

MÉTIS CHILD REMOVAL IN FRENCH INDOCHINA

Change and Continuity from the Second World War to Decolonisation

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ABSTRACT: In this article, the practice of removing mixed-race, or *métis*, children from their indigenous mothers in French Indochina is examined. While the changed circumstances of the Second World War and the ensuing process towards decolonisation forced colonial authorities to rethink their priorities, the practice of child removal remained constant. Against the backdrop of this persistent and relatively unchanging practice, changes and continuities in rhetoric about and justifications for child removal reveal underlying colonial interests and anxieties around race, memory, and maintaining French influence, even beyond the official end of French colonial rule.

KEYWORDS: colonial practices, *métissage*, repatriation, FOEFI, *métis* protection system



Introduction

All throughout the colonial period, and in many cases decades beyond formal decolonisation, removal of indigenous or half-indigenous children remained a widespread practice, whose ubiquity and durability are indicative of its central role in European colonial endeavours (Firpo & Jacobs 2019: 530-1). The systematic removal of *métis*, or mixed-race, children in the colony of French Indochina (present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) differed from more well-known cases in settler colonial contexts, such as the Residential School system in Canada and the Stolen Generations of Australia. While child removal in settler colonial contexts was informed by a “logic of elimination”, as phrased by Patrick Wolfe, in Indochina, where colonisers never made up more than a tiny fraction of the total population,¹ different motivations were at play (Firpo & Jacobs 2019: 533-5).

While the forced removal of children within settler colonial contexts is well-researched, the removal of *métis* children is widely overlooked in general works on the French possessions in Southeast Asia, including Indochina, and very little studied as a separate field of inquiry, despite the scale and persistence of the practice, from the early years of colonisation and well into the postcolonial period. One notable exception is the work of Christina E. Firpo, who identifies one primary, overarching purpose of child removal; *métis* children were to “aid in reproducing the French nation” (Firpo 2016: 6). In the following, I will attempt to cast light on the changing faces of this project by examining changes and continuities in colonial concerns surrounding *métis* children. First, I will examine how looking at developments in Indochina from the Second World War through decolonisation from the perspective of the “*métis* issue” can reveal nuances to colonial perceptions of race as they were challenged by changing circumstances. Next will follow a brief discussion of what the lens of *métis* children and their mothers can reveal about colonial views of gender relations, and how these often-overlooked groups can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of agency in the colonial setting.

¹ Estimates say most likely no more than 0.2 percent at any one time; see Ha 2014: 122-33.

Eric Jennings points out how, when examining colonial questions, metropole-centred approaches often reveal mostly the rhetoric of colonising states, with significant discrepancies between such rhetoric and “much more overlooked and revealing practices” (Jennings 2001: 5). In this article, *métis* child removal will serve as one such practice. The phenomenon of child removal is especially suited for critical examination of colonial rhetoric, since this practice remained relatively stable and unchanged throughout the colonial period and beyond. Thus, when held up against the ever-changing justifications for the practice, gaps appear which reveal the underlying motivations, anxieties, and interests behind colonial rhetoric on the “*métis* issue”.

Development of the “*Métis* Issue”

French men fathered children in Southeast Asia for at least a few centuries before the beginning of formal colonisation, due to French trade and missionary activity. In the years between 1858 and 1893, the French established colonies and protectorates in what was to become known as the Indochina Union, and the increased military and imperial interest in the area led to a larger French presence (Brocheux & Hémary 2009: 15-17). The largely military nature of the French presence meant that there was a significant gender imbalance in the European inhabitants of Indochina, since European women were only encouraged to immigrate to the colony at a later stage (Ha 2014: 125-32). In the early years of colonisation, colonial authorities thus held a general acceptance of the practice of concubinage, where French men would form relationships and cohabit with native women. Such unions were considered beneficial by French men and colonial authorities alike, since concubines provided domestic labour and comforts free of charge, while also regulating sexual activity and staving off the perceived threats to the men’s moral and physical health associated with prostitution and homosexual activity. Moreover, intimate relationships with local women helped French men learn local languages and customs (Ha 2014: 29-31).

