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GENERAL ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

A Question of Tone: The Mythological Barrier between Westerners and the Vietnamese Language and Culture

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Abstract

Language as a source of communication can also be a form of establishing an identity and setting barriers to communication. This article presents one example of such barriers in a major national language: Vietnamese. The Vietnamese language is one of the markers of identity that Vietnamese often claim as the distinguishing feature of their culture, particularly its use of tone. As an assimilative culture changing rapidly due to its absorption into the global, urban economy, the Vietnamese language is now one of the only fixed identity markers of the Vietnamese. This may be why the Vietnamese now seek to establish it as both a symbol and a barrier. As an American anthropologist I critically examine the Vietnamese perception of their language and its role among other identity markers in creating boundaries between Vietnamese and outsiders as an example of how stronger markers of ethnicity that promote cultural survival and sustainability are replaced by shallow markers reinforced by mythologies.

Keywords

Language; Identity; Culture; Colonialism; Vietnamese; Tonality

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Introduction

Language as a source of communication can also be a form of establishing an identity and setting barriers to communication. This article provides an ethnographic case study of the barriers between East and West and of the reinforcement of a national cultural identity based on language even when stronger aspects of culture disappear. It focuses on the claimed inability of Westerners to understand Vietnamese language tones as a case study to explore how ethnic groups, including nation states with a national language, try to establish their identities by looking for a difference that they can use as a marker in setting barriers, even though this marker may not be the actual barrier that it is claimed to be and may not even be an effective way of establishing their identities or protecting cultural survival or sustainability. This paper therefore critically examines the perception the Vietnamese have of their language, as reported from ethnographic field work over several years in Vietnam, and its role among other identity markers in creating boundaries between Vietnamese and outsiders.

As an ethnographic anthropological study, the focus on this paper is on language as an expression of identity. My identification of the importance of language in Vietnamese identity was one of the results of my ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam rather than an initial research question itself. This is a different approach to the one taken by Linguistic Anthropologists who typically focus more on the language itself and who pose a specific question about language and identity at the outset.

I begin by outlining the preliminary results of the fieldwork and describe the ethnographic methodology used, followed by background information on the Vietnamese language as an identity marker. I reflect on the Vietnamese language and its tonality as well as how tonality is presented in Vietnamese language study and in foreign language dictionaries. I then show how the six tones in the Vietnamese language can be found in English in some fixed tonality on English words that helped to bridge what are claimed as rigid barriers to communication. I follow this with some hypotheses on the role of tone and sound in Vietnamese language and how they may reflect parts of cultural identity that have disappeared. In the following sections, I then test and challenge what I find to be a Vietnamese myth—that the use of structured tonality (word intonation) that has an overlap with the concept of tones (fixed pitch pronunciation for specific words) is somehow alien to speakers of English and other European languages. I examine in depth the finding that a weak identity marker like language is magnified by mythology and discuss its import on contemporary identities. My discussion concludes by considering how globalization and the organization of peoples into entities such as nation states may be forcing the creation of certain markers and myths of identity. I argue that peoples are constructing identities that serve as little more than political boundaries given the disappearance of cultural attributes that were fit to pre-globalization eco-systems that are disappearing in an emerging, global, urbanizing 'Anthropocene' monoculture, in which cultural survival and sustainability are at risk (Lempert 2010).

Background: The Larger Ethnographic Methodological Context on Vietnamese Identity

In looking back at the post-World War II independence struggles of minority peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Americas against European colonialism, one of the questions that is and will increasingly be asked in light of independence followed by processes of globalization in which cultural distinctions rapidly disappeared is—what did these newly independent peoples actually win and what is it that they communicate among themselves and others about those identities? Some twenty years ago I began research in Ha Noi and throughout Viet Nam on Vietnamese (Kinh/Viet) identity, the historical relationship of the Vietnamese to their geography and environment, the contemporary responses of Vietnamese (Kinh)

to globalization and modernization, and their views on what they were historically fighting for and against in their resistance to the Americans, the French, and other groups in recent and ancient history. My study included examination of the Vietnamese Kinh's characterizations of their culture in national media, in localities with historic sites and shrines, and among the Vietnamese public, including their descriptions of their relations with other cultures encompassing periods of historical peace and conflict with the Han Chinese, the Japanese, the Cham, the Khmer, and many different ethnicities now within their current borders, including many Tai groups and proto-Tai whom they also claim as part of their ancestry on the Red River.

The methodology that I employed in this research was that of ethnography and participant observation—well-established techniques in anthropology for holistic study of societies (Malinowski 1922; Spradley & McCurdy 1972)—with a focus on the city of Hanoi/Ha Noi (Hà Nội) as a complex city (Warner 1947). I centered my observation on economic and political institutions following a classic tradition of participant research in a complex society with commentary on political culture that also has a long tradition including scholarship in the U.S. in the nineteenth century (see Tocqueville 1835-1840). The techniques that I applied included interactions 'up' and 'down' the social structure and its institutions including 'studying up' with government officials (Nader 1972). Other techniques I used included the study of use of language (Osgood 1964) and interactions between different groups and the approaches of interpretation and meaning of words (Cottam 1986). Given my ability to remain in Viet Nam for several years, with work in several different capacities, my study was not limited to a specific institution or strata but included diverse and extensive interaction with the Vietnamese across class, region (with travel outside of Ha Noi and to its surrounding areas), age, and types of relations (work, friendship, economic transactions, teaching).

I began my language study in Viet Nam in the foreign language school in Ha Noi, following just a short introduction to the language in a night school class in the U.S. I further developed my language skills while undertaking fieldwork over eight years in Viet Nam, consisting of visits to every area of Ha Noi and surroundings in a radius of some 100 km in unobtrusive visits by bicycle to traditional villages, housing projects, markets, religious sites, health clinics, almost every kind of shop, eating street food, and in interactions with peddlers, farmers, and government officials at all levels. I attended a cooking course for Vietnamese (mostly for women) at the Women's Union and worked with an entrepreneur selling tapes of children's stories and schoolbooks. I taught at the university to students and Ministry officials, took a case to the local courts, studied guitar with local musicians, ran occasionally with a Vietnamese running club as well as another one mixed with foreigners and Vietnamese, attended weddings and funerals, visited hundreds of local community eateries with simple food and the common draft beer, and spoke with everyone from the wealthy to street children. I worked alongside Vietnamese colleagues on a Ministry publication and was also interviewed in Vietnamese on television and for print publications. My work is reported in much more detail elsewhere that I hope to make more widely available soon. My eight years in Viet Nam were followed by several years in the neighboring countries of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand (Lempert n.d. 1; Lempert n.d. 2) and also followed prior extensive fieldwork and analysis of Russian culture and the (Soviet) Russian Empire (Lempert 1996).

