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What it means to be a Métis in Vietnam

Vietnam began as a mixture of Asian and Oceanic peoples. These people built a cultural identity which is now the ethnicity "Vietnamese." However, in 282 B.C. the Chinese invaded and occupied the Northern part of Vietnam[1]. And they established a tributary system. Consequently, the Vietnamese began to adopt Chinese culture and government systems.[2] From that time on, the Chinese continued to influence the Vietnamese. Then, in 1885-86, the French began to make territorial gains in the region they would soon call Indochina.[3] This era marks the beginning of the French Colonial period in Vietnam. The colonization of Vietnam led to racial changes in population that resulted in social-economic restrictions and altered the class structure. During this time, the people who faced the most interpersonal challenge and who were affected the most were the children born of parents from different cultural backgrounds.

During the colonial period, the "colonial authority was constructed on two powerful but false premises. The first was the notion that Europeans in the colonies made-up an easily identifiable and discreet biological and social entity; a 'natural' community of common class interests, racial attributes, political affinities, and superior culture. The second was the related notion that the boundaries separating colonizer from

[1] David Del Testa, Lecture, (2002).
[2] John K. Whitmore, Foreign Influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core: A Discussion of the Premodern Period (Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1987), 9.
[3] David Del Testa, Lecture, (2002).

colonized were thus self-evident and easily drawn"[4]. This idea led to much tension between the indigenous people and the French, who wanted to safeguard their privileges and power[5]. The problem with these two ideas was that they were far from reality. There was also another idea which played a major role in forming Europeans mindsets and self-perception with regard to other cultures. A work by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the founder of racial classification who was a "…German anatomist and naturalist who established the most influential of all racial classifications, invented this (the) name (Caucasian) in 1795, in the third edition of his seminal work, De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa (On the Natural Variety of Mankind)".[6] Blumenbach had two reasons for his choice of the Caucus region and thus the name of Caucasian for the dominate ethnicity of Europeans "the maximal beauty of people from this small region, and the probability that humans were first created in this area."[7] Blumenbach created a five-race system of classification which were "the Caucasian variety, for the light-skinned people of Europe and adjacent parts of Asia and Africa; the Mongolian variety, for most other inhabitants of Asia, including China and Japan; the Ethiopian variety, for the dark-skinned people of Africa; the American variety, for most native populations of the New World; and the Malay variety, for the Polynesians and Melanesians of the Pacific and for the aborigines of Australia."[8] The reason that this five-race system was so important in shaping the European perspective was the fact that "Blumenbach radically changed the geometry of human order from a geographically based model without explicit ranking to

[4] Ann Stoler, Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures (1989), 36.
[5] Ann Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 53.
[6] Stephen Jay Gould, The Geometer of Race (1994), 1.
[7] Ibid, 1.
[8] Ibid, 2.

a hierarchy of worth, oddly based upon perceived beauty, and fanning out in two directions from a Caucasian ideal."[9] These ideas greatly affected the colonizers during the Imperialistic Era of history and helps lay a base for understanding why mixed people complicated colonial societies.

In Vietnam men were the primary colonizers during the French colonial period. Even into the 1930's European men outnumbered European women.[10] This disproportion of men to women led to an increase of inter-racial relationships and children of mixed origins. In most cases the father was European (French), and the mother Vietnamese. But there are incidences of European mothers and Vietnamese fathers. The statistics from 1922, 1930-1933, and 1936, help us see how this phenomenon of mixed children progressed. 1922 has a more comprehensible breakdown of children born according to legitimacy and parentage. The years 1930-1933, and 1936 do not include children of a European and half-breed union.

Births	Father European & Mother Mixed
	1922
Female Legitimate	8
Male Legitimate	9
Female illegitimate	0
Male illegitimate	5
Total	22

	Mother European & Father Mixed
Female Legitimate	0
Male Legitimate	1
Female illegitimate	0
Male illegitimate	0
Total	1

Father European & Mother Vietnamese

[9] Stephen Jay Gould, The Geometer of Race (1994) 2.
[10] Ann Stoler, Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures (1989), 42.

		1930	1932	1933
Female Legitimate	57	F----142	F---185	F---254
Male Legitimate	89	M---220	M---232	M---277
Female illegitimate	70	T---362	T---417	T---531
Male illegitimate	102			
	318			

Mother European & Father Vietnamese

		1936
Female Legitimate	1	
Male Legitimate	1	F---261
Female illegitimate	3	M---306
Male illegitimate	4	T---567
Total	9	

[11]

Although these statistics are not entirely accurate owing to the fact that there were so many orphaned and illegitimate children that were overlooked by the census, the numbers can still be useful. The statistics for the five different years indicates an increase in the numbers of mixed children born every year.

