

Indigenous Tribes and Kinh-Vietnamese Infiltration in the Tây Nguyen Highlands of South-Central Vietnam

GERD R. ZIMMERMANN

I. Introduction

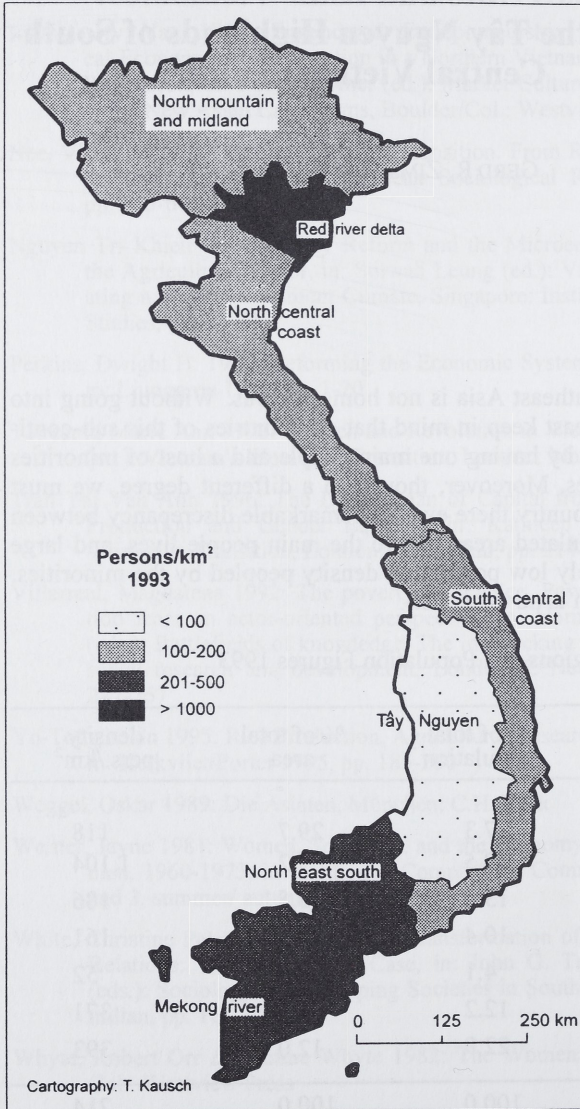
The population of Southeast Asia is not homogeneous. Without going into details we should at least keep in mind that all countries of this sub-continent are characterized by having one main people and a host of minorities within their boundaries. Moreover, though to a different degree, we must realize that in every country there exists a remarkable discrepancy between small but densely populated areas, where the main people lives, and large regions with a relatively low population density peopled by the minorities. In this respect Vietnam is no exception.

Table 1: Vietnam. Regions and Population Figures 1993

Region	% of total population	% of total area	density pers./km ²
North mountain and midland	17.3	29.7	118
Red river delta	19.5	5.2	1,104
North central coast	13.4	15.5	186
South central coast	10.4	13.7	161
Tây Nguyen	4.1	16.8	52
North east South	12.2	7.1	371
Mekong river	22.9	12.0	393
Vietnam	100.0	100.0	214

Source: General Statistical Office 1994a

Figure 1: Vietnam. Population Densities 1993



While the population density of Vietnam as a whole, was 214 in 1993 and in the Red River Delta surpassed 1,000 persons/km², the representative figures for the three provinces of Tây Nguyen were:

Table 2: Tây Nguyen. Population Densities 1993

Province	persons/km ²
Gia Lai – Kon Tum	38
Dac Lac	59
Lam Dong	73

Source: General Statistical Office 1994 a

II. The Peopling of Southeast Asia: a New Perspective

With regard to the peopling of Southeast Asia there is a theory which is still regarded as valid: the first Austro-Asians and Austronesians migrating from Southern China to Mainland Southeast Asia from about 2,500–1,500 BC were driven back into mountainous areas by peoples who came later (1,500–300 BC). At a first glance a quite important fact seems to support this view: It is true that the "older layer" and what is regarded as their descendants nearly always live on plateaus between about 400–1,000 m where they practice shifting cultivation. On the other hand, the settlements of the "younger layer" are generally situated in the lowlands with wet rice cultivation as the predominant form of land-use. In the case of Vietnam, the indigenous peoples of Tây Nguyen belong to the first group, the Kinh to the second.