Since I am not a linguist but rely here on the scholarship of linguistics, my approaches are not controlled experiments to test specific hypotheses in laboratory conditions but focus instead on the relational, social and political aspects of language interactions. The tests that linguists use and the questions that they ask are largely limited to the use of a language and language acquisition, rather than the feelings of native speakers about their languages and identities and how they feel about and interact with foreigners learning their language in multiple settings. I have not used a sociological survey to elicit this information not because my discipline of anthropology discourages such research (I have conducted various types of surveys including surveys of entrepreneurs and consultants in Vietnam). The reason I have not used it here is that for questions of identity on a national scale I consider such research to be unreliable both for reasons of

sampling (inability to construct a random sample or even an acceptable survey methodology) and for political reasons. In Ha Noi, and in Viet Nam in general, questions of national identity are politically sensitive. Viet Nam remains a one-party state and the leadership is sensitive about its foreign relations, image and identity. Indeed, in many cases where I was engaged in international consulting or teaching work in Vietnam, government officials formally and informally controlled information and results even where those activities were for research purposes and/or were officially approved. Such formal research is likely impossible for foreigners and, even if it were possible for Vietnamese, would still be subject to such pressures to distort results and controls that in the past have included jailing, damage to careers, and pressure on family members. In my own experience authoring pieces for Vietnamese publications in English, a Vietnamese editor introduced me to the expression that Vietnamese intellectuals used regarding truth and censorship: 'this is too true to be good,' an inversion of the English expression 'this is too good to be true.'

The value of ethnographic research that crosses into the broad range of anthropology, including linguistics, is that the low profile of such research avoids triggering political sensitivities and allows for more freedom to construct hypotheses, apply a theoretical approach, and allow for political interpretation. The tradeoff is that ethnography is indeed subjective as both a science and an art. It both allows for and recognizes the limitations of individual and personal observation and commentary (i.e., opinion) in promoting wider ranging results in what is considered 'interpretive anthropology' (Geertz 1973). Comments on politics are therefore not an aberration to be eliminated (as opinionated) but are an integral part of the interpretive process.

My focus on the Vietnamese language needs to be placed within the larger context of my conclusions and characterization of Vietnamese (Kinh) culture and identity from much more detailed ethnographic work that I can only briefly summarize here. As a result of constant questioning about Vietnamese pride, identity as well as examinations of how it was officially presented, my conclusion is that Vietnamese (Kinh) culture has become an imitative culture. This is an observation hinted at in earlier studies (Woodside 1988) and reflects a process of how cultures are patterned partly in relationship systems with other cultures as well as by their environments (Lempert 2014). My expanded research suggests that the Vietnamese today do not really have much of a sense of what they 'won' with independence or what they have protected beyond one set of leading families and alliances over another. The Vietnamese resistance struggles throughout history—including those of the twentieth century—appear to have been driven by economic insecurity channeled into racial aggression and violence in which Vietnamese mostly fought (and fight) against each other—rather than foreigners—and construct a cultural system that they claim to be 'independent' and run by Vietnamese. An examination of their political and social system indicates they continually recreate the same inequalities in a continuity of hierarchies that include foreign sovereigns to which they pay forms of tribute. Perhaps the major difference that occurred following the independence struggles of the twentieth century is that the foreign part of the political hierarchy in which the Vietnamese Kinh are embedded today is now better hidden than it was in the past. Thus, those foreign powers enforcing it are not seen to be directing it within the country itself, though they do so through economic and military hegemony (China, Russia, the U.S. and global institutions like the World Bank). In seeking to define what differentiates Viet Nam from neighboring countries in the process or globalization and/or from countries whose cultures they have largely copied, the conclusion of my fieldwork was that most Vietnamese today seem to be unable to articulate anything specific about their own cultural identity.

My consistent finding through questioning, interactions, and research, is that the only major distinguishing cultural marker the Vietnamese (Kinh) seem to recognize beyond political borders and land is language. In asserting the uniqueness of their language, Vietnamese make several claims about it that may be myths, while also using language and communication to create barriers against outsiders to establish an identity that they find difficult to base on anything else. With this conclusion as a starting point, in this article I narrow in on the Vietnamese (Kinh) claims that their language is somehow impenetrable to

foreigners by focusing on the peculiar ways in which they affirm language and sounds. In highlighting this aspect of my fieldwork, I also draw on the work of linguists in characterizing both Vietnamese and English, as well as the learning of Vietnamese as a second language, to confirm my own participant observations.

My study of the Vietnamese language started in 1996 on my first visit to the country for a consulting project, followed by a short night course. Between 1990 and 2006 I lived in Ha Noi and continued using the language in communication in visits to the country until 2015, as well as in continuing contacts with Vietnamese communities in neighboring countries (Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia) as well as the United States and Europe. One of the most common comments that I heard from Vietnamese listening to foreigners (including myself and others) and to particularly Western (American and European speakers) was that the main barrier to understanding Vietnamese was the inability of foreign speakers to understand its tones. Western speakers learning the language also agreed, frequently claiming in discussions on Vietnamese and Vietnamese culture that they were and are often unable to use or recognize its tones. Alongside this belief on both sides is the oft-repeated statement that English and other Western languages do not have tones, only intonation, making it difficult or impossible for most Western speakers to hear or produce tones. The idea of tones as a barrier, I argue, is claimed to be a much greater obstacle than it is, suggesting that it may in fact be an artificial construct or myth that has been accepted on both sides. That raises the key research question in this article—if the idea that Vietnamese tones and Vietnamese language are a nearly insurmountable barrier to mutual understanding between Vietnamese and Westerners is an artificial construct, what purpose does it serve?

To highlight this point—and as a starting point for the rest of the paper—I offer the following vignette showing how even my own name has tones and that the Vietnamese with whom I interacted recognized this clearly even while claiming foreign languages had no tones and that Westerners could not recognize Vietnamese tones. In written communications, Vietnamese leaving messages for me using my English name David would (correctly or incorrectly) spell out the name without any tones in direct approximation to the English intonation of flat tones (often 'Devid'). Yet, when using the Biblical version of my name from Hebrew דויד —also a non-tonal language that I sometimes used in pronouncing my name—they would write the name as it sounded to them in the way my intonation reflected a specific tonal pronunciation on the second syllable, with the same tone that is used in English in words like 'need' or 'speed' or 'creed' or 'kid' or 'did' or like the Spanish name El Cid. They recognized it, as I also would in Vietnamese, with a tonal mark, a *sắc* rising tone on the second syllable (possibly also to distinguish it from actual words with that syllable that have a meaning in Vietnamese). As with other foreign words, Vietnamese apply an interpretation that gives these words tonality, a phenomenon that linguists call phonological adaptation (Kang 2010), which they in fact often have. In my interpretation of their transcription of my name most Vietnamese with whom I interacted—and who would also tell me that non-Asian languages had no tones—were in fact recognizing the very tonality in other languages that they claimed did not exist. In writing my name, they all chose the same tone in the choice from among the six tones that could be used in Vietnamese.

