

The uprooted: one boy's story

At the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence, a newly declassified file provides biographical information on Henri ROBERT,¹ born in Vietnam in the late 1930s of a Vietnamese woman and a French man. Included among the medical exam records, annual teacher evaluations, and smiling school pictures of young Henri is a document telling the story of how he came to be a ward of the French colonial state. This document, dated 1945 and signed by a Madame Aumont, states that Henri's mother was "completely uninterested in her children"² and hence handed them over to colonial authorities. Yet files tucked away in the Vietnamese National Archives in Hanoi reveal that Madame Aumont forcibly removed Henri from his mother and willfully lied about Henri's history.

Christina Firpo

HENRI ROBERT WAS JUST ONE of thousands of children who were removed – at times by force – from their Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao mothers between 1890-1975, from the colonial period through the end of the Vietnam War; and Henri's file was just one of many from the *Fédération des oeuvres de l'enfance française d'Indochine* (FOEFI), a French organization dedicated to mixed-race (métis) children from Indochina who had been abandoned by their French fathers. When the FOEFI closed its doors in the early 1980s, FOEFI authorities placed the wards' files in the French national archives to enable former wards to trace their families when they reached adulthood.

Preserving colonial power by 'protecting' métis children

Madame Aumont, a French woman who worked as a librarian in Tonkin during World War II, also worked for the Jules Brévié Foundation, a protection society for abandoned métis children that would later be renamed the FOEFI. The Brévié Foundation had grown out of the multiple Societies for the Protection of Abandoned Métis Children founded in the late 1890s – a period during which French civilians and colonial authorities were growing concerned about the rising number of métis children born to Asian mothers and French fathers, who would later abandon them. These French colons feared that Indochina would develop the same problem that plagued the Dutch in the Netherlands Indies: a sizable population of impoverished mixed-race men and women who engaged in prostitution and rebelled against the colonial government. Drawing on detailed reports from the French consulate in Batavia, the colonial government in Indochina formulated a métis protection system modeled on the one used in the Dutch Netherlands Indies.

For some unmarried mothers of métis children, the protection society system was a blessing. In a society where contraception and abortion were illegal, protection societies provided reluctant mothers with a means of escaping the duties of motherhood. Other mothers turned to the protection societies not to permanently relinquish custody of their children but to ensure their survival in times of hardship. During the 20th century impoverished mothers, or those incapacitated by disease, temporarily placed their children in foster-care type situations. They did so with the understanding that, when their situation improved, they would be able to retrieve their children – though, as it turned out, the protection societies rarely, if ever, returned them. Other mothers refused to relinquish custody of their fatherless métis children. In those cases, French authorities forcibly removed the children and placed them in special orphanages. While it is impossible to quantify exactly how many children passed through Indochina's protection society orphanages, in the course of my research, I have collected data on more than 4,000 métis wards. The history of métis child removals in Indochina bears striking similarities to the removal of more famous cases of indigenous child removals in other colonial contexts, namely Australia, the United States, and Canada.

In Indochina, the métis protection program was tied up with colonial demographic plans. The mass carnage of World War I had revived French fears of depopulation and fueled the growing French Pronatalist movement in the colony, as well as the metropole. Authorities in Indochina looked to fatherless métis children to help bolster the colony's dwindling white French population. Claiming ownership over fatherless métis children on the grounds that they were sons and daughters of Frenchmen, authorities removed them from their mothers and even sent some to the metropole to repopulate areas that had been decimated by the war. Initially, colonial authorities were only interested in children who could pass for white, but by the time World War II broke out, protection society workers like

Madame Aumont were also removing the fatherless children of African men who had served in the colonial army. This was the beginning of a gradual shift in the colonial understanding of what it meant to be French. With the increase of colonial troops from Africa and India representing France in Indochina, some protection society workers began to see African and Indian troops, and their métis children, as French. The expanding definition of what it meant to be French had less to do with enlightened ideas than a desperation to preserve the empire. The child of a French West-African father, Henri Robert was one such case.

