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5

National Colors: Ethnic Minorities in Vietnamese Public Imagery

Hjorleifur R. Jonsson and Nora A. Taylor[1]

The year 2000 marked a number of Vietnamese national celebrations. On 3 February the Communist Party commemorated its 70th year; 30 April was the 25th anniversary of the Hanoi victory over the Saigon government; and on 19 May Ho Chi Minh would have turned 110 years old. Throughout the country, the government drew attention to these national milestones by commissioning artists to make posters, billboards, stamps, statues, and paintings and placing them in public view. These works of art were intended not only to commemorate a historical event but even more importantly to unite the Vietnamese population through common national images. They were designed to present the Vietnamese people as a unified group, joined under a single flag, cause, and/or identity. The content of these representations of the nation, most of which feature images of women and ethnic minorities, points to ways in which Vietnamese national identity is constituted. The cases we discuss include images of women in ethnic dress, those of ethnic-majority *Kinh* (Viet), and some of the fifty-three other ethnic groups comprising Vietnam's population. The relationship between ethnic dress, identity, and the state is key to this discussion.

Along with its material function of facilitating human adaptations to a diverse range of environments, dress has long served as a symbolic code to mark people as particular kinds of individual. Societies have brought out different ways of marking identity and difference through dress, emphasizing features such as gender, status, and age within a system of codes that draw on color, fabric, and cut (Sahlins 1976; Turner 1980). Dress is communicative, and it elaborates a set of basic features into a system of relations and differences

that people embody as members of socially recognized categories or groups. Dress fashions people into particular individuals who relate to larger worlds in specific ways.

Contemporary Western culture tends to assume that dress serves primarily to express individuality, but various social entities are marked through category-specific outfits, such as nurses, police, military staff, and so on. Different social frameworks bring out or reinforce particular ways of dividing up a social universe. Like language, dress simultaneously defines who shares a communicative code and who stands outside it. Because of this communicative function, dress can stand on its own and signify in the absence of a person embodying it. The same item of dress can encode a range of messages depending on the context of its use. There is no intrinsic relationship between dress and what it communicates, so the communicative properties of dress are symbolic rather than those of a sign (Leach 1976). It follows that the meanings of dress are intimately linked to specific and changeable frameworks for socially recognized categories or groups.

The focus of our chapter is on what is communicated through the traditional dress of Vietnam's highland ethnic-minority women. Many of the highland ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia use dress to distinguish men from women and children from adults at the same time as they mark one ethnic group off from others. Dress in these societies communicates membership in particular networks of exchange and other social relations. Our examination is not meant to explore the local meanings of dress within a particular minority society. Rather, we focus on the public life of its representations within the modern nation state, in museums, paintings, billboards, and propaganda posters. The topic of our chapter is thus the national appropriation of the symbolic dimensions of ethnic-minority women's dress for particular statements about identity and difference.

Contemporary representations of ethnicity through dress, however local they may appear such as in the case of Vietnam, may be viewed in the global context of nationalism. The nation, as a historically specific form of connecting people into lived social orders, has provided a general framework for reorienting identity and difference. The contributors to *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) provide many examples of how fundamentally new forms of ceremony, dress, sports competitions, and public spectacle provided social and cultural frameworks for emerging national communities. The rise of national communities was a transnational process, and new nations could be modeled on preexisting ones (Anderson 1983). Of particular relevance to our case about ethnic-minority dress from the highlands of Vietnam is the rise of museums and related exhibits as public sites for displays of identity and difference through dress.

Since the nineteenth century, museums and expositions have displayed peoples through dress and other material culture. The logic of these displays suggests a tension between two ways of conceptualizing group identity, which dress has often been made to stand for. One is the nationalist emphasis on any one "people" ("*Volk*" in German) as unique, and their folk dress being a signifier for their identity. The other framework assumes an evolutionary or progressivist narrative, where the objects and dress of "a people" indicate their position within a global scheme of ranking groups in terms of postulated stages of evolution. American and European World's Fairs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries frequently included "primitive" representatives in their displays, as integral components in these attempts to visualize and materialize processes of progress and civilization (Bennett 1995; Mitchell 1989; Stocking 1987; Taffin 2000).

Vietnamese depictions of ethnic minorities, in which dress serves as the fundamental signifier of identity, do not necessarily resolve the tension between the two views of identity, the nationalist emphasis on "a people" as unique versus the universalist notion of peoples as manifesting different stages of evolution. In part, this ambiguity has to be seen as a product of the nation's ambivalent relationship to its ethnic minorities as acting reminders of internal difference. This ambiguity is manifest, for instance, in a recent Vietnamese book on the textiles of ethnic minorities in the country's northern region (Diep 1997). The author states, "Textile patterns are truly the most vivid expressions of Vietnamese traditional culture . . . The designs express traditional cultural identity, the historical and cultural developmental process and of cultural interaction between ethnic groups (*sic*). The textile patterns thus preserve the culture of ethnic groups" (1997: 2). The author does not resolve the issue of whether to view the ethnic dresses as national or as markers of unique identities that are independent of the nation, but proposes that in spite of all the markers of difference, "The woven products of its 54 ethnic groups are valued cultural treasures of the entire Vietnamese nation . . . Wearable textiles and utilitarian fabrics play an indispensable role in the historical and cultural evolution of Vietnamese peoples" (1997: 1).

Neither is the tension between an evolutionary approach and one that sees each "people" as unique resolved in this work, and ethnic-minority dress stands for this problematic relationship of the modernizing nation-state and its internal Others. This tension remains unresolved in Vietnam, but the alterity that ethnic-minority dress signifies has in fundamental ways been nationalized. Further, this nationalization of difference is predominantly, if not exclusively, projected through images of women.