The difficulty with this situation was that Vietnamese women who had relations with European men were usually disowned by their families because they were seen as consorting with the enemy. Subsequently, many children of these unions were illegitimate because their fathers would not claim them either. The French saw these children as 'the fruits of a regrettable weakness' (Mazet 1932:8), physically marked and morally marred with 'the defaults and mediocre qualities of their [native] mothers' (Douchet 1928:10);[12] which goes back to the mindsets that were ingrained in Europeans after the article by Blumenbach in regards to the superiority of Europeans. The women who were not supported by their French lovers would sometimes abandon their

[11] Governor General of Indochina, Annual Statistic of Indochina (1922, 1930-1933, 1936).
[12] Ann Stoler, Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures (1989), 56.

children.[13] Most of these children would end up in orphanages, being cared for by religious institutions and eventually there were societies such as "La Société de Protection de l'Enfance de la Cochinchine" (The Society for the Protection of the Childhood of Cochinchina) in Saigon which was founded in 1895, and "La Société d'Assistance aux Enfants franco-indochinois" (The Society of Assistance to French-Indochinese Children) in Hanoi which was created in 1898 to give these children an education, instruction, and protection.[14] However, if the women kept their children, they would return to their families and most of these children were accepted by their Vietnamese relatives; but the communities they lived in tormented them. As the children grew-up, they experienced prejudice and varying degrees of acceptance from both cultures.[15] During this period mixed children did not have a place in society. They were not seen as French or Vietnamese. The Eurasians (as they were called by the French) were considered an ethnic minority by the colonial authorities.[16] Up until as late as 1912, the French authorities and judiciary systems battled with the problem and in 1912 any mixed child that were not recognized by their French fathers were considered Indochinese.[17] But it was not until 1928 that by decree the Eurasians were considered French.[18] Therefore, until the decree of 1928 the only way for the Métissage to survive and make a better life for themselves was to make a choice; a choice that split them in two to improve their lives.

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[13] Ann Stoler, Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures (1989), 57.
[14] Les Métis Franco Annamites en Indochine () 267.
[15] Ann Stoler, Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures (1989), 56-57.
[16] William Baze, Les cent mille Eurasiens d'Indochine (1952) 490.
[17] Les Métis Franco Annamites en Indochine () 257.
[18] Ibid, 259.

If a mixed person tries to assimilate into one of their cultures more than the other in order to succeed in life, he/she is "passing" as either French or Vietnamese. Passing is to "gain acceptance as a member of a group by assuming an identity with it in denial of ones ancestry, background, etc.[19] When an individual of French-Vietnamese origin tries to pass as either ethnicity, it is more difficult because it involves race and gender. According to Ginsberg,

> ...assimilation has so often been accomplished, class, ethnic origin, sexual orientation are difficult to enact or to disguise. Race and gender, however, present other complications. First cultural logic presupposes a biological foundation of race visibly evident in physical features...and the putative visibility of these two identifying categories...make race and gender passing seem more problematic than other instances of passing.[20]

The emotional complexities of "passing" compound the difficulty of transitioning from one culture to another. A strong acceptance and appreciation for both cultures helps a person to attain social-economic advancement, if they did not already have these benefits from their parents. Therefore, the stronger and more confident the individual is, the better his or her chances of dealing with the prejudices that occur. The study of "passing" is therefore more meaningful when viewed from case studies because each person's parentage and socio-economic status is different and the adversities that they face will be different. In addition, as the number of mixed marriages increased, as the chart below shows, the ability for individuals to "pass" became more common and therefore, more expected by both the French and the Vietnamese people.

MARRIAGES

	European Man & Mixed Woman

[19] New World Dictionary of the American Language: Second College Edition, 1037.
[20] Elaine K. Ginsberg, "Introduction: The Politics of Passing" (North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1996), 4-5.

	1922	1928	1936
	18		
European Woman & Mixed Man			
	1		
European Man & Vietnamese Woman			
	28	41	73
European Woman & Vietnamese Man			
	2	10	20
TOTALS	49	51	93

[21]

Years	All the Marriages	European Men and Vietnamese Women	European Women with Vietnamese Men
1937	274	27%	7%
1938	349	32%	7%
1939	398	39%	5%
1940	762	48%	7%

[22]

Two case studies will be reviewed in order to illustrate how self-worth, self-acceptance, parentage and socio-economic factors play a role in a mixed person's ability to succeed when faced with prejudices from both of the individual's ethnic heritage. Jean-Jacques Maitam and Claudie Beaucarnot are both mixed children who lived through part of the French colonial period. The third case study is my personal account of my experience as a mixed person visiting Vietnam, which gives some insight into how a mixed person would feel in Vietnam today and how individualistic each study is.