Increasingly rigid ideas of racial categorisation and the subsequent attempts to maintain clear distinctions between the French colonisers and the native colonial subjects eventually brought an end to official condonement of concubinage, and colonists were instead encouraged to marry the increasing number of European women in Indochina, and establish domestic situations modelled

on metropolitan bourgeois households (Ha 2014: 29-31). The change in official attitudes did not, however, stop white men from establishing relationships with native women, and they continued to do so throughout the colonial period. As these unions were generally temporary and seldom took the form of legally binding marriages, the result was a growing population of children who were never legally recognised by their French fathers and were left with their native mothers in the indigenous milieu once the father went back to the metropole, was stationed elsewhere in the empire, died, or simply ended the relationship with his Asian partner, or in cases where the birth of a child was the result of rape or transactional sex.

Such children came to be referred to as *métis*, or mixed-blood. Their position in the empire was tenuous and ambiguous in a number of ways, which was underlined by the fact that *métis* often found themselves struggling to fit into the social as well as administrative structures of the colony, since there was no official legal category for *métis*. *Métis* should thus primarily be understood as a social category which came into being as a result of, and developed in tandem with, the French colonial presence (Saada 2012: 8-9). While interracial unions, or *métissage*, was a reality in practically all parts of the empire, the “*métis* issue” was first problematised as a significant imperial challenge, and potential threat, in the context of Indochina, which functioned as a sort of colonial “laboratory”, where potential solutions were formulated and subsequently exported to different parts of the empire (Saada 2012: 3-4). This perceived colonial issue was primarily taken up by decentralised, civil so-called protection societies, who would seek out “abandoned” children, including those who were in fact living with their mothers, and remove them from the home on grounds of “moral” abandonment, the exact definition of which was determined by metropolitan French laws, or simply at the discretion of protection society officials.

Overlapping Continuities in Vichy Racial Views in Indochina

Developments during the Second World War brought about significant changes to colonial rule and its associated ideas of race in Indochina, while at the same time containing strong elements of continuity regarding both the preceding and following decades. When seen through the lens of ideas and practices associated with *métis* children, the 1940-45 period was characterised by demographic

concerns which had been prevalent since the First World War as well as throughout the interwar period and were simply exacerbated by wartime conditions. At the same time, the uncertainty of war, and not least the presence of Japanese occupying forces, brought about new anxieties about retaining French influence in the colony. This was to remain a defining feature of French attitudes and practices regarding the *métis* of Indochina well beyond formal decolonisation.

As such, developments regarding the “*métis* issue” show the era of the Second World War to be an intersection of enduring and persistent colonial agendas of preceding and subsequent years, where the uncertain conditions of war caused a shift in priorities and mentalities regarding race, citizenship, and nationhood. Continuities and change alike in the colony are strongly tied to the influence of the authoritarian Vichy regime, headed by Philippe Pétain, whose establishment in the metropole in 1940 and close collaboration with the German National Socialist regime was quickly felt in Indochina. In June of 1940, the Governor General of Indochina, Georges Catroux, who later joined de Gaulle and Free France, was dismissed. He was replaced as Governor General by Jean Decoux, a loyal Pétainist naval officer, and the everyday administration of Indochina was brought under the control of Vichy officials (Jennings 2001: 131-8). Developments in Indochina were heavily influenced by Vichy ideology, and Pétain’s *Révolution nationale*, centred around the motto of *travail, famille, patrie* (‘work, family, fatherland’), was exported to the colonial context (Jennings 2001: 20-22).

Views of race in Indochina as well as the metropole during the Vichy years were, overall, a continuation of pre-war views, with a strong focus on racial categorisations and hierarchies. However, from the late 1930’s, views of racial categorisations in Indochina began to diverge from those in the metropole in significant ways.

In the metropole, the establishment of the Vichy regime meant an abrupt departure from the republicanism of the preceding period. Regarding views of race, however, the change was much less drastic. The preoccupation with racial mixing and “degeneration” and the associated increasingly rigid views of racial categorisation which had become widely accepted in Europe by the 1930’s were also prevalent in republican France, where an exclusive view of racial categorisation developed. In the metropolitan, exclusive understanding of race, mixed-race individuals were generally not

considered part of the white racial group. This exclusive view of race was a result of anxieties surrounding interracial unions engendered by the pronatalist movement, which developed in response to concerns about population deficits during the First World War, and remained prevalent through the Second World War (Firpo 2007: 209).

