

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

French Indochina:  
How Gender Shaped the Imperial System

By

Theresa Elisabeth Bird

August 2021

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts degree in the  
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Faculty Advisor: Leora Auslander

Preceptor: Sarath Pillai

**Abstract**

This thesis examines the intimate relationships between indigenous Indochinese women and their French counterparts in the 1930s colony of French Indochina, along with understanding the threat the *métis* children posed and how that subsequently connects with ideas surrounding roles of both gender and race. More specifically, I argue that French imperialists used gender roles and expectations to uphold their system of empire. Utilizing the stories of two women, one French and the other a *métisse*, I aim to comprehend these complex systems put into place by the French empire, and therefore understand how they functioned to keep people in their place and create a system under which those at the top could benefit.

## Introduction

Indochina, *la perle de l'Extrême Orient*, was France's rival colony to the British 'jewel in the crown', India. French imperialism of the early twentieth century centered on a *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission), where assimilation to French ideals of fraternity, liberty, and equality were key components used to disguise anxieties surrounding the French Empire's brutal methods of expansionism. In conjunction with these concepts came more specific limits of how the empire should treat people and subsequently how those people should act in order to align with the accepted imperial order. French imperialists placed gendered roles upon women. This was the case for both French and indigenous women of their many colonies. In this thesis, I focus on the hierarchies within the gendered relationships of French and Indochinese women from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1930s, highlighting the clear power dynamic between the two groups of women. I argue that the gender systems put in place by French imperialists upheld and maintained the overall political, economic, and cultural norms and expectations of the established system within the French Empire.

My primary argument deals with how French imperialists used gender as a methodology to maintain their control over those within their empire. More specifically, I aim to identify and comprehend the specific standards that subjugated French women for their gender, and indigenous women for their gender *and* their race in conjunction. It is also important to discuss the complicated and complex relationship between French and indigenous women. Through reading the sources and accounts from people who lived during this period, it is quite apparent that there was a clear hierarchal relationship where French women held far more power and privilege over their Indochinese counterparts. Not only were French women privileged because of their race, but also many of the women who came to French Indochina from the metropole

were middle or upper class, whilst many indigenous women suffered from poverty under colonial rule. Even those that might have had power, position, and prestige within their own indigenous communities found themselves at the very bottom of the social, political, and economic ladder of the French empire in Indochina.

I will also dedicate a small section of this thesis to an examination of the *métis* (mixed-race children) question, which involves the problem of how to identify mixed-race children under French citizenship laws and provides additional evidence of women's complicated place in the sphere of empire. The relationships that produce *métis* children were most often between European men and indigenous women, which exemplifies intersections of gender and race relations, along with colonizer/colonized relations. During this time, there was an imperial view of Indochinese women as promiscuous and submissive. This view was greatly magnified in situations within which an indigenous woman had a mixed-race child from a European man, which meant society viewed them as social outcasts. *Métis* children, in turn, were both fetishized and hated for their European and Indochinese features, which were obvious traits on both sides of the equation. Indochinese people looked down on *métis* for their European features, while Europeans looked down on *métis* for their Indochinese features, leaving *métis* children in a confusing position where they questioned their own identity and did not know where they belonged or which cultural norms to conform to. This complicated view of not only *métis* children, but also of the women who gave birth to them, will aid in understanding the expectations for indigenous women of this period. It will also help in comprehending how people viewed each 'side' of a female *métis* child, and therefore what was viewed as normal in terms of appearance, demeanor, and behavior for French women versus indigenous women.

Before delving into the arguments on this thesis, it is important to discuss the research that has already been completed on this topic. Both the English and French scholarship surrounding French Indochina has been uneven when compared to the research on French North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Much of the documented accounts left behind are from men, but the ones from women come from letters written to the colonial administration requesting various types of assistance, such as family allowance, financial aid, employment, or scholarships for their children.<sup>1</sup> This information tells us what voices historians valued during the early twentieth century: white, middle-class males. Their voices were recorded above all, with little visibility given to women, especially indigenous women. The difficulty of women's place in the private sphere meant that they did not have the same level of access to the public record that men had access to. In fact, even when seeking out women's words directly, many documents about women in the public archives were written by men in official positions.<sup>2</sup> Without women's direct words, we can already interpret exactly who was well-regarded in colonial society, along with who was prevented from leaving a true historical account of their lives. This makes the in-depth study of this subject matter challenging and frequently leaves the door open to interpretation, especially regarding the accounts of indigenous women.

