patrimony

Scholars have defined national days as constituting ‘celebrations and/or commemorations of historic events related to the foundation of the nation-state’.<sup>21</sup> It has been de rigueur for a modern nation state to celebrate the anniversary of its founding via a National Day, which commemorates a significant historical event or accentuates a

<sup>18</sup> Sean Wilentz, ‘Introduction Teufelsdröckh’s Dilemma: On Symbolism, Politics, and History’, in Sean Wilentz (ed.), *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 194; David McMullen, ‘Bureaucrats and Cosmology: The Ritual Code of T’ang China’, in David Cannadine and S. R. F. Price (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 181–236. See also Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Asian Ritual Systems: Syncretisms and Ruptures* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 20–1.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriella Elgenius, ‘Successful Nation-building and Ceremonial Triumph: Constitution Day in Norway’, in David McCrone and Gayle McPherson (eds.), *National Days: Constructing and Mobilizing National Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 106.

foundational mythology. Its selection sends a symbolical message, as it carries with it values emblematic of that nation's spirit, culture, history, and determined future path. National Days' 'significance lies ... in what they tell us about social, cultural and political processes'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, its choice is part of a politics of memory determined by varied forces that make up the national fabric. For example, France considers the Fourteenth of July as the founding day of its republic that had ended the monarchy in the 1789 Revolution.<sup>23</sup> For Eric Hobsbawm, Bastille Day, first commemorated in 1880, had transformed 'the heritage of the Revolution into a combined expression of state pomp and power and the citizens' pleasure'.<sup>24</sup> In conquering Vietnam, France would foist this republican festive legacy on the dominated peoples as a display of its military and civilizational superiority.

However, prior to the French colonization of the empire of Đại Nam, in the Vietnamese culture as well in monarchical state practices, there had been ancient holiday-festivals (*lễ hội*) and public rituals that involved the entire society 'communing' in the same experience based on common cultural beliefs. Thus, practised since the fifteenth century, there was the imperial annual ritual of *lễ tế Nam Giao* performed in public by the emperor, *Thiên Tử*/Son of Heaven, followed in this by the entire court to bring blessings to the realm and its subjects.<sup>25</sup> Its organization and performance were minutely regimented, with the emperor's gestures and oral recitations during the event regulated by the Ritual Master. Along the route, villagers set up altars with incense and fruit offerings and bowed deeply as the imperial procession approached. At the village level, there were the innumerable festivals to honour the tutelary spirits or *Thành Hoàng* (*Spirits of Ramparts*) of each community that were celebrated at the communal houses (*đình*). All the public rituals followed a lunar calendar adapted to the cycles of seasons and to the practice of

<sup>22</sup> David McCrone and Gayle McPherson, 'Marking Time: The Significance of National Days', in McCrone and McPherson (eds.), *National Days*, p. 219.

<sup>23</sup> See Rosemonde Sanson, *Les 14 juillet (1789-1975): Fête et Conscience Nationale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976); Alain Corbin, Noëlle Gerome, and Danielle Tartakowsky, *Les Usages Politiques des Fêtes aux XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm et al., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 271.

<sup>25</sup> Nguyễn Thị Diệu, 'Ritual, Power, and Pageantry: French Ritual Politics in Monarchical Vietnam', *French Historical Studies* 39.4 (2016), pp. 719-20.



Sino-Vietnamese animistic, Confucian, and Buddhist beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Unifying this mosaic of festivals and celebrations and given Vietnam's history of repeated invasions from China, there was a tradition issued from and observed by the people, but which was reinforced by the monarchy, of commemorating heroes and heroines who had defended the homeland against invaders. As Benoit de Tréglodé explains: 'the historical hero offered Vietnamese dynasties a way to politically unify their territorial space.'<sup>27</sup> The Trưng Queens (First Century CE) and Trần Hưng Đạo (Thirteenth Century CE) became highly ranked heroic figures on whom the monarchy conferred a 'national deity' status. The monarchical state also founded or approved the construction of local temples dedicated to their worship in the Red River Delta. The approximate day understood to be that of their victory (or sacrifice) became a 'traditional' day to be celebrated by the local community.<sup>28</sup> These public ritualistic practices created an enduring reflexional template that would readily receive nineteenth-century French Republican imports as well as subsequent twentieth-century national commemorations.

When the French conquered Đại Nam, among the measures enforced by the colonial authorities to undermine Vietnamese culture was the imposition of the French Republican calendar of celebrations on the indigenous ones. Starting from the 1870s, the French forced the Republican culture of commemorations imported from the métropole first on the colony of Cochinchina, and later in the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam. They included the July Fourteenth National Day, Victory Day on 11 November, and the 'Fête du Patriotisme' or Joan of Arc commemoration on the second Sunday of May.<sup>29</sup> Numerous decrees reaffirmed the calendar of *fêtes*

<sup>26</sup> See Nguyễn Văn Ký, *La Société Vietnamienne face à la Modernité* (Paris: L' Harmattan, 1995), pp. 36–50; Nguyễn Văn Ký, 'L'Evolution des cultes villageois au Vietnam dans leurs rapports avec le pouvoir central', Colloque EUROVIET III, Amsterdam, 2–4 July 1997, <http://danco.org/comcol/cultes1.html> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Benoit de Tréglodé and Claire Duiker, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam* (Singapore: NUS Press in association with IRASEC, 2012), pp. 18–20.

<sup>28</sup> Phạm Quỳnh Phương, *Hero and Deity: Tran Hung Dao and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009), pp. 22–32. See also Liam C. Kelley, 'From Moral Exemplar to National Hero: The Transformations of Trần Hưng Đạo and the Emergence of Vietnamese Nationalism', *Modern Asian Studies* 49.06 (2015), pp. 1963–93.

<sup>29</sup> Sudhir Hazareesingh, "'A Common Sentiment of National Glory": Civic Festivities and French Collective Sentiment under the Second Empire', *Journal of Modern History* 76.2 (2004), p. 280.

*publiques* with all their Second-Empire features: Catholic masses, military parades with brass bands, maypole games, fireworks, boat races, *bals populaires*, and sports competitions were organized for colonized peoples' edification. Mandarins' attendance and observance were de rigueur alongside French officials. Eventually, France's commemorative practices became so integrated into the Vietnamese popular imagination as to render them 'traditional' public celebrations of twentieth-century Indochina. They created a public space that commingled both state solemn rituals and people's ludic celebrations and habituated the colonized to accept the invented tradition of a 'National Day' as quintessential to any modern state's public rituals. Equally, under the French Catholic Church's pressure, a Catholic calendar of saints' days and celebration of fetes such as Easter, Assumption, and so on were also officially observed, albeit mostly within French colonial and Vietnamese Catholic milieus.<sup>30</sup>

### The 'invention of patriotic tradition': Khải Định, Decoux, Trần Trọng Kim, Bảo Đại

From the 1880s, Vietnamese monarchical power was slowly eroded as the ruler became a figurehead put on ceremonial display, hemmed in by the French *Résident* who appeared by his side in all public activities. And yet, Emperor Khải Định (1916–25), considered the most servile of them all, attempted an experiment that bridged modernity and tradition, fusing East and West, even though it was only meant to regild the crumbling imperial image in the eyes of disillusioned subjects.<sup>31</sup> Apparently inspired by the Fourteenth of July National Day, Khải Định revived on a grand scale a Vietnamese imperial day: the 'Celebration of National Restoration'.<sup>32</sup> Previously, it had marked Emperor Gia Long's enthronement or *lễ tiến tôn* (1 June 1802)

<sup>30</sup> Nguyễn Thị Diệu, 'Ritual, Power, and Pageantry', pp. 725–6.

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the relationship between colonial authorities and the monarchy, see Patrice Morlat, *Indochine Années Vingt: Le Rendez-vous Manqué (1918–1928)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2006), pp. 278, 288, 318–20; Vũ Ngu Chiêu, *Các Vua Cuối Nhà Nguyễn, 1883–1945*, vol. 3 (Houston, TX: 2000), pp. 667–703.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyễn Thế Anh, *Monarchie et Fait Colonial: Le Crépuscule d'un Ordre Traditionnel* (Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1992), p. 250; Bruce McFarland Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1993), p. 23.

following the unification of the empire. Court records describe how, on that day, marked by drum cadences and rhymed by the sounds of the imperial orchestra, with incense swirling in the air, with civil and military mandarins in their high-court robes aligned left and right, the Golden Book, which recorded the name of each new ruler, was brought to the Outer Court. The newly ascended ruler in his gold-embroidered Dragon robes encircled by a jade belt, and his Nine Dragon headdress, made offerings to Heaven and proclaimed the dynasty's founding. At the Temple of Imperial Ancestors, the emperor announced to the ancestral spirits this momentous event, taking his 'dynastic name of Gia Long to unify' North and South, and bestowing a general amnesty on those who had been condemned for petty crimes and exempting the population from taxation.<sup>33</sup> The whole court made its obeisance as the mandarins kowtowed. Outside of the Imperial Citadel, the population followed suit. Nine artillery salvos were fired. Successive emperors continued the practice of marking their new reign by conducting strictly regulated commemorative rituals.<sup>34</sup>

Khải Định's revival on 10 June 1919 followed prescribed imperial rituals and offerings to Heaven and Earth and to the ancestral spirits. But, by then, these rituals had to integrate colonial strictures such as the presence of French representatives, music, marching bands, and so on. This imperial 'National Day', promoted by the Huế court, was celebrated throughout the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam as a public holiday—though not in Cochinchina, a colony. The 'Celebration of National Restoration' continued until Emperor Bảo Đại's abdication in 1945. Significantly, this imperially invented and French-inspired tradition, interrupted by the Pacific War, was renewed under the French-sponsored, Bảo Đại-led State of Vietnam in 1949. Thereafter, the Republic of Vietnam (1955–63) would 'recycle' its symbolic matrix into its politics and administrative practices.