In Indochina, republican ideals never gained much traction among colonial administrators in the first place; French colonial rule had maintained an authoritarian character throughout the Third Republic (1870-1940), and the assimilationist policies which had developed in some of the older colonial possessions were not applied in Indochina (Jennings 2001: 133). Despite this, an inclusive view of race developed in Indochina from the end of the 1930's, marked especially by the colony-wide implementation of a new policy regarding *métis* children in 1940. The policy stated that *métis* children with lighter skin were to be considered part of the colony's white population, and that abandoned *métis* (who in many cases were in fact living with their indigenous mothers) were to be placed in the *métis* care system and raised as Frenchmen (Firpo 2007: 203-205). The divergence between views of race in the metropole and the colony is telling; the focus on the children's physical attributes shows that racial categorisation and hierarchisation remained as central to the ordering of colonial society as it had ever been, but that different interests were at play than in the metropole.

Firpo identifies a new set of colonial concerns which developed around the years of the Second World War; a perceived demographic imbalance between native and French populations, and the necessity of ensuring a lasting white, French presence in the colony. Because of their perceived possession of white racial characteristics, *métis* children were seen by colonial authorities and the newly centralised *métis* protection organisation, the Fondation Jules Brévié,² as a potential solution to these issues (Firpo 2007: 209). Thus, the Pétainist Governor General, Decoux, ordered an intensified effort to locate fatherless *métis* children, remove them from their mothers, and give them a French education, so that they could become part of a permanent, white elite in the colony, or settle in areas with a shortage of agricultural labour or a perceived demographic imbalance due to

² Named after the Governor General of 1936-1939, who was behind the initiative to centralise *métis* protection under the colonial government in 1939 (Firpo 2016: 82-85). Brévié since became secretary of state to the colonies in the Vichy government in the metropole.

“indigenous overpopulation” (Firpo 2016: 92-8). Thus, new circumstances lent new meaning to the practice of removing fatherless *métis*, whose ambiguous position in the racial hierarchy now made authorities see them as a solution to colonial problems, rather than primarily as a threat to the colonial order.

However, strong continuities in such colonial concerns can still be seen in the rhetoric used by Governor General Decoux and the Fondation Jules Brévié, which holds clear echoes of pre-war concerns about maintaining “white prestige” in the colony. Maintaining the standing of the colony’s white population, both materially, politically, and socially, had been a central concern of colonial authorities since the early days of colonisation, and the risk of abandoned *métis* falling into poverty and prostitution had been a central element of rhetoric on child removals since the early years of the practice. In a letter from 1921, François Baudoin, the Resident Superior of Cambodia, writes to the Governor General of Indochina on the subject of the area’s *métis* protection society, la Société de protection de l’enfance de Phnom-Penh. In this letter, he stresses that protection societies taking in abandoned *métis* are essential to the upholding of “the prestige of the French reputation in the colony”.³ In his letter, Baudoin reflects the main focal point of the “*métis* issue” at the time, namely, that *métis* abandoned by their European fathers would become “rebellious outcasts”⁴ who would threaten the colonial regime; a concern which was reiterated by protection society officials two decades later (Firpo 2016: 92).

The interplay between continuities and changes in the justifications of *métis* child removal show that changed perceptions of colonial problems brought about a nuancing of the otherwise rigid racial categorisations of the colony. However, the telling gaps between metropolitan and colonial views of race, as well as the continuity in rhetoric on white prestige, reveal that the practice of child removal during the years of the Second World War was still primarily carried out in order to further the interests of colonial authorities. Eventually, the underlying understandings of racial belonging

³ “(...) le prestige du nom français dans la colonie”; Lettre du Résident Supérieur au Cambodge au GGI au sujet de la Société de protection de l’enfance de Phnom-Penh – circulaire 26C du 24 juillet 1921, FR ANOM GGI//15298.