The key secondary sources for this paper come from historians Marie-Paule Ha, Nicola Cooper, Christina Firpo, and Ann Stoler. All four of these sources examine intimate spheres of empire, focusing on gender and race as central components to their arguments within the realm of colonial studies. Where they differ is how they employ their methods of study. Ha and Cooper focus on the historical background of Indochina, with Cooper leaving out Vietnamese voices altogether from her book. Stoler expands more upon the themes of women and miscegenation

---

<sup>1</sup> Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 5.

through philosophical examination of gender and racial roles in the colonies. Firpo looks at miscegenation and the Vietnamese view of *métis* children, arguing that shifting social attitudes towards *métis* children affected how the government dealt with them. All of these sources connect the social to the political, arguing similarly that women's gender roles and expectations impacted how the overall French imperialists viewed them and their role within the colonies.

The two central primary sources I draw upon come from Clotilde Chivas-Baron and Kim Lefèvre. Chivas-Baron writes in her book, *La femme française aux colonies*, about the experiences of French women and why they ended up in the colonies. This book displays not only the reasons that French women may have come to the colonies, but also what people expected from these women once they moved there. I hope to use Chivas-Baron's work as a clear example of women's experiences from this time, although it will also be interesting to examine the biases in her writing as an upper-class French woman of the 1930s. Lefèvre, on the other hand, documents her experience growing up in French Indochina as a *métis* child in the 1930s in her book *Métisse Blanche*. This will aid in my understanding of how *métis* children were treated growing up in French Indochinese society.

## Historical Background

French Indochina refers to Vietnam (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina), Cambodia, and Laos. In the 1880s, France viewed Indochina as its most favorable new colony.<sup>3</sup> At first, it was unpopular in comparison to African colonies, as the colony seemed almost unnecessary.<sup>4</sup> But the conquest of Tonkin in 1884 popularized Indochina, and after the war was over, the main group

---

<sup>3</sup> Alice L. Conklin, Sarah Fishman, and Robert Zaretsky, *France and its Empire Since 1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91-92.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Chafur and Amanda Sackur, *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 15.

that aided in establishing Indochina as a place for French people to come and live were the soldiers who had just finished fighting on the battlefield in the Sino-French War.<sup>5</sup> The overall colonial period spanned ninety years.

France, in this image, tried to portray themselves through a 'more humane' version of colonialism. It sought to distance itself from violence in empire by attempting a more humanitarian version.<sup>6</sup> This is important because it sets France apart from other empires of this period and highlights the methodology and thought behind their imperial structure. The narratives they put in place about conquest and reconciliation were the foundation upon which they laid their imperial ideologies. This, in turn, set up the fundamental structure of the relationship between colonizer and colonized.<sup>7</sup> These narratives included turning tales of conquest on their heads, framing expansionism as a heroic imperial adventure rather than the violent and bloody conquering of the indigenous peoples of Indochina. The result of this was subsequently allowing the indigenous populations of Indochina to adopt their economic system of capitalism and the following of its customs.<sup>8</sup>

France also used gender as a way to distance themselves from the violent images of colonialism. France as a country is associated with the feminine *la mère-patrie*, or the Mother-Fatherland, with imagery of their country surrounding female icons such as *Marianne*, *la Semeuse*, and *la Moissonneuse*.<sup>9</sup> By using feminine imagery and calling themselves the Motherland, it implied the colonies were the Fatherland. Motherhood is also linked with nurturing and caring, which is far different from the traditional colonial image of bloody

---

<sup>5</sup> Chafur and Sackur, *Promoting the Colonial Idea*, 20-22.

<sup>6</sup> Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 133.

violence. In reality, France was still the Fatherland, or the one in complete charge of the colonies, and not the other way around. Additionally, the sexualized image of Indochina propagated by the French allowed French Empire to frame their takeover of Indochina as more of a union or a parental arrangement between mainland France and the colony.<sup>10</sup> This tactic was also intended to soften the reality of a brutal colonization, creating an image of the gentle partner as opposed to the conquest of a lesser nation or people, which was important to France's ability to continue its imperial mission. They needed to convince people to come to the colonies in order to build an empire and exploit the natural resources so that they could make more money to support the French nation.