During the Pacific War, under the diarchic Franco-Japanese occupation (1940–45), Indochina was permitted to commemorate

<sup>33</sup> Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam Thực Lục Tập Một* [Veritable Records of Dai Nam, vol. 1] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 2007), pp. 491–2, 663. Nine was the imperial number, just below the heavenly ten, and symbolized the imperial figure.

<sup>34</sup> Ironically, in socialist Vietnam, this enthronement ritual—along with other imperial rituals—has been not only revived, but also celebrated in great pomp, and is attended by an increasingly larger and more fervent public in Huế. Marina Marouda, 'Potent Rituals and the Royal Dead: Historical Transformations in Vietnamese Ritual Practice', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45.3 (2014), pp. 355–9.

an indigenous 'National Day'. Governor General Jean Decoux implemented a Pétainist strategy that encouraged the revival of Indochinese 'patriotism'.<sup>35</sup> He allowed it to express itself in many ways, including parades, youth movements, and public celebrations.<sup>36</sup> The commemorations of national heroes such as the Trưng Queens, for the first time celebrated along with Joan of Arc, figured prominently among Decoux's patriotic revival measures.<sup>37</sup> The commemorations followed a pageantry of Catholic masses, public singing of rousing French anthems—in this case, the *Marseillaise* but also the Pétainist *Maréchal Nous Voilà*—and sporting events. Decoux's dangerous game was, however, disrupted by Japan's March 1945 coup, which facilitated the creation of a Vietnamese government under Trần Trọng Kim. From March to July 1945, this government attempted the erasure of colonial symbols but continued to employ Decoux's apparatus of mass and youth mobilizations. Thus, a new flag and anthem were created and an attempt to replace the French colonial nomenclature by an indigenous one was begun, with 'Vietnam' becoming the official reference to the country.<sup>38</sup> Kim's government was ephemeral, but several of its measures to affirm independence were to be taken up by successive incarnations, including the French-instigated State of Vietnam and its successor, the American-supported Republic of Vietnam.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, France attempted to regain its colonial empire by countering the rise of independence movements in its Indochinese Union. To neutralize the Việt Minh's

<sup>35</sup> Eric Thomas Jennings, 'Conservative Confluences, "Nativist" Synergy: Reinscribing Vichy's National Revolution in Indochina, 1940–1945', *French Historical Studies* 27.3 (2004), pp. 601–35; Rémi Dalisson, 'La propagande festive de Vichy: Mythes fondateurs, relecture nationaliste et contestation en France de 1940 à 1944', *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 207.3 (2002), pp. 5–35.

<sup>36</sup> See Pierre L. Lamant, 'La révolution nationale dans l'Indochine de l'Amiral Decoux', *Revue d'Histoire de La Deuxième Guerre Mondiale et des Conflits Contemporains* 35.138 (1985), pp. 21–41; Sébastien Verney, *L'Indochine sous Vichy: entre Révolution Nationale, Collaboration et Identités Nationales, 1940–1945* (Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Eric Thomas Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 154, 190–8.

<sup>38</sup> Vu Ngu Chieu, 'The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution: The Empire of Viet-Nam (March–August 1945)', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45.2 (1986), pp. 83–5, 304, 309; Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'The Formulation of the National Discourse in 1940–1945 Vietnam', *Journal of International and Area Studies* 9.1 (2002), pp. 66–7.

nationalist appeals, France recalled to office, though not to his throne, ex-emperor Bảo Đại. The 8 March 1949 Elysees Agreement between France and Bảo Đại proclaimed the ‘independence’ of an Associated State of Vietnam within the French Union. Subsequent decrees, in July 1949, granted, in principle at least, *Quốc Trưởng* (Chief of State) Bảo Đại full legislative and executive powers.<sup>39</sup> From 1949 to 1954, the Bảo Đại solution proved ineffective in rallying popular support. However, the ceremonial manifesting-the-nation aspect of the State of Vietnam continued the legacy of the Trần Trọng Kim’s government, as the French-imposed national holidays were replaced by Vietnamese ones, while the colonial mechanics of public commemoration such as military brass bands, public speeches, youth demonstrations, and so on were retained. Bảo Đại even revived Emperor Khải Định’s imperial-nationalistic commemoration of the ‘Celebration of National Restoration’ with full ‘solemnity and desirable pomp’ throughout the territory.<sup>40</sup> Reports from provinces in the Mekong Delta affirmed that the ‘National Restoration Day’ was dutifully celebrated, that the national flag—three blood-red stripes on an imperial yellow background—was flying everywhere, with the new national anthem sung by all.<sup>41</sup> In a move that revived the imperial past, it was decided that the official ceremonial attire for public servants should be the silk tunic and turban formally worn by the Nguyễn court’s mandarins.<sup>42</sup> Symbolically, the State of Vietnam merged Nguyễn-dynastic festivals, French-instigated colonial commemorations, and Vietnamese-inspired nationalistic ones, creating a rich and variegated fabric into which the Ngô would weave their own symbolic vision.

<sup>39</sup> For more recent interpretations regarding this period, see Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of An Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012); Christopher E. Goscha and Karine Laplante, *L’échec de la Paix en Indochine, 1954–1962/The Failure of Peace in Indochina, 1954–1962* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010); Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Gouvernement provisoire du Sud-Vietnam, Ministère de l’Intérieur, 27/05/1949. B6/145.Thủ Hiến Nam Việt (THNV) [Prime Ministership, Nam Viet]. Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II [National Archives Center II], Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (hereafter THNV NAI).

<sup>41</sup> Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Viet Nam, Province de Longxuyên, Objet: Couleurs et hymne nationaux, 14/05/1949. B6/281. THNV NAI. See also Jason Gibbs, ‘The Music of the State: Vietnam’s Quest for a National Anthem’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2.2 (2007), pp. 137–40.

<sup>42</sup> Đoàn Thâm, *Hai Mươi Năm Qua: Việc Từng Ngày (1945–1964)* [*The Past Twenty Years: Daily Events*] (n.l., 1986), p. 106.

### Conflicted loyalties, contesting faiths

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Ngô brothers began to gather followers, who were overwhelmingly northern and Central Vietnamese in their origins, and Catholic in their religion. Some, like Trần Chánh Thành, had participated in the Việt Minh government but left to follow Ngô Đình Diệm. Others such as Trần Kim Tuyến or Đỗ Mậu had been early supporters and went on to serve in important positions within the Diệm Administration.<sup>43</sup> The few southerners such as Huỳnh Văn Lang were, like the others, full of hope when they answered the call to serve the new prime minister in the summer of 1954.<sup>44</sup> These men coalesced around the Ngô family's sons, especially Diệm and Nhu, and would serve them, some loyally to the end in 1963, others with mounting disappointment leading to flight or dissent.

Ngô Đình Diệm was from a Catholic family of Central Vietnam, whose father, Ngô Đình Khả, had trained in the French missionary seminaries in Huế and in Penang.<sup>45</sup> Khả had worked for years for the French colonial authorities as an interpreter prior to being promoted into the imperial Administration.<sup>46</sup> Much has been made about the fact that Diệm 'was not educated abroad or in a completely Western

<sup>43</sup> Dr Trần Kim Tuyến headed the 'Service des Etudes Politiques et Sociales' (SEPES), 'the national intelligence and counterespionage service which can, at Nhu's direction, conduct clandestine political and propaganda activities for the Can Lao Party'. Despatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Saigon, 2 March 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1958–1960, Volume I, Vietnam (Washington, DC: Department of State), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60vo1/d56> (accessed 8 November 2018). Đỗ Mậu, issued from a Confucian family, met Diệm in 1942 in Huế, was appointed head of Military Intelligence in the Republic—a post that he retained until the 1963 coup, in which he participated. Đỗ Mậu, *Việt-Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi [Vietnam, My Homeland through Fire and Blood]* (Westminster, CA, Văn Nghệ: 1993), p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Huỳnh Văn Lang returned from the United States of America in August 1954 to serve as Diệm's secretary, and financial and political factotum in the Cần Lao Party. See Huỳnh Văn Lang, *Ký ức Huỳnh Văn Lang. Tập II [Huỳnh Văn Lang's Memoirs, vol. II]* (2012).