Nevertheless, as a result of my own research comprising Mainland as well as Insular Southeast Asia (Zimmermann 1992 a, b; 1995 a, b). I have come to another theory: Austro-Asians and Austronesians, the older layer, were not pushed back to Tây Nguyen but, by trial and error, they discovered the special suitability of this region. Though it is not possible to trace the exact migration routes, there exists a striking number of references in myths, legends and oral history to the fact that, on the one hand, the low zones - especially the coasts and river mouths - were avoided and, on the other, mountainous areas were preferred for establishing their original settlements. If we try to give a plausible explanation for this situation we have

to compare the ecological facts of both regions: The coastal areas are often amphibic and were originally covered with dense mangroves and nearly impenetrable rain forests. The soils are sometimes sterile, quite acid, even toxic, and as such not at all qualified for agricultural use. The settlement areas in the hilly zones, however, consist mainly of igneous rocks, especially basalt, with highly fertile soils. In these medium heights the widest spectrum of plants, which can be used for food, is found, and animals, which function as protein suppliers breed better than in the lowlands. Last but not least, living conditions are also healthier in mountainous areas. To sum up, since we find similar settlement conditions throughout Southeast Asia, we are convinced that the older layer had already discovered the high quality soil, nutrition and health conditions - and had occupied these best places. So, the hill tribes in Tây Nguyen had not been pushed back into the mountainous areas but had been attracted to these regions by their advantageous ecological conditions. They occupied such areas at their own free will. They defended them later against the Kinh who could not expel them from these most favoured regions. Therefore the Kinh settled the second-best locations: the lowlands. This situation only changed when, since the end of the 19th c. the French set up their large-scale plantation schemes and "imported" the necessary number of Kinh workers.

III. The Gradual Kinh-Infiltration in the Tây Nguyen Highlands.

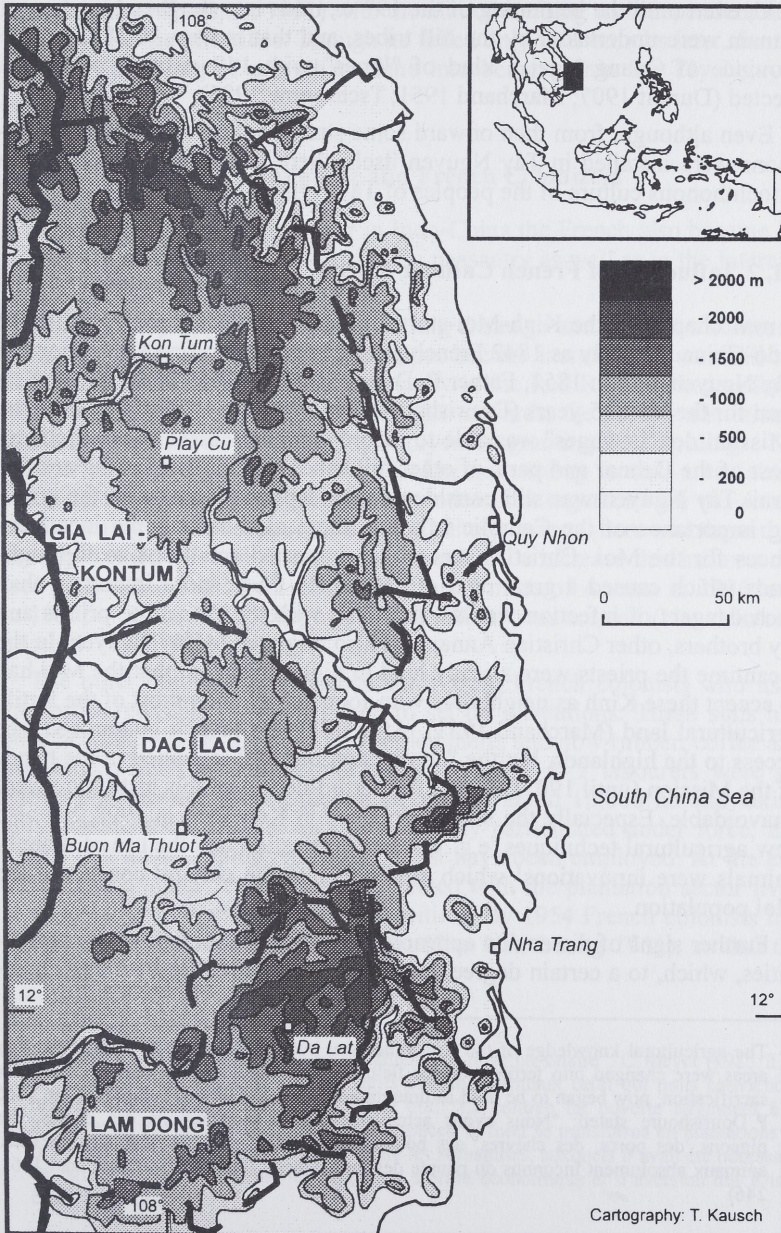
Though occasional conflicts between "lowlanders" and "highlanders" are quite old, only since a modernized technology facilitating the opening-up, penetration and occupation of such "underpopulated" areas have the hill tribes, living in Tây Nguyen more or less undisturbed since their arrival in the neolithic age, been threatened step by step in their cultural existence.