On a more individual level, this was also for French men to enrich themselves and gain power through the exploitation of natural resources and the people of the colonies. This reinforces the point that women and men were assigned specific roles based on their gender and women were not perceived as the aggressor or leader, but were (by nature of their supposed femininity) expected to play a secondary, supportive role. This underpins the contention that gender inherently set women at a disadvantage to gaining wealth or power in their own right and appears to act as a suppressant to their ability to utilize the French colonies in the same manner as men could; based not on their capabilities, but on their gender role and expectations.

Another central component to French expansionism rested upon the overlapping anxieties surrounding French identity and birthrates from the late nineteenth century. Losing the territory of Alsace-Lorraine to the Prussians in 1872, along with a declining birthrate, contributed to the question of what and who was French, which in turn subscribed to the overall expansionist

---

<sup>10</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 135.



mindset.<sup>11</sup> The declining birthrates led to a focus on domestic arrangements, sexual morality, parenting, education, and upbringing.<sup>12</sup> These categories were no longer an at-home, private part of life. They became national projects that the government dedicated time and regulation to, pulling them into the public sphere. This government policy direction will become important when discussing the fecundity expectations of women in the overseas colonies as opposed to the metropole.

A central component of French imperialism was the idea of maintaining ‘Frenchness’ in the colonies. This is referred to as assimilation, and what came with such a concept was the policing of blood lines, racism, and skin color biases. Although they tried to regulate biological blood lines in order to maintain racial purity, there was no guarantee of ‘authentic’ Frenchness.<sup>13</sup> French citizens were expected to replicate the metropole in the colonies, down to culinary and dietary practices (considering food is an important part of French culture).<sup>14</sup> Dress and clothing came in as second most important, as colonial leaders and the bourgeois encouraged colonists to adopt European methods of dress.<sup>15</sup> What was the purpose of enforcing these cultural norms? According to Ha, recreating French households in the colonies was meant to bring about the “rehabilitation of metropolitan civility.”<sup>16</sup> This was all part of the imperial concept of recreating Frenchness in the colonies. Through doing this, they were able to bring France into the places they governed, which at the same time disallowed the indigenous populations from keeping their own customs and traditions. This also served the purpose of protecting Europeans from the ‘temptations’ of indigenous cultures.<sup>17</sup> In the same manner as the gender roles assigned to French

---

<sup>11</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 72, 82.

<sup>12</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 66.

women suppressed them in their ability to gain wealth and power, it also left them to be at the forefront of the maintenance of the French persona, whether through their clothing, their behavior, their home, the education of their children, and the support of their husband. This pressure to maintain the superiority of Frenchness impacted their ability to connect and grow to understand the cultures and in turn the colonized peoples. This robbed them of the ability to form a true understanding of the people they lived amongst and built a barrier that led to the superiority complex and lack of empathy and care for the indigenous people.

The categorization of citizens versus subjects in the colonies was a dynamic, not static construct. It was not a cultural, but a political classification, which was flexible and disputed territory.<sup>18</sup> Identifying ‘white’ versus ‘native’ was central to this, as categorizing the children of mixed relationships helped to determine who was legitimate for citizenship and who was not. But who could be classified as ‘European’ was not based solely on skin color, as this was also tested based upon a sense of morality and ‘appropriateness’.<sup>19</sup> It is clear through these examples that determining who was and wasn’t French enough was a difficult task, based more upon people’s private lives than their public lives:

“Assessments of civility and the cultural distinctions on which racial membership relied were measured less by what people did in public than how they conducted their private lives – with whom they cohabited, where they lived, what they ate, how they raised their children, what language they chose to speak to servants and family at home.”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 2-6.

<sup>20</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 6.

Sexual relationships were a central feature in interpreting someone's French citizenry. Eugenics played a role in this as well through ideas against miscegenation and 'unnatural' sexual relationships such as concubinage or prostitution.<sup>21</sup> While racism is often thought as a visual concept, it really is based on nonvisual ideas surrounding morality and cultural aspects, as well as being focused on gender and class. Any changes made to sexual access or domestic engagements caused a redefinition of privilege boundaries.<sup>22</sup>

### **French Women in Indochina**

French women in the empire were key to achieving 'real' colonization.<sup>23</sup> When I refer to 'French women' in this case, I am primarily discussing upper to middle class white women, who were the main people privileged enough to leave behind their own accounts. French women came to the Indochinese colony due to the creation of government organizations like that of the *société Française d'émigration des femmes* (SFEF), which encouraged women to emigrate to the colonies.<sup>24</sup> Whilst the British colonial female emigration movement has a well-documented history, its French counterpart does not.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the British female emigration movement was an inspiration for the French, as British women were praised in the French press for their commitment to the empire.<sup>26</sup> The French, like the British, used the idea of '*politique de la famille*' to get women to move to the colonies. This was essentially encouraging women to move to colonies like Indochina in order to find a match and have children, establishing a family overseas from France.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 28.