Along with this belief in the barrier that tones present to Westerners, the Vietnamese offer several other related assertions regarding sound in communications in ways that purport to create barriers. Among them are beliefs that I directly heard several times in fieldwork, that the Vietnamese are more musical and poetic, more peaceful and spiritual, and that Vietnamese speakers are more emotionally restrained without the need for intonation in use of language (i.e., Vietnamese do not raise their voices but know how to restrain emotions in speech so as not to be viewed as immature). I found these perceptions also largely contradicted by ubiquitous street and rural noise, electronic noise, and ever-present conflict that one encounters in contemporary Viet Nam, though true in meetings dealing with authorities and in public where one needed to use restraint and self-censor.

Focusing Research on the Vietnamese Majority Ethnic Group (Kinh)'s Markers of Identity including Language

In many cultures, including that of the Vietnamese Kinh[1], language has come to be an historical marker for cultural distinctions. This is not surprising given the amount of time required for distinct languages to emerge (approximately a thousand years according to classic linguists, anthropologists, and historians) (Wang 1982; Sarich & Miele 2004), though that is now somewhat disputed given the definition of a language is contested. Language does not in itself define what is specific to a culture and how cultures are differentiated from each other even though language may contain some of the historic record of some past differences, but it is a marker of 'distance' that emerges between groups and that differentiate them. When language is the key remaining marker of cultural identity, however, without other differences in social, political, or economic behaviors, it may either suggest that a culture is a derivative or 'copying' culture among powerful neighbors or that a culture has assimilated or lost its traditional distinctions, making this question a good one to ask about the Vietnamese Kinh. Indeed, the Vietnamese Kinh culture today largely appears to be both a derivative culture and one that is assimilating (Lempert n.d. 1; Lempert n.d. 2). As a key identity marker (along with certain rituals and clothing that retain information from the past), attitudes towards the language can create a window into attitudes about that Vietnamese history and current cultural choices.

Although there is controversy within the field of anthropology today as to the meanings of concepts like 'race' and 'ethnicity' and when and how they emerge (Barth 1969; Wolf 1982), and on the processes of the formation of 'identity,' there is still an evolutionary and linguistic record of population differentiations throughout history (Eriksen 1993). Among these distinct groups is the Vietnamese Kinh majority that anthropologists recognize as an 'ethnicity' and that the Vietnamese Kinh majority government seems to recognize as a 'race'—perhaps because of the disappearance of earlier aspects of Vietnamese culture. The Vietnamese government's use of race today as a means of determining Vietnamese citizenship is, however, problematic since the Vietnamese Kinh population shows characteristics of the historical mixing of populations—Chinese Han from the north and other waves of Chinese migrations in the south, Tai peoples up and down the Red River, Malayan Cham peoples, Mon Khmer, and others—in a variety of genetic characteristics specific to sub-regions of Asia and Southeast Asia. Those characteristic genetic adaptations that exist are part of the evolutionary historical record of physical adaptations to different environments in the region over a few millennia. Similarly, the language differentiation in the region—including that of the Vietnamese language and its dialects that are regional products of mixing—reflects similar processes of isolation, differentiation, and mixing, as well as the cultural adaptations and behaviors of local groups.

In Viet Nam, there are some long-term cultural continuities over several thousand years that are embedded in the Vietnamese language. For example, rice was the staple dating back to the Hoa Binh period and water management for rice cultivation and flood protection through dykes dates back to the Dong Son bronze era around 300 B.C.E. when the Red River was occupied by Tai tribes and flourished during the period of Han Chinese occupation over the following several centuries (Taylor 1983). Basic cultural forms of economic production and consumption (the structural differences of Vietnamese life), however, are challenged today as markers that are reflective of the Vietnamese Kinh's identity. Words like *đất-nước* (literally 'earth-water' the word for country) and *cơm* ('cooked rice' the word for food) exist in the language as markers or 'superstructure' of the culture (Kroeber 1944) but the cultural structure they reflect is disappearing. Like Vietnamese rituals that are also markers of cultural differentiation and still exist as symbols of structural differences between Vietnamese and other groups, neither the rituals nor the language

1 Within the boundaries of the nation state of Viet Nam some 85% of the country's 90+ million population (*General Statistics Office*, Vietnam, 1996) and in overseas populations of several million (largely in the U.S., France, Cambodia, and Laos) identify as majority Kinh.

are structural (institutional and behavioral choice) differences. Instead, they are merely the remaining markers of what historically existed.

While Vietnamese historians today seek to present history and identity as a continuous stream of resistance to the northern invaders (the Han Chinese who began to emerge in different empires some two thousand years ago) (Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam 1971; Nguyễn 1993; Nguyễn 1995; Trần 2001), non-Vietnamese historians generally see Vietnamese identity emerging with the formation of early Vietnamese empires of the *Nam Yue* (Nam Viet or Southern Barbarian group in relation to China) during the first millennium and then with the formation of *Dai Viet* (Great Viet) in the early second millennium (Taylor 1983). What is problematic with the Vietnamese official presentation of identity as that of 'resistance' to northern invaders, is not only that this contradicts the actual Vietnamese origins as northern Tai (the Red River civilization of Au Lac defeated from the north in the third century B.C.E. may have been ethnically Tai) or Australo-Asian/Mon, but that the Vietnamese empire that emerged as a result of the so-called 'resistance' was largely modeled on the Chinese Han empires to which it may have continuously (and possibly even today) been a vassal/subordinate state paying tribute as part of a larger hierarchy. Vietnamese identity as a separate culture may just be a mythical creation to build support for local leaders breaking away from centralized Chinese control during periods of economic collapse and instability and ruling over areas where tribal languages and customs, including those that were distinctly 'Vietnamese' (rooted in Tai or Australo-Asian/Mon), had mixed with those of the Chinese Han.

Many of the key attributes of early Vietnamese (or Red River or perhaps Red River Bronze or Vietnamese-Tai) culture before the Chinese invasions (including prominent political and economic roles of women, a system of local *lac* lords, and local nature worship), were erased or supplemented by Chinese Han influences in politics, foods, technologies, religions, and language (Taylor 1983). Though Vietnamese fought against the Chinese Han they appeared to live under the Chinese without incident for a much longer period of history. Moreover, the eras of independence (including independence in 1945, 1954 and 1975), were not marked by any return to reverse the attributes of the colonial cultures from which the Vietnamese became independent but by decisions to largely embrace and copy those attributes under local leadership (Nguyễn 1993; Nguyễn, 1995).