<sup>45</sup> The Catholic Ngô Đình line had reportedly migrated from the North to Quảng Bình province, Central Vietnam, in the late nineteenth century. Ngô Đình Khả (1857–1925), the *pater familias*, had nine children: six sons (Khôi, Thục, Diệm, Nhu, Cần, and Luyện) and three daughters. Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, p. 28; Miller, *Misalliance*, pp. 22–3; Ngô-Đình Quỳnh, Ngô-Đình Lê Quỳnh (+2012), Jacqueline Willemetz, *La République du Việt-Nam et les Ngô-Đình* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), pp. 11–14; Võ Hương An, *Từ Điểm Nhà Nguyễn* (Irvine: Nam Việt, 2012), pp. 404–5.

<sup>46</sup> Vũ Ngự Chiêu, *Các Vua Cuối Nhà Nguyễn 1883–1945*, vol. 2, p. 531; Charles Fourniau, *Vietnam: Domination Coloniale et Résistance Nationale, 1858–1914* (Paris: Les

school' to demonstrate his 'authentically Vietnamese' roots; in fact, he had followed the same intellectual and religious path as his father's in the local French-founded missionary schools and seminaries.<sup>47</sup> After graduating from the *Hậu Bổ* (Mandarinal Training School) in Huế in *circa* 1922, he started his career as a French-appointed administrator in a number of districts in Central Vietnam, earning a reputation for ruthless efficiency in combatting dissidents, until he was plucked out of anonymity thanks to Catholic familial connections to be appointed minister of interior under Bảo Đại in 1933.<sup>48</sup> He navigated the rigid court culture of French-dominated, imperial Huế, patronized in this journey by the powerful Catholic Prime Minister Nguyễn Hữu Bài, his godfather and in-law through matrimonial alliance.<sup>49</sup> Thus, from the inception, his worldview had been profoundly influenced by Vietnam's imperial and colonial past.<sup>50</sup> For Diệm, traditional symbols were regarded as fundamentally integral to a national ethos, especially the nationhood symbolism of historical heroes and state rituals long considered as expressions of imperial power. Modern and specifically

Indes Savantes, 2002), p. 463; Nguyễn Thế Anh, *Monarchie et Fait Colonial au Viêt-Nam*, p. 208, fn. 146.

<sup>47</sup> Phuc Thien, *President Ngo-Dinh-Diem's Political Philosophy* (Saigon, Review Horizons: 1956), p. 15. Hà Ngại, a Confucian-trained Hậu Bổ graduate and colonial mandarin, criticized Diệm's lack of mastery of classical Chinese, disdainfully noting that the latter had gone to a French-curricula Catholic school, *Ecole Pellerin*, and obtained only a *Diplôme complémentaire*. Hà Ngại, *Khúc Tiêu Đổng: Hồi ký của một vị quan triều Nguyễn* [*Memoir of a Nguyen Court Mandarin*] (Ho Chi Minh City: Trẻ, 2014), pp. 164–5.

<sup>48</sup> The reformed 1911 *École d'Administration des Hậu Bổ* in Huế trained a new generation of French-fluent mandarins to serve the colonial administration in Indochina. Emmanuel Poisson, 'Administrative Practices: An Essential Aspect in Mandarinal Training (Nineteenth-Early Twentieth Century)', in Gisèle L. Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (eds.), *Viêt-Nam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 108–39.

<sup>49</sup> For a hagiographic recreation of the Ngô family's early years, see Andre Nguyen Van Chau, *Ngo Dinh Thi Hiep, or, a Lifetme in the Eye of the Storm* (Salt Lake City: American Book Classics, 2000). Some of the Ngô sons' French administrative postings can be tracked via *Annuaire Administratif de l'Indochine*, the *Bulletin administratif de l'Annam*, and the *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française*, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32731793g/date> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>50</sup> It seems that, as early as 1917, when posted to the Tân Thư Viện in Huế, Diệm had already manifested his fascination for all things related to the Nguyễn emperors. He made a presentation to the 'Société des Amis du Vieux Huế' on 5 June 1917, about a remarkable inkwell owned by Emperor Tự Đức. Ngô-Đình-Diệm, 'L'Encrier de S.M. Tu-Duc, Traduction des Inscriptions', *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue* 3 (1917), pp. 209–12.

Western concepts that supposedly inspired him later were simply utterances meant for an external audience.

According to Vũ Ngự Chiêu, during the Franco-Japanese occupation, the Ngô family switched allegiance from the French to the Japanese patron, as they had felt slighted by the former, who favoured Phạm Quỳnh, Bảo Đại's prime minister.<sup>51</sup> The Ngô's support for the Japanese, along with their backing of Prince Cường Đệ and founding of a political party (*Đại Việt Phục Hưng* or Restoration of Great Viet), led the French Sûret  to crack down on the brothers on 12 July 1944, with Di m escaping to Saigon under Japanese protection. During the post-1945 years, Di m danced the 'pas de deux with the Việt Minh' while setting up anti-communist networks and re-establishing ties with Bảo Đại, then residing in Hong Kong.<sup>52</sup> It all came to naught, as, by August 1950, with the Việt Minh out to assassinate him, Di m left the country in search of external support in Europe and the United States of America, stopping in Japan to visit his former patron, Cường Đệ.<sup>53</sup> There, Di m's activities were closely monitored by American diplomats, and 'one of their principal sources of information' was Wesley Fishel—a professor of political science who also served as an officer in 'the Military Intelligence Section of the General Headquarters of the Far East Command'. In his reports, Fishel was initially impressed by Di m but soon found him to be 'vague and general in his comments', leading him to conclude that Bishop Thục was 'the driving force behind Di m'.<sup>54</sup> Fishel maintained contact with

<sup>51</sup> Vũ Ngự Chi u, *C c Vua Cuối Nhà Nguy n*, vol. 3, pp. 854–5. Regarding Di m's whereabouts and political networking during the 1940s period, see Ralph B. Smith, 'The Japanese Period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9.2 (1978), p. 274; Kiyoko Kurusu Nitz, 'Independence without Nationalists? The Japanese and Vietnamese Nationalism during the Japanese Period, 1940–1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15.1 (1984), p. 117; Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy*, pp. 127–33. See also Chizuru Namba, *Fran ais et Japonais en Indochine, 1940–1945: Colonisation, Propagande et Rivalit  Culturelle* (Paris: Karthala, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Edward Miller, 'Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đ nh Di m, 1945–54', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35.3 (2004), pp. 438–9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441. See also Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan: Prince Cuong De (1882–1951)* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Joseph G. Morgan, 'A Meeting in Tokyo: Komatsu Kiyoshi, Wesley Fishel, and America's Intervention in Vietnam', *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 20.1 (2013), pp. 29–47. Ngô Đ nh Thục (1897–1984) was ordained bishop in 1938 in Ph  Cam, Central Vietnam. He had a decisive political and religious influence on Di m and Nhu, and contributed to their rise to power through his national and international Catholic networks. Thục oversaw a 'Personalist Training Center' in his diocese of Vinh Long province, meant to instruct cadres in the doctrine formulated



the Ngô family and was among their first American supporters within the ‘Vietnam Lobby’.

Among the Western-educated Ngô brothers, Nhu chose the secular path of the Ecole des Chartes, from which he graduated in 1938; he returned to Indochina to work at the Hà Nội and Huế Archives from 1939 to 1942.<sup>55</sup> During these years, Nhu founded a network of Catholic organizations, some of which were to form the core of his *Cần Lao Nhân Vị Cách Mạng Đảng* (Revolutionary Personalist Labor Party), dubbed *Cần Lao*.<sup>56</sup> A report by the local French Sûreté agent to Admiral Decoux, dated 18 August 1944, indicated that the agent had had regular exchanges with Nhu, who reported conversations with his brothers, Khôi and Diệm. Nhu attested to Khôi’s loyalty, ‘sworn on the cross’, toward France, since Khôi owed France his ‘bowl of rice’. In contrast, Nhu reportedly qualified Diệm’s anti-French incitation as being ‘culpable and blindly extreme’.<sup>57</sup> When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam offered Nhu the position of ‘director of the Archives and National (formerly Central) Library in Hanoi’ in September 1945, he accepted but, recognizing imminent danger, sought refuge in Catholic seminaries on his southern flight. It was in the Đà Lạt seminary that Nhu explored Jacques Maritain and

by Nhu. As he became archbishop in Huế in 1960, Thục and his brother Cấn were to transform Central Vietnam into a quasi-fief that attracted ambitious local politicians and eager-to-please military officers. A polarizing figure, Thục played no small role in igniting the Buddhist crisis of 1963, which culminated in the regime’s overthrow. Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 169–71, 176.

<sup>55</sup> *Chronique de l’Ecole des chartes et des archivistes-paléographes* 99.1 (1938), p. 195; Carlo Laroche, ‘Les archives d’outre-mer et l’histoire coloniale française’, *Revue Historique* 206 (1951), p. 252, fn.1.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed analysis of the party, see Despatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Saigon, 2 March 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960, Volume I, Vietnam*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d56> (accessed 8 November 2018); Robert G. Scigliano, ‘Political Parties in South Vietnam Under the Republic’, *Pacific Affairs* 33.4 (1960), pp. 327–46. For an insider’s view of the *Cần Lao*, see Tôn Thất Đính, *20 Năm Bình Nghiệp: Hồi Ký Của Tôn Thất Đính [A 20-Year Military Career: Memoirs of Ton That Dinh]* (San Jose: Phụ nữ Cali, 2013), pp. 85–101; Đỗ Mậu, *Việt-Nam*, pp. 225–56.

