

In Memory of Georges Condominas and His Contributions to the Anthropology of
the Mekong Region

by Ronald D. Renard

Professor Georges Condominas was the pre-eminent anthropologist of Mainland Southeast Asia of his time. He was born in Haiphong in 1921 to Louis Condominas, a French "sous-officier" in the French colonial Garde and Adeline Ribeiro-Vieira a Vietnamese mother (who was also part Chinese and Portuguese). He pursued a conventional course of studies at the Lycée Lakanal south of Paris and later in the field of law. He then returned to Hanoi where he served as a colonial official, studied visual arts in 1943 at the École supérieure des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine in Hanoi, and earned a law degree that year. He was then taken into the Marine nationale in Saigon in September 1944. From March until September 1945 he was interned by the Japanese in what the inmates informally called the "Mikado Hotel".

By this time, Condo had already taken an interest to those he first called "Moi" (a general Vietnamese word—now out of favor—referring to indigenous peoples of Indochina). He explains that when, at the age of ten, along with his older sister, first met minorities, he found them more intriguing and not at all as menacing as he had previously been led to think. He also gained an appreciation of them from his father's letters and photos as well as from a great aunt and a great uncle named Charles. All this helped him appreciate the "nobility of the French peasantry" as well as ethnic diversity in Indochina and elsewhere where his father had served, such as Tunisia (*L'Exotique* 1965, pp. 9-13).

Condo was imbued with a strong sense of filial piety (*hiếu* in Vietnamese) and the love of his fellow human beings. In 1988, Condo edited writings by his father in *La Chasse et autres essays* (The Hunt and Other Essays). The book is well illustrated with pictures taken by his father, including during his time as local administrator in Kontum. Condo tells that his father was the first European (perhaps the first "non-Moi") able to enter freely the mountainous Ngoc Linh area east of Kontum. This was, he added, reputed to be the most difficult in Indochina and populated by Moi who had never submitted to lowland rule. Nonetheless, his father could unify these villages under a single authority (*L'Exotique* 1965, p. 12).

Condo wrote that he was taken by the "diverse origins" of his mother. Although the part-Chinese ancestry of one grandmother was completely absorbed by the "dominant Vietnamese", this was not so with his Portuguese grandfather who regaled Condo with tales of maritime adventures. Above all, his Anglo-Irish grandmother captured his attention with stories of Sinn Fein which led him to become sympathetic to anti-colonial thinking (*L'Exotique* 1965, p. 15).

Although finding his ancestry of great interest he was troubled by how others viewed people such as him. It was not until January 1940, aboard the *D'Artagnan*, sailing from Marseilles after the completion of studying law in France, that discussion he had on being Eurasian with a pretty lady and her two children that led him to embrace his diverse origins even though he admitted this was not easy. The sensitivities and cultural skills this made available to him furthered his ethnographic work (*L'Exotique* 1965, pp. 40-41).

By the end of World War II, Condo had his sights set on ethnography and his life was a lesson on how to practice it. Among the precepts guiding his scholarship was that ethnographers must explain their background, that is, conduct ethnographies of themselves as an ethnographer. He does this in *L'Exotique est quotidien* (The Exotic is Ordinary) with an autobiography covering the shaping of his academic work (*L'Exotique* 1965, pp. 40-42).

After returning to France in 1946, he began studying anthropology. He immersed himself in studies with progressive French ethnographers, including the Africanist, Marcel Griaule, André Leroi-Gourhan, and Maurice Leenhardt. Griaule was the first person to hold the professorship in anthropology at the Sorbonne while Leroi-Gourhan was a seminal thinker who stressed the importance of technology. Condo joined the Centre de formation aux recherches ethnologiques which Leroi-Gourhan had just founded, and joined a seminar run by Leenhardt at the Musée de l'Homme. He earned a degree in Arts from the Sorbonne in 1947 and, the following year, completed his course at the Musée de l'Homme.

He was recruited by the Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer (ORSTOM, now IRD -"L'Institut de Recherche pour le Développement) with which he remained until 1960. He went to the Central Highlands town of Dalat, in Vietnam, where his official objective was to work with the High Commission for Montagnard Populations of Southern Indochina as the French army reasserted its control after the War (and not so far from where his father had worked). While he did his research he was seconded to the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) through which he furthered his academic interests.¹

Although planning to conduct an ethno-musical study of a Malay-Polynesian group in the area, such as the Jarai, the position in which he found himself led to Mon-Khmer peoples. He was attracted to little-studied isolated groups, and as he explicitly noted, to where his family could stay with him.

¹ He was also a corresponding member and then became an honorary member in 2007.