Ironically, rather than just attributes that reflect the difference with China in having a warmer, southern climate and its natural products, many of the elements of Vietnamese society today may reflect French and European influences that make the Vietnamese distinct from the Chinese or at least from the Chinese of Yunnan and southern China, along with some absorption of some cultural aspects from India (Indianization) and customs of the Cham and Khmer. French clothing, foods, architecture, colonial administration, music, and other attributes are part of Vietnamese cultural forms today. These are visible today in technology, economics, treatment of minorities, and the organization of the nation state (Evans 1992; Lempert 2000). Foreign technologies and globalization continue today to homogenize the country in terms of family structure, mobility, technology, workplace, and fashion. Many key cultural attributes of the past, including those recorded not long ago by anthropologists, have disappeared (Hickey 1964; Crawford 1966; Lê 1993; Jamieson 1993; Templer 1993).

The key cultural attributes that I have identified in my ethnographic fieldwork that continue and could be seen as unique to the Vietnamese even with industrialization, urbanization and globalization are (1) natality (early marriage and childbirth to generate population expansion rather than large families) and (2) a belief in spirits (superstitions) rather than science. Such a cultural strategy might be described as one of 'breeders and palm readers' and is characteristic of empires (militarism), as well as cultures defined by copying rather than innovating (with innovation limited to specific spheres that promote intensive use of resources and density).

With current Vietnamese staple foods replacing rice and now serving as a sign of foreign influence (corn from the Americas now grown in the country along with African yams and increasing consumption of imported wheat), and with most of the traditional cultural attributes either culturally borrowed and not specifically Vietnamese or under threat, there is little left of identity other than the borders of the nation state and the cults and symbols of Viet Nam's current leadership in the form of a small group of families (rather than dynastic kings). With the leadership largely in place with the help of foreign powers and support, traditional Vietnamese political networks such as the monarchy and local lords, village ties and leaders, have been replaced. Most Vietnamese are thus left searching for some kind of symbol of identity.

During the early revolutionary period against the French in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sons of the local Vietnamese elites who were working with the French, like Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen That Thanh), did seek to restore the Vietnamese monarchy and even its symbol in the language: the traditional Vietnamese Nom (*chữ Nôm*) (Chinese character-based) script to replace the modified Portuguese Western alphabet of Vietnamese that had been introduced in the seventeenth century. But this *Can Vuong* (*Cần Vương*, 'Aid the King') movement was quickly replaced by revolutionary movements that were effectively more like *coup d'états* replacing the elites while maintaining the colonial culture and hierarchy they established. While Nom itself was based on Chinese characters (but with different pronunciations), it is hard to define as more Vietnamese than the adapted Portuguese alphabet that replaced it with critical markers to indicate the six tones.

Indeed, it is the Vietnamese language that is the record of various foreign influences and transformations and that may be one of the main (or only) markers that distinguishes the country from the Chinese and other urbanizing and industrializing countries during this era of globalization. Like many languages, Vietnamese is filled with borrowed words reflecting, for example, the changes in production and staple diet. In Vietnamese there are large recognizable categories of borrowed words from identifiable cultures and time periods including words from French like *bánh* (panne)/bread along with *ga-tô* ('gateau')/cakes, *kem* (crème)/ice cream and *bơ* (beurre)/butter as well as *khoai tây* (literally Western potato) supplementing local root crops and yams.

While the Vietnamese language cannot be described as indigenous given all of its influences, it is exactly this language that incorporates the amalgamated cultural influences that define Vietnamese Kinh culture and history. While linguists (and Vietnamese) might suggest that it is the Vietnamese who are taking foreign objects and influences and making them Vietnamese (in much the same way that words like 'Viet Nam' and place names are transformed in reverse into other languages like English with the wrong tones such as Hanoi pronounced like the word 'annoy' with the rising tone on the second syllable), ethnographers recognize as a principle of cultural interaction that changes can occur in both cultures and particularly in the weaker ones. Language provides a record of those changes even though native speakers may not even be conscious of it (Alves 2009). This amalgam of Chinese, Australo-Asian (Mon and/or Tai), and French, with a Portuguese induced script, is itself the marker that the Vietnamese use for their identity.

Vietnamese Language: Overview of Differences from European Languages

Although native speakers of Vietnamese are only about one percent of the globe's population, its roughly 90+ million native speakers make it among the ten to 20 most widely spoken languages in the world. While it shares many commonalities with other nearby languages including Thai, Lao and minority languages (tonality and basic words) and Chinese (its word block pairs linking two concepts to form common two-syllable words comprising nearly half its vocabulary though the measurement and classifications are still subject to debate), it has a distinct writing system as well as a distinct mix of words reflecting historic influences (particularly recent borrowings from French). Even though its system of tones is not unique in

the region, it may be the tone system that appears at first glance to be most unusual to native speakers of European languages.

Linguists classify Vietnamese as an Austroasiatic language and a Mon-Khmer language in the same category as languages found in Cambodia and among minorities in the south of Viet Nam today and throughout Laos and Thailand before the entrance of Tai peoples from Yunnan and the Chinese (by land and sea). Yet, Vietnamese also has many common words with modern Thai and Lao that indicate a common origin at least during the first millennium B.C.E. with bronze era trade up the Red River between Yunnan, China and the sea, as well as the commonality of having six distinct tones. There was no Vietnamese written language prior to invasions of the Chinese and Vietnamese writing originally adapted Chinese characters (Nom). The current alphabet abandoned the characters and replaced them with the Western alphabet, supplemented with additional letters and with markers to indicate the tones at the initiative of a Portuguese missionary Alexander de Rhodes in the seventeenth century (Rhodes 1991 [1651]; Nguyen 1986).

Tone that characterizes the language is described as the use of musical pitch for distinguishing meaning of words (Yip 2002; Trask 2004). Due to historical mixing of peoples, these tones differ by region and the language exists in a number of dialects though the leading families in Ha Noi along the Red River in the north define their dialect as the standard (though it also includes aspects of other dialects) since Vietnamese imperialism and colonialism historically spread from there. In the center of the country, the Vietnamese mixed with the Cham (Indianized Malayan peoples) and in the south with the Khmer, whose empires they invaded and whose lands they conquered and whose languages generally do not have tones (though some dialects like Utsat and Eastern Cham do). In the north, it was heavily influenced from the invading Chinese Han, though Chinese also left its mark in the south as in other countries of Southeast Asia, from migrating Chinese and Chinese merchants. Mandarin Chinese (literally the language of the Han) has only four tones (only one falling tone rather than two as in Vietnamese and no rising-falling tone) though this distinguishes the Han Chinese from southern peoples in China whose languages have six to nine tones (depending on how they are defined). Northern Vietnamese speakers use six tones while speakers in other regions have partly lost the rising-falling tone and the rising-falling-rising tone (Vũ 1982; Ferlus 1996; Brunelle 2009).

In my experience studying Vietnamese, (Mandarin) Chinese, Lao, Thai, and Khmer, Vietnamese as both a spoken and written language was the easiest to learn among these tonal languages. The simplified Vietnamese writing system that replaced Nom (using complex forms of Chinese characters not for their pictorial representations but for their sounds) reinforces the tones by presenting them individually. Lao and Thai use letter systems but the tones are dependent on rules and shift of certain consonants, while Chinese characters do not encode the tone.

