

Abstract: Why did some national liberation struggles turn toward revolutionary anticolonialism while others achieved their goals within colonial apparatuses? Prior research focusing on relations between colonized elites and colonial authority have yet to fully consider how alliances among indigenous groups pattern anticolonial strategy. This study shifts the analytical focus towards contestations and negotiations between emergent social actors, relationships, and coalitions. I analyze alliance formation across space (urban/rural) and status (elite/mass) using a paired comparison between two former French colonies. I find that Vietnam's alliances bridged both spatial and status divides while Senegal's bridged status divides but maintained urban/rural divides. I advance a relational and networked analysis, in which mechanisms of anticolonial strategy cannot be reduced to working-class formation or peasant rebellion, for example, but rather are constituted by one process being contingent on another. I then examine the consequences of this divergence using counterfactuals in which alliance formation failed in one case but succeeded in the other. I employ lower-level archival records collected in Vietnam, Senegal, and France to analyze decolonial trajectories as dynamic and contingent processes, explaining not only why certain historical paths are not taken but how it could have been different.

Introduction

How are alliances contested across space (urban/rural) and status (elites/masses) to bridge or maintain divisions and shape anticolonial strategy? I compare alliance formation in two former French colonies from the late 19th-century onset of formal colonialism to Vietnam's (VN) independence in 1945 and Senegal's (SN) in 1960. I analyze the politics of alliance formation across four indigenous actors—urban elites, rural elites, peasants, and the working class—as latent categories emerging from agrarian institutions that were remade throughout colonialism.

I address contemporary interdisciplinary approaches to the study of nation-states, decolonization, and political elites. Prior debates cast national liberation struggles and newly independent nation-states through processes of continuity, in which traditional indigenous practices are adapted to form “old societies in new states” (Geertz 1963) or change, in which colonial state rule is reproduced to form “old states in new societies” (Anderson 1983) (see Lentz 2017 for contemporary discussion on Vietnam) I extend this enduring debate to understand how precolonial divisions were transfigured and exploited by emergent dynamics throughout colonialism to enable and constrain different anticolonial strategies.

Strategies of national liberation employed by indigenous actors are shaped by processes that are internal to systems of action that may not be attributable to the external shock of colonialism. Stated differently, what “causes” anticolonial mobilization assumes independence between a precolonial, indigenous, and colonial regime, but disruptive mobilizations are internal (or endogenous) to systems they hope to overcome (Ermakoff 2015:74, 2019; Zhang 2024:265). This research reconsiders the revolutionary role of working class and agrarian communities by situating indigenous structure and strategy as dynamic processes that enable and constrain an important dimension of contentious politics: alliances.

Using sequential process-tracing on a paired comparison (Emigh, Riley, and Ahmed 2024; Tarrow 2010; Zhang 2024), this study examines how and why mechanisms of alliance formation can lead to revolutionary change to identify the structural and strategic levers by which these mechanisms are opened or closed. I argue that alliances can result in fundamental reconfigurations in indigenous structures, even if they do not forcibly change an existing regime. This advances an analysis into varieties of decolonization that seeks to explore different historical paths, and *why* certain paths are not taken. Thus, rather than examining Senegal as a “negative” case, in which some argue “the only thing that changed at independence was that a few Black men replaced a few White men” (Cooper 2019; Deets 2023:82), I employ in-depth comparison with Vietnam to understand when, how, and why each could have been different.

I collected original archival data in Vietnam, Senegal, and France to undergo case-specific analysis and understand how precolonial indigenous institutions were re-made by colonialism to shape core social relationships. I employ historical records as sites of ethnography (Stoler 2002). Lower-level administrative records in Vietnam and Senegal enable a more comprehensive analysis of everyday indigenous functions and relations under colonialism. This allows for a latent conception of revolutionary capacity rooted in emergent and shifting indigenous dynamics and processes beyond traditional frameworks that focus only on state-targeting, class struggle, or anti-colonial resistance. While most studies of revolution emphasize either material factors (working-class formation or land ownership) or cultural ideology (such as communism or elite discourse), I bridge the two and show that revolutions emerge from the specific ways elites and masses negotiate power across rural and urban spaces. This multi-layered analysis shows how structures change over time to shape agency and strategy.

I find that Vietnam bridged both urban/rural and elites/mass divisions in the absence of a robust urban working class, while Senegal bridged elite/mass divisions in urban areas with an emerging working class, but this did not extend to rural geographies and came at the cost of addressing agrarian concerns. After tracing these different decolonial pathways, I extend this paired comparison using “counterfactual analysis” on each case, where an event was attempted but failed and use insights from the other, where it did occur. This analytic strategy differs from negative case methodology (Emigh 1997) by advancing arguments about how revolutionary capacity is enabled and constrained using within-case instances in which deviance could have occurred but did not. How would alliance formations have changed if Vietnam *did* develop a robust working class that granted the industrial centers with more leverage and set them closer to urban elites and intellectuals than the peasant masses? Similarly, how would have alliances changed if urban and rural divides *did* successfully develop in Senegal and the development of an urban working-class did not undercut a growing rural power that was heading anticolonial resistance campaigns?