Let us try to prove this statement.

III, 1 Engagements until the 19th century

Probably from the 2nd c. AD onwards there were conflicts between the newly formed kingdom of Champa and the mountain peoples, which continued till the 16th c., when the Kinh-Vietnamese or Annamites conquered Champa. From now on the Annamites tried to dominate Tây Nguyen and its population, then called "Moi", which means "barbarians". Although, in 1540, a first mandarin was installed to control the region and Kinh troops occupied the rivers, giving access to the highlands, this development in no way meant its subjugation. Only occasionally did Kinh traders try to barter

Figure 2: Tây Nguyên. Relief and Provincial Boundaries



Source: Atlas Địa Lí Việt Nam, Hanoi 1993.

salt, fabrics and iron ware for the bush-products of the Moi. On the other hand, even until the beginning of the 19th c., raids into the then kingdom of Annam were undertaken by the hill tribes, and that is why, in 1832, in the province of Quang Ngai a kind of "limes" with 148 military posts was erected (Durant 1907; Marchand 1951; Tschesnow 1985).

Even although, from then onward some strong-holds with Annamite garrisons were installed in Tây Nguyen itself, there was never a threat to the autochthonous culture of the peoples of Tây Nguyen.

III, 2 Influences of French Catholic Priests

A new chapter of the Kinh-Moi-story opened with the French conquest of Indo-China. As early as 1842 French priests undertook a first "excursion" to Tây Nguyen, and in 1851, Father P. Dourisboure installed himself near Kon Tum for the next 35 years (Dourisboure/Simonnet 1961). Little by little the "Mission des Sauvages" was able to record some successes in evangelizing most of the Bahnar and parts of other hill tribes such as the Sedang and the Jarai. Tây Nguyen was still considered as independent but, with the growing importance of the Catholic Mission, there also came some inconveniences for the Moi. Christian Annamites imported small-pox to the highlands which caused a great deal of casualties. Even more important than such dangers of infection was the fact that, with the Annamite priests and lay brothers, other Christian Annamites also migrated to Tây Nguyen. In the meantime the priests were already held in high esteem, so that the Moi had to accept these Kinh as neighbours who soon seized upon most of the fertile agricultural land (Marchand 1951). After 1887 the French guaranteed free access to the highlands, but the "administration" still remained in the hands of the Mission (until 1907), so that further influences of this institution were unavoidable. Especially the schools, opened in Kon Tum in 1908, but also new agricultural techniques, e.g. wet rice cultivation and the use of draught animals were innovations¹ which didn't fit into the cultural context of the Moi population.