He conducted field work, probably the first by a professional ethnologist anywhere in the country, among the Mnong Gar, at Sar Luk in the Central Highlands about twenty kilometers from Dalat. This satisfied him in that it was essentially a single political unit, was remote and previously unknown to him, and had been little studied previously. He welcomed the chance to investigate "Proto-Indochinese" which he felt yield some understanding of the region's prehistory. He studied a single village because local conditions were changing so rapidly that focusing on one unit would give him a solid point of reference.

Condo was obliged to give his due to the High Commission and the colonial administration. He thus examined contacts between the Mnong Gar and both the Vietnamese and the French officials. However, before the government started introducing policies and recommending how the people should live, he gained permission to conduct a thorough study of the way of life of the people—that is to say the field work he desired. In this way he satisfied the demands of the authorities as well as academia.

He began work in Sar Luk in September 1948 and documented village activities for one calendar year. He wanted to go beyond the accounts of colonial officials and missionaries by fully participating in village life. He aimed to, (as translated in the English edition, p. xx) produce "simple raw materials...with no attempt on my part to establish a sociological structuring or to compromise the material with literary embellishments." He covered all aspects of the Mnong Gar's life, from agriculture to music to ritual to relations with outside authorities, amassing data more comprehensively than anyone before him.

Condo did not forget to record their music. He was intrigued by meter-long "Cham Stones," which he wrote were the "most ancient musical instrument in the world" (*Exploration Outre-mer* 1953). He stated that their pentatonic scale was an Indic pentatonic type that was the "sole surviving ancestor of the gamelan". Years later, the recording he made of Mnong Gar music would be used in the final scene of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

After a year in the field, however, he fell ill and had to return to France. An erroneous diagnosis made him believe his affliction was so serious that he had only months to live. He poured all his energy into finishing his book for fear that he might soon die. He recovered, though, and went on to research and write more.

While convalescing, Condo's friend, André-Georges Haudricourt introduced him to the work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss regarding linguistic and anthropological structural analysis. Condo wrote that "this was for me a revelation; one of those rare privileged moments during which we become conscious of a new dimension, of a way along which to become committed" (*L'Exotique* 1965, pp. 90-

91). Lévi-Strauss believed that all people, including the "savage" and the "civilized" were equal in mind and that underlying similar human patterns linked them to all the world's cultures. The purpose of anthropology for him was to discover the hidden rules governing cultural behavior.

While the conception that "savage" and "civilized" were equal may have inspired him, Condo pursued a more pragmatic approach in *Nous avons mangé la forêt de la pierre-génie Gôo* (1957). He described the agricultural cycle of 1948-1949 when the people swiddened Gôo's forest (to be followed the next year by that of by *Phii Ko'* and others after that).² He wrote, in what would later be identified as a post-modernist style, in the first person projecting himself as active in village life. Condo detailed, in print and photograph, daily activities, births, a death, sacrifices, rituals, in addition to the farming. Complementing the book are indices on Mnong Gar terms, geographical and ethnic group names, as well as personal and plant names. Condo considered these indices integral to his work. When the United States Embassy would later publish a translation of his book without these indices, and without his permission, he would be deeply offended because it was "pirated" and because the lack of indices stripped the book of its multi-dimensionality.

After his field work, Condo was invited by Leroi-Gourhan to join the Centre de formation aux recherches ethnologiques (CFRE) in 1950. Then, as a part of his continuing work with ORSTOM, he applied the same research approach³ to the traditional religion of Togo of Vodun (voodoo) and also the Merina, a Malay-Polynesian group with links to Southeast Asia, in Madagascar in 1955 and then for six more months in 1959. During his work there, he concluded that the colonial administration was far harsher than what he had experienced in his youth. He protested and was consequently forbidden from carrying out further research in Madagascar.

On a short visit in 1958 to Sar Luk, he was appalled by the Diem Regime's treatment of the Mnong Gar. Condo wrote that "the government had "sent a large-scale expedition to clear the valley of all its inhabitants" leaving them "haggard" and "uprooted", "broken by illness and despair, in what the organizers of their death delicately termed 'refugee camps'" (*We Have Eaten the Forest*, p. xiv).⁴

²Condo followed the lead of Leroi-Gourhan in his use of multiple indexes which was to be a characteristic of his writing from then on.

³He later wrote, though, that "the effort required for the work carried out in Sar Luk was such that I have never been able to repeat that experience elsewhere" (preface to the *We Have Eaten the Forest*, p. xii).