Literature Review & Case Background: Spatial and Status Divides

Writing in the year 1937, indigenous elites of French possessions in Indochina and West Africa acknowledged how their own status and wellbeing was tied to the peasants of their land. Originating from what is now known as Vietnam and Senegal, these high-status, elite, and French-educated indigenous intellectuals took divergent paths regarding their rural counterparts. In *The Peasant Question* (1937:3) Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh, both key figures in the Indochinese Communist Party at the time, lament that “city and countryside are very closely connected... despite this interdependence, many people in the cities are indifferent to or despise the peasants. This is really too bad!”(Chinh and Võ Nguyên 1937:3).

In “The Resistance of the Senegalese Bourgeoisie to the Popular Rural School,” Leopold Sedar Senghor, who was born in the rural region of Sine-Saloum and teaching in French universities at the time, reiterates how Senegalese elites did not want their own power and status to be jeopardized with rural betterment through colonial development and education policies. The “rural popular school would be an excellent institution, provided it does not leave the village and does not expand into the city...our bourgeoisie does not understand the Franco-African cultural movement, of which the rural popular school is one of the expressions” (Senghor 1938:41–42). The Senegalese bourgeoisie were “repelled by what is concrete and practical, perhaps by what is African,” states Senghor, because “there is a sense—or a perceived sense—of political danger in the creation of rural schools (Senghor 1938:42–43).

Across Vietnam and Senegal, many indigenous leaders were self-proclaimed communists and socialists working with France’s alliance of left-wing parties under the Popular Front and were embedded in French networks and educational systems. Both faced the same types of economic and cultural pressures through extractive *mise-en-valeur* and *mission civilisatrice* campaigns which included rural development and agrarian education and hoped to increase profitable returns on these agrarian non-settler colonies (Reynaud-Paligot 2020). The two French possessions were subject to similar directives originating from the same Minister of Colonies, albeit implemented in highly varied ways with differentiations between formal colonies and protectorates. Furthermore, cultural and geographic barriers prevented elites from relating to the popular masses in both cases. Even when there was a minority of “urban people who would like to understand the peasants... [they] cannot clearly see the life of the peasant in his ricefield, or behind the village bamboo hedge” (Chinh and Võ Nguyên 1937:3; Senghor 1938).¹

¹ For the few Senegalese bourgeoisie supporting rural and practical development, see (Senghor 1938)

Analytic Strategy

By making my key “variables” and unit of analysis to be sets of relations (urban/rural, elite/mass), I undergo processual analysis by first defining the relationship and then examining “the mechanism of conflict or contestation that produces a change in the relationship” (Emigh et al. 2024:299). The focus on these two relationships their interdependence extends core debates about indirect rule (Crowder 1964; Letsa and Wilfahrt 2020; Mamdani 1999; McNamee 2019) and projects of governance more generally (Scott 2009). Colonial authorities being a demographic minority meant indigenous actors were the engine and oil of the colonial machine, even if they were not the drivers. According to Mamdani, this created “two distinct systems of power—one civic but racialized, the other customary but ethnicized—under a single authority. The structural effects of this form of power reproduced a double division, that between the urban and the rural, and that between different ethnically-organized Native Authorities in the rural.” (Mamdani 1999:883). It is not always clear, however, “whether the people involved lived their lives according to the structural theories of colonial governors” (Cooper 1997:158). Mamdani’s urban indigenous elites who were part of a selected educated group “might well have had rural, uneducated families” and such relations “might have linked the domains Mamdani considers impermeable; and social movements might have sprung from religious or other networks that never quite fit the tribal conception of culture” (Cooper 1997:158).

Indigenous urban-rural relationships are central, emerging and evolving through dynamics that, although contemporaneous with colonial rule, may have too readily been attributed to colonization at the risk of obscuring more local processes. For example, recent scholarship on tutelage relationships seeks to combine structural explanations with cultural ones and material with ideological ones (Fall 2006; Hammer and White 2019; Janoski 2020; Trần 2020b). “Tutelage, rather than a sideshow to coercion and capital... constituted a cultural project in its own right” (Go 2008:27). Yet, studies of tutelage and colonial political subjectivities are often studied among indigenous elites in relation to colonial structures rather than indigenous masses (Go 2008; Hammer and White 2019). This comes at the cost of obscuring the process by which elite indigenous discourses are themselves acts of tutelage to indigenous masses.

