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Cannibalism and Race Transformation in a Mekong Delta at War, 1945-54

One day in July 2004, while going through dossiers in the French military archive, I came across a curious comic book that had been seized by French military forces in the Mekong delta. One page had a picture of a tank on a battlefield, with dead bodies strewn around it. And on another page was a puzzling picture: shadowy figures marching in a line into a black building, a coming out the other side. Baffled, I looked at the Vietnamese text underneath the picture, and what it said astonished me: it claimed that the French were cooking Vietnamese in ovens to transform them into blacks.

This presentation will examine these and other extraordinary Vietnamese texts on cannibalism, race, and bodily transformation. By virtue of their extraordinary character, these propaganda texts defy easy exegesis. I thus strike out in a variety of new directions in order to shed light on the meaning of these texts and the world in which they circulated. These excursions are animated by the desire to address a few simple questions. Why are individuals and groups willing to circulate texts filled with fantastic claims? Why do the creators of texts believe that audiences are receptive to such messages?

Questions about the creation and dissemination of such texts help us understand only half the story. What about the reception of such propaganda, and the conditions under which audiences may be predisposed to believe unusual claims?

Scholars often assume that individuals living through great turmoil are more likely than usual to believe rumors and violate norms of acceptable behavior. In the immediate post-1945 upheavals, norms of belief and behavior shifted in the Mekong delta at the same time that state and group authority came under severe challenges. I will eventually focus on how the issues of credibility and trust becomes of central importance to our understanding of this period. I will also look at the particular character of unstable violence in the delta, and how that violence. More broadly, I am interested in understanding of the politics of belonging in a time of decolonization and war, and the limits of a nascent "Third Worldist" solidarity.