⁴In 1962, he was not even able to travel to the village. He found the people "suffering from malnutrition, epidemics, and their zest for life," all in all a "catastrophic" situation. He hoped that the Mnong Gar's compatriots would help the "survivors of the holocaust preserve whatever still exists of their ethnic identity... I should like to think that this book might aid

Because of this and his experience of colonialism in Madagascar, he joined other academics, writers, and politicians in signing the Manifesto of the 121 in 1960, which supported the Algerian struggle for independence. This was daring for the time, one not taken by other leading anthropologists including Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Much has been made of Claude Lévi-Strauss' opinion of Condo. It seems clear that at a meeting of the Singer-Polignac Foundation, probably in 1959 or 1960, Lévi-Strauss complimented *Nous avons mange mangé la forêt* as a very good endeavor but that a more analytical work should be produced. Lévi-Strauss also wrote that Condo's research achieved "greater intimacy with the indigenous reality than anything that had been accomplished previously" (Goudineau 2011). It is unclear whether unprovenanced references to Lévi-Strauss referring to Condo as the "Proust de l'ethnologie" were sincere or not. Perhaps he believed Condo's work was insufficiently analytical because Lévi-Strauss, who held the chair of Social Anthropology at the College of France from 1959 to 1982, supported Lucien Bernot's appointment to the anthropology chair in this prestigious institution.

Condo's contended, however, that the most important moment of an anthropologist's professional life is fieldwork. The field, he believed, is the laboratory and the *rite de passage* which transforms an individual into a true anthropologist.

In *L'exotique est quotidien* Condo also tells about the basic influences that shaped his professional career and his approach to Sar Luk, commenting, "Some people will be surprised that I did not mention the name of Claude Lévi-Strauss more often. As with all French people who have come to ethnology after the Liberation, I was greatly influenced by his work and his teachings at l'École pratique des Hautes Études on the return from my first mission" (p. 89). Condo, however, "regretted not having received these new insights until after his fieldwork." He writes in *L'exotique* that his study of Sar Luk, despite having disrupted his marriage, inspired: "I am so voracious for life, everything [presumably in his study of Sar Luk] seemed to quench my thirst... [nothing] could shake my faith or mad optimism" (pp. 90-91).

This enthusiasm was shown in his approach to ethnography and the collection of information on a wide variety of subjects, not just on music and agriculture, but on such topics as ritual, shamanism, slavery, and botany. After Condo's pioneering approach to fieldwork, most anthropologists emulated this methodology. His

them to that end, and that it not be reduced to a mere collection of records" (*We Have Eaten the Forest*, p. xv).

enthusiasm spread to his students and colleagues. His combination of erudition, compassion, friendliness, and insightfulness, led to a rich and influential career.

In France, from 1962 to 1984, he was the director of the Centre de Documentation et Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien (CeDRASEMI) which was established through the cooperation of several academics including Fernand Braudel, Claude Lévi-Strauss, André-Georges Haudricourt, and Lucien Bernot. This was set up in Valbonne, just outside of Nice on the French Riviera, as an experiment in French academic decentralization. Condo held the positions of Vice-President of the Union of Anthropologists and Chair of Ethnology and Sociology of Southeast Asia at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and for several years was a professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He received his doctorate from the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1971. From 1976-1980 he was the president of the Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory Section of Le Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique.

Condo's writings also covered social space, which he defined as an imaginary geographical area. While, for many groups, this is defined in terms of the rising and setting sun and the cardinal points, this is not inevitable. Condo said the Mngong Gar set their social space by a river flowing east to west; what was important was whether they were on the near or the far bank. Concluding *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du Sud-est*, he wrote, "In presenting *social space as the space determined by the entirety of the related systems characterizing the group under consideration*, we wish to present in a concise form the definition of a conceptual tool whose extent rarely coincides with culture and use it, to measure to the extent possible, the boundaries and movement of a group, while taking into account its design and its mode of organizing space" (p. 76).

Condo defines the concept of social space as a comprehensive view, from the house to the kingdom. He mentions that in societies from Madagascar to those in the Mekong Region many structures including family residences, and not just temples or palaces, are aligned with the cardinal points. In this way he prefers a wider view, such as proposed by Edmund Leach, to those more limited such as by Claude Lévi-Strauss and André Leroi-Gourhan (*L'espace social*, p. 27). Condo believed that this wider view of social space, particularly that in which Mon-Khmer (including the Mngong Gar) inhabited along with those in the Lao-Tai world, was a structure that satisfactorily explained the region's societal dynamics

Condo moved beyond Vietnam to Thailand and Laos, studying the social space of the Mon-Khmer within the Tai-Lao world. In 1958 Condo examined what the local people said was a Lua gravesite in Chiang Mai. Before the Tai arrived in the area (and before many local people became Tai), one loosely defined group known as