Jean-Jacques Maitam was born on Oct. 13, 1922 in Hanoi.[23] His father was a well to do Vietnamese businessman, with a French education, and a half-breed wife. He had a

[21] Governor General of Indochina, Annual Statistic of Indochina (1922, 1928, 1936).
[22] Pierre Guillaume, Les Métis en Indochine : Annales de Démographie Historique (1995) 187.

sheltered upbringing that minimized his exposure to prejudice and adversity during his early years, and his career and socio-economic status sheltered him in his adult life. As a toddler, he was raised by a nanny and his aunt, while his parents took care of their business[24]. He did not experience prejudice in his home life, but at school he often heard the ridicule of children that was directed at half-breed children. There was a "rap" song that Mr. Maitam noted in his book. "Tay Lai (half-breed), An khoai ca vo (Eat their sweet potatoes without peeling it), An cho ca long (eat their dogs with their hairs)."[25] These statements were meant to insinuate that a half-breed was brought up not knowing their native customs and traditions.[26] When he was a teenager, he went to France to study and did not experience the socio-economic status prejudice that was present in Vietnam. As a young man he returned to Vietnam, worked with his father for a short period, and then applied for the army. Mr. Maitam was interested in joining the service because he had heard so much about the army from his father, who fought in World War I for the French army.[27] His first attempt to join the army was not successful because he was too thin, which caused him to feel disgraced because this incident did not bring honor to his family or himself. So, he returned home, and his father helped him to attain a position in the police department as a chief inspector.[28] After several years, he again applied to the army and was accepted. He fought against the Japanese during World War II, and experienced prejudice from his captain who had a distrust of mixed French-Vietnamese people. Mr. Maitam was asked to spy on fellow mixed soldiers because of his police

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[23] Jean-Jacques Maitam, A House Divided (North Carolina, Tudor Publisher, Inc., 1999), vii.
[24] Ibid, 9.
[25] Ibid, 11.
[26] Ibid, 11.
[27] Ibid, 15.
[28] Ibid, 41.

background.[29] This was a job that he hated because he did not believe that a man was a spy just because he was mixed.[30] After his career in the service, he worked again as a police inspector. Then later in his career, he became a French Consul and while working in France, he met Annie, a French woman whom he later married.[31]

When I interviewed Mr. Maitam, he told me that he never felt disabled by his racial background; it was "natural" for him. After reading his book "A House Divided," and interviewing him, I believe that he encountered minimal amounts of prejudice due to his social-economic status. In addition, he did not appear to struggle with his self-identity and dual background. He accepted the Vietnamese part of him that wanted to be honorable in the eyes of his father and sought out and accepted help from his father without feeling resentment towards him for helping him run his life. Mr. Maitam did not struggle or oppose going to France for his education and later he even worked for the French Consulate. This French influence in his life appeared to be "natural" due to his father having similar educational and socio-economic opportunities.

Claudie Beaucarnot the second case study. She is three quarters French and a quarter Vietnamese. Her father was French and her mother was half-Vietnamese half-French. Physically, she looks Eurasian with her Asiatic features less prominent. As the General Director of a company called Tileworks Corporation of Indochina (La Société des Tuileries de l'Indochine or STI),[32] Mr. Beaucarnot was financially well off. Claudie grew-up comfortably with Vietnamese servants and a stronger French than Vietnamese influence in her upbringing. She did not appear to identify herself as Vietnamese. This is

[29] Ibid, 52.
[30] Ibid, 53.
[31] Ibid, 162-169.

evident in her diary, "Journal personnel de 1943," where she records her impressions of the Vietnamese people. She writes about her chauffeur, but never gives him a name, and even states that he deserved to be called a chauffer because he was in charge of loading charcoal into the gazo (a kind of car).[33] She calls the Vietnamese that she sees working "coolies."[34] Even when Claudie is with her mother, she does not change her attitude towards the Vietnamese people. When she went to visit a tomb of a king, she was asked to sign a guest book that looked like a school notebook. Her mother signed the book willingly, but Claudie felt that a stinging remark was more appropriate.[35] All these examples show how Claudie felt superior to the Vietnamese people around her, and more importantly demonstrates how she identified with her French background without feeling emotionally attached to her Vietnamese background.

Her socio-economic status and her physical features appeared to eliminate any emotional attachments she might have felt toward the Vietnamese people. During my interview with Mr. Maitam, who moved in the same social circles as the Beaucarnots; he noted how people talked behind Claudie's back regarding her mixed heritage, but would never say it to her face because of her socio-economic standing. She did not realize the prejudice towards her because the Vietnamese people around her had to treat her with respect. In addition, Claudie's identification to her French heritage prevented her from realizing that the way she treated the Vietnamese added to their resentment. In fact, her behavior toward them reflected the prevailing French attitudes of the time toward the Vietnamese.

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[32] David Del Testa, Draft of Adieu Saïgon, Au Revoir Hanoï: The 1943 Vacation Diary of Claudie Beaucarnot (California, David Del Testa, 2002), 4.
[33] Claudine Beaucarnot, "Journal personnel de 1943," (Marmagne: 1943), 11.
[34] Ibid 22.