Women, Difference, and Nation

On visits to the countryside in northern Vietnam during the summer of 2000, we noticed several posters that portrayed the nation of Vietnam to itself. In one of them, placed on the outside wall of an ethnographic museum in the administrative center of Bac Thai Province, four women are shown standing in a semicircle, facing the other way (Figure 5.1). Each is dressed differently from the others. Three of the women carry flowers and the fourth a colored ribbon. The path they are on is depicted as a bright yellow line, and they are headed toward factories and construction materials that lie at the horizon. The four women are on the path toward industrialization and progress. As they head in that direction, they seem to be offering the flowers and banner to Ho Chi Minh whose face, in conjunction with four doves, appears in the sky above them. To the right of Uncle Ho is the image of the Vietnamese flag, a gold star on a red background. Also in the sky are dates, two marking the birth and the 110th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh and one marking the successful takeover of Saigon in 1975 that ended the American War (as it is locally known) and brought the country under a single government.

This official poster conflates the biographies of Ho Chi Minh and modern Vietnam in a specifically national manner. The date of his birth and the 110th anniversary of his birth several decades after his death come together with an image of the national flag and the visual markers of industrialization and peace, along with the date of the military takeover of Saigon. The poster's assemblage of images implies the destiny of the nation as tied to the life of Ho Chi Minh. But if the image is intended as a statement about modern Vietnam as a unified country, the dresses of the four women seem to speak to another reality. The women's dresses are neither modern nor national. Rather, they index "traditional" and ethnic or regional realities that seem at first glance to contradict the modern, modernist, and nationalist message of the poster. What makes traditional, ethnic and/or regional women's dresses suitable to the official portrayal of national destiny that includes military victory, an industrialized future, and the national emblems of the flag and the founder's life?

The representation of "traditional" Vietnamese (*Kinh*) and highland ethnic minorities through images of people in "ethnic" clothing is a fundamentally modern phenomenon. It draws on a nationalist gaze within which a select few ethnic markers stand as references to the multiethnic composition of the Vietnamese nation. Images of women in minority-ethnic dress are posted as celebratory. The intent of the images is not a move back to imagined or historical roots of ethnic diversity, or a multiculturalist celebration of difference for the sake of difference, but, and without exception, an appropriation of the markers of difference for the project of national unity and progress. Traditional

Figure 5.1 Banner outside an ethnographic museum in Bac Thai Province, that juxtaposes Ho Chi Minh and national temporality with women in outmoded ethnic and regional dress on the road toward industrialized progress. The text on the banner simply says "Socialist Republic of Vietnam." Photo: Hjorleifur R. Jonsson.

Vietnamese and ethnic-minority women are depicted, through the visuals of their dress, as analogous indexes of national unity. In their portrayals in the public sphere of postage stamps, billboards, etc., visibly non-modern women perform an iconic service to the nationalist cause, through both their dress and their femininity. The picture presented in this poster is one of harmony among different types of Vietnamese women who have been chosen to stand for the

nation. But what is this picture about? Why does its subject matter make sense to an audience that is commemorating both the birthday of the founder of the nation and national reunification? In other words, why do women wearing traditional dress stand as national emblems?

In Vietnamese art, women and their clothing are portrayed to illustrate national symbols that have been invented or created for political purposes. As Ann Marie Leshkowich describes (in Chapter 2 of this volume), the *ao dai* (Vietnam's national dress) was designed by a painter as a means of capturing the essence of the modern Vietnamese woman and is often used by national propagandists to convey the modernity of the ethnic *Kinh*. When depicted in works of art utilized by a national organization, the dresses worn by minority women highlight the non-modern qualities of the ethnic minorities. Both kinds of dress are signifiers for the nation's peoples, the modern and the non-modern, and as such they problematize modernity and progress. As signifiers for kinds of people, the national majority and its internal Others, they focus the attention on peoples and erase traces of the state's involvement in defining peoples and national agendas.

The women in the Bac Thai poster are adornments in an artistic rendering of the nation and therefore we must consider their semiotic position and question whether ethnic-minority women in Vietnam are being represented or transformed as they become pictorial and national subjects. Also, how does art become a terrain where issues of ethnicity, gender, and nationalism get played out? In this particular poster, the four women are identified by their dress or costume. Their nonindividual identities are equally manifest in the dresses that stand for particular ethnic or regional collectivities and in the fact that their faces are not emphasized. The women's outfits tell the viewer who they are, where they come from, and which segment of the population they stand for. The woman on the far left is wearing a precolonial outfit called an *ao tu than*. Currently, this outfit is most familiar from performances of *cheo*, a folk opera associated with the Red River Delta in Vietnam's north, where Hanoi is located. At her right is a woman in an outfit that identifies her as one of the indigenous minorities of the Central Highlands region. The dress could be from Ede, Jarai, Bahnar, or another of the many ethnic groups in the region, but the reference of the dress is regional. The woman "stands for" the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen) that lie in the hinterlands adjacent to the border with Cambodia and Laos. Next to her is a woman in a shirt worn over black trousers, an outfit that associates her with the rice farmers of the Mekong Delta region that includes the city of Saigon. To the "southern" woman's right is the last of the four, wearing the colorfully dyed and embroidered skirt, blouse, and scarf that define her as belonging to one of the Tai ethnic groups in the northern part of Vietnam bordering China and Laos.

Through their non-modern dresses, the four women stand for the four traditional components that have come together through Ho Chi Minh's contribution to the nation. As representations of traditional collectivities, the four women hide as much as they reveal about the constitution of the modern nation of Vietnam. What they reveal through their dress is a reference to "the people" as fundamental to the modern nation. It is made obvious in this and other propaganda posters that Vietnam is made up of several kinds of people. At the same time, the conceptual workings of defining "the people" (through regional and ethnic identities) are hidden. What is in view and actively promoted in official imagery is the nation as various kinds of people who are all united in their gratitude to their leader, in their fight against foreign aggression, and/or on the way to progress.

An aspect of this nationalization of difference is evident on the fourth floor of Vietnam's Women's Museum in Hanoi, which displays mannequins in ethnic dress. The first three floors of the museum are devoted to important women from Vietnam's history, who have contributed to the nation's struggle against foreign enemies. In the context of the various war heroes, the mannequins of ethnic Viet and minority women appear incongruous. Some are posed as weaving or embroidering, but most as simply standing in their ethnic dress. The text panel at the entry to this exhibit suggests how inactive or domestic women belong to the official commemoration of the nation:

> Fine clothes are made to beautify women of various ethnic groups who, at the same time, are the creators of the cultural values in dressing. Through clothes, we can understand the diligent work of women, their creative mind, their optimistic spirit, their responsibility toward the family and the community. Efforts of women are expressed through the different kinds (*sic*) of cloth they have woven, the forms of dress they have designed, the colors they have chosen, the decorations they have made, and through each of their stitches. In fact, those women (*sic*) clothes have contributed importantly to creating the cultural characteristic of each ethnic group and the whole Vietnamese nation.