Further signs of dissension appeared between the Moi and Kinh communities, which, to a certain degree, may have been stirred up by a French ad-

¹ The agricultural knowledge of the Annamites was such that, for the first time, swampy areas were changed into fertile wet rice fields. Water buffaloes formerly used only for sacrifice, now began to be used as draught animals, especially for ploughing. In 1865 P. Dourisboure stated: "Nous avons actuellement dans nos maisons des poules, des pigeons, des porcs, des chèvres, des boeufs, des buffles, et même quelques chevaux, animaux absolument inconnus du peuple des montagnes." (Dourisboure/Simonnet 1961: 246)

venturer who, in 1888, proclaimed himself "roi Marie, king of the Sedang" (Dourisboure / Simonnet 1961) with the aim of creating an independent federation of all the hill tribes. Though he failed only four months later, for the first time a feeling of unity had come into being within the Tây Nguyen peoples.

III, 3 Exploitation by Annamite and French Colonizers

With the extension of their power in Indo-China the French also became involved in the problems of the Annamite peasantry as well as in the interests of the French colonists.

Although, by upgrading and expanding drainage and irrigation schemes, the absolute rice output and its yields per hectare increased, it was still the case that a lot of small farmers, especially in the Red River Delta, suffered from undernourishment. Thus, from 1888 onwards, the French administration encouraged settlements in Tây Nguyen by granting 5-ha holdings. The number of such immigrants from Tonkin now living in this area (about 1,000 up to 1937) might appear quite modest, but together with the Annamites coming in with support from the Catholic priests, here and there they already formed quite visible ethnic minorities. To increase this influx a decree established settlement offices in all provinces of Annam in 1936, and in 1937, a "Conseil Supérieur de Colonisation" was created (Naval Intelligence Division 1943).

The other noteworthy influence came from French colonists who used the fertile red soils of Tây Nguyen to set up plantations. These soils had once been the reason the hill tribes settled there, and now rubber, coffee and tea were planted as commercial crops. Roughly 1-2 labourers were required per hectare. With a plantation area of about 10,000 ha and taking into consideration that the local people only participated under force, this means that about 15,000 Annamites must have been employed. At the end of the 1920s about 50,000 Kinh connected with the plantation sector lived in Tây Nguyen together with their families.² By 1954 French colonists had extended the area to about 110,000 ha (Cao Van Luong 1966), so that the

² N. Lewis (1953: 85): "Les Mois ne travaillent pas pour un salaire". C. Meyer (1985: 238) stated: "L'Annamite est de tous les natifs extrême-orientaux celui qui nous convient le mieux." J. Marchand (1951: 37,38) points out: "La contrée fut ouverte largement à la colonisation européenne et sur de grands espaces, la forêt se transforma en plantations de thé ou de café qu'animentèrent de leur activité les Annamites, auxquels il avait été nécessaire de faire appel pour concilier les exigences d'ordre économique et d'aversion des Rhadé pour le travail."

number of Annamites working there as plantation coolies, must have risen to at least 150,000.

Central locations for these plantation areas, such as Kon Tum, Play Cu, Buan Ma Tuot or Da Lat, which were first developed under the French mission and administration, registered a further take-off. Beside some Chinese at least one half to two thirds of their population were of Annamite origin (Lewis 1953; Marchand 1951).

III, 4 The Situation during the Vietnam War

When, after the Japanese defeat in 1945, the French came back to their former colonies, the independent movement of the Communist Viet Minh also installed itself in Tây Nguyen. Their members were mainly former plantation workers, originating from Tonkin and Annam. According to French sources the Moi were afraid of becoming subjugated under an independent but Kinh-dominated Vietnam, so that several chiefs openly declared their preference for living under French rather than Kinh authority.³ In contrast, however, Vietnamese scholars, such as Cao Van Luong (1966), stressed the fact that the "Tuong" ("montagnards" in the Viet Minh version) had waged a continuous fight against the "imperialists" and so proved to be sincere patriots. In reality, especially since the Vietnamese-American War, the Tây Nguyen hill tribes had fallen between two stools and they became suspect to both sides.