As mentioned earlier, the low birth rates of this period, along with the consequences of young soldiers dying in large numbers during the Franco-Prussian War, led to the need to increase the population, which is one of the reasons why the French government was so keen on encouraging women to move to the colonies. Sending women to the colonies to reproduce aided the ideas of spreading the French race across the world and furthering the superiority of ‘Frenchness’ across the globe. Ha describes sending women to the colonies as a two-birds-one-stone situation; it solved the two problems of excess bachelors in the colonies and excess bachelorettes in the metropole.<sup>28</sup> Single women were a problem in the metropole due to high female unemployment rate for educated women, in addition to the inability to afford a dowry.<sup>29</sup> Driven by a growing pro-natalist ideology, advocates called for increased births to “solve the social, economic, and political problems plaguing the country.”<sup>30</sup> The solution to the problem of excess single women was to encourage them to move to the colonies and aid in growing the population and at the same time providing more truly French colonists who could sustain and expand the empire past its metropole. This reduction of the character of women into a primary function of reproduction is possibly one of the key factors that begin to answer why women were repressed by the imperialist expectations and gender norms of the French colonies.

The SFEF, however, faced problems in trying to convince women to move to Indochina. People in the metropole viewed Indochina as ‘cemeteries’, which kept them from wanting to move there.<sup>31</sup> The SFEF had two objectives in its mission to bring more women to the colonies: patriotism and philanthropy.<sup>32</sup> They encouraged women to move there in order to create a ‘little

---

<sup>28</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 40.

<sup>31</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 40.

France' in their new homes in Indochina, bringing the metropole to the colony. Additionally, recreating the French race abroad would spread the French language and culture around the world, ensuring the growth and longevity of the French empire. Women were clearly a central component to the civilizing mission in their ability to aid in recreating the French image across the globe. The SFEF sought women who were interested in "assuring women an honorable means of existence," along with those concerned with France's future and its rivalry with the British Empire in spreading its influence.<sup>33</sup> They also charged an annual membership fee, which, intentionally or not, meant that they were empowering women from the middle to upper classes to participate in the grand adventure. This sidelined those in lower classes and ensured that their ability to have any form or opportunity for class mobility that might have come from a move away from mainland France was practically nonexistent.

A similar organization that targeted middle class women in the metropole was the *Oeuvre colonial des femmes* (known as the OCFF), which also sought to inspire women to move to the colonies.<sup>34</sup> The OCFF's membership fees were much higher, however, which encouraged a more bourgeois society of women to join. This organization had five committees that focused on moral and material aid to applicants, collection and distribution of clothing to the needy, finding employment for those under their care, organization of fundraising events, and assistance for women who planned to depart the metropole for the colonies.<sup>35</sup> Organizations like the SFEF and the OCFF are a central reason as to why so many women migrated to colonies like Indochina, and it is clear from their targeting of middle class women as to why we have accounts left behind

---

<sup>33</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 45.

primarily by those who could afford to travel there and had the education and ability to write such accounts.

The empire encouraged French women to migrate to the colonies in order to complete what Ha refers to as a double mission. These middle-class white women were called upon to complete their own *mission civilisatrice*. They were told to not only construct their own version of France inside the home, but also to ‘teach’ the ‘backward’ races of Indochina the culture and morals of the French Empire.<sup>36</sup> These concepts are both feminine in nature. Society invigorates women to create a happy home and nurture and teach their children. In this same way, empire encourages women to create a home reminiscent of the metropole, and to treat indigenous peoples as if they were children to teach. Through these methods, the French way of life was to be replicated throughout the globe.