⁴ “(...) des révoltés rejetés”; Lettre du Résident Supérieur au Cambodge au GGI au sujet de la Société de protection de l’enfance de Phnom-Penh – circulaire 26C du 24 juillet 1921, FR ANOM GGI//15298.

showed their brittle nature when met with the reality of the Japanese presence in the colony, which forced colonial authorities to rethink their relationship with the indigenous population, as well as the *métis*.

The Japanese Presence and Other Ambiguities

The implementation of Vichy policy in Indochina was made complicated early on by the entry of Japanese forces into Tonkin in September 1940. An important aspect of Japan's imperial project of creating a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (GEACS) was the liberation of East Asian countries from European colonial powers in favour of bringing them under Japanese influence. Throughout the early years of the 1940's, the European powers lost control of all colonial possessions east of India. In Indochina, however, the French colonial administration was retained until 1945, despite the obvious tension this caused within the framework of the GEACS (Shiraishi & Furuta 1992: 59-60). The Japanese, too, were faced with the complexity of racial relations in the former European colonies, where, just as in Indochina, the European presence had caused Eurasian (mixed-race European and Asian) populations to develop.

Japan's policy towards the Eurasian populations of the Southeast Asian territories where it ousted European colonial powers was not consistent, but was adapted to the circumstances of each, ranging from actively seeking out Eurasians on account of their cultural and linguistic competences, to sparing them from European internment, to active hostility. Japan's policy towards the *métis* of Indochina was less hostile than in other parts of occupied Southeast Asia, likely due to the lack of French resistance. Some mothers nonetheless feared for the safety of their *métis* children and attempted to disguise their European features (Firpo 2016: 88).

This illustrates the further ambiguity that the presence of the Japanese lent to the *métis* population's position in the racial categorisations of the colony. Now, the very features that were used by colonial authorities and the Fondation Jules Brévié to determine a child's rightful place in the white racial group – and their access to the associated privileges – were at the same time seen to exclude them from racial affinity with the Japanese and thus putting them in a position of perceived risk. Thus, the Japanese presence brought about new uncertainties for the colony's *métis* population. The

population of fatherless *métis* were in turn considered a possible solution to some of the problems colonial authorities faced due to the Japanese presence and, especially, due to their own policies in response to it. In an attempt to steer local traditionalist elites away from Communism as well as to counter the pan-Asian propaganda of the Japanese occupying force, the colonial authorities implemented policies that favoured native elites. For example, Governor General Decoux opened colonial administrative posts to local elites in an attempt to court them away from pan-Asian sentiment (Jennings 2001: 165-7). This plan was delayed by the opposition of Vichy higher-ups, but came to fruition in 1942, after Jules Brévié became secretary of state to the colonies (Jennings 2001: 165-6).

Part of the decision to include indigenous elites in the colonial administrative apparatus should most likely be seen in light of the “*métis* issue”. The Fondation Jules Brévié thought up a strategy for turning abandoned *métis* children into a permanent white elite which could serve as a buffer between the colonial authorities and local elites (Jennings 2001: 165-6; Firpo 2016: 91). This was one of the ways in which the *métis* population came to be seen, on account of their perceived whiteness, as a resource within the inclusive but strictly hierarchical perceptions of race of the Vichy colonial period.

One of the central elements of colonial demographic concerns of the period was the ability to maintain a sufficient white presence in the city of Dalat, which was to become the colonial capital in 1946, to uphold its status as a little European island in the colony (Jennings 2011: 19). As part of this vision, in 1939, a so-called *École des Enfants de Troupe*, a military academy, specifically for *métis* youth, was opened near Dalat. At first, *métis* children were placed in academies for indigenous children, but the colonial authorities were nervous that *métis* children admitted to indigenous schools would not develop sufficient French identities, or might come to resent colonial authorities for being placed in schools with colonial subjects, echoing earlier anxieties about *métis* children who were left in the indigenous milieu (Firpo 2016: 81-2). The same anxieties that lay behind the creation of a school specifically for *métis* also created a renewed sense of urgency to remove *métis* children from their mothers (Firpo 2016: 82).