Table 1 presents the six tones as they appear in northern Viet Nam where I conducted my fieldwork.[2] The final column notes whether or not English and other Western language speakers can find these tones in ordinary intonation or exclamation in English. Generally, the *hỏi* tone can be found in certain question words in English while the *ngang* or level (no tone) tone is described as the common English pronunciation. It may be possible to hear most of these tones in English in intonation and some others associated with particular expressions.

Note that while linguistic anthropologists often investigate why certain types of sounds develop in a language and what advantage they might offer (Schafer 1993; Bull & Back 2004; Feld & Brenneis 2004) as well as why particular types of body language (Hall 1963) and expression (Proshansky, Ittelson & Rivlin 1970) might exist (e.g. Vietnamese laughter to express embarrassment and relieve tension rather than only for humor as in English), it is not my goal here to seek to explain the reasons for Vietnamese tones, though I present some hypotheses in the discussion section below.

2 There are dialectic differences in the country with the southern and central parts of the country using different tones for several words.

Table 1. Tones in Vietnamese and Analogues in English and Other Western Languages

Name of Tone in Vietnamese	Symbolic Representation	Description	Analogue in English and Western Languages
Sắc	′ symbol over the vowel	Rising tone	Possibly used in exclamation and surprise but not generally recognized as affiliated with a word.
Hỏi	*′ (hook or question mark shaped symbol) over the vowel*	Rise and falling tone	Yes, in some question words when emphasized like "Why?", "How?", and "When?"
Ngang	None	No intonation	Yes. Viewed as the common pronunciation.
Ngã	˜ (the Spanish "tilde" symbol) over the vowel	Slight rising, falling and rising	Not recognized though possibly used as intonation with some questioning words as a sign of exasperation, such as "Wha..t?" and "Where" and other exclamations like "Whoa" or "No...".
Huyền	` symbol over the vowel	Long falling tone.	Not recognized as affiliated with words though possibly used as intonation for emphasis of sadness.
Nặng	. underneath the vowel.	Short falling tone.	Not recognized as affiliated with words.

The Evidence of Tones in English: Its Absence in Presentations of Vietnamese Language to Europeans and in How the Vietnamese Present European Languages

Although English word intonation does not use precisely the six tones in the same way as they are found in Vietnamese (in the six clear distinctions for words), and though English is not characterized by tones throughout the entire language, examples of the Vietnamese tone system do in fact exist in English given the breadth of intonation used in English (Ladd 2008). At the same time, the pronunciation of Vietnamese words can also add elements of intonation as in English (Brunelle, Ha & Grise 2012; Ha 2012; Michaud & Vaissiere 2015). In English, the uses of pitch in speech that overlap the pitches found in Vietnamese can be found both in the use of intonation to distinguish meaning, as well as in tones assigned to specific words to distinguish meaning for different parts of speech used with the same spelling and sometimes for homonyms where slight spelling differences also reinforce pronunciation in different tones.[3]

In the five tables below, there are examples of how Vietnamese tones are used in English and how listeners hearing only individual words (or in some cases just specific syllables from words) taken out of the context of sentences, can infer the meaning of the sentence only from specific tones of those words or syllables. This, in fact, is the essence of tonality. Merely seeing the same word or syllable (or list of consonants) in print without the tone (or in some cases without linked letters or syllables that trigger the

3 Although such presentations may exist in language books for teaching Vietnamese to English speakers or in language books or dictionaries for teaching English pronunciations to Vietnamese speakers, I have yet to find one and neither could the four reviewers of this article.

tone in English) would not be enough to distinguish meaning. Tones in English may not be as distinct as the Vietnamese tones and may offer a bit of choice for the speaker (sometimes, for example, between long or short falling tones) and may not exactly match the Vietnamese tones, but Vietnamese hearing them would be able to assign a Vietnamese tone to what they heard (I have tested the pronunciations with a native Vietnamese speaker). Note that of the six distinct Vietnamese tones, only the *ngã* tone cannot be affiliated with specific English words, though it can be used electively (as described in the section above) in some question words for emphasis. Several Vietnamese linguists have also documented this both experimentally (Nguyễn 2017) and anecdotally (Nguyen 1970a; Nguyễn 1980; Ho 1997).

Each of the tables presents the English word, its non-tonal dictionary pronunciation in English as reflected in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and then a tonal pronunciation for the word with English spellings and the addition of Vietnamese tonal marks in a final column to indicate which Vietnamese tone can in fact be associated with the English pronunciation. In some cases, two different tones may be possible or a cross between them (usually the two falling tones, the *huyền* and *nặng* tones). No English-Vietnamese dictionaries offer pronunciation keys to English that offer Vietnamese tonal equivalents and one can open any English-Vietnamese dictionary to note this absence (Phụng 2003).

Tables 3 through 6 also contain definitions and parts of speech (noun, verb, pronoun) to indicate that different meanings of a single word that are associated with the different tones that are used in pronouncing the word. In these tables, sample meanings are chosen from among several to reinforce the differences.[4]

Table 2 shows how certain parts of speech in English require the use of the *sắc* rising tone in the first syllable (such as the gerund case of verbs) followed by no tone in the second syllable. In these polysyllabic words, pitch (tone) is a correlative of stress. Without this kind of tonality (in this case a fixed pitch on specific syllables in these words), there is no other way to correctly pronounce these words. For linguists, this is not the same thing as tone because it is not occurring in single syllable words. But it indicates that the use of pitch in a fixed way partly shares a feature—in some words in a non-tonal language—that is found throughout a tonal language like Vietnamese. In just hearing the first syllable, listeners know they are hearing a verb form of the word.

Table 2. Sample Gerund Case Words with Fixed Syllabic Tonality

English Word	Dictionary Pronunciation	Vietnamese Tonal Depiction of English Word
Shopping	ʃɑ:pɪŋ	Shóp-ping
Boxing	bɑ:ksɪŋ	Bóx-ing

Table 3 offers four different couplets of words that are homonyms in English in both noun and verb forms and where the verb and noun form come from the same root meaning. For each of these words, the verb and noun form take on different but distinct fixed tones to distinguish the meanings. The noun forms may be no tone, *huyền*, *nặng* or *sắc* while verb forms are usually no tone or *sắc*. In other words, four of six tones found in Vietnamese are commonly represented in English usage.

Table 4 also presents a series of noun and verb homonym couplets with the four tones also used to distinguish the forms and meaning. What is different about these couplets is that the two forms are not from common root words. In English, different root word origins could also lead to different tonalities to distinguish words of common spelling.

4 In all of the tables below, dictionary definitions and the IPA pronunciations have been taken directly from The Free Dictionary online at: http://www.thefreedictionary.online/ (Free Dictionary 2015).