<sup>57</sup> Chiêu, *Các Vua Cuối Nhà Nguyễn*, vol. 3, p. 856. See also a letter by Ngô Đình Thục, bishop of Vĩnh Long province, to Admiral Decoux, dated 21 August 1944, in which he asserted his brothers’ loyalty to France, stressing that Ngô Đình Khả, their father, had loyally served the French by putting down the *Cần Vương* resistance movement in the 1890s. Vu Chieu Ngu, ‘Political and Social Change in Viet-Nam between 1940–1946’ (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1984), p. 288, fn. 13.

Emmanuel Mounier's philosophy.<sup>58</sup> The resulting doctrine, *chủ nghĩa Nhân Vị* (Personalism)—an amalgamation of Vietnamese culture, East Asian traditions, French Catholicism, and 'Marxian economic analysis'—provided *Cần Lao* with its ideological foundation. To the degree that it could be described as presenting a coherent worldview, it advocated an authentic Vietnamese culture stressing 'humanistic values', an equitable government of 'true freedom of religion', and a governmentally supervised economy of 'sharing'.<sup>59</sup> While Diệm was in exile in Europe and in the United States of America, Nhu was preparing the political foundation necessary to catapult his brother to power by founding a weekly paper, *Tạp Chí Xã Hội* (*Social Review*), in Saigon, by crisscrossing the country to mobilize Catholic support, and by founding the *Công Nông Chánh Đảng* (Workers and Peasants Party).<sup>60</sup>

In the aftermath of the Geneva Accords, Diệm, appointed prime minister by Bảo Đại, returned from Paris to Saigon on 25 June 1954, officially entrusted with the mission of forming a government. By 5–6 July, the newly coalesced Cabinet included many of Diệm's early and Catholic followers from northern and Central Vietnam. A notable exception was the southern-born Buddhist Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, who was appointed secretary of interior in July 1954.<sup>61</sup> Thơ, whom Diệm considered 'the most brilliant administrator in South Vietnam', became vice president of the new Republic in December 1956 and served in this capacity alongside President Diệm until the 1963 coup. Thơ provided a veneer of regional and religious balance,

<sup>58</sup> Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 135; Marr, *Vietnam*, p. 439; Miller, 'Vision, Power, and Agency', p. 448; Miller, *Misalliance*, pp. 43–6.

<sup>59</sup> John C. Donnell, 'Personalism in Vietnam', in Wesley R. Fishel, Mike Mansfield, and Joseph Buttinger (eds.), *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), pp. 29–67; Miller, *Misalliance*, pp. 46–8, 133–6; Ngô Đình et al., *La République du Viêt-Nam*, pp. 30–4.

<sup>60</sup> Despatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Saigon, 2 March 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960, Volume I, Vietnam*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d56> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Thơ acted as 'political adviser' to then-Colonel Dương Văn Minh, also a Southerner and a Buddhist, in campaigns against competing politico-religious organizations in 1955–56, cementing a lifelong bond between the two men. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, p. 21; Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), pp. 321–2; Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, pp. 56, 264.

but his influence on major political decisions was limited, especially during the 1963 Buddhist Crisis.<sup>62</sup> Ngô Đình Nhu's father-in-law, Trần Văn Chương, who had been minister of foreign affairs in Trần Trọng Kim's government, was appointed secretary of state and later ambassador to the United States of America.<sup>63</sup> Chương's brother, Trần Văn Đỗi, the State of Vietnam's representative at the 1954 Geneva Conference, was named secretary of foreign affairs.<sup>64</sup> Trần Chánh Thành became secretary of state and of information and youth. He headed the regime's mass movement, *Phong Trào Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* (National Revolutionary Movement), as well as the legislative committee in charge of drafting the Republic's Constitution; he also spearheaded the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign in 1955 (*phong trào tố Cộng diệt Cộng*).<sup>65</sup>

Reshuffling his Cabinet several months later, additional family members were appointed, including Nguyễn Hữu Châu, husband of Trần Lệ Chi, Madame Nhu's sister, and who became secretary of the interior. Justifying his reliance on family members and Central Vietnamese, Diệm told Fishel that he mistrusted 'wily' northerners and despised 'lazy' southerners.<sup>66</sup> As William Henderson and Wesley Fishel commented, 'Diem tended to rely heavily on members of his family and close personal friends', even though 'the persons in this

<sup>62</sup> Field Administration Record of a Meeting with President Ngo Dinh Diem, Tuesday 25 August 1956, Wesley Fishel Papers, 6-20-112-116-UA17-95-000289, Michigan State University (hereafter MSU), <http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/fullrecord.php?kid=6-20-112> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Vu Ngu Chieu, 'The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution', p. 302; Biographical Sketch of Tran Van Chuong, Ambassador of Vietnam to the United States, April 1959, Folder 05, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University (hereafter TTU VA), <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=1780605004> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>64</sup> Party Accompanying His Excellency Ngo Dhin [*sic*] Diem, May 1957, Folder 07, Box 15, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, TTU VA, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2321507014> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>65</sup> The Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign (hereafter ACDC) was never referred to by name in any official Vietnamese governmental documents that the author has found. It was alluded to publicly only in staged street demonstrations by police forces, civil servants, and so on.

<sup>66</sup> Memorandum for the Record, Subject: Conversation with the President, 1 August 1957, Wesley Fishel Papers, 6-20-1C8-116-UA17-95-000481, MSU, Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan, <http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/fullrecord.php?kid=6-20-1C8> (accessed 8 November 2018).

cluster shifted from time to time', as they undercut each other and/or were 'shunted aside for various reasons'.<sup>67</sup>

### Reinventing a new patrimony, constructing a modern nation?

As Mona Ozouf observed of the French Revolution, 'whenever the regime changes, the festival calendar had to be rearranged. New festivals were created ... and objectional reminders from the preceding regime were eliminated'.<sup>68</sup> As it assumed power, the Ngô regime faced apparently insurmountable obstacles posed by Bảo Đại as well as by religious-political organizations such as the *Hòa Hảo* and the *Cao Đài*, and the *Bình Xuyên* gangsters.<sup>69</sup> Diệm first turned against his former patron by organizing the 1955 referendum (*Trung cầu dân ý*), asking the people of southern Vietnam 'whether or not the Emperor Bảo Đại should be deposed and replaced as head of State by M. Ngô Đình Diệm, the Prime Minister'.<sup>70</sup> Recognized by the United States of America, the referendum allowed Ngô Đình Diệm, in a public ceremony on 26

<sup>67</sup> William Henderson and Wesley R. Fishel, 'The Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem', in Wesley R. Fishel (ed.), *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict* (Itasca: Peacock, 1968), p. 194, fn. 1; Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, pp. 58, 64.

<sup>68</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. xi.

<sup>69</sup> Jessica M. Chapman, 'The Sect Crisis of 1955 and the American Commitment to Ngô Đình Diệm', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5.1 (Winter 2010), pp. 37–85. The *Hòa Hảo* movement (named after the village whence it issued in 1939), founded by the 'Buddha Master', Huỳnh Phú Sổ, is part of the popular messianic phenomenon derived from Buddhism which emerged in the western Mekong Delta in the 1920s. It evolved into a significant political and military force, as did the rival religious-political organization of the *Cao Đài* (Elevated Altar). The latter, founded in the 1920s in Tây Ninh province, was inspired by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, as well as by French figures such as Victor Hugo and Joan of Arc. Its temples are distinguished by a Masonic-inspired symbol of a triangulated left eye. *Bình Xuyên* forces, also named for the region of their origin, issued in the 1920s from armed groups of outlaws in the Mekong Delta, derived their resources from highway robberies, piracy, gambling, and so on. Members were not, for all that, devoid of national sentiment, and some factions joined the Việt Minh in the anti-French struggle; others were integrated into the French-backed Vietnamese National Army (VNA). See Serguei A. Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity* (Huntington: Nova Science Publishers, 2001); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Nguyễn Long Thành Nam and Serguei A. Blagov, *Hoa Hao Buddhism in the Course of Vietnam's History* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003); Pascal Bourdeaux and Jérémy Jammes, *Religions du Vietnam (XVIII–XXIe siècles): Érotisme Traditionnel et Nouvel Occultisme* (Paris: Scripta, impr., 2010).

<sup>70</sup> *Chronology of International Events* 11.21 (1955), p. 731.



Figure 1. A group of officials with the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group celebrating Vietnamese Constitution Day. The men are standing and talking in a circle. The caption on the reverse of the photograph reads: 'Dean Taggart and Dr. Fishel speaking with a group of Vietnamese, Constitution Day Celebration, October 26, 1958—unidentified, Dr. Le Dinh Chan, Dean Taggart, Dr. Fishel, Mr. Tho, and Mr. Thoi.'

Source: Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections Vietnam Project. Records. (UA 2.9.5.5) Photograph File Drawer, <http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/fullrecord.php?kid=6-20-1882> (accessed 27 November 2018).