As a result, between 1954 and 1960 the South Vietnamese government tried to separate Tây Nguyen from Viet Minh-infiltrated Vietnam; a "Mouvement d'Autonomie Nationale" called for the restricted autonomy of the area. A national policy based on agricultural intensification centres was to contribute to upgrading the farmers' knowledge and tie them to the South Vietnamese regime. To this end, the highlanders were concentrated in "zones de propriété", "villages modèles" and "fermes des compatriotes Thuong". Such regroupments totally contradicted the cultural pattern of the hill tribes with the result that revolts broke out in several localities (Cao Van Luong 1966). During the same time new settlement schemes were set up. Until 1959 about 35,000 ha land had been opened up and about 70,000 people, especially poor Kinh farmers, transferred to Tây Nguyen. During the next three years six more schemes were introduced in the highlands (Schiller 1964).

³ J. Marchand (1951: 57): "Plusieurs chefs assurent, dans leur dialecte, le représentant de la France, de leur loyauté et expriment le vœu de continuer à vivre sous notre autorité; chacune de ces déclarations est saluée par les longs cris d'approbation poussés par la foule des Moi."

With the intensification of the liberation activities the minorities of Tây Nguyen also became more and more involved in the Vietnam War. Especially since the Viet Minh used the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail to transport all the necessary war supplies from the North of the country to the South, the US administration, in 1961, started their "defoliation program", using Agent Orange, White and Blue (Nguyen Van Hieu 1971) as well as napalm and white phosphorous bombs (Sheehan 1992). Large areas not only became unsuitable but toxic to man if crops were cultivated and the harvest used as human or animal food.⁴ In the same year special US forces set up eight "military training centres" for the different ethnic groups, which were considered as "concentration camps" by the Vietnamese anti-imperialists. In the first half of 1962 26 purges and 12 bombardments were carried out near Kon Tum, and in the same year a lot of montagnards died from eating poisoned rice (Cao Van Luong 1966). G. Hickey wrote in 1993: "... one of the most tragic and little known consequences was the decimation and destruction it brought the highland people. By war's end about 85 percent of their villages were either in ruins or abandoned ..., of the estimated one million highlanders, between 200,000 and 220,000 had died. But a great many were not killed by bullets or bombs. They died because their world was shattered."⁵

Tây Nguyen is still scarred with craters looking like small water reservoirs, but which are the remnants of B-52 bombing, and the highlanders are still victims of delayed fuse bombs. Up to now there are still children born with physical and mental defects caused by the spraying of defoliation toxins and poison gas. The forests and the plantations are decimated, nothing but a few species growing anew; and only in recent years has the fauna started to recover.

It is almost impossible to get more data concerning the damages of the Vietnam War in Tây Nguyen. But, though only a few facts have been presented here, it seems clear that the hill tribes were most seriously afflicted by the warfare which finally ended in 1975.

⁴ Vo Hoai Tuan (1971:37): "D'après des statistiques préliminaires, plus de 1.086.000 hectares de terre cultivable et de forêts ont été soumis à des épandages en 1969. Pour les neuf premiers mois en 1970, ce chiffre était de 415.000 ha, et, depuis 1961, toutes les provinces du Sud Viet Nam ont subi de tels épandages pendant des années entières."

⁵ "A post-war Communist census put the number of Montagnards at just over a million, though they themselves estimate it as closer to 500,000 to 800,000." (Critchfield 1994: XVI, XXIII).

III, 5 "New Economic Zones"

Since the reunification of Vietnam the government has started to set up large-scale settlement schemes. At the beginning de-urbanization had been the main aim, later on a "rational" distribution of the production factor "labour" over the whole country seems to have become predominant. As ideological and security targets also played an important role, the provinces of Tây Nguyen, thinly populated and settled by minorities, became the centres of interest for the so-called "NEZ" or "New Economic Zones" (Revilla Diez 1995). According to Radio Hanoi "... in 1989 two million lowland settlers had been sent to these "NEZ" during the previous seven years, most of them to the central highlands, border regions with China, or the Red River Delta, and 250,000 more would go each year." (Critchfield 1994: XVI)

Though it seems that the target was never fulfilled⁶, nevertheless, this development meant a further strong influence on the habits and customs of the Tây Nguyen hill tribes, which – last but not least – even showed in the increasing appearance of new topographical names of Sino-Vietnamese origin (Koninck et al. 1996).