Table 3. Noun-Verb Homonym Pairs in which Tonality Distinguishes the Forms of Similar Root Meaning

English Word Couplets	Particular Meaning	Dictionary Pronunciation	Vietnamese Tonal Depiction of English Word
Part	n. 1. a piece or portion of a whole v. 22. to divide or separate from one another; take or come apart:	pɑ:t	Part Párt
Hope	n. 1. (*sometimes plural*) a feeling of desire for something and confidence in the possibility of its fulfilment v. 6. (*tr; takes a clause as object or an infinitive*) to desire (something) with some possibility of fulfillment	həʊp	Hòpe Hópe
Bite	n. 22. a wound, bruise, or sting inflicted by biting v. 1. to grip, cut off, or tear with or as if with the teeth or jaws	baɪt	Bịte or Bìte Bíte
Start	n. 20. a slight involuntary movement of the body, as through fright, surprise, etc. v. to begin or cause to begin (something or to do something); come or cause to come into being, operation, etc.	stɑ:t	Stárt Start

Table 5 offers examples of one syllable words where the use of tones in English indicates additional parts of speech with different meaning and not just nouns and verbs. Here where the meaning is a usage that is a command, one may find the *hỏi* tone, as in question words that are used as questions (in Table 1).

While it is rare to find homonyms in English with both different spelling and different tones, Table 6 offers two examples of such pairs. Here the different spelling is a marker of a different tonal pronunciation. There is no rule here where a specific letter serves to indicate a different tone, but the different spellings mark the usage of different tones.

Despite this clear existence of tones in English, in specific word forms and not just intonation, none of the books I used in the 1990s in language study from the U.S. and available commercially (e.g. Lam, Steinen, & Emeneau 1944; Nguyen 1967; Nguyễn 1970b) or from government (the U.S. Foreign Service/ Monterrey Institute) or in Viet Nam (produced by Ha Noi's Foreign Language Institute as well as commercially and by government publishers in the country) nor those for teaching English to Vietnamese, recognized English as having tones. The new sets of teaching materials are now broader in their methods (Moore 1994; Nguyen 1997; Hoang, Nguyen & Trinh 2000; Healy 2004; Catlett 2008; Ngo 2013) and include a variety of dialects such as the Southern Vietnamese dialect, but they still do not recognize tonality in English.

Table 4. Noun-Verb Homonym Pairs in which Tonality Distinguishes the Forms, Where Root Meaning is Not Determinative

English Word Couplets	Particular Meaning	Dictionary Pronunciation	Vietnamese Tonal Depiction of English Word
Court	**n. a.** An extent of open ground partially or completely enclosed by walls or buildings **v. a.** To attempt to gain; seek	kɔ:t	Còurt or Cọurt Cóurt
Rot	**n. 4.** Pointless talk; nonsense **v. 1.** To undergo decomposition, especially organic decomposition; decay	rɒt	Rot Ròt
Shorts	n. **1.** (Clothing & Fashion) trousers reaching the top of the thigh or partway to the knee, worn by both sexes for sport, relaxing in summer, etc v. To short-circuit.	ʃɔ:ts	Shọrts Shórts
Sports	n. **1.** (General Sporting Terms) an individual or group activity pursued for exercise or pleasure, often involving the testing of physical capabilities and taking the form of a competitive game v. **13.** (Clothing & Fashion) (*tr*) to wear or display in an ostentatious or proud manner:	spɔ:t	Spòrts or Spọrts Spórts
Smarts	n. **2.** *Slang* Intelligence; expertise v. **10.** to feel, cause, or be the source of a sharp stinging physical pain or keen mental distress	smɑ:ts	Smárts Smarts

What Explains the Perceived and Reinforced Barrier of Tones

Although the Vietnamese language is not easy for native Western language speakers to learn, it is not nearly as hard as Chinese and may not be as hard as languages like Lao and Thai which also have tones given that the written Vietnamese language directly contains and cues the tones in the spelling. The idea of tones as being a barrier to foreigners largely appears to be a myth. It seems to be part of a set of barriers that Vietnamese impose in communications and interactions with foreigners to try to establish some kind of identity as well as to reinforce the traditional Vietnamese cultural boundaries with outsiders not within their families, communities, and other networks.

There is no denying that it is not easy for Western language speakers to learn Vietnamese compared to learning other European languages given the lack of common word roots other than for some French words. There is also no denying that the need to focus on the tones of many words that use the same consonants and vowels imposes an additional burden on language learners even though the problem may not be the idea that tones are completely new and do not exist in Western languages. Studies have found this additional burden for Westerners (Wang et al. 1999; Wayland & Guion 2004; So 2005; Nguyen & Macken 2008)

Table 5. Homonyms Where Tonality Indicates Different Meanings for Same or Different Parts of Speech

English Word Couplets	Particular Meaning	Dictionary Pronunciation	Vietnamese Tonal Depiction of English Word
Lot	n. 2. a collection of objects, items, or people	lɒt	Lot
	Pr. 1. (preceded by: *a*) a great number or quantity	lɒt	Lót
Right	n. 35. any claim, title, etc, that is morally just or legally granted as allowable or due to a person	raɪt	Rígh̀t
	n., adj., adv. 1. in accordance with accepted standards of moral or legal behaviour, justice, etc		Right
	Sentence substitute: 50. a. indicating that a statement has been understood		Rìght
Don't	v. (declarative) 1. Contraction of *do not*	dəʊnt	Don't or Dón't
	v. (imperative) 1. Contraction of *do not*	dəʊnt	Dỏn't or Dọn't

even of Vietnamese origin (Tăng 2006; Đào & Nguyễn 2017). Native speakers of Asian tonal languages also have difficulty when they learn a different tonal language, suggesting that learning rates depend on the familiarity with the specific tones themselves and not with tones overall (So 2005). But tones may not be the most difficult part of learning the Vietnamese language. There are other subtle sound differences that are found differently in English (the 't' and 'th' sound that is seemingly more subtle in Vietnamese than the difference between 'd' and 't' in English, different diphthongs, and distinctions in vowel pronunciations that also have different spelling differences). Though there do not appear to be studies by linguists on the difficulties in consonant pronunciation, several studies do confirm the difficulties that Western learners experience with some of the vowels and note that it is not just Western learners (Winn et. al. 2008) but also other Asian learners such as Korean and Japanese (Đào & Nguyễn 2018; Đào & Nguyễn 2019a; Đào & Nguyễn 2019b) and therefore not the idea of tonality itself. One of the problems that I noted in my own learning in distinguishing Vietnamese tones is not their existence but the fact that they do change and blur with intonation/emotion and with position in sentences. But this is a normal process that I have discovered in language acquisition in languages with and without tones, highlighting again that the barrier claimed by Vietnamese is one that is created and imagined in order to establish distance.