October 1955, to 'solemnly proclaim that the State of Viet-Nam is a Republic'.<sup>71</sup>

As he was determined to replace incompatible, colonial relics with representations of a recently independent, newly created *quốc gia* (nation), Ngô Đình Diệm proclaimed on 1 March 1955 the official calendar of National Days of Viet Nam, which did not differ much from

<sup>71</sup> President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy: Addresses Relative to the Constitution, February 1958, 11, Folder 03, Box 08, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monographs, TTU VA, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2390803002> (accessed 8 November 2018). Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 144–5.



Figure 2. Photograph showing an Independence Day parade in process. A young band walks behind a large picture of President Ngo Dinh Diem with the caption: 'Người cha cách mạng là bầy. Bài phong, thực công, đấu xây cộng hòa.'

Source: Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections Vietnam Project. Records. (UA 2.9.5.5) Photograph File Drawer, Identifier: UA2-9-5-5\_004844.jpg, <http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/fullrecord.php?kid=6-20-1877> (accessed 27 November 2018). Creator: Walter Mode. Translation: 'The FATHER of revolution is here [to] eradicate feudal customs, colonialism, and communism, to construct the republic.' Translator's note: The above sentence was derived from the slogan: 'Bài Phong, Đả Thực, Diệt Cộng' ['To eliminate feudal customs, to struggle against colonialism, and to obliterate communism'].

the Bảo Đại's State of Vietnam's.<sup>72</sup> But, regarding the October 1955 referendum celebrations, the president stipulated that they were to be held 'at churches, temples, of all religions ... to thank the Almighty (*On Trên*, literally, "Blessings from Above," a Catholic expression), to pray for the Republic of Vietnam to be a lasting one and for the people to be safe' and that particular emphasis be placed for the ceremonies at 'the Holy Mother Cathedral in Saigon [that] should

<sup>72</sup> National Days of Viet Nam, Saigon, 1 March 1955, The President: Ngo Dinh Diem. Wesley Fishel Papers, 6-20-19C-116-UA17-95-000441, MSU, <http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/fullrecord.php?kid=6-20-19C> (accessed 8 November 2018).

be especially magnificent'.<sup>73</sup> Subsequently, the Ceremonies Office requested directives from the president regarding the organization of Memorial Day (*Lễ Tưởng Niệm Liệt Thánh*, derived from France's *Fête des Morts*) on 2 November 1955. It remarked that 'this year, the government has regained independence ... and thus, it is no longer foreigners who oversee the organization but on the contrary, it should be through directives of the national government'. It suggested tentatively that the celebrations begin with a Mass at the Holy Mother Church, conducted concurrently at the Protestant church and at the mosque, to be presided over by a representative of the government at the level of secretary (of foreign relations, for example) and by the mayor of Saigon. After the Masses, representatives of foreign delegations and of the government could, if they wished, participate in a Buddhist ceremony celebrated at the Zoological Garden.<sup>74</sup> In short, public commemorations should be organized primarily in Catholic churches, with obligatory attendance for top-level officials; afterwards, public servants would have the option of attending a Buddhist ceremony. It was suggested that the Department of Information, headed by Trần Chánh Thành, should inform the ministries and military headquarters of the presidential displeasure that 'people in numerous places have not yet understood that with the Referendum, a new era for Vietnam has begun'.<sup>75</sup> In order to mark the ending of French rule and the founding of the Republic by *Ngô Lãnh Tu* (Ngô The Leader), their offices should organize a far-ranging celebration 'among the populace, penetrating villages, schools, organizations, and military units'. A suggested programme would emphasize the meaning of the referendum, the president's proclamation, and support for him. Such suggestions were repeated numerous times throughout the year and into 1956, with increasing involvement by President Diệm himself.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Tổng Trưởng Đại-Diện Thủ-Tướng Phủ [Ministers Representing the Prime Minister's Office], 29/10/1955. Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa [Presidency's Office, First Republic], Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II [National Archives Center II], Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam (hereafter PTTĐỊCH NAIL).

<sup>74</sup> Lễ Tưởng Niệm Liệt Thánh. Sở Nghi Lễ [All Souls' Day. Office of Ceremonies], 28/10/1955. Folder 15980. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>75</sup> Tổ-chức liên-hoan mừng Chính-thể Cộng-Hòa trong các tầng lớp dân-chúng. Bộ Thông Tin và Chiến Tranh Tâm Lý [Organizing Celebrations of the Republic among Different Social Classes. Ministry of Information and Psychological Warfare], 19/11/1955. Folder 15987. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

In 1956, the Diệm regime, tightening its hold on Vietnamese society, issued Ordinance Nos 6 and 47, which made support for Communism a capital offence.<sup>77</sup> It enforced land reform through Ordinance No. 57 and imposed forced assimilation on the Chinese community via Ordinance Nos 48 and 53.<sup>78</sup> It concurrently modified the official calendar, decreeing 26 October the 'National Day', to be marked by a whole-day holiday.<sup>79</sup> It granted half-days off to honour two Catholic celebrations (Ascension and Assumption) and full days off for the Trần Hưng Đạo, Confucius, All Saints' Day, and Christmas celebrations; there was only one full Buddhist holiday, Vesak (*Thích-Ca Thành-Đạo*), for the entire calendar year.<sup>80</sup> With Madame Nhu's involvement, the ceremony of Memorialization of the Trưng Queens became an obligatory event for all officials starting from 1955, with their statues replacing the colonial ones at Mê Linh Square in 1962.<sup>81</sup> President Diệm delivered a speech on 18 March 1956, Trưng Queens celebration, exhorting citizens and especially women 'to exterminate the invaders and the Vietnamese Communist traitors ... to liberate the north and the millions of people suffering under the domination of the red devils'.<sup>82</sup> Moving on the same day to the Cao Đài Holy See in Tây Ninh, which had but recently been raided by the government, forcing its 'living saint', Phạm Công Tắc, into Cambodian exile, Diệm delivered a starker speech.<sup>83</sup> He declared that

<sup>77</sup> Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, pp. 183–4.

<sup>78</sup> Ordinance 48 'made Vietnamese citizens of all Chinese born in Vietnam' and Ordinance 53 'barred all foreign nationals from eleven professions known to be largely in Chinese hands'. Joseph Buttinger, 'The Ethnic Minorities in the Republic of Vietnam', in Wesley R. Fishel et al., *Problems of Freedom*, p. 110.

<sup>79</sup> Định ngày 26 tháng 10 dương-lịch, kỷ-niệm ngày tuyên bố Chánh-Thể Cộng-hòa, là ngày Quốc Khánh, Dụ Số 3 [October 26, Following the Solar Calendar, the Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Republic Is to Be the National Day, Decree 3], 09/01/1956. Folder 16037. PTTĐICH NAIL.

<sup>80</sup> Ấn-định các ngày khánh-tiết hàng năm. Dụ Số 4 [Regulations Regarding the Yearly Calendar of Holidays. Decree 4], 09/01/1956. Folder 16037. PTTĐICH NAIL.

<sup>81</sup> Vietnam Thong Tan Xa [Vietnam Press Agency], 16/03/1956. Folder 16043. PTTĐICH NAIL; Công tác sửa sang Công-trường Mê-Linh [Repair Works for the Mê Linh Square], 04/01/1962. Folder 1753. PTTĐICH NAIL. The statues, reportedly in the likenesses of Madame Nhu and her daughter, Lê Thủy, were pulled down by the populace, and the heads paraded in rickshaws throughout the streets in the aftermath of the 1963 November coup. Demery, *Finding the Dragon Lady*, pp. 123, 126; Trần Văn Đôn, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> Huấn thị của Ngô Tổng Thống trong Ngày Lễ Hai Bà Trưng [Injunction by President Ngô on the Two Trưng Ladies Commemoration Day], 17/03/1956. Folder 16043. PTTĐICH NAIL.

<sup>83</sup> Blagov, *Caodaism*, pp. 80, 107.



his government ‘does not show any preferential treatment towards any religion nor discriminate against any religious beliefs. However, for morals (*đạo lý*) to propagate among the people, righteous leaders must preserve moral order’. He went on to affirm that ‘righteous morals (*đạo phải*) are extinguished in the atheist Communist regime. ... The government’s mission is to maintain order, promoting the good and punishing the bad; only then can religion be protected and freedom be asserted’.<sup>84</sup>

As he strengthened his rule, President Diệm paid more attention to its public manifestations, notably that of celebrations, issuing directives via his brother-in-law, Nguyễn Hữu Châu, charged with transmitting his orders. The latter conveyed the presidential displeasure over the fact that ‘the celebrations ... had often been proposed and organized in a hasty manner, resulting in his Excellency’s dissatisfaction on two counts—principles of ceremony and details of the programme’. Thus, ‘1) Each time that you intend to organize any ceremony, please draft a fully detailed programme, 2) Afterward, in an audience with the President, you will present your intentions and the programme so that the President will have the opportunity to discuss and consider them with you’.<sup>85</sup> The tightening of the screws manifested itself through a minute inspection of every detail, as

the President desires that the programme of ceremony be approved by his Excellency at least one week prior to the day of ceremony. 3) In the programme, if there is a scheduled speech then the President wishes that at least 4 to 5 days prior, you present to him drafts of speeches to be read.<sup>86</sup>

Each department that organized an event could present drafts adapted to ‘the circumstances and meaning’ of the event, but that had to be vetted by the presidency, which was responsible for the official text. Drafts should be short (no more than four minutes), concise, and practical, and employ language simple enough for people to understand and remember. It was decided that the new republic should adopt for its national anthem and flag those of the defunct State of Việt Nam.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Diễn văn của Tổng Thống đọc tại Tây Ninh ngày 18-3-1956 [Presidential Speech Read in Tay Ninh]. Folder 16043. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>85</sup> Bộ Trưởng Tại Phủ Tổng Thống [Secretary to the Presidency], 10/04/1956. Folder 16036. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., emphasis in original.