The public and private divide was highly malleable as the empire was being built. French women found themselves as not only taking on roles of mother and wife, but also the role of *colonial* mother and wife.<sup>37</sup> These new roles were different in that their presence in the colonies was assumed to have a profound impact on men. Colonial advocates encouraged women to move with their spouses to the colonies, as they believed that women would be able to “watch over his well-being and his health, to care for him in a thousand indispensable ways.”<sup>38</sup> The assumption that women were naturally more caring led to this expectation that colonial women would be the perfect partner and emotional support for their husbands. Not only emotional, but also their physical and moral well-being as well.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 54.

Women's colonial motherhood expectations were similar in terms of the contribution to the overall imperial project. Though having children was encouraged, there was great caution surrounding white women having children in the colonies. Medical officials of this time period warned of 'great risk' regarding childbearing and rearing in the colonies, and some women were sent back to the metropole to give birth and wean their child before returning to the colonies.<sup>39</sup> However, colonial propaganda still placed a great emphasis onto French women having children in colonies, as it was believed to be a long-term commitment that would convince men to settle down permanently in the colonial setting.<sup>40</sup> This also plays into the goal of the expansion of France and its Frenchness into many countries on many continents. A goal that was not only based on national pride and the desire to see as many nations as possible become civilized according to the French national characteristics but was also driven to a great extent by ambition and greed. The need for control over natural resources and the vast amounts of income generated by overseas businesses and plantations poured into the national treasury and enriched much of the French elite society.

A French colonial author from this time, Clotilde Chivas-Baron, describes in her 1929 book *La Femme Française aux Colonies* that women are "a powerful sex which knows how to make man softer."<sup>41</sup> She also writes about indigenous women as if they are children, referring to them in belittling ways and stating that the French women were good to 'teach' the indigenous peoples to be 'civilized'. Her writing clearly reflects the colonial ideas described above from this period. The colonial wife was expected to 'soften' their husband and take care of him, while the colonial mother was expected to 'teach' indigenous peoples of the French way of life. This

---

<sup>39</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Clotilde Chivas-Baron, *La Femme Française aux Colonies* (Paris: Editions Larose, 1929), 25.

aligned with gender roles of the time, as women were seen to be nurturing and caring. It kept them in their traditional role rather than allowing them alternative opportunities within the new colony. Chivas-Baron descriptive writings on the role of women in the colonies provides us with some real evidence of how the traditional gender roles assigned women to certain tasks and limited their ability to move beyond them.

It is also important to note here that Chivas-Baron was the wife of a colonial administrator living in Indochina, which is a privileged position to be writing from at this time and possibly provides an explanation to the biases she exemplifies and opinions that she shares in her writing. Chivas-Baron also used many men's sources in her book, which exemplifies that even when writing about women from a woman's perspective, she's influenced by men's perceptions in some situations. She cites French colonial educational policy writer George Hardy as one of her most used sources, and it is with his viewpoints and prior writings in mind that she writes her own depiction on the life of a colonial woman. In contrast, by doing this, she does draw attention to the fact that there were male writers and historians who were beginning to acknowledge the importance of women to the success of the men and thus the French empire as a whole. It is this collaborative work of her experiences and the slow acknowledgement by male writers that supports the idea that women's roles, even though restricted by the boundaries of gender expectations, had a greater impact on the success of the colonies and the colonists than early historians have acknowledged.

Chivas-Baron ends the book by stating: "Leave without regrets and without fear... with the one we love, we make France everywhere, we make happiness everywhere."<sup>42</sup> This is an interesting sentence to end the book with, and I found it intriguing. She equates making 'France

---

<sup>42</sup> Chivas-Baron, *La Femme Française*, 190.



everywhere' with happiness being brought to their colonies. This is a thought-provoking statement because for many people, it was not happiness that they felt when the French took over their land. Chivas-Baron clearly has a very different perspective than the indigenous people who had their land taken over by the French. She shows here the bias of an upper-class French woman who supports empire and sees the good things she believes the French are doing in the colonies.