These statements from the museum and the book on textiles are nontrivial semiotic appropriations of women's work. Whatever significance women's weaving and embroidery has had in the (re-)production of identity and difference, marking individual, gender, household, region, and/or ethnicity, the meanings of this work as a whole have been nationalized. At the same time, and equally important, through this appropriation of the values of their work, women have been defined as the makers of tradition. Given the overarching modernist project of the Vietnamese government, this symbolic classification of women as the source of tradition has to be viewed in part as a patriarchal

disenfranchisement of women within the nation. In lowland Vietnamese society, women have long remained in the shadows of their fathers, brothers, and husbands professionally, and subjected to Confucian moral codes of behavior. In art, women have been the subject of paintings since the colonial period and most often appear as dutiful and elegant wives and mothers. In painting, women are expected to look beautiful and represent the cultural ideal that is repeatedly propagated in magazines and newspapers as the proper Vietnamese woman (Taylor 1996).

If tradition resides so unequivocally with women and their work, then progress, national and otherwise, is the realm of men. Women, like ethnic minorities, can only be led to progress, as their essence resides squarely within the domain of the traditional. Lowe's (1996) analysis of the imagery of gender and nation in North Vietnam from the 1960s to 1975 brings out the same themes:

> In the iconography of the revolutionary nation-state, the peasant woman plants the roots of Vietnamese identity deep in the national soil, and tends their growth, displaying the signs that establish difference: her dress and her class. This division of labor frees the male worker and soldier to devote themselves to the forward-looking tasks of nation building, modernization, and integration into the communist brotherhood (Lowe 1996: 45).

After 1975, subsequent to the war against the United States and for national unification, images of women in (outmoded) regional and/or ethnic dress have continued to convey "traditional" realities to the nation. Public imagery in postindependence Vietnam is not confined to notions of gender and class. The modernist, national project has repeatedly presented ethnicity, gender, occupation, and class as analogous markers of identity. But, as we discuss below, the modernist appropriation of the markers of identity and difference is also a legacy of the colonial era. During that time, ethnicity and dress were redefined in relation to emerging political realities and new forms of subjectivity. This reworking of identity and social relations served to undermine the resonance of precolonial states as well as the practices of difference that sustained highland people's autonomy from state control. Colonial and postcolonial depictions and enactments of ethnic-minority identity through dress and customs share a concern with naturalizing state control of social reality. Using dress as a signifier, Vietnamese artists have played an important role in conveying ethnic and gendered realities to the general public in ways that reinforce the nationalist project. While our main concern is with this twentieth-century reality, we start the following section by charting dimensions of the reality that the colonial system undid.

The State, Ethnic Difference, and the People

A historical examination that attempts to chart majority–minority relations in Vietnam toward the present may implicitly project the territorial and ethnic dimensions of the contemporary postcolonial state onto a historical terrain where the bounded nation-state does not belong and where a majority–minority discourse may be fundamentally alien. Our intent here is not to map a Vietnamese space on the landscape of the past, but to highlight the historical specificity of twentieth-century ethnic relations and the period's imagery of ethnic and national identity.

Precolonial Vietnamese courts tended to be indifferent to the internal affairs of hinterland villages, while relations for trade and tribute were common. Ethnic identity was a feature in these dynamics, in that hinterland populations reproduced cultural schemes that were largely independent of state-centered, lowland society. Dry-rice farming (swiddening, slash-and-burn) was beyond the reach of the state's taxation schemes, and from the state's perspective these hinterland populations were uncivilized. Vietnamese courts, and society more generally, used terms such as *man* (Chinese, "barbarian") and *moi* (Vietnamese, "savage") for highland peoples. While the courts might strike deals with their leaders for warfare, tribute, and allegiance against a rival court, there is no indication of an attempt to integrate highland peoples into Vietnamese society. In this, highland–lowland relations in Vietnam are analogous to those in other parts of Southeast Asia. "Society" assumed a state with a court that integrated settlements and people through its control over trade and tribute and assigned identities in a hierarchic fashion. Lowland wet-rice farmers were as central to the economy of this state-centered society as they were low in its hierarchy.

Among populations that subsequently came to be defined as minorities in the northern region of Vietnam, there was commonly a local elite whose status depended on its relations with Vietnam's courts (and sometimes those of northern Laos). Many of these settlements, of Muong, Thai, Tay, Nung, Cao Lan, Yao, and other peoples, were engaged in wet-rice cultivation, and were thus within (while often marginal to) the civilized realm of the state. Within the state's framework of society, there was nothing questionable about these settlements, while their distance from the court may have contributed to cultural autonomy and the perpetuation of differences (in language, ritual, and dress) from Vietnamese society (see Condominas 1990; MacAlister 1967). In theory, highland dry-rice farmers stood outside this court-centered vision of society. The status of settlements vis-à-vis the state was not determined in ethnic terms, but through relations and positionings that were as likely to divide as to coalesce people who shared an ethnic reference. Discussing the

early nineteenth-century law code of the Nguyen ruler Gia Long (r. 1802 to 1820), Hickey notes that while it allows Vietnamese men

> to enter the frontier areas and settle in one of the military colonies, it was forbidden . . . to remain in the milieu of the highlanders, for in doing so [a man] would be contaminating himself. Article 109 of the Gia Long Code specified that any Vietnamese who contracted marriage with a person "of barbarous races" would be subject to one hundred blows with a rod. (Hickey 1982: 165–6)

One of the few statements concerning the significance of dress within this bifurcated social environment is in a decree from another Nguyen king, Minh Mang (r. 1820 to 1841). He attempted to "civilize" the leaders of highland peoples, who occasionally presented tribute to the court, by providing them with tunics appropriate for the occasion rather than their appearing for the court in what to him was "bare skin." The outfit that the highland leaders were given for the occasion was that specified for "mandarins of the second class of the seventh degree in the civil service" (Hickey 1982: 172–3). One delegation of thirty-three highland leaders offering submission to the court in 1842 was summarily executed, which effectively cut the court's relations with highland peoples for some time (Hickey 1982: 182). Woodside (1971) characterizes the court's relations with highland peoples as "quasi-tributary, quasi-bureaucratic, [noting that] the Tho, the Nung, the Man, and the Meo highlanders [in the north] all lived under their own local chiefs," some presenting their tribute through the Lao rulers of Luang Prabang (1971: 244). Woodside shows further that the Nguyen court's emphasis on proper attire did not extend only to tribute-bearing highlanders. During his reign, Minh Mang twice issued "long edicts commanding [lowland] northern women to change from skirts to trousers" (1971: 134).