<sup>87</sup> Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, p. 63; Gibbs, ‘The Music of the State’, pp. 139, 149. Along with the national anthem, the government disseminated another song, *Suy Tôn*

### In search of viable heroes

In Vietnamese history, national heroes, considered as guardian spirits, 'are seen as moral core of the nation and as having a role to play in meeting present-day challenges'.<sup>88</sup> They were viewed as 'a sort of barometer of patriotic virtues ... connected to this nation by a filial link. ... The heroic figure distilled the essence of the national character. There was no patriotism without heroes, nor heroes without patriotism'.<sup>89</sup> Among its first official acts as inheritor of that past, the Republic went in search of its own heroes.

The Cabinet's agenda on 20 August 1956 listed as a priority the president's decision to celebrate 26 October—when the Constitution was to be proclaimed—as the National Day of the Republic of Vietnam. On that most festive occasion, 'there should be a solemn three-day celebration during which the achievements of heroes and fallen soldiers who were meritorious in combating invasion will be evoked'.<sup>90</sup> The Department of Foreign Affairs was put in charge of an Inter-Ministerial Committee that was to search 'for fallen heroes who had fought against invaders ... in order for their accomplishments to be cited with the nation (*citation à l'Ordre de la Nation*) [in French in the text]'. Significantly, many of the names cited were figures linked to the Ngô family, for instance, Prince Cường Để and Phan Bội Châu.<sup>91</sup> In the provinces, villages, and schools, there were to be 'receptions to welcome descendants of patriotic soldiers who died fighting invaders' and reading of texts evoking their accomplishments. Tombs of heroes were to be cleared of debris, renovated, and guarded by local militia on the eve of the National Day. Upon presidential

*Ngô Tổng Thống [Praise to President Ngô]*. This ode to Diệm, 'with the entire Vietnamese people standing behind President Ngô', was regularly performed in public places such as schools, theatres, and so on. This author remembers that moviegoers, under cover of darkness, delighted in twisting one of the lines, *Ngô Tổng Thống muôn năm* into *Tô Hủ Tiếu Muôn Năm*: 'Long Live President Ngô' became 'Long Live the Bowl of Noodle Soup!'.  
<sup>88</sup> Phạm Quỳnh Phương, *Hero and Deity*, p. 171.

<sup>89</sup> de Tréglodé and Duiker, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>90</sup> Quyết nghị của phiên họp Hội Đồng Nội Các [Resolutions at the Meeting of the Cabinet], 20/08/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>91</sup> Cường Để had expressed the wish to have his ashes deposited at the Holy See in Tây Ninh, as the Cao Đài were among his 'most loyal supporters'. The urn, flown back from Japan, was greeted with full military honours on 12 October 1954. However, to deny the Cao Đài added prestige, the ashes were removed to Huế in 1957. Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 221–3, 229.

order, all civil servants should wear ‘the national dress’ (*quốc phục*)—a black turban and a long blue silk tunic. Borrowings from the French tradition included receptions for foreign delegations and civil servants, troop reviews, boat races, theatre, and fireworks, but also ‘Masses’ to be celebrated at churches and pagodas, with the latter accorded lower priority. At the same meeting, the Cabinet also approved ‘the draft ... proposing to punish criminals who act against external national security’.<sup>92</sup>

Meanwhile, the Department of Education was tasked with the drafting of heroic biographies for the upcoming National Day, in accordance with the directives provided by Ngô Đình Nhu, who made the final decisions. Throughout, we see Nhu’s constant imprint, accepting, revising, or rejecting, pencilling in blue his remarks down to the most minute details. Subsequently, provincial authorities submitted names of heroes who had fought against invaders; some were rejected as lacking national reputation, others (civil servants, village officials) because they had fallen ‘in the course of their duty’ rather than while fighting invaders to save the country.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, the official ‘List of National Heroes and Heroines Representative of the Indomitable Spirit of the Vietnamese People’ included 42 names, among them legendary figures such as the Trưng Queens and Trần Hưng Đạo. Significantly, the forty-second one was that of Ngô Đình Diệm’s elder brother, Ngô Đình Khôi, described as follows:

He was a mandarin of integrity, who dedicated himself to defending the rights of the people and of the land, and to fighting the colonial policy of repression and exploitation. When the Việt-Minh took over, he was well aware of the Communists’ cruel policy and unflinchingly opposed the Doctrine of the Three Nos.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, he was killed at the Hiền Sĩ Mountain, district of Phong-Điện (Thừa Thiên Province) around 1945.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Quyết nghị của phiên họp Hội Đồng Nội Các [Resolutions at the Meeting of the Cabinet], 20/08/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAI.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Lễ Cộng Hòa. Nhắc lại thành-tích các anh-hùng liệt-sĩ đã có công chống xâm lăng, 24/10/1956’ [The Republic’s Day. Recalling Accomplishments by Heroes and Martyrs Who Fought Invaders]. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAI.

<sup>94</sup> The *Tam Vô* or ‘Three Nos’ was a putative policy that Vietnamese anti-communists attributed to their communist rivals: No Family (*Vô Gia Đình*); No Nation (*Vô Tổ Quốc*); No Religion (*Vô Tôn Giáo*).

<sup>95</sup> Danh Sách và Tiểu Sử các Vị Anh-hùng Liệt-nữ tiêu-biểu tinh-thần bất-khuất của Dân-Tộc Việt-Nam [Names and Biographies of Heroes and Female Martyrs Symbolizing the Vietnamese People’s Irrepressible Spirit]. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAI.

In the turmoil of summer 1945, Khôi, Diễm's eldest brother, former governor of Quảng Ngãi, was executed along with his son, Huân, a former tax collector and interpreter for the Japanese consulate in Huế, and buried in an unmarked grave in Annam. Their remains were identified in February 1956 by the Ngô family—thanks to a network of informants set up in Central Vietnam by Ngô Đình Cẩn. They were given a solemn state funeral attended by the highest members of the Cabinet, a military honour guard following the flag-draped coffins, to the accompaniment of the national anthem, and reinterred in the Phú Cam family cemetery in Huế.<sup>96</sup> Khôi's was the only name that was mentioned as being a victim of the communists. Officially classified as a hero, Khôi was given a national commemoration, enhancing the myth of the living Ngô family members as the descendants of a long line of martyrs who died fighting for the country. In fact, Khôi had devotedly served the French for decades, working his way to the position of provincial governor. Subsequently, with French power eclipsed by that of Japan, he switched sides, throwing his support behind Prince Cường Để, incurring the wrath of French authorities, who forced him to resign in 1943.<sup>97</sup>

As the National Day approached, presidential directives rained upon the ministries, the province chiefs, mayors, and so on, reminding them to collect historical documents related to the fallen heroes, to locate their tombs to be renovated, and to contact their descendants.<sup>98</sup> Religious leaders were also 'reminded' to adhere to a strict schedule of bell tolling beginning with the Catholic churches from 5:45 to 5:50 a.m., with Buddhist pagodas and other temples to follow at 5:50.<sup>99</sup> Three bishoprics (Vĩnh Long, Cần Thơ, Saigon) were instructed to ensure that all the churches in the region toll their bells at exactly the appointed time.<sup>100</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Châu instructed the mayors of Saigon and Cholon, as well as the provincial and city heads, that there were to be solemn prayers for national heroes at churches, memorial

<sup>96</sup> Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam*, pp. 198–9; Trần Gia Phụng, 'Trường Hợp Phạm Quỳnh' ['Phạm Quỳnh's Case'], in Phạm Quỳnh, and Lương Ngọc Châu (eds.), *Giải Oan Lập Một Đoàn Tràn: Tuyển Tập* [*Redress for Phạm Quỳnh: A Collection*] (Silver Springs: Tâm Nguyên, 2001), pp. 337–8, fn. 38.

<sup>97</sup> Vũ Ngự Chiêu, *Các Vua Cuối Nhà Nguyễn*, vol. 3, pp. 855–6.