Lua were usually mountain-dwellers while those who predominated in the valleys were known as Mon. What was significant according to Condo was that when the first queen of the kingdom of Hariphunchai arrived in the area, bringing writing with her, "it allowed for the establishment of a sustainable and favorable (way of life) that would be adopted several centuries later by the new masters of the region, the Thai" (*Notes sur l'histoire lawa*, p. 160). Condo later said that the Lua were the "key" to understanding early Thai history and society (personal communication, 1985). His work on social space, perhaps more than that on the Mngong Gar, has led to much further research.⁵

His work led him across the Atlantic in the 1960s. He was visiting professor at both Columbia and Yale University and a fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto. He delivered the Distinguished Lecture at the American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting in 1972. He told (reportedly in tears) that the Diem regime had destroyed their Mngong Gar's way of life. He was more than outraged that the CIA had used the text of the translation to track down certain villager leaders and have them executed (Sider). He popularized the use of the term *ethnocide*, and in a 1977 updating of *L'Exotique est quotidien*, and in a broadcast on France Television in 1996 he discussed the fate of Sar Luk.⁶

In 1973 he arranged a pioneering Western social science research mission to Hanoi. He and Haudricourt organized conferences in Hanoi and visited sites outside Hanoi, such as in Cao Bang and Gia Lam. This was to have a profound impact on Vietnamese anthropologists, namely Dang Nghiem Van, Be Viet Dang, and Vuong Hoang Tuyen and led to French-Vietnamese research partnerships after 1975 (Jammes).

Condo was exceptionally people-oriented in the field as well as with his many students who universally remember him warmly. I had the chance to meet Condo in 1985 while on an academic exchange between Payap University and the Social Science Academy of Yunnan. While in the lobby of the old Kunming Hotel I noticed someone who looked remarkably like (if not a bit older) than the picture of Condo on his book (translated as *We Have Eaten the Forest*). And so it was that the Academy had put together our group with that of Condo and Jacques Lemoine. We both travelled to Sipsong Panna (Xishuang Banna) for two weeks at the same time in the early days of academic visits to Tai areas in Yunnan.

⁵Condo extended his study of social space to religion in Laos (1998 *Le bouddhisme au village*).p

⁶He was later invited to ANU in 1987 and Sophia University in Tokyo in 1992.

When we (myself and four Thai professors) arrived in Jinghong, we worked with Cheeah Yang Chong. Born in southern Thailand, he went to study in China before World War II. He ended up in Kunming working with the Academy as a specialist on the Tai and other groups there. When we went to the villages we asked questions in northern Thai (the Chiang Mai language) which Khun Cheeah translated into Lu. We understood his questions and could figure out the answers. We ate Lu food with the villagers. We were very pleased with the entire experience.

Condo and Lemoine were with Han specialists (Lemoine knows Chinese). They asked questions in French which the Han specialists translated into Chinese to ask the villagers. The villagers did not understand Chinese very well and did not always answer the questions asked. To make sure that the French scholars enjoyed a proper cuisine, the Academy prepared sandwiches for Condo and Lemoine.

After we compared notes, the French (both knowing Lao) asked to go with us and also to eat the local cuisine. Thus it was for the next ten days we travelled together with Condo whose innate ability to converse (more like schmooze with academic tones) with local people helped us gain rapid insights into the life of the Lu before and after 1949. Working with Khun Cheeah made it even better. Condo also pointed out interesting sidelights to what we saw. After viewing the dance drama of the Lu epic, *Manora*, Condo explained that it was French influence through Marius Petipa that helped ballet spread to Russia from where it was transformed (through hybridization with Peking Opera) into something like the performance in Jinghong.

One of the last days we were in Jinghong was the Lu New Year (which the Chinese government restricted to a one day celebration, and even that was too much for some hapless Han who got splashed by the celebrants). Among the most enthusiastic was Condo who was dancing on the beach of the Mekong to the delight of his many dancing partners.

This was an experience in a time now gone. The dramatic performance in Jinghong has been spoiled to suit Han tourists. The beach has been built over. The villages have been much influenced by Han culture. Although already changed in 1985 by three decades of Beijing rule, the villages still retained their indigenous spontaneity. What remains is the memory of Condo's ingenious powers of perception and understanding. This was key to the insights underpinning his more theoretical. He also had a strong memory, never forgetting who I was even decades after our trip to Jinghong, most recently at Euroseas 2004 in Paris.

Anyone who worked with Condo will not forget him. His writings will remain widely cited and appreciated by social scientists and historians studying the Mekong Region for decades. The Musée du quai Branly in 2006 arranged an exhibition

devoted to his work in Sar Luk. His papers, personal library, and photographs are preserved there for use by researchers.

Approaches he developed will be further studied by scholars from many countries and will contribute to his hope that the ethnographer "may be deemed above all the historian of the different ethnic communities of reunified nations" (*We Have Eaten the Forest*, p. xv).

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