The French colonial takeover of Vietnam in the nineteenth century gradually extended to neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and the French called their domain Indochina. Colonial rule brought a new model of state and society, one that took ethnic-cum-racial identities as axiomatic, and ethnographic classification became an important aspect of the colonial strategy. Henri Roux's (1924) ethnographic account on northern Laos, for instance, insisted on the correctness of a racial classification of ethnic categories in terms of language families. Roux complained (1924: 373) about the laxness of local categorizations, where people's identity could change along with changes in livelihood and social relations.

The French colonial effort to identify peoples as "races" was in terms of the evolutionary theories of the time, and assumed that people could be ranked on a scale of progress (Blanckaert 1988). There was no inherent agreement on

the policy implications of such classifications. French administrators debated whether the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands were better off "protected" by the French from Vietnamese lowland populations or if they "vanished" as a "race" because they were too primitive (Salemink 1991: 254–6). In the Central Highlands, French administrators established themselves as the legitimate rulers through ceremonies where leaders of highland populations paid allegiance to them in a "traditional" way and wearing their traditional (highland) garb (Hickey 1982: 306–7; Salemink 1991: 252). This manipulation of tradition, including the explicit use of traditional dress, for the purposes of rule and expropriation draws on the colonial-era (and proto-nationalist) notion of "the people" as the basis for rule. Herein lies the drive behind the French colonial zeal to identify and classify all the "races" in Indochina and their ethnic components (see for instance Bonifacy 1919; Aymé 1930).

As was the case with other colonial regimes in Southeast Asia, the French rulers of Indochina became the collectors and defenders of traditional cultures and ways of life once they had quelled various forms of local resistance to their rule. This is one aspect of the colonial-era shift away from rulers and their courts and toward "the people" as the defining feature of "society." In Vietnam, other aspects of this shift drew on nationalist and anticolonial ferment in the early twentieth century that was decidedly antiroyal and antitraditional. Markers of a Chinese-influenced hierarchy in dress and hairstyle, as well as the Chinese-derived *Nom* script that was unique to Vietnam, became the targets of nationalist movements (Marr 1971). The state was identified with feudal and colonial oppression, and the nationalist making of Vietnam was expressly in the name of "the people" whose historical destiny was shaped by the struggle against foreign aggression. The Vietnamese term *dan toc*, analogous to the Malay *bangsa* and the Thai *chonchat* (all mean "the people"/"nationality"), indexes a historically specific formulation of the nation that assumes an ethnic essence as the defining feature of community and identity.

In official documents, modern Vietnam is said to consist of fifty-four ethnic groups. But aside from a very recent Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and its publications, and a set of one-inch-tall porcelain figures of women in ethnic dress (Figure 5.2), public notions of Vietnam's ethnic diversity assume a smaller number of peoples. The four women in the poster in Bac Thai are one example. Others depict figures standing for the three (lowland) geographical regions of north, center, and south, and the division of the population into members of five language families. The latter is common in museum displays. There is not a single predominant definition of the components of the national population in Vietnam as there is in Laos. In the Lao case, the notion of High, Mid, and Low Lao (*Lao Sung*, *Lao Thoeng*, and *Lao Lum*) has become a very resonant model of the national population. This tripartite categorization is depicted,

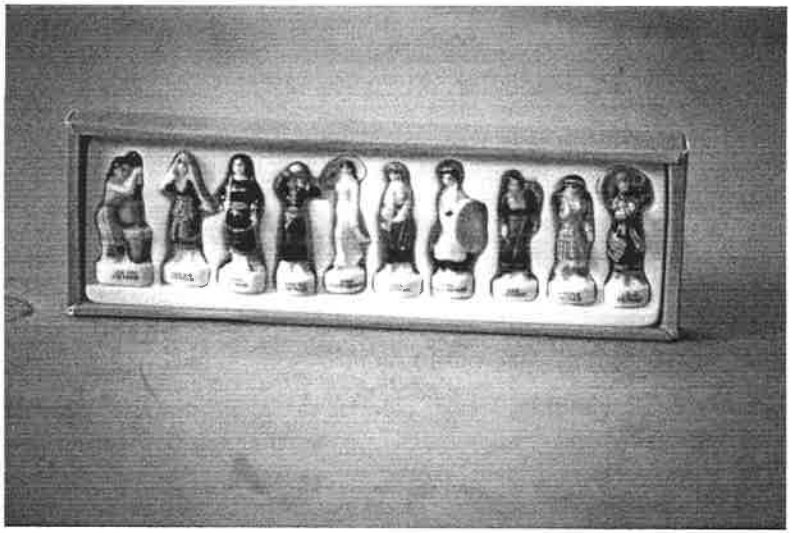

Figure 5.2 A box of ten miniature porcelain images of women in ethnic dress, from a set that depicts all of Vietnam's ethnic groups. The figurines are of unified national space (e.g. "Bana, Vietnam") with the exception of majority Kinh for whom there is one each for "North Vietnam" and "South Vietnam." Photo: Hjorleifur R. Jonsson.

for instance, on currency notes through a representation of women in ethnic dress (Trankell 1998: 48). The three women refer to components of the nation both through ethnicity and region, Hmong highlanders in the north, Lao lowlanders in the central region, and Mon-Khmer-speaking mid-slope dwellers in the south.[2]