With the arrival of French women in Indochina also came the need for new bourgeois amenities, as women were thought to have required more 'delicate sensibilities' than men, needing their own private spaces. Imperialists saw French women as more fragile both mentally and physically, which meant they would need more help from servants around the household as they clearly could not handle it all by themselves, according to imperial ideology.<sup>43</sup> In terms of domesticity, women were meant to be the colonial *maîtresse de maison* (mistress of the house), required to set up an official household staff: cooks, maids, laundrymen, wet nurses, etc.<sup>44</sup> These positions were usually filled by native peoples, creating a racial dynamic between white female homemaker and indigenous housekeepers. In fact, it was incredibly important for the white woman to maintain her dominance over her indigenous workers. A good *maîtresse de maison* would train her servants, again creating this dichotomy where white women were teachers to their indigenous counterparts.<sup>45</sup> Chivas-Baron states:

"In order to have clean domestics, be impeccably clean yourselves. In front of them, never let your language slip. Discipline yourselves in order to discipline them...the primitive or simple-

---

<sup>43</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 63.

mind tend to imitate the actions of those whom they observe and repeat the words that they hear.”<sup>46</sup>

In this quote, Chivas-Baron uses charged language such as ‘primitive’ or ‘simple-minded’ to get her point across. She exemplifies the teacher/student relationship between white women and their indigenous servants, treating the indigenous peoples as if they are children who will repeat whatever they hear. She also assumes here that ‘domestics’ equals indigenous peoples, displaying the prevalence of indigenous peoples working in these types of jobs during this time period. By highlighting the gender expectations between French women and indigenous people, along with the domestic environment and the tensions between women of two different races, Chivas-Baron allows us to see how the gender and cultural norms impacted the relationship that two women could forge. Even if they had wanted to be friends, or friendly with each other, it would not have been viewed favorably and so both fulfilled the roles in the manner that was expected. Just as French women were expected to be subservient to men, indigenous women were expected to be subservient to French women.

It is also important to note another key reason why French women were brought into the colonies: to keep French men in ‘check’ by preventing them from being intimate with indigenous women or worse (in imperial eyes), other men.<sup>47</sup> I have previously mentioned the importance of trying to spread and maintain a pure French race in the colonies, and this also played a central role in that mission. But these were not merely political concerns, as they took place within domestic and household spheres, closely related to the relationships both matrimonial and sexual

---

<sup>46</sup> Clotilde Chivas-Baron, “Le milieu colonial,” in Fédération Française de l’enseignement ménager, ed., *La vie aux colonies*, 197.

<sup>47</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 2.

in which Europeans lived.<sup>48</sup> Asian women were depicted as promiscuous and submissive, while European women took up the position of the opposite: fulfilling power illusions for men outside of the sexual realm. Imperialist rhetoric, in fact, depicted French women more often as passive imperialists or as enforcers of moral codes rather than as the subject of European men's sexual desires.<sup>49</sup>

Chivas-Baron refers to women as 'the precious help' and 'an indispensable collaborator'.<sup>50</sup> This shows that they were seen as partners in empire, each half contributing in their own way. Men saw women as important because they needed their help in endeavors that they believed men could not do, such as homemaking and childrearing. Though women may not have been viewed as equally important to men at the time, their influences were clearly valued in some way, even if they were only seen as 'the precious help'. The word 'precious' here is key, as it implies that men truly needed women to come to the colonies and help them. 'Indispensable' is another key word from above, highlighting the vitality of women's roles to the men they were there to aid.

Another reason that women were brought into the colonies originated from the intimate relations between white men and indigenous women, and subsequently their mixed children. Having relations with indigenous women was seen as part of the conquering experience of empire, especially considering there were no white women with them when they first took over the land. Chivas-Baron states: "Despite the taming of indigenous beauty, the pioneers who became colonizers, feeling the need to have white companions near them."<sup>51</sup> She uses the word 'taming' here much like I used the term 'conquering' above. Additionally, the 'indigenous

---

<sup>48</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 44.

<sup>50</sup> Chivas-Baron, *La Femme Française*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Chivas-Baron, *La Femme Française*, 18.

beauty' removes autonomy from the indigenous women and treats them as spoils to be won. It is also important to point out that although there were women already there, the men needed white women in particular to come and help them create a white colony, rather than a mixed colony with indigenous peoples and their mixed children. This was a central reason as to why white women were sought out to move to the colonies: not only to keep their men in check, but also to prevent too many mixed-race children from being born.

Therefore, this implies that European men and women did not have an equal relationship in the colonial milieu, as European women clearly had different expectations and restrictions placed upon them from their male counterparts. French women were supposedly the force behind the quick decline of concubinage, though it is claimed this was not solely based upon racial aspects, but the double standard that men were allowed to have sexual contact outside of their relationships and women were not.<sup>52</sup> Not only this, but European women's sexuality was something that needed protection from the 'primitive' sexual urges of indigenous men.<sup>53</sup> This displays that there were racial elements within sexual and domestic relationships at all levels of imperialism.