As predicted by critics, the official program of the Vichy regime did not serve its purpose in the colonial setting, and with the liberation of the metropole in 1944, the regime and its collaborationist policies were discredited with the beginning of the so-called *épuration légale* ('legal purge'), the series of trials where thousands of people were found guilty of treason owing to their collaboration with the Vichy regime and, by extension, the German occupying force. As for the colonies, the majority had come to support de Gaulle by 1943 (Namba 2019: 520). In Indochina, however, the Vichy regime remained in place almost until the end of the war, only being dismantled by the March 1945 coup by the Japanese. The approach to *métis* children became one arena within which the construction of collective French memory of the contentious legacy of the Vichy years was carried out.

Blurring the Lines: Child Removal as a (Post)Colonial Practice

In January of 1946, the Fondation Jules Brévié was dissolved by the newly formed Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This decision was largely ignored by protection society members, who disregarded DRV law, but the colonial government likewise decided to dissolve the organisation because of its association with Jules Brévié, due to his affiliation with the Vichy government (Firpo 2016: 116). The *métis* protection system went back to being a civilian undertaking with state support, but remained largely centralised in an organisation which became known as the Fédération des Oeuvres de l'Enfance Française d'Indochine, or FOEFI (Firpo 2016: 106-7). The fall of the Vichy regime as well as the discreditation of many of the doctrines of scientific racism after the war brought with it new perceptions of racial belonging. Within the *métis* protection system, this meant a further departure from rigid racial categorisations and the ubiquitous focus on white racial characteristics.

With the outbreak of the Indochina War in 1946, the vision of *métis* children ensuring the French presence in the colony, a sentiment which had emerged during the Second World War, also took on new meaning, and new potency. Throughout the Indochina War, colonial authorities saw the removal and institutionalisation of *métis* children as a means to prevent them from defecting to the

anticolonial Vietnamese forces, as *métis* joining the ranks of the anticolonial movement would pose a political threat as well as a threat to French prestige (Firpo 2016: 106). At the same time, *métis* children who were imbued with French culture and values through the protection system could provide a way of ensuring continued French influence in Indochina as the colony was fighting for independence.

During the Indochina War, and after its end and thus the end of the official French colonial presence in Indochina, changing anxieties surrounding the “*métis* issue” contributed to one of the most drastic changes in the otherwise stable practice of *métis* child removal – the evacuation, or “repatriation”, of *métis* children to the metropole. The new protection system leadership feared for the safety of *métis* children in Indochina. Their perceived potential for retaining French influence in Indochina, which was seen as desirable by the *métis* leadership, was seen in quite the opposite light by the Vietnamese independence movement, who saw them rather as reminders of French colonial oppression (Firpo 2016: 107).

Thus, the *métis* protection system brought large numbers of *métis* children to France, where they attempted to reunite them with their fathers or paternal families or have them adopted by French families (Firpo 2016: 124-5). Those who weren’t adopted were placed in FOEFI orphanages or religious institutions where they continued to receive a “French” education and upbringing, similarly to the practice in the colony in the preceding decades.

The *métis* children’s transitioning from the colonial to the metropolitan context highlights how race was still very much a factor post-1945 – and how perceptions of race differed between colony and metropole. “Repatriated” *métis* children often grew up to be “socially displaced and déclassé” (Firpo 2016: 133). While their perceived white racial characteristics had set them apart from the indigenous population in the colony, in France their Asian heritage was what stood out, and they were subjected to persisting racial prejudices. In this way, the practice of “repatriation” exposes the meanings that were constructed around *métis* children in the colony to be just that – constructs created so serve a specific purpose in the colonial setting, but which took on new, unforeseen meaning in the metropole. At the same time, the FOEFI continued to use racial characteristics to determine whether

to “repatriate” children, belying the idea of a clean break with the racial categorisations of the Vichy years.