In Vietnamese public art, depictions of "kinds of people" are not fundamentally ethnic in character. Rather, ethnicity is one of the features that constitute kinds of Vietnamese. Examples of this include billboards that portray a doctor, a factory worker, a soldier, a peasant woman, a child in a school uniform, and an ethnic-minority woman as together making up the peoples of Vietnam (Figure 5.3). In these depictions, ethnicity and occupation stand as analogous markers of identity, and the most commonly implied reference of these pictorial assemblies is how all the kinds of people contribute (in their different ways) to the nation. Identity, whether ethnic, occupational, gendered, or otherwise, has been nationalized. Our understanding of the position of ethnic minorities in these depictions is that they stand as a measure

Figure 5.3 A billboard image showing representatives of the various sectors of the modern nation as in a family photo. Note the spatial division of men, women, and children, and the symmetry of the women in traditional ethnic minority dress (far left) and the modern ao dai (far right). Drawn on the margins are the outlines of the electrified urban future (left) and a flower garden (below). In official pronouncements, Vietnam's ethnic diversity is often described as a garden of scented, colorful flowers. Photo: Hjorleifur R. Jonsson.

of the progress of the Vietnamese nation. In their traditional, non-modern ethnic dress, they are an indication of the inclusiveness of the national community and at the same time of how far all other segments of Vietnamese society have moved from this condition of non-modern-ness.

The Vietnamese Propaganda Poster

The art of the Vietnamese propaganda poster draws equally on colonial encounters, nationalist politics, and the experiences of war for independence. Artists who had studied painting and drawing under the French colonial regime from 1925 to 1945 at a school established by the French painter Victor Tardieu, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine, joined anticolonial forces and began to

create art that served the rising nationalist movement (Taylor 1997b). This included paintings of landscapes, Vietnamese villages, farmers, and ethnic minorities. Artists used their drafting skills to fashion images of the Vietnamese in their native environment, drawing attention to the characteristics of the Vietnamese nation. Depictions of people served to encourage Vietnamese citizens to consider themselves national subjects. Landscapes were the most common genre that served to incite pride in the Vietnamese land and reinforce viewers to imagine the nation as a geographic entity, where "land" and "people" were aspects of the same essence. Posters utilized these ideas and simplified them for the average viewer.

As national art that contributed to a national understanding and sentiment, this art was "popular" in the sense of being nonelite and being aimed at nonelite public spaces. The posters also addressed an international audience in order to project images of an independent Vietnam in the face of colonial opposition. The first poster created for the independence movement read in English "Vietnam for Vietnamese" and consisted of a lineup of historical figures meant to evoke past struggles against foreign aggression. This first graphic depiction of the nation of Vietnam and its people, created by Tran Van Can in 1941, served as a model for many subsequent posters. The image of a heroic Vietnamese standing at the helm of an abstracted outline of the Vietnamese map was utilized throughout the independence period, the revolution, and the war against the United States. Posters often show Vietnamese nationals standing on maps of Vietnam as a way to legitimate Vietnamese rule over the entire territory of Vietnam, north and south.

The nationalist depictions of Vietnam had a political project, toward the shared signifiers of a national community and away from alternative configurations such as the French colonial creation of Indochina (Goscha 1995). This shift, as well as the focus on "the people," contributed to a conceptual reworking of space and identity in terms of a shared struggle against foreign aggression, and posters then broadcast this vision with their combinations of "Vietnamese subjects" and the outlines of the national space.

While paintings were used to imagine the essential traits of the Vietnamese nation in an ideal or romantic form, posters spoke more directly of the Vietnamese fight for nationhood. In the early 1940s most of the population of Indochina was illiterate and posters served to draw attention to the anticolonial struggle and to combat illiteracy. Using the ancient art of woodblock printing, artists drew images of women learning to read and peasants wielding pens instead of hoes, thus simultaneously encouraging the population to learn to read and join the revolutionary forces. Painting materials were expensive and scarce, but paper was easily made and images easily reproduced through basic printing processes. Graphic arts did not just serve poster making but also

helped to create stamps, currency, and political logos. Artists participated in the making of medals, stationery, banners, and pamphlets. Portraits of the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh were also created during this time. In fact, Ho Chi Minh figured more prominently in posters than in paintings.

Posters reduced complicated political ideas to simple, iconic messages. A mother and child, a rice farmer, or a soldier standing beside a flag, a historical relic, or brandishing a weapon, projected the concept of the people fighting for Vietnamese autonomy. References to history were combined with present concerns, such as poverty and illiteracy, to illustrate the need to modernize for the sake of national well-being.

> A number of posters mixed modern and traditional images and symbols to highlight the timeless character of the spirit of resistance to foreign invasion: a traditional Dong Son design, a modern map of Vietnam, and images of different ethnic groups armed with modern and traditional weapons . . . Placed together, modern, traditional and linguistic signs echoed specific patriotic messages: patriotic traditions; the goal of national reunification; national defense; commemoration of war heroes; contribution to national construction; military victory; territorial integrity; national reunion; and regenerative patriotism. (Vasavakul 1997: 4)

Ethnic minorities were included among the symbols of patriotism, history, and/or tradition in these posters. In poster art, ethnic minorities are visual signifiers of national unity and yet they are historically non-Vietnamese and live in areas removed from modern development and political authority, in the mountainous regions bordering China, Laos, and Cambodia.

One reason for their inclusion is that the seat of the independence movement was located in the highlands north of Hanoi. This was also where the art school was relocated after it closed down during the Japanese occupation, and the French withdrawal and subsequent return to Indochina after the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh declared independence in September of 1945. Posters were not made at the art school in Hanoi. But when an art school reopened in the region of Viet Bac where the independence movement was stationed, To Ngoc Van, a graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine, was put in charge and there he conducted classes in art and politics. Influenced by movements in the Soviet Union and China, artists in Viet Bac were encouraged to think about ways in which art could serve the state and the process of nation building. Posters became the popular vehicle for expressing national identity and encouraging the population to join the national struggle. The art school remained in the region of Viet Bac until the Viet Minh (Independence League) victory against the French at the valley of Dien Bien Phu, northwest of Viet Bac, in 1954. During the nine years that the revolutionary movement was

stationed in the hills, artists were greatly intrigued by the ethnically varied highlanders residing in the northern regions of the Red River Delta and were inspired to sketch them and include them in their posters depicting the nation of Vietnam (Taylor 1997a).