The real barrier to communication in Vietnamese in the past was in written communication given the difficulty for Vietnamese and foreigners to achieve literacy using the written characters that existed in Nom and came from the Chinese. Indeed, most Vietnamese could not read these characters. Today, only a handful of scholars read Nom and perhaps it is a source of embarrassment that Vietnamese are unable to directly read most of the documents containing their history without translation. Moreover, the history that is available is 'official' history that is selected, interpreted and censored to meet specific government objectives. That is also often the case for documents in museums from the French period (as well as in Russian for

Table 6. Homonym Pairs where Tonality Indicates Different Meaning and Where Spelling Differences Key the Different Tonality

English Word Couplets	Particular Meaning	Dictionary Pronunciation	Vietnamese Tonal Depiction of English Word
Not	Adv. **a.** used to negate the sentence, phrase, or word that it modifies	nɒt	Nót
Knot	n. **3.** a tangle, as in hair or string	nɒt	Knọt
Quarts	n. **a.** A unit of volume or capacity in the US Customary System, used in liquid measure, equal to $^{1}/_{4}$ gallon or 32 ounces (0.946 liter).	kwɔ:ts	Quarts
Quartz	n. A very hard mineral composed of silica, SiO_2, found worldwide in many different types of rocks, including sandstone and granite.	kwɔ:ts	Quàrtz

leaders who went overseas). This is not to imply that alphabets are better than pictographs but simply to note the time and effort required to achieve basic literacy, something that many countries recognize in choosing to simplify their languages. While some earlier generations of Vietnamese scholars, including those like Ho Chi Minh (Hồ Chí Minh) and earlier nationalists of the Cần Vương, (Save the King) movement of the late 19th century, saw an advantage to learning both Nom and Chinese for relations with China and a view of solidarity of the 'East' against the 'West,' Vietnamese today who seek relations with the West see the current alphabet as an advantage.

Today, Vietnamese erect other barriers to outsiders trying to understand them. The reference to tone may politely hide attempts by Vietnamese in their relations with foreigners to maintain distance through use of slang or through other tactics to avoid communication, while blaming it on the tone. In some cases, Vietnamese culture is changing so fast that Vietnamese themselves may be unable to communicate with foreigners who know certain technical language or even information about Vietnamese culture and history (and affiliated words with it) that Vietnamese themselves do not know. This may also be a source of embarrassment that prompts them to hide behind the idea that they cannot understand the tones rather than specialized concepts outside of their own vocabularies or understanding. Many political and ideological terms and explanations used by government elites today also create confusion and embarrassment for Vietnamese (Lempert 1999).

When I first arrived in Viet Nam, certain contacts with foreigners could still be subject to political sanctions and there were incentives to avoid communication or to claim lack of understanding on several types of topics. Even now, I find that in communications with Vietnamese government officials, they often claim they are unable to understand anything that foreigners say and require translators. I have often had the experience of speaking Vietnamese to a Vietnamese translator who then either censored or reformulated my Vietnamese into an official or ideological or jargon-filled Vietnamese for the listener, with the listener pretending that I was speaking something other than Vietnamese to the translator. The claim of foreigners not understanding tones is often a cover for Vietnamese being unable or unwilling to entertain certain kinds

of questions or ideas. Hence, tonality itself is not the barrier that is claimed. Many foreigners who are fluent in Vietnamese report the same phenomena—fluent communication exchanges with many but artificially created barriers claimed on tones with others. In general, Vietnamese are very scripted at first meetings, asking a very specific set of questions to ascertain age status (for hierarchical relations), marriage status, and (now) salary and economic status. Only after establishing relationships and eliminating some aspects of the scripts (gendered interactions; official interactions) is there a possibility of communication.

Along with beliefs about the Vietnamese language are other myths about Vietnamese communications and interactions that the Vietnamese tell themselves and foreigners, but that also do not hold up to historical and cultural examination. Vietnamese Kinh often maintain that they speak softly and that their language is musical because they are historical peaceful and song loving not warlike or colonial. Yet, Viet Nam itself is an empire like China and has been since the tenth century (as the *Đại Việt* (Great Viet), with a well-recognized history of colonial expansion (starting in the north and moving into the areas of the Cham, Khmer as well as northward into the territories of some 50 other recognized ethnic groups that the Chinese once referred to as the 100 barbarian tribes of the south that are now part of the nation state of Viet Nam and under control of the majority Kinh) (Evans 1992; Jamieson 1993; Kiernan 2019). The country's history has been marked with perpetual war and internal conflicts and revolts as well as imperialism. It is hard to avoid this understanding because it permeates the Vietnamese landscape in statues of kings, imperial cities and palaces, religious shrines to military heroes, and everything from children's stories to films. Similarly, Vietnamese claim that speaking loudly or engaging in conflict are frowned upon in their society and that one must keep a moderate tone. This may be true of unmarried women in Viet Nam who speak in a soothing tone that is not found among overseas Vietnamese, and the idea of speaking softly and managing conflict may be culturally important in a society of high density and potential for violent conflict. But even though the country is not particularly violent today, it is not quiet. Much speech is suppressed but the Vietnamese are not afraid to shout within their households or among neighbors. Conflict in daily life is common everywhere from the market to traffic. Everywhere in the country one hears the blaring of horns in traffic, loud engines, and electronic noise, at decibel levels that endanger normal hearing.

Overall, there appear to be ideological and cultural reasons for Vietnamese creating barriers in speech with foreigners—not wanting to get close; not wanting to feel colonized; not being able to compete with certain kinds of systemic thinking/free thinking and logic and wanting to force conformity. At the same time there may be a need to claim that there are real differences and that the culture is not disappearing through urbanization, as well as to claim that those cultural attributes that remain are not just what are considered culturally backwards to outsiders (unsustainable population and resource consumption/lack of planning; lack of science/spirituality that is based on magic and luck; lack of concepts of social contract and citizen empowerment and rights).

Tones must have developed in Southeast Asia for some advantage, though what this advantage is has not yet been answered despite some historical work on the question (Haudricort 1954). Although environmental theories are not currently in favor in anthropology or linguistics and some have been discredited (Collitz 1926), possible explanations may also include components of how sound carries in particular environments with specific voices. The air in Viet Nam is heavily laden with moisture, either from rain or fog. The traditional form of labor was work in rice fields or in small rivers. Communicating across these distances may have required some way of precise enunciation that would also distinguish sound from animals in the environment (buffalo, pigs, chickens). Today, however, with Vietnamese urbanizing and globalizing, the advantages that tonality once offered may no longer be needed and may just be an historical vestige like much of what remains in the Vietnamese language. That itself may be the reason that the Vietnamese seek to stress it, without knowing or practicing the original reasons that led to its development.