After the end of the Indochina War in 1954 and the subsequent end of the French colonial presence in Indochina, the FOEFI continued to operate, invoking colonial-era laws which were no longer in place to legitimise the continued practice of child removal. Firpo has pointed out this continuity in legal justification as an example of the “increasingly blurry distinction between colonial and postcolonial eras in Franco-Vietnamese history” (Firpo 2016: 132). This blurring of lines caused significant friction between FOEFI and the French authorities, who feared for France’s reputation and diplomatic relations in Vietnam (Firpo 2016: 132-3).

After 1954, the *métis* issue had become an issue of memory for both the French authorities and the FOEFI, but with very different meanings ascribed to the continued child removals and “repatriations”. While the French state was firmly focused on shaping the collective memory of the colonial era in Indochina as a closed chapter, the FOEFI saw the – in their view – benevolent act of *métis* repatriation as a means of maintaining a positive memory and a degree of legitimacy for the French empire in France as well as in the former colony, even as the French presence in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos was at an end (Firpo 2016: 126).

Seen from the perspective of the FOEFI, it was not a given that the departure of a formal colonial presence meant the complete retraction of French influence, or the relegation of the colonial project to a shameful corner of national memory. For the FOEFI, the symbolically significant mission of protecting *métis* children in Vietnam maintained a degree of legitimacy for the colonial project, which otherwise had very little left (Firpo 2016: 133).

One development which is very telling of official French motivations regarding the construction of a clear cut in collective memory between France’s colonial and postcolonial relationship with Indochina is the partial takeover of the practice of *métis* child removal and repatriations around the mid-1960’s by l’Assistance Publique, the French social services, who began bringing *métis* children to France through the public welfare system (Firpo 2016: 154). Now, the French authorities were not simply condoning but actively appropriating the practices of the *métis* protection system, with

FOEFI even critiquing l'Assistance Publique for coercing mothers into giving up their children – using much the same techniques the *métis* protection system had itself been employing for decades (Firpo 2016: 154).

This begs the question of why *métis* child removal and repatriations were partially taken over by the French authorities even as the independent *métis* care system was allowed to remain in place for more than a decade, although the French authorities were at times working to defund or even close down the FOEFI. Here, the appropriation and continuation of FOEFI practice by authorities seems to suggest that the French authorities' issue was never with the continuation of the actual practice of child removal after formal decolonisation, but rather an issue of optics and, significantly, of memory.

It would seem that it was not so much the actual practices of the FOEFI that were unacceptable to French authorities, but rather the FOEFI as an inherently colonial actor, with its strong ties to the legal structures of the colonial era and overlap in individual actors with colonial leadership, including the Vichy regime. As such, we see in the relationship between the FOEFI and French authorities in the ambiguous transition from the colonial to the postcolonial how the changing contextualisation and justification of a relatively unchanging practice reveals underlying motivations. In France, the post-1954 preoccupation with the upholding of France's international reputation and the firm placement of the colonial era in Indochina within the realm of memory did not immediately bring authorities to put an end to child removal and "repatriation". Rather, it caused them to gradually single out the pre-1954 system as embodied by the FOEFI as a symbol of colonial continuities which did not fit within the official French agenda of constructing the memory of a decisive break with the colonial era in Indochina.

Gendered Anxieties and Colonial Agency

The racialised views of Frenchness that become apparent when examining the motivations for *métis* child removal are closely tied to heavily gendered rhetoric and justifications for the practice. Whereas pronatalist sentiment had led to a larger degree of acceptance of single mothers in the metropole, the same was not the case for single indigenous mothers in the colonial setting (Firpo 2016: 42).

One of the most persistent aspects of colonial authorities' and protection societies' rhetoric on *métis* child removal is the demonisation and vilification of indigenous mothers. From at least the turn of the century and until the end of the Vietnam War, indigenous single mothers of *métis* children were consistently referred to as prostitutes. As justification for removing their children, authorities portrayed indigenous mothers as morally base, and claimed that they would return to prostitution once their French lovers left, leaving the *métis* children to grow up in an immoral environment (Firpo 2016: 27-8).