III, 6 The "Law on Environmental Protection"

In view of the negative consequences of the Vietnamese War on the country's biosphere, the enactment of a "Law on Environmental Protection" should have been warmly welcomed.

But if we go into details and, for example, look at Article 29, which starts with: "The following activities are strictly prohibited: Burning and destruction of forests ..." (General Statistical Office 1994b) it is the highlanders again, being shifting cultivators, who are more than seriously afflicted. Strict observation of this paragraph means that they will finally lose their basis of subsistence.

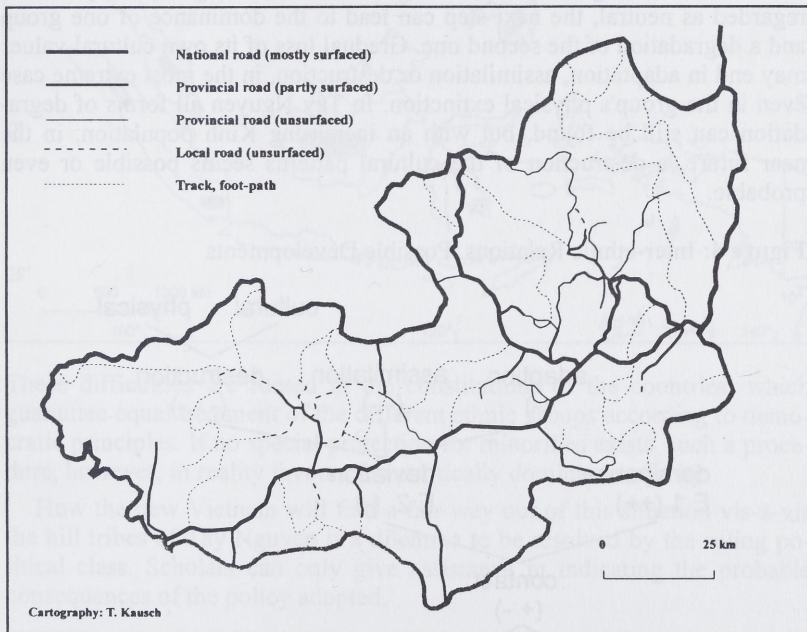
III, 7 Infrastructural Transformation

To further the developments, planned under French colonial rule, infrastructure, especially in the form of a road system, had become necessary, at least since the tremendous extension of the plantation sector. Since 1918 Route Nationale No. 4 ran between Saigon and Da Lat. Another important road was completed in 1941 from Saigon to Quang Nam via Loc Ninh, Buon Ma Thuot and Kon Tum. Furthermore, two all-weather roads con-

⁶ It was impossible to get more exact and locally differentiated data.

necting Qui Nhon with Kon Tum and Ninh Hoa with Buan Ma Tuot were opened. In the meantime, many more roads, especially of a regional character, have been constructed. In 1933, a railway branch line starting from Thap Cham reached Da Lat, the health and residential centre of the southern part of Tây Nguyen. Today, even domestic air services exist, connecting Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City 2-3 times a week with Play Cu, Buan Ma Tuot and Da Lat (Naval Intelligence Division 1943; Guide Tourist Maps 1995).

Figure 3: Province of Lam Dong. Road Infrastructure as Indicator of Areal Penetration



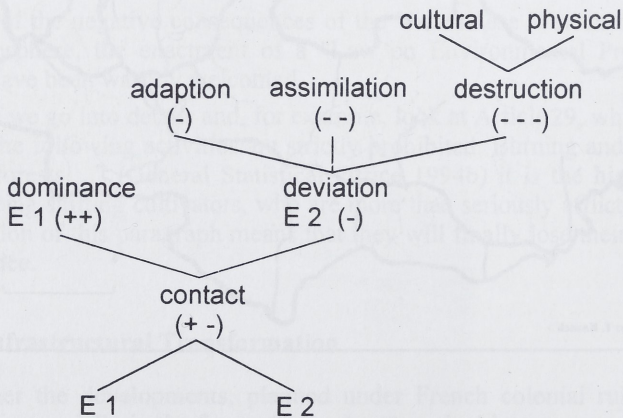
IV. The Drawback of Minorities in a Plural Society