<sup>98</sup> Đại Biểu Chánh Phủ gửi các Tỉnh-Trưởng Nam-Việt [Government Representative to Provincial Governors of Nam Viet], 20/10/1956. Folder 16054. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Đại Biểu Chánh Phủ Kính gửi các Đức Giám-Mục Địa-Phận Vĩnh-Long, Cần-Thơ, Saigon [Government Representative to Bishops of Vĩnh Long, Can Tho, Saigon], 20/10/1956. Folder 16054. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

sites, temples, and pagodas on the morning of 26 October 1956.<sup>101</sup> The presidency also emphasized the fact that, until the National Day, all citizens should ‘daily pray for the national unification and for the Republic’s future to be ever radiant’.<sup>102</sup>

### Pomp and circumstances

President Diệm, through directives, repeatedly addressed the matter of the official dress. These stated that all had ‘to attend the Heroes Memorialization service in national dress’, defined as ‘a blue tunic and black turban’.<sup>103</sup> In the villages, ‘members of the administrative councils were allowed to wear the customary black tunic and turban [, but] everyone should be dressed formally and properly’.<sup>104</sup> The same directive went to the National Assembly, conveying in a softer tone that the president wished its members to follow suit. Invitations were sent out to all foreign delegations to attend on the ‘First Anniversary of the Founding of the Republic of Vietnam’. The presidency communicated the text of the ‘Oration for the Heroes’ to be declaimed by officials of all regions on the National Day. It recited heroic feats by ‘Children of the Lạc Hồng quadri-millennial race’, by anti-French heroes and so on but, lest listeners miss the point, the oration adjured: ‘We find ourselves [here] today thanks to our forebears/We are grateful to them, and thus we memorialize them/.../The entire people elected the President/He who had wandered overseas, tasting in turn sweetness

<sup>101</sup> Bộ Nội Vụ Văn Phòng [Office of the Department of Interior], 01/10/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAI.

<sup>102</sup> Đồng Lý Văn Phòng Phủ Tổng Thống [Chief of Cabinet of the Presidential Office], 20/10/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAI.

<sup>103</sup> Đồng Lý Văn Phòng Phủ Tổng Thống [Chief of Cabinet of the Presidential Office], 18/10/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐỊCH NAI. One can have an aperçu of how the imperial Ministry of Rites used to enforce a strict regulation concerning the matter of dress for all imperially related persons and officials from the following sources: Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* [*Classified Survey of the Institutions of Successive Courts*] (Ho Chí Minh City: Trẻ, 2014); Nội Các Triều Nguyễn, *Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Điển Sự Lễ: tập VIII (Bộ Lễ)* [Imperial Repertory of Institutions and Rules of Dai Nam, vol. VIII, Ministry of Rites], Viện Sử Học (ed. and trans.) (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 1993). The following illustrated work provides a rich visual understanding of past ceremonial attire: Trần Đình Sơn, *Đại lễ phục Việt Nam thời Nguyễn 1802–1945* [*Vietnamese Grand Court Dresses under the Nguyễn Dynasty*] (Hà Nội: Hồng-Đức, 2013).

<sup>104</sup> Đồng Lý Văn Phòng Phủ Tổng Thống Kính gửi Ông Chủ Tịch Quốc Hội Việt-Nam [Chief of Cabinet of the Presidential Office to Head of National Assembly], 1/10/1956. Folder 16054. PTTĐỊCH NAI.

and bitterness/Now he rightfully leads the citizens, a helmsman steering steadily.'<sup>105</sup>

The carefully orchestrated programme for the National Day opened with the 'Oration', followed by the president's arrival and reviewing of the troops to the strains of the national anthem. Diệm's proclamation of the Constitution was succeeded by his address to all the forces in his capacity as president and commander-in-chief. He congratulated them for their 'impeccable and martial performance on the National Day of 26 October 1956', praising them for being 'worthy of the valorous martial tradition of the race'. Diệm adjured them that, since an entire, dedicated nation had supported it, the Army must, in return, 'manifest the inherent qualities of the ideal soldier: Loyalty, Propriety, Faithfulness, Courage, Humbleness, to strengthen the Republic, protect the Constitution, and instill in the people an unshakeable belief in the glorious future of the Fatherland'.<sup>106</sup>

Reports began pouring in on the second day of the celebrations about what had been accomplished, reassuring the president that everything had been done per his directives. One hints at the not-so-subtle message of presidential religious priorities. The secretary for justice, Nguyễn Văn Sĩ, reported that he had represented the president at a Buddhist service for the fallen heroes conducted at the Phước Hòa Pagoda.<sup>107</sup> Also in attendance, he noted, were magistrates, prosecutors, the ambassador of Japan, and lower-level civil servants and military officers.<sup>108</sup> The ceremony took place in the late afternoon and lasted one hour, unlike the lengthy Catholic pomp of the morning attended by the president and the diplomatic corps. The message was clear: Buddhism was considered by the head of state as a secondary religion. The ceremony was covered in the foreign press, especially by

<sup>105</sup> Bài văn truy niệm các vị anh hùng liệt nữ đã hi sinh cho tổ quốc Việt Nam nhân ngày quốc khánh tuyên bố hiến pháp Cộng [sic] hòa [Oration for the Heroes and Heroines Who Sacrificed Themselves for the Fatherland, Vietnam, on the National Day of the Proclamation of the Constitution], 25/10/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐICH NAIL.

<sup>106</sup> Nhật Lệnh Của Tổng Thống Việt-Nam Cộng Hòa [Daily Directive of the President of the Republic of Vietnam], 29/10/1956. Folder 16054. PTTĐICH NAIL.

<sup>107</sup> The Phước Hòa Pagoda in Saigon's third district was the initial seat of the Association for Buddhist Studies for Southern Vietnam. Its abbot was Thích Quảng Đức, who was to be the first monk to immolate himself on 11 June 1963. <http://giacngo.vn/PrintView.aspx?Language=vi&ID=134201> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>108</sup> Kính đệ Ngài Tổng Thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa [Respectfully Submitted to His Excellency the President of the Republic], 27/10/1956. Folder 16057. PTTĐICH NAIL.

American newspapers, where Diệm, ‘the little president’, was widely praised for his accomplishments on the Republic’s first anniversary. One article probed more deeply, however, noting that ‘today in South Vietnam there is a big push under way to deify Diem to his people. Trained cheer leaders direct the crowds’.<sup>109</sup>

Likewise, discordant notes began to appear in this otherwise perfectly choreographed commemoration. A letter from the chairman of the National Assembly, Trần Văn Lắm, protested the perceived disrespect shown to its representatives. It reminded the president that, although the National Day commemorated the ‘birth of the Constitution’, its deputies encountered numerous difficulties, were in some cases prevented by the police from reaching the stands, and, for those who did make it, were seated in the rear. The letter complained that utter silence greeted its chairman as he arrived at the ceremony, and the proper ‘ritual pomp’ to which his position entitled him was lacking. Similar incidents took place in the provinces, the letter claimed.<sup>110</sup> Another participant, General Trần Văn Đôn, noted the Ngô brothers’ displeasure when then-Colonel Dương Văn Minh, fresh from victories against the Bình Xuyên and Hòa Hảo, was publicly hailed as ‘a hero of our people’, as he led the military parade on that day.<sup>111</sup>

### The years thereafter

In 1957, Diệm travelled extensively throughout Asia and was the honoured guest of the Eisenhower Administration. The American press, fuelled by the Harold Oram public relations firm’s campaign, praised Diệm as ‘Vietnam’s Man of Iron’, extolling the fact that ‘Diem has added a strongly spiritual ... note to his definition of “democracy” and remarking glowingly about his ‘deep religious bent’.<sup>112</sup> Catton and Masur have written that the regime’s propaganda machine projected to the world an image of Diệm as a liberally minded, culturally

<sup>109</sup> ‘Vietnam President Makes Progress Toward Recovery’, *The Times Record*, 25 October 1956, p. 20.

<sup>110</sup> Chủ tịch Quốc Hội Việt Nam Kính gửi Tổng-Thống Việt-Nam Cộng-Hòa [National Assembly Chairman to the President of the Republic of Vietnam], 31/10/1956. Folder 16054. PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

<sup>111</sup> Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng: Hồi Ký Chánh Trị* [Vietnam Witness: A Political Memoir] (Los Alamitos: Xuan Thu Publishing, 1989), pp. 147–8.

<sup>112</sup> Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*, pp. 254–6.

open, modernizing Asian leader, with his own Asian culture policy that supported the revival of 'Confucianism, Buddhism, and popular culture'.<sup>113</sup> John Donnell, a witness, noted that, from 1956 onward, Confucius-related events were on the rise and increased in scale, from anniversary celebrations to association foundings to literature competitions, in schools and at sports events, with the president delivering speeches and his brother, Nhu, declaring Confucian temples to be part of the 'national cultural patrimony'.<sup>114</sup> However, beneath that culturally festive façade, there was a darker current dominated by a policy of increasing cultural and religious selectivism, with Catholicism playing a dominant role. 1959 was officially declared a Marian Year with countrywide celebrations, with the Cathedral at La Vang officially recognized as a national shrine.<sup>115</sup> It culminated in the dedication of 'South Vietnam ... to the Immaculate Heart of Mary', with Diệm leading a national pilgrimage to La Vang, 'promoted to a basilica minor in 1961'.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, the attempt to associate the Ngô nation with an unbroken past and millennial symbols of heroic resistance was integrated into the state's commemorative matrix of 'Vietnamese nation-construction' with the Ngô family and Diệm as national symbols. By then, many of the Ngô family's early supporters had left the regime—and the country—among them Trần Chánh Thành and Nguyễn Hữu Châu.<sup>117</sup> With the rise in influence of the Nhu couple, Thành lost his status as a member of the 'inner circle' and joined the ranks of 'golden exiles', formerly trusted aides who were increasingly populating Republic of Vietnam embassies in developing countries. Madame Nhu later referred to him as a 'crypto-coco'—by which she apparently meant a communist sympathizer—and always harboured suspicions about his loyalty.<sup>118</sup> Meanwhile, Châu, her

<sup>113</sup> Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, pp. 40–1; Matthew B. Masur, 'Hearts and Minds: Cultural Nation Building in South Vietnam, 1954–1963' (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2004), p. 92.