Posters made after 1954 consistently included one or more ethnicities when referring to the Vietnamese "people." Part of the reason for this has to do with vocabulary and Vietnamese definitions regarding ethnicity and nationalism. Ho Chi Minh first used the term *dan toc Viet Nam* or Vietnamese nationals in his 1945 declaration of independence. By *dan toc Viet Nam* he meant that all the people of Vietnam were to define the nation. In subsequent use, the term *dan toc* is less inclusive, as ethnic minorities are persistently marked in speech as *dan toc thieu so* or *dan toc it nguoi*, "small-group people."

In poster and billboard art, ethnic minorities are essentially an Other within the Vietnamese population, they never stand for average Vietnamese. In posters made during the war against the south, ethnic minorities were portrayed in arms. The combat for national unification was depicted in posters as a struggle for the entire Vietnamese population against the United States and imperial aggression. In posters, therefore, ethnic minorities appear concerned with national causes and are placed on equal terms with the Vietnamese in national affairs. Yet, the fact that minorities are represented in their traditional clothing negates that equality. Unlike the *ao dai* that is worn by Vietnamese ethnic nationals and connotes modernity and urban sophistication, the dresses worn by Hmong, Yao, or Tai women have no modern counterpart. They did not undergo a transformation during or after the colonial period in response to the "new" independent nation. It is as if the posters are still locking the ethnic minorities in time and refusing them full participation in the modern Vietnamese nation. Their participation in the national struggle, the process of nation building, and Vietnamese society are recorded through their dress. Presenting the ethnic minority in art as an item of ethnic clothing is more than an identification symbol, it projects an image of backwardness. The ethnic-minority dress is the symbol that legitimates Vietnamese authority over the ethnic minorities within the national borders.

During our visits to the ethnic-minority areas in the north and the south of the country we discovered that ethnic-minority dress is not commonly worn. Conversations with minority people suggest widespread Vietnamese prejudices regarding ethnic-minority cultures as "backwards," and partly for this reason ethnic-minority peoples wear market clothes[3] in an attempt to avoid these prejudiced connotations. Official policies have aimed at eradicating backward practices and have emphasized progressive changes in livelihood, culture, and rituals (Evans 1992). Recent efforts at the "selective preservation" of minority cultures (Salemink 2000) therefore seem aimed more at sustaining enough

markers of ethnic difference to maintain the notion that Vietnam consists of fifty-four ethnic groups than at any interest in these minority cultures or identities as such.

The official notion of ethnic diversity, that the country contains fifty-four ethnic groups, is presented as an achievement. As such, it belongs with other statistical markers of national acheivement such as gross domestic product. But most importantly, the "achievement" implied in the cliché of fifty-four ethnic groups concerns the success of unifying such diverse peoples. It is in this context that the markers of alterity must be retained through the visuals of diverse ethnic dress. If this diversity disappears, then the great achievement of national unification is no longer apparent. What the posters declare, in their propagandist fashion, is not far from the reality of ethnic diversity in contemporary Vietnam; difference is officially sanctioned only insofar as it contributes to the image of the nation. Within this framework, as in the posters, the more locally oriented practices of ethnic-minority livelihood, culture, and rituals simply have no place.

The Bac Thai poster of Vietnam's population through four kinds of women in traditional dress can be viewed as portraying some of the regional and ethnic divisions with which the making of modern Vietnam has been confronted. The representation of lowland ethnic Vietnamese as "north" and "south" speaks to a particularly twentieth-century predicament, not only in the dismissal of the previously predominant central region of the Nguyen courts in Hue, but also and more importantly concerning the 1954 division of the country into North and South Vietnam following the nationalist victory at Dien Bien Phu, and the subsequent American War. Both the nationalist victory in the north and the struggle over the south involved contest over the loyalties of highland ethnic minorities, and this is what poster depictions of people in ethnic-minority dress variously commemorate or attempt to stimulate. The importance of women in these posters appears informed by many of the same concerns as Gladney (1994), Schein (2000), and others have noted for the visual portrayals of ethnic minorities in southern China. The other is repeatedly presented as feminine and backward (colorful and exotic). Not only does this convey the "unmarked" majority as masculine and progressive, in important ways it makes it possible to imagine and experience the national majority as a coherent subject.

The depiction of Vietnam's internal Others as traditional, diverse, and feminine is a projection that conveys uniformity on lowland peoples, erasing ethnic and other divergence. That is, the imagery of highland minorities as the national Other conjures up the national Self as modern, uniform, and masculine. This projection of diversity through images of ethnic-minority women is clearly an example of internal Orientalism. But whether it is primarily about ethnic-minority peoples in the hinterlands is another issue. There are sizeable

populations of ethnic Chinese, Khmer, and Cham peoples in the lowlands, for instance. The portrayal of national diversity in posters, billboards, and the like serves to sanction and routinize particular ways of imagining and experiencing diversity. Diversity is depicted in relation to national goals, which serves to insert national hegemony into the imagery of the nation's Others. As such, the propaganda function of the images may lie in what they leave out as much as in what they make implicit. Among the features of diversity that are erased from view are frameworks of lowland social life that vary by class and region as well as ethnicity, the limited success and ultimate failure of collectivized farming, and Vietnamese masculinity as concerned with household matters or private pleasure as opposed to the relentless contribution to national defense and progress that is on view in posters and billboards.