Rhetoric on the *métis* children themselves reveals heavily gendered anxieties as well (Firpo 2016: 34). The concerns for white prestige, as described above, were expressed regarding *métisse* girls in very particular terms. Their potential to threaten white prestige and the colonial order was understood largely in terms of sexuality and reproduction, just as the solution proposed by protection societies was most often marriage with a respectable (preferably French) partner. In the context of post-war "repatriations", FOEFI wards in the metropole were encouraged to marry metropolitan French men and women (Firpo 2016: 146). For the FOEFI, marriage was a central means of ensuring that *métis* wards became integrated into metropolitan French society (Firpo 2016: 153). Especially for female wards, the FOEFI was preoccupied with monitoring their sexualities and sought to make them into good wives and mothers who would make attractive marriage partners (Firpo 2016: 146-7).

The preoccupation with the sexuality and marriageability of "repatriated" *métisse* girls reflects a strong continuity in the interwoven concerns of class, race, and gender, which remained central to the "*métis* issue" throughout the decades. The Resident Superior of Cambodia's letter from 1921 thus reflects a similar sentiment, as he emphasises that female wards of the *métis* protection system in Indochina "most often find themselves marrying either our compatriots or natives occupying a certain social rank".⁵ Here, marriage of *métisse* girls to men from the indigenous population of

⁵ "(...) trouvent le plus souvent à se marier soit avec de nos compatriotes soit avec des indigènes occupant un certain rang social"; Lettre du Résident Supérieur au Cambodge au GGI au sujet de la Société de protection de l'enfance de Phnom-Penh – circulaire 26C du 24 juillet 1921, FR ANOM GGI//15298.

Indochina is seen as acceptable, so long as it will not steer them into the lower classes and thus cause harm to white prestige.

Another aspect of child removal which remained constant even after the addition of “repatriations” to the practice, was the coercive measures used to obtain custody of *métis* children, and the disregard for maternal consent, justified by the demonisation and vilification of indigenous mothers. Just as the FOEFI continued to use colonial-era laws to justify separating children from their mothers even after decolonisation, the organisation continued to use the same bureaucratic tactics to pressure mothers to give up their children (Firpo 2016: 138-9).

It is clear, however, that indigenous women and *métis* children themselves used similar bureaucratic measures to avoid removal and “repatriation”. For example, there are examples of mothers, and *métis* children themselves, requesting Vietnamese naturalisation for *métis* children to keep the FOEFI from being able to take them to France (Firpo 2016: 142). External circumstances also seem to have influenced indigenous mothers’ sense of agency. After the 1973 Paris Peace Accords and the ensuing ceasefire and withdrawal of American troops, some mothers reclaimed children in FOEFI custody, and both mothers and children in some cases refused “repatriation” (Firpo 2016: 158). On the other hand, after the fall of the Republic of Vietnam government in Saigon and the ensuing instability, large numbers of mothers of *métis* children actively requested having their children sent to France (Firpo 2016: 159). Additionally, there are cases, if few, where “repatriated” *métis* children managed to get their mothers to France – or chose not to because of the emotional turmoil of separation and the FOEFI’s insistence (truthful or not) that their mothers had willingly abandoned them (Firpo 2016: 159). In this way, while *métis* child removal was a fundamentally coercive colonial practice, indigenous women and their *métis* children also found opportunities to exercise agency and make choices for themselves within the framework of the practice. In this way, the perspective of *métis* child removal also reveals a more nuanced picture of colonial agency than the dichotomy between coercive colonisers and passive colonised populations.

Conclusions

In Indochina, the practice of *métis* child removal remained strikingly unchanged throughout the colonial period and beyond, even as its justifications and motivations changed. In the changed circumstances brought about by the war, and by colonial authorities' own policies, the fatherless *métis* of the colony came to be seen as a resource, rather than simply a threat. The changed motivations behind child removal, when held up against the constancy of the practice, thus reveal an instrumentalising view of *métis* children, which persisted for years after formal decolonisation. After the war, multiple meanings were assigned by different actors to the practice of child removal, now including the practice of “repatriation”. Despite authorities' and protection societies' fairly consistent portrayal of *métis* protection work as a charitable and necessary undertaking, the many changes and incongruities in French justifications for child removal and “repatriations” make it clear that the constant guiding principles of the practice were, ultimately, French concerns of empire and memory.



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