I focus on three indigenous contexts: (1) contestations around indigenous state structures and shifting moral economies (such as the decline of monarchal authority across the kingdoms of Senegal in the aftermath of abolition and frustrations over a restrictive Confucian imperial administrative system in Vietnam and social mobility), (2) religious developments (such as the Islamic brotherhoods in Senegal and growing Caodism and millenarianism in Vietnam), and (3) international influences beyond the metropole and the World Wars (consisting of *negritude* and pan-African socialism in Senegal and the “Go East” movement in which Chinese and Japanese movements strongly influenced Vietnamese nationalism and eventual communist organizing from Moscow). While prior work finds that indigenous institutions are an important factor in shaping trajectories of state development, analysis of indigenous determinants are often fossilized in the earlier part of their sequential analyses (Mahoney 2010; Slater 2009; Slater and Soifer 2020). Yet, temporal analyses can be iterative and nonlinear (Zhang 2024:270) in which indigenous institutions continuously revised colonial efforts and policy (Steinmetz 2007).² The three indigenous contexts shaping alliance formation interacted with emergent colonial imperatives to extract, build, and “civilize.”

² Another way of saying this is that indigenous institutions are recursively updated so that while they may be viewed as causes, indigenous adaptation and reactivity may then be viewed as effect (see discussion in Zhang 2024)

Preliminary Findings

Agrarian economies and customary village practices made it so that rural elite power derived from nobility status. Power meant the ability to distribute land, and not necessarily own land given the subsistence practices of Vietnam and Senegal. Despite these similarities, however, the development of global economic exchanges and Senegal and Vietnam's subsequent peripheralization into the world economy meant the power of rural elite nobility strengthened in Vietnam but weakened in Senegal. In Senegal, traditional rural elites were replaced with a growing network of rural Islamic leaders whose status grew symbiotically alongside colonial rule. Analyzing a new phase of colonial interventions to extract, build, and "civilize" after World War I, I argue that the increasing autonomy and corruption of traditional rural elites in Vietnam sparked discontent to galvanize alliances between rural masses and urban elites to counteract their growing power. In contrast, Senegal's spatial divides were maintained as an urban working class grew parallel to decentralized rural Islamic authority. Ultimately, Vietnam's alignment of city elites and peasant masses led to mass mobilization in 1930, despite a lackluster "proletarianization" campaign. Senegal's cosmopolitan elites used a different strategy and reluctantly forged alliances with a nascent working class to conduct unprecedented urban strikes in 1946, but this came at the cost of sidelining agrarian concerns for labor ones.

How would alliance formations have changed if Vietnam *did* develop a robust working class that granted the industrial centers with more leverage and set them closer to urban elites and intellectuals? Vietnamese Communist intellectuals had launched a "proletarianization" campaign from 1928 to 1930 to strengthen working class consciousness using a variety of strategies in cities such as Hà Nội, Nam Định, and Hải Phòng, but this largely failed (Thanh Niên [Revolutionary Youth League] 1972:7–8; Trần 2020a). Given that working-class railway workers were one of the few groups to not participate in the pivotal large-scale Nghệ-Tĩnh Soviet uprisings of 1930-1931 (Del Testa 2011), I suggest that working-class formation was not a necessary condition, at least, and may have *impeded* revolutionary capacity, at most, because it could have strengthened spatial divides along urban lines similar to Senegal.

Similarly, how would have alliances changed if urban and rural divides *did* successfully develop in Senegal and the development of an urban working-class did not undercut a growing rural power? Urban-rural divides were being bridged in the case of the Casamance, Senegal's southern region geographically separated from the rest of Senegal by the Gambia. Casamance was the only region to grow rice from rainfall and home to many Casamance resistance fighters against both French colonial authorities and encroaching Muslim influences from northern Senegal. If there was any sense of a latent anticolonial nationalist spirit, it would be found in the Casamance. Many urban elites made their way back to Casamance villages after being French-educated or living in Dakar, Senegal's capital upon independence. Urban-trained elites strategically developed schools, health infrastructure, and agricultural programs for Senegal's southern rural region. Leaders such as the legendary heroine Aline Sitoé Diatta would come to be symbolic of this growing rural power, and the French-educated Casamançais elites, such as Emile Badiane and Victor Diatta, would come to establish the political party Movement of Democratic Forces of the Casamance (MFDC), but were largely shut out of power in the late colonial period as contestations ended up favoring northern Senegalese interests closely partnered with the French metropolitan Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), or French Socialist Party (Deets 2023:123). What if the MFDC and growing rural Casamance power supported by certain urban elites had *not* been suppressed, targetted, and contested to favor the French Section of the Workers' International based in Senegal's northern urban cities?

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