Ethnic-Minority Clothing in Art

Artists found the highland peoples interesting to sketch and draw. There was also a political motive for including them in the art of the period. The Viet Minh knew that it needed the support of the peoples in the highlands to fight against the French. In the preparations for the battle of Dien Bien Phu, ammunitions, food, water, and other supplies had to be carried through areas inhabited by highland minorities. Not only had the highlanders to physically help the Viet Minh in offering food and water, but also the Viet Minh had to secure their friendship and alliance. The French had traditionally viewed the hill peoples as "primitive" peoples who could be manipulated to benefit the colonial economy more easily than could the more sophisticated Annamese urbanites. During the interim period between 1945 and 1954, the French also may have hoped to promote a "divide and conquer" policy and set the highlanders against the Vietnamese in order to weaken Viet Minh forces (Salemink 1991). It was in the interest of the Viet Minh to uphold a unified front and join forces with ethnic groups living within the contested geographic area of Vietnam. And after the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnamese scholars maintained the idea of a Vietnam with a harmonious population and dissolved any notion of ethnic tension. As Patricia Pelley writes, "(t)o repudiate the colonial claims that Vietnam was fragmented along ethnic lines, post colonial scholars vowed to write national history from an inclusive, multi-ethnic perspective" (Pelley 1998: 377).

Sketches made of ethnic minorities during the 1940s and 1950s served as models not only for future billboards and posters but also for paintings and drawings made by artists and graduates of the various national schools and colleges of fine arts after independence. It has become standard practice even

today for art students to travel to the mountainous regions of Vietnam and sketch portraits of the different ethnic groups. These sketches turn into paintings that are sold on the tourist market and in galleries in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. While these portrayals of ethnic minorities have an appeal as curiosities or exotica, they originally served a political agenda similar to that of (propaganda) posters and billboards. Artists from the 1960s through the 1980s often painted themes revolving around the education of minorities by Vietnamese soldiers or government workers, the development of the highlands, and other assistance projects provided by the state to less modernized regions of Vietnam. In these paintings, the Vietnamese are shown in their worker or soldier uniforms helping their fellowmen. Women are dressed in indigenous clothing to delineate the nation's diversity and yet emphasize the collaborative efforts of majority citizens and others.

Some artists who trained during the resistance period in the hills of Viet Bac have continued to paint minorities almost as a reminder of that period. Artists such as Mai Long and Linh Chi have made paintings of highland ethnic minorities their trademark (Figure 5.4). Furthermore, part of their success as painters is due to their ability to portray minorities in a realistic and yet idealized fashion with an emphasis on minority dress and textile patterns. Minority clothes provide artists with artistic and aesthetic material, enhancing a portrait with color and texture. Paintings of farmers and soldiers in their simple uniforms appear bland and drab compared to the brightly embroidered leggings, skirts, jackets, and headdresses of the Yao, Hmong, and Tai. Through portraits made by Vietnamese *Kinh* artists, minorities become commodities, signifiers for sale that add another layer to how minorities are appropriated for Vietnamese agendas.

After graduating from the art school in Viet Bac during the period of resistance against the French, Mai Long and Linh Chi developed their artistic skills while sketching minorities in the mountains. Though their intent never was to sell paintings of minorities in particular, their reputation as painters of minorities helped to establish them as artists first in the immediate postindependence period and more recently in the development of the international art market. Mai Long lived in Son La province northwest of Hanoi near the border with Laos for eight years after the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. He grew very familiar with the Tai groups living there, eating their food, living in their houses, and raising his children with theirs.

Mai Long's presence in a highland village was part of a program of educating minorities in the Vietnamese language and political theory to incorporate them into the nation. He was not sent as an educator but rather as an observer, a body, an influence on the local population. Somewhat like an American Peace Corps volunteer, he was there to help spread the goodwill of the government's

Figure 5.4 Mai Long's painting of a Black Thai woman. Private collection, photo by Hjorleifur R. Jonsson.

literacy campaigns to the mountainous regions. The influence that he and others would exert on the highlanders would help the process of socialization reach the border areas. He and his family grew fond of Tai customs and habits, and in conversations with us they suggest that the stay there had a greater impact on them than on the highland Tai. Mai Long's paintings of minorities show signs of his affection for the Tai, but they are also emblematic of the Vietnamese intervention in the highlands and the national appropriation of ethnic-minority dress as a signifier.

Nationalizing Difference, Naturalizing the State

Dress as a marker of ethnic groups is a particular legacy of the colonial period and nationalist ferment during that era. This is not to say that prior to the colonial era ethnic differences were not marked through dress and fashion. Rather, notions of difference were reworked. For the region that became Vietnam, dress marked status and relations to the state, for instance, and

changes in status could be manifest through dress, such as when a ruler made his mark on his subjects with a new dress code or provided leaders of hinterland populations with outfits adequate for royal visits. During the colonial period, dress became a signifier for a different classification of identity, one that assumed ethnic uniformity in the place of shifting positions within a political landscape. There is an element of continuity in spite of these apparent changes, in that dress as a marker of identity still depended on the state's classificatory scheme. This scheme, rather than the state's role, is what changed; people were now to be identified in terms of assumed ethnic essences.

The colonial-era making of dress as an ethnic index served to redefine pre-existing markers of community, tradition, and political affiliation, and the anticolonial nationalist movement drew on this colonial legacy of "peoples" to problematize internal Others in relation to national agendas. Pervasive notions of ethnic-minority clothing as a marker of backwardness have led hinterland peoples to wear market clothes. Meanwhile, these essences of assumed backwardness have been repeatedly appropriated by agents of the state, in a varied global context, for celebratory statements of the ethnic and regional unity of the nation.

Earlier, we stated that locally oriented practices of ethnic-minority livelihood, culture, and rituals had no place in Vietnamese propaganda posters or within national imagery more generally. But ethnic-minority practices and markers of local identity have not been erased. Instead, they have been reoriented to the extralocal. It is as such, as they bear on national goals, that ethnic-minority dress and cultural practices have been endorsed. The public commemoration of alterity has in fundamental ways been about the nation. There are numerous parallels to this process in other settings (Muratorio 1993; Adams 1997; Jonsson 2000), where national authorities engage in celebrating markers of difference such as ethnic (minority) dress at the same time as national policies have effectively undermined any of the practices of difference that the dress previously signified.