The last case study is my own account of my trip through Vietnam. When we began our research trip to Vietnam I set a goal for myself: to experience at least to a certain degree, what it feels like to be a mixed person in Vietnam. Granted it is not the same time period as the French Colonial Period or the Vietnam War but there are still many mindsets and perceptions which still prevail to this day.

I am half Chinese and half African woman with features of both of my ethnic backgrounds. I realized before I ever set foot in Vietnam that there was a chance of meeting with prejudice and different treatment due to the fact that I was mixed. But as I soon learned, nothing can prepare you for the feelings that run through you when you are put face to face with a situation dealing with your race or the color of your skin. When I began my silent inner study, I found it very interesting how people reacted to me. In most cases people would not say anything. Most people were very polite, nice, and warm. But I could feel and see that some people would stare or just look at me with curiosity. At times it felt like being a specimen under a microscope being carefully studied and found to be acceptable, tolerable, or just a curiosity. However, there were a few instances when people did say things. One time while our group was hiking in Tam Dao, a couple of Vietnamese men walked past us. They stared at me for a moment and then made a comment in Vietnamese to the affect that my skin was really dark. Being from California and having a strong family background I have never felt awkward or embarrassed of my ethnic heritage. On the contrary, I am very proud of who I am, where I come from, and the person I have become because I have embraced both cultural backgrounds. I have never known what it feels like to have to defend myself because of the color of my skin or physical features; most of the time I was complemented on how I

Beaucarnot-Brugière, "Journal personnel de 1943," (Marmagne: 1943), 21.

looked or the tone of my skin. I did not know how to respond to this comment; I didn't know if I should be offended or just let it pass as a comment based on an observation. My initial reaction was to be upset; I wanted to tell the man "so what if my skin is dark; so is yours."

I was actually hurt by this comment and I did not think that words could bother me so much. For a person who feels that they are secure with who they are and is supposedly a strong, this was a bit of a shock to me and made me think about who I am and if I was happy with that. It was one of the most uncomfortable feelings I ever had but a feeling I have learned from. Subsequent after this incident, every time someone looked at me I was wondering what they were thinking and if it was bad or good. The feelings of wondering why you were born different and persecuted for something you had no control over were feelings that many Métissage throughout Vietnamese history must have felt.

As the days went along and I had time for self-reflection; we traveled further and further south. I got used to the fact that people would look at me different and might say things. As long as I was happy being me it did not matter what they thought. I knew most people did not mean to hurt me or be rude. I came to understand that most people were just curious and if they said something it was just an observation. They knew I was different from them and were stating that fact.

Finally when we entered Southern Vietnam, something different began to happen. I noticed that people were still looking at me, but it seemed they were more curious. In some situations the people we came into contact with began to ask me if I was Vietnamese. I was very flattered by these comments. Even though I am not Vietnamese

if felt good to be accepted and even welcomed because I started to look more like the people I was surrounded by. My experience shows that it is reasonable to see why people pass to feel accepted like everyone else.

Our trip taught us many things about the Vietnamese people. There were many who would talk to us but there were also many subjects that we could not touch. There were a few times when I brought up the topic of the Métissage. Some people would give us a little information for example Mrs. Lan, one of Claudie's friends who we interviewed, told us that she had known some mixed people but many times that is where the information stopped. We did not meet any mixed people while we were on our trip, and if we did, they were either "passing" or we were just ignorant to their ethnicity. One man we interviewed in a village in Dalat told us that there were a few indigenous tribes women who married foreigners but that they left Vietnam for other countries such as the United States to live their lives. The lack of Métissage in Vietnam could mean that many of them have moved out of the country to create better lives for themselves, or they are passing as either Vietnamese or their other ethnicity to avoid problems. The invisibility and inaccessibility of this group of people is a major factor in studying and giving a voice and face to this specific group.

Today a large amount of passing literature which gives a voice and face to the mixed people is concerned with passing in the United States. But, passing in Vietnam is a very individualistic problem as the evidence above shows. It cannot be compared to passing in the United States, where African Americans were slaves and as a group, and were denied all rights and were governed by slavery laws. There was total domination in the case of Blacks in America versus a colonized state in Vietnam. There were not many

laws against “half-breeds” or against passing. However, based on the aforementioned personal accounts, we can see how social-economic standing, more than physical appearance, enabled both of these individuals to pass as French more than Vietnamese. The study of the Métissage (mixed people) of Vietnam is an ongoing project. It is a work that will only be completed with as many accounts of the lives of these people as we can collect. I myself will never forget the lessons I learned about myself as a mixed person in Vietnam and will always carry those feelings and knowledge with me and hopefully will continue this work until it is completed.

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