Discussion and Conclusion

In overcoming barriers to communications and in establishing understanding, language can work to impose mythical barriers to promote a form of identity even when stronger and more important ideas of cultural identity today (promoting sustainability with resources and promoting a diversity of ideas) are disappearing. The idea of Vietnamese identity and nationalism today, of a collection of autonomous and sustainable nationalities living in harmony with their eco-systems and each other and promoting their separate languages and practices (which is what Ho Chi Minh represents to the country's minorities and to Viet Nam's neighbors in winning their support for the 'independence struggle,') is not what exists in practice or may have never existed. Most of the country's cultural (and language) diversity is disappearing by design (Lempert 2000). While the Vietnamese language is the one that is promoted, much of its own culture is disappearing but not the aspect of Vietnamese hegemony over minorities and exertion of pressures on neighbors. This is not something new that arose in reaction to the recent era of colonialism (Lempert 2000). It is rooted in a history of Vietnamese Kinh imperialism that can be traced back centuries (Lempert 2014). Nevertheless, given how heavily the Vietnamese have borrowed from the Chinese, including this approach to neighboring cultures and internal minority groups, it is hard to specifically define what it means to be Vietnamese. In an era of globalization where identities are even further blurred, and with the global system reinforcing the boundaries of nation states that essentially assimilate or destroy minority cultures within these national borders, the assertion of identity is even more problematic.

In Viet Nam, the Vietnamese Kinh majority largely asserts identity based on language and myths about what makes that language somehow impenetrable. While this may be seen to be something new, it apparently dates back centuries and has been recognized in Vietnamese works a century ago encapsulated in the aphorism '*Tiếng ta còn, nước ta còn*' (Our language is still there, our country is still there) (Pham 1924). But today it has a new emphasis as cultural identities are under increasing pressure with globalization. Even though language is only an historical record of past cultural strategies and borrowing and does not act to affirm specific cultural strategies (other than perhaps continued borrowing and mixing in the case of the Vietnamese), it works for the Vietnamese in resolving contemporary questions about identity and boundaries, even if they are just political boundaries.

The modern nation state of Viet Nam does not reflect any specific principles or cultural attributes that clearly distinguish it as socialist or even Vietnamese (as opposed to a province of China) that Vietnamese today find easy to identify other than recognized borders of a nation state, a language and a specific group of ruling families. This is despite the government promoting this idea of a common Vietnamese identity as part of its expression of contemporary nationalism and perhaps explains while they also reach for the idea of 'race' as another way to create an idea of difference without having to identify and define real systemic differences (Lempert 1999; Lempert 2000). This creates difficulties for the Vietnamese people particularly in an era of greater travel and information exchange. While there are certainly differences between Vietnam and China and other countries in choices of policy, leadership, climate, and fashion, many of these are cosmetic differences that are not much more than regional differences. They are not deeply rooted cultural differences and that is a source of some confusion (and embarrassment) among Vietnamese.

The political implications of the Vietnamese government's remaining silent on China's hegemony over minority peoples in its borders and even over Taiwan are that they strip away protection of Viet Nam's own legitimacy and autonomy as an independent nation state. Given that Viet Nam was under Chinese sovereignty for the majority of the past two thousand years in much the same way as China's current internal minorities, China's historical claims to rule over Viet Nam are as good (or better) as they are over Taiwan, Tibet, or the areas of Yunnan that were part of the Bac Viet/Bai Yue (100 Tribes) that included the Nam Yue (Viet Nam). Indeed, even the country's name today in the Vietnamese language identifies it in a way that suggests the country is just a 'tribe' (Viet/Yue) to the 'south' (Nam) that pays tribute to the

Central Kingdom of China (Trung Quoc/Chung Guo). This contradiction is not only problematic for the Vietnamese (and for its leaders that seek to maintain claims of autonomy), but it often leads to discussions today among educated Vietnamese as to whether the government is, as it was historically, secretly under Chinese sovereignty as Chinese extends its influence in Southeast Asia (and globally).

Sovereignty in Viet Nam today is exerted by a group of Kinh families over the non-Kinh minorities and over the Kinh population through military force with the help of foreign arms. The ruling party in Viet Nam has broken promises to minorities and citizens regarding local autonomy, human rights, and elections, that were part of the social contractual agreement with minorities in its revolutionary/independence struggles in the anti-colonial wars with France, the U.S., and the People's Republic of China. Today, the several families that currently rule over Viet Nam as a nation state have little claim or legitimacy to representing and protecting something uniquely Vietnamese (they wear Western suits, drive foreign automobiles, and essentially copy foreign cultures as they join the global economy). Though they have created national symbols and cults, such as popularity cults of Ho Chi Minh and other Communist Party symbols in ways that do reflect Vietnamese traditional worship cults of leaders and symbols (e.g. red and yellow flags are the traditional colors of Chinese and, by imitation, Vietnamese royalty), they have a very difficult time defining a Vietnamese identity apart from this multi-family and military control over the State.

Relying on genetics as a boundary marker is also problematic for the leadership given the long intermixing of Chinese and other foreigners in the different genetically regional mixes in the country (Cham and Tai in the central region from which Ho Chi Minh hailed, Indianized Mon Khmer in the southern region as well as southern Chinese). While the leaders of the anti-colonial struggles (whose children and grandchildren now inherit control of the country in a form of caste or dynastic rule) claimed that they opposed the dynasties of the past, they now continue to fill leadership positions with members of their families and build statues to worship the past imperial dynastic kings. Though this may be what they mean to preserve from traditional Vietnamese culture and identity as they also enter into the hierarchies of globalization and the cultural aspects of industrialization and urbanization, these attributes of caste and dynasty are those that they do not wish to openly acknowledge, along with other cultural continuities of imperialism.

That leaves little left as a marker of identity other than language. In the case of Vietnamese, it is a barrier that can be too easily crossed by educated foreigners, including the overseas born children of Vietnamese who emigrated for political reasons. As such, it is not surprising that Vietnamese seek to make the barrier seem insurmountable to foreigners by reinforcing attributes that are unusual in the language such as tone, especially when overseas foreigners learning the language whose families are from the southern or central regions of Viet Nam and whom the leadership wishes to keep at a distance, or who are taught by these emigrants, are also likely to use different tonal pronunciations from those of the leaders in Ha Noi. Given the pressures that Vietnamese leaders now exert in concert with foreign powers to internationalize the country and to encourage globalization through the teaching of foreign languages like English as well as Chinese, they may also need this particular myth more than ever before (Le & O'Harrow 2007; Le, Ha & Dat 2014).

This is not to say that this case is unique to Viet Nam or even to non-European nation states and ethnic groups. The author's experience in the former Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe and even in Western and Central Europe, suggests that countries today seek to create similar types of boundaries based on language or other identity markers, even as they strip away those very cultural attributes that may be needed for their future sustainability. Language is a marker of ethnic identity, but ethnicities are historically the product of interactions with environments and attempts to fit sustainably within those environments. The focus on shallow markers may protect those markers while destroying meaningful identity, sustainability, survival and diversity which is what may also be necessary today for human survival (Lempert 2010; Lempert & Nguyen 2011).

Biographical Note

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