The truth about Henri's removal

The documents produced by women who worked for the métis protection societies reveal that the ways that protection societies obtained custody of these children were not always as ethical as the societies led the colonial public to believe. In 1942, Madame Aumont was alerted to the existence of the Robert children; Henri was the youngest. Aumont forcibly removed Henri's older sister and brother and placed them in orphanages in Tonkin. It is not clear whether Aumont permitted young Henri to stay with his mother because he was still nursing – a typical exemption – or whether she was simply unaware of his existence at that time. In 1943, Aumont decided to take Henri after all. She requested aid from the colonial police because his mother refused to relinquish custody. Madame Aumont's inclusion in her report of Henri's mother's resistance, directly contradicts Aumont's later claim, quoted at the beginning of this article, that Henri's mother was completely uninterested in him, or her other children. But Madame Aumont had colonial law on her side. She carefully manipulated an 1889 metropolitan French law that stripped absent or abusive parents of their parental rights, declared Henri's mother "incapable of raising" the two-year-old, and ordered authorities to forcibly take him from her.³

Madame Aumont placed Henri in the École Saint Joseph, an orphanage and boarding school for fatherless mixed-race children, many of whom had undergone similar experiences of being removed from their mothers. There, wards were raised in a French-only linguistic and cultural environment. The plan was that once the wards reached adulthood, they would integrate into the colony's French population. Not long after Henri arrived at the École Saint Joseph, his mother tracked him down. In a move that leaves little question about Henri's mother's interest in her children, she confronted the priest in charge and demanded that he return her child. When the priest refused, she took Henri and the two of them fled. Upon learning of Henri's so-called abduction, Madame Aumont dispatched the colonial police to conduct an extensive search of the Tonkin countryside. Mother and son managed to evade authorities for a few weeks until a local Vietnamese official turned them in to the police. Wise to the indomitable will of Henri's mother, the protection society moved Henri to another orphanage and sent his brother and sister to separate institutions. At the orphanages, officials changed Henri's name multiple times – from Henri ROBERT to Robert HENRI to Robert-Charles HENRI, and finally to Charles HENRI – to prevent his mother from tracking him down again. Indeed, during this time, his teenage brother attempted to find him but was thwarted by the series of aliases.

Journey to France

Henri remained in the protection society institutions. As an adolescent, he attended the *École des enfants de troupe eurasiens*, a military school in Dalat designed to train young métis men to become officers in the colonial military. After the military defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Accords that declared Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao to be independent nations, France was forced to withdraw its colonial administration and military. The FOEFI, the latest manifestation of the protection society programs, proceeded to send almost all of its wards to France. As archival documents indicate, many mothers objected to the evacuation program and attempted to retrieve their children before they left. For their part, many wards refused to go. In 1955, as the *École des enfants de troupe eurasiens* was preparing cadets for their journey to the metropole, young Henri NICHOLAS obstinately refused to leave Vietnam. He incited a small riot among other cadets who wanted to stay in Vietnam with their families. Teachers reported that Henri made anti-French statements and told lies about the protection societies. While it is not clear what kinds of 'lies' he told, it is possible that he alluded to the circumstances of his separation from his mother. As the French military and protection societies were pulling the last of the French presence from Indochina, authorities at the military school struck Henri's name from the list and left him in South Vietnam.

Saigon after decolonization in the mid-1950s was a rough town, plagued with corruption and violence. Among the city's problems were the gangs of fatherless Eurasians, now adults and social outcasts, who roamed the town causing disturbances. In an attempt to curb the problem this population presented, the South Vietnamese government permitted the FOEFI to continue searching the countryside for fatherless métis children. As in the colonial period, some such children were forcibly removed and shipped to France, where they were raised in orphanages. Within this context, Henri Robert was eventually sent to France. The archival trail for Henri Robert ends in 1963, when he finally aged out of the protection society system.

The FOEFI continued to search the South Vietnamese countryside for the children of French men or French colonial soldiers, through till 1975. By sending them to France, the Federation's actions, in this case, aided many young men and women who would have otherwise been social outcasts. But that had not always been the case. When piecing together wards' lives from documents scattered among seven archives and libraries in Vietnam, Cambodia, and France, it becomes clear that the stories of how fatherless métis children came to be separated from their mothers are not as clear-cut, or as rooted in altruism, as has historically been presented; many of them had been forcibly removed from their Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao mothers.

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Notes

- 1 In an effort to respect privacy laws, I use the pseudonym Henri ROBERT.
- 2 "Note de Madame Aumont, chargée de l'oeuvre des enfants eurasiens a Hai Phong," 22 June 1946. Centre des Archives Outre Mer, fonds du FOEFI: 90APC62.
- 3 Letter, Madame Aumont to M. Resident Mayor of Hai Phong, 28 October 1942. Vietnam National Archives 1, files of the Governor General of Indochina 495.

Below:
'Clairs Matins'
orphanage, Hanoi.