The arrival of French women also caused a rise in racial tensions, not entirely at the fault of French women, considering these systems were already put into place. European women's safety and protection was repeatedly brought up in discussions on distinguishing racial lines: "It coincided with perceived threats to European prestige, increased racial conflict, covert challenges to colonial politics, outright expressions of nationalist resistance, and internal dissension among whites themselves."<sup>54</sup> In this way, European women were central to the

---

<sup>52</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 58.

<sup>54</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 57.

solidification of racial boundaries. They both created and participated in the racial hierarchy of the French Empire.

### **Indigenous Women of Indochina**

An important concept to discuss when considering women's place in imperial society is women as a standard of civilization. Historian Ann Towns discusses the status of women as a standard of 'civilization', which utilized women as a measuring rod for the civility of a nation, which has remained a standard since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> The way a nation treated its women determined just how 'savage' it was when compared with French expectations for women. This measuring tool was used in colonies like Indochina to subjugate indigenous peoples and deem them 'other' according to French standards. It was especially used to determine how French imperialists viewed men and women within indigenous groups, along with their gendered roles within their own cultures.

Before discussing how French imperialism treated indigenous peoples (particularly women), it is important to discuss the ethnic categories within French Indochina. In Ha's book, she cites Rebouillat's report on "Français d'Indochine," where he breaks down the population into four 'ethnic' groups: (1) French people born in the metropole; (2) those born to French parents in the colony; (3) Eurasians or *métis*; and (4) the 'naturalized natives'.<sup>56</sup> It is important to note that Rebouillat cites all four of these categories under the definition of *Français d'Indochine*, which was not always the case in the Indochinese colony.

---

<sup>55</sup> Ann E. Towns, "The Status of Women as a Standard of 'Civilization'" *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): 684.

<sup>56</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 119.

As French women moved into the colonies and began to police Frenchmen to stay away from indigenous women, one can assume ties to the indigenous community overall weakened, as there were no longer as many personal relationships that connected the two communities and fostered a bond between them. Those in interracial relationships had served as mediators between the French and the indigenous cultures.<sup>57</sup> With French women migrating into the Indochinese colony, these relationships began to dwindle, simultaneously separating the two groups even more than they already were.

Along with keeping Frenchmen in check, white women shared the so-called ‘burden’ of “domesticating the untutored and uncivilized natives.”<sup>58</sup> They were given the task of teaching natives to be ‘civilized’ in French terms, particularly regarding homemaking and childrearing for native women: “Due to their backwardness and deprivation, the native women were said to be totally lacking in knowledge of homemaking, childcare, and hygiene.”<sup>59</sup> Chivas-Baron contended that native women in Indochina were treated as “the equal of her husband.”<sup>60</sup> White women were ultimately still tasked with teaching Indochinese women; they would need to learn from their ‘white sisters’.<sup>61</sup> The first major assignment of this teaching surrounded education on housekeeping:

“The native woman needs to learn to keep house: she knows nothing of running a European house...It is in the home that a woman can be an aid in Frenchification. Is the metropolitan woman prepared...for this far reaching and rewarding task of educating the native?”<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 69.

<sup>59</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 72.

<sup>61</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 72.

<sup>62</sup> Gaston Valran, “L’éducation colonial des jeunes filles,” *BOCFF* (November 1906), 207.

This quote exemplifies the ideas surrounding indigenous women in the French colonies, particularly Indochina. The above quote not only assumes that keeping house is something a woman *must* know how to do, but it also assumes that the household an indigenous woman should be keeping is a French one. This aligns well with the assimilationist narratives of French imperialism. It also displays the thought that it would be challenging for the French woman to teach her ‘native sisters’ to maintain a French household, as it is referred to as both a ‘far reaching’ and ‘rewarding’ task.

A second ‘intervention’ that French women were encouraged to participate in came through social and humanitarian responsibilities. Imperial advocates told French women to aid their ‘native sisters’ in whatever ways possible, as they were considered to be ‘less fortunate’ than the French and in need of their assistance.<sup>63</sup> This relates to the ladder of civilization that I cited at the beginning of this section. The imperialist system encouraged Frenchwomen to aid their indigenous counterparts in bringing them ‘into the present’, equating modernity with Frenchness in this case.