<sup>114</sup> Donnell, 'Personalism in Vietnam', pp. 33–4. See also Jason Lim, 'Confucianism as a Symbol of Solidarity: Cultural Relations between the Republic of China and the Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1963', *Issues and Studies* 50.4 (2014), pp. 119–56.

<sup>115</sup> Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, pp. 162–5.

<sup>116</sup> George A. Carver, Jr, 'The Real Revolution in South Viet Nam', in Fishel (ed.), *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict*, p. 272; Demery, *Finding the Dragon Lady*, pp. 154–55.

<sup>117</sup> Telegram from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Lodge) to the Department of State, Saigon, 31 October 1963. *FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume IV, Vietnam*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63vo4/d250> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, p. 67; Henderson and Fishel, 'The Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem', p. 196; Miller, *Misalliance*, pp. 133–5; Ngô-Đình et al., *La République du Viêt-Nam*, pp. 164–5.



now estranged brother-in-law, in his communications with American officials, expressed frustration at the nefarious role played by the Ngô family and the omnipotent *Cần Lao*. He spoke of the ‘general demoralization of the administration’, as it was widely believed that ‘sycophancy and slander ... were the tools by which one achieved power and prestige’.<sup>119</sup> Catton explained the Republic’s factional in-fighting as legacies of ‘traditions of court intrigue’ and ‘colonial politics [that] positively encouraged the suspicion of others’.<sup>120</sup> American ‘nation-builders’, including the teams from Michigan State University, equally suffered. Diệm terminated its contract in 1962, and Fishel, increasingly critical of the regime, was forced to leave Vietnam. In a subsequent letter to MSU President John Hannah, Fishel harshly denounced the ‘evil influences’ of Nhu and his ‘Borgia-like’ wife but blamed Diệm himself as the main factor in preventing the teams from achieving their goals.<sup>121</sup>

### Conclusion

In its early phase, the Republic’s leaders, free of the colonial domination but deeply imbued by French practices, were uncertain about how to build a nation, and how to define and express it symbolically in a manner befitting the Vietnamese legacy. They peered into a pre-colonial and anti-French past and found familiar national beacons easily recognizable in the heroes who had opposed invaders. But, beyond these well-known figures, who should be honoured? What criteria should be used to define a ‘national hero’—one that could replace Joan of Arc but appeal to the peasants of the former Annam and Cochinchina, now the Republic of Vietnam? Even though the memories of ‘fallen local and regional heroes’ were carefully honoured, these heroes had to be ‘immaculate’, untainted by any suspicious

<sup>119</sup> Telegram from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 25 February 1958, *FRUS, 1958–1960, Volume I, Vietnam*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d5> (accessed 8 November 2018); Despatch from the Ambassador in France (Houghton) to the Department of State, 31 December 1958, *FRUS, 1958–1960, Volume I, Vietnam*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d46> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>120</sup> Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>121</sup> Letter from Wesley R. Fishel to President John Hannah, President, 17 February, 1962. Wesley Fishel Papers, 6-20-70-116-UA17-95-000111.192, MSU, <http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/fullrecord.php?kid=6-20-53> (accessed 8 November 2018).

political associations, with moral standards suiting the Ngô vision. As one of the 42 national heroes, Khôi was deemed to be a symbolic portend of the Ngô nation to come. This heroic memorialization of a family member was part of an all-encompassing campaign to leave an indelible imprint on the Vietnamese ethos through a process that Đỗ Mậu termed *quốc gia hóa* or 'nationalization' of family celebrations. The patrimonial ritualization, which included the 'President's Patron Saint's Day' on 21 June 1956 and the President's Sixtieth Birthday, both celebrated nationwide, reached a crescendo in 1961 with festivities for the Ngô matriarch, which parroted centuries-old imperial longevity traditions. Thus, Khá's widow received a sumptuous 'Nonегarian Celebration' attended by numerous military and civilian delegations and the highest Cabinet members, who flocked to Huế, eager to show their devotion to the Ngô family, with full prostrations before the matriarch as before the monarchs of old, while the Department of Interior organized a lavish Thanksgiving Mass at the Saigon Cathedral.<sup>122</sup>

The 1956 National Day's organization and symbolism manifested an autocratic urge to control everything: the speeches, the chronological order of religious ceremonies nationwide, even the sartorial minutia for attendees. As the Republic sank further into the quagmire and Ngô rule became more rigid, patrimonial, and dictatorial, the search for national identity would be folded within an all-encompassing Ngô nation defined by the cult of Diệm and expressed in staunch Catholic and anti-communist terms. Contrary to Catton and Miller's arguments that Diem set out 'to build a version of a modern nation rather than create a copy of the precolonial past' and that his 'ideas about governance, politics and society were not holdovers from Vietnam's ancient past', symbolically, the Ngô nation built by the brothers was indeed a relic of the past, albeit one swathed in the 'emperor's new clothes'.<sup>123</sup> Kathryn Statler, analysing the process through which the United States of America displaced colonial France, argues that the former had in the process constructed a neo-colony by replacing French values with American culture, imprinting it on the Vietnamese population through its nation-building agencies and programmes.<sup>124</sup> This formulation presupposed that the 'South

<sup>122</sup> Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam*, pp. 202–3, 407; Đoàn Thêm, *Hai Mươi Năm Qua*, pp. 286, 304.

<sup>123</sup> Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, p. 37; Miller, *Misalliance*, p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> Statler, *Replacing France*, pp. 249, 258–60.

Vietnamese' on whose behalf the United States of America was to nation-build were 'essentially malleable and their history and culture were relegated to a seemingly irrelevant past'.<sup>125</sup> In a word, the Vietnamese below the Seventeenth Parallel were considered as *tabula rasa*—without past and culture—like clay that American nation-builders' initiatives might shape into modern citizens, suffused with democratic values, defined solely by their loyalty to a modern Vietnamese nation state. Suffice only to provide them with the tools necessary for building a viable state that would dispense capitalist economic development and democratic values following 'American standards, culture, and language'. The *deus ex machina* selected by Washington to carry out this programme was a man believed to be the 'saviour of democracy' simply because of the American perception of Diệm as an anti-communist nationalist and a willing puppet. This perception gave little weight to the fact that he and his family issued from an intransigently devout Catholic family of Central Vietnam—legendary for being a bastion of deep-seated imperial tradition and culture—with a past mired in mandarinal administrative experience and willing collaboration with occupying forces, be they French or Japanese.

Among those who attempted to explicate the Republic's downfall, Philip Taylor contends that Diệm's 'authoritarian leadership attempted to achieve unity by suppressing ideological alternatives to its paternalistic rule' by forcing a uniform Vietnamese identity on highland peoples as well as on the Chinese diaspora, and by suppressing the dissenting political-religious organizations distinctive of the frontier culture of the Mekong Delta such as the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài.<sup>126</sup> A devout Catholic, Diệm had an abhorrence for all non-Catholic, animistic beliefs and practices considered as *tà đạo* (heterodox)—the definition that, ironically, the Vietnamese monarchs had once applied to Catholicism. Karin von Hippel, for her part, writing about 'democracy by force', has pointed out that, overall, 'nation building really means state building', namely the construction of 'a government that may or may not be democratic, but preferably is stable'—a statement that aptly describes the American nation-

<sup>125</sup> Michael E. Latham, 'Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation-building in South Vietnam', *Third World Quarterly* 27.1 (2006), p. 28.

<sup>126</sup> Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), p. 35.

building experience in Vietnam.<sup>127</sup> In this sense, the American officials used the term 'nation-building' *misleadingly*, since, in the case of the Vietnamese republic, America focused rather on 'state-building' as it attempted to construct a functioning government through the establishment of modern, Western institutions on remnants of a French-created colonial state. A *Pentagon Papers* commentator did not err in describing Ngô Đình Diệm as follows: 'despite extensive travel and education in the West, and despite his revolutionary mien, he remained what he had been raised: a mandarin of Imperial Hue, steeped in filial piety, devoted to Vietnam's past, modern only to the extent of an intense, conservative Catholicism.'<sup>128</sup> To this day, much of the physical infrastructure that the United States of America constructed south of the 17th parallel is still functional and highly regarded in reunified socialist Việt Nam. But America failed to impose its vision of a Vietnamese nation, as, to do so, it would have required a *longue durée* approach that would have been inconceivable and a cultural understanding capable of transcending its own cultural and political Cold War framework. It would also have needed a genuine 'national hero' worthy of its trust and that of the southern Vietnamese.

<sup>127</sup> Karin von Hippel, 'Democracy by Force: A Renewed Commitment to Nation Building', *The Washington Quarterly* 23.1 (2000), pp. 95–6.

<sup>128</sup> United States of America, Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam: The Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 1: p. 253.