In the course of time the conflicts and influences between Kinh- and Montagnard-Vietnamese have increased. With the development of the political sphere of influence laws and decrees of the government were more and more streamlined to accord with Kinh-Vietnamese interests. It is true that in

some parts of Vietnam we have really overcrowded areas, while Tây Nguyen still seems to be "half empty". But this is only the case, if we compare purely demographic data. Comparison of the agricultural systems of the Montagnards with that of the Kinh, however, shows that the hill tribes who practice shifting cultivation need about ten times the area of the Kinh wet rice cultivators. So, another standard has to be applied, if, at least, the remnants of the traditional way of life of the peoples in Tây Nguyen are to be conserved and not totally extinguished, a possible development of inter-ethnic relations as observed in many Southeast Asian cases.

In comparing these relations we may distinguish between different stages of influence. Though mere contact between two ethnic groups may still be regarded as neutral, the next step can lead to the dominance of one group and a degradation of the second one. Gradual loss of its own cultural values may end in adaptation, assimilation or destruction, in the most extreme case even in the group's physical extinction. In Tây Nguyen all forms of degradation can still be found, but with an increasing Kinh population, in the near future, a destruction of the cultural patterns seems possible or even probable.

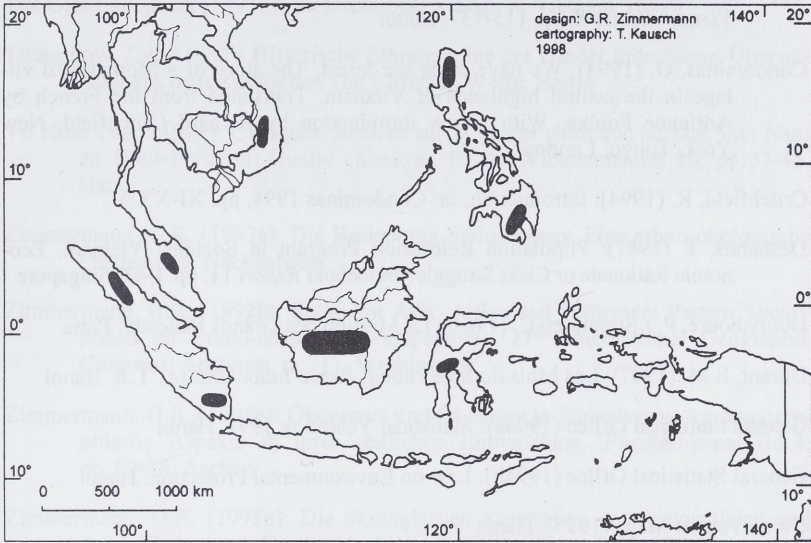
Figure 4: Inter-ethnic Relations. Possible Developments



It seems easy to condemn the Kinh-Vietnamese infiltration into the Tây Nguyen highlands. Yet Vietnam is not the only country where ethnic minorities, often the "older population layer" in the mountainous areas, are threatened in their culturally independent existence. It is true that because of the long-lasting wars Tây Nguyen had to suffer more than other areas,

but the map which figures only the most important ethnic minority groups, shows that it is a phenomenon of the whole Southeast Asian region.

Figure 5: Southeast Asia. Areas with Hill Tribe Minorities (selected)



These difficulties are rooted in the constitutions of the countries, which guarantee equal treatment of the different ethnic groups according to democratic principles. If no special protection for minorities exists, such a procedure, however, in reality favours the politically dominant majority.

How the new Vietnam will find a fair way out of this situation vis-à-vis the hill tribes of Tây Nguyen is a dilemma to be resolved by the ruling political class. Scholars can only give assistance in indicating the probable consequences of the policy adopted.

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