The most recent example of such dynamics of reorientation occurred in the context of widespread unrest in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, in January and February 2001, where thousands of ethnic-minority people staged demonstrations protesting religious persecution and outsiders' encroachment on their land. Authorities sent in the military to quell the protests, and arrested at least twenty people (*New York Times*, 8 and 9 February 2001). A few weeks later, according to the Vietnamese media, over two thousand ethnic-minority youth in the region assembled for a:

> two day annual festival aim[ed] to preserve and develop minority groups' cultural identities and to welcome the 70th founding anniversary of the Ho Chi Minh

> Communist Youth Union and the 26th anniversary of national reunification. A folk song singing contest, costume show and musical instrument performance, and introduction of local culinary arts are included in the festival. (Vietnam News Agency 2001)

The emphasis on markers of local identity (dress, music, and food) in the Central Highlands festival of national loyalty, several weeks after ethnic-minority peoples staged public protests against their current predicament, shows clearly how the nation-state appropriates signifiers of local identity and reorients them to a national public sphere. As in billboards and museums, this indexing of diversity as celebratory and fundamentally national in character thrives on notions of the state's agents as leading the peoples of Vietnam toward modernity and progress, and/or in sustaining their traditions. The success of that notion depends on depictions of the people as in need of guidance and leadership, which is what the recurring portrayal of "the people" (ethnic-minority or not) as feminine and traditional so persistently conveys. Dress is fundamental to these portrayals and enactments of the people. As an appropriated signifier, ethnic-minority dress serves as a vehicle for defining national unity and for sanctioning the state's power to define the parameters of the social landscape.

Through various policies regarding livelihood and cultural practice, Vietnam's authorities have effectively stigmatized ethnic-minority traditions as backward and incompatible with national goals. Within this national scheme of identity and difference, ethnic-minority peoples may reproduce some of their cultures outside the official gaze. But any public manifestation of minority peoples through dress or other features is likely to be a statement about national essences, a display of the successful insertion of national agendas, and definitions into the fabric of ethnic-minority identity.

The Vietnamese appropriation of their internal Others is in many ways an inheritance from the French colonial regime, and it is within that process of global/local interactions that we situate the emphasis on the visual markers of alterity: traditional, ethnic, or regional dress. Both the French colonial state and the modern nation-state of Vietnam have staged rituals of ethnic-minority allegiance, where the use of traditional dress has played an important part. In both cases, the endorsement of alterity has closely followed the suppression of protests. The repeated embrace of internal Others in their traditional dress can be seen as an attempt to erase from view the disruptions that various forms of warfare and state control have brought upon the peoples of Vietnam since the nineteenth century.[4] The fundamental contribution of globalization to dress as a signifier in Vietnam may be that it has facilitated the image of "local" (ethnic-minority) identities as timeless. At separate historical moments, this

state-endorsed image of the Other's timelessness has placed colonial and postcolonial state regimes within the traditional and natural order of things, at the same time as it has removed state-produced violence and inequality from view.

Notes

1. This chapter is a revised version of our "Other Attractions in Vietnam," published in *Asian Ethnicity* (3, 2), copyright Taylor & Francis 2002, and is used with permission. Our research in and on Vietnam and its art and ethnic minorities draws on several stays and visits since 1992 (Taylor in 1992–94, 1995–96, 1998, and 2000, Jonsson in 1996, 1998, and 2000). We are each indebted to the Center for Asian Studies at Arizona State University for separate A.T. Steele Grants, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University for separate Faculty-Grant-In-Aid Fellowships, that made possible our most recent research. Our collaboration draws also on separate strands of previous research in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. Nora A. Taylor thanks Fulbright-Hays for a research grant, and, for another grant, the Joint Committee on Southeast Asia of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, whose funding came from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Henry Luce Foundation. For support of his research, Hjorleifur R. Jonsson thanks the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, and the Walter F. Vella Scholarship Fund.

2. Trankell (1998: 49) states that Lao Thoeng refers primarily to Khmu. The banknote representation of mid-slope Lao does not show Khmu, however. Khmu (Kmhmu) are northerners. Frank Proschan (2001) states that the striped dress of the Lao Thoeng woman is that of one of the southern groups. The ethnic-as-regional division of national space in the Lao imagery has parallels in Vietnamese depictions of the nation through kinds of people. See Proschan's (1996) discussion of the ethnic label *Kha* (that is analogous to the Vietnamese term *Moi*) for an account of the tripartite division of the peoples of Laos.

3. By "market clothes" we mean the standard, store-bought shirt and pants that do not mark people as local in the sense of having a sub-national ethnic or regional identity. This is not to say that such store-bought clothes are neutral as signifiers of identity; they tend to mark people in national terms as rural or urban and further to be a marker of class position.

4. Such processes of erasure are also evident in the designation of the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam as "proto-Indochinese" and "Montagnards," both of which "suggest a virtual reality of transparent concepts uncorrupted by the shifting terrain of history that has local, national, and transnational dimensions" (Jonsson 2001: 63).

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6

Dress for Sukses: Fashioning Femininity and Nationality in Urban Indonesia

Carla Jones

On a hot afternoon in Jakarta in June of 2000, I listened carefully to one of Indonesia's foremost "experts" on professional dress and lifestyle explain her reasons for worrying about Indonesian middle-class women.[1] Eileen Rachman, owner of a nationally renowned self-improvement course for women, writer of a syndicated magazine column, and expert in a traveling workshop series on dress and manners, explained her reason for the need for these programs thus, "Carla, I must confess that sometimes I am embarrassed by Indonesian women's lack of appreciation of 'lifestyle.' I see Indonesian women, especially when I am traveling abroad, who make me feel ashamed because they don't know how to interact with others, they dress awkwardly, and they just don't seem world class. They just don't have a lifestyle. I feel it is a kind of responsibility for me to help them become more developed." Her comment was telling for its frankness, but also as an indication of how seriously the appearance and manners of Indonesian women were understood to be to a larger national debate on the future of Indonesian national culture.

In this chapter I suggest that a significant site for the contest over the terms of modernity in contemporary Indonesia is women's bodies, particularly through their dress and manners. I describe how middle-class women in the central Javanese city of Yogyakarta strove during the late 1990s, through a private course of personal development, to educate themselves and others on the appropriate ways of personal appearance and presentation. The course instructors and students were involved in cultural production, by distinguishing themselves from and with other class and status groups both within and without Indonesia, through consumption.[2]