The third source of intervention that imperialists looked to French women to interact with was healthcare. Female physicians played a unique role in that male doctors were denied access to female patients, so women stepped in.<sup>64</sup> French female doctors treated native women and children, along with participating in dentistry, midwifery, and pharmacy.<sup>65</sup> However, it is important to note how much influence a French female physician would have over her indigenous patients. A doctor can take a very personal role in a family’s life, and their advice

---

<sup>63</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 74.

<sup>64</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 75.

<sup>65</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 76.

whether medical or not could have an impact on familial matters: “By rendering such services, she [the French physician] would help the colonized appreciate the greatness and kindness of French civilization and foster their love for the mother country.”<sup>66</sup> This quote shows that through her aid as a physician, a Frenchwoman could guide how indigenous people viewed the colonizing nation of France, especially since she was giving them medical aid that came straight from the metropole.

Although male French imperialists gave Frenchwomen the task of taking care of indigenous peoples, they also entrusted them with their own household chores. Indigenous women in particular were trusted with Frenchwomen’s children when needed, taking care of them and almost acting as a nanny or a second mother to the children.<sup>67</sup> To delegate such a personal chore to indigenous women must have required some sense of trust between French and Indochinese women, though there was likely still race and gender at play here. Frenchwomen may have expected Indochinese women to do this task simply because they too were women, or possibly because they were underneath them on the scale of privilege. These indigenous women formed close relationships with the children they took care of; this is very reminiscent of Black women in the United States taking care of white women’s children during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Though some of the blame for the poor relationships between white and indigenous women can be placed onto Frenchwomen, it is far too complex of a situation to solely blame Frenchwomen for the entire ordeal. In Ha’s book, sociologist George Balandier cites the ‘colonial situation’, in which “a ‘racially’ and culturally distinct foreign minority dominates a materially inferior autochthonous majority, in the name of an alleged racial and cultural

---

<sup>66</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 229.



superiority.”<sup>68</sup> This essentially means that the colonial situation, or the imperial structure, set up a racial and cultural barrier between French and the indigenous people, which made it nearly impossible for the two groups to interact on a common level of understanding: “Ratios of men to women *followed* from how sexuality was managed and how racial categories were produced rather than the other way around.”<sup>69</sup>

This tension between the two groups only grew with the physical relationships of native women and white men. This was termed as ‘encongayement’, which comes from the Vietnamese term for a female concubine of a white male: *con gai*.<sup>70</sup> ‘Encongayement’ represented a traditional myth perpetuated in colonialism: of the mythologized indigenous woman who was obedient in her own sexual conquest by dominant white male colonizers.<sup>71</sup> This term is described through a popular colonial song of this period called ‘Petite Tonkinoise’, which describes from a white man’s point of view his ‘loving and leaving’ of an indigenous mistress.<sup>72</sup> The song describes the ‘petite Tonkinoise’ as submissive and flexible, along with perpetuating the myth that indigenous women were easy to acquire and then discard.

Cooper describes this as the ‘landing, loving, leaving’ pattern that forms the foundation of the colonial narrative.<sup>73</sup> This narrative implies that indigenous women were an easy conquest, and through suggesting they were submissive, the French disallowed them from being the victims within their own situation. It also aimed to present indigenous women as ‘other’ to their French counterparts. While imperialists viewed Frenchwomen as morally acceptable, they saw indigenous women as far more sexual because of their supposedly compliant and easy nature.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ha, *French Women*, 241.

<sup>69</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 154.

<sup>71</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 154.

<sup>72</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 155.

<sup>73</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 156.

However, the view of the *con gai* could also be viewed as one of advantage to the native woman, as she could ‘tempt’ him and deplete him of all his resources.<sup>74</sup> This was why colonization needed Frenchwomen to come in and keep their men away from native women: because they were seen as a temptation that could not be resisted. This was known as ‘indigenization’, in other words, when one had ‘gone native’ by giving into the temptations of *encongayement*.<sup>75</sup> The result of ‘going native’ was sometimes *métis*, which was another major problem of French Empire.

An example of this comes from novelist George Groslier’s *Le Retour à l’argile*, where seduction plays a huge part in his tale. In his book, Groslier describes an ideal image of life in Cambodia, displaying Indochina itself in a feminized light.<sup>76</sup> This is important because if Indochina itself was represented as a feminized or sexualized being, then that aligned well with the conquering of not only the nation, but its women as well. Groslier depicts a romantic notion of the colonies which complicates the colonized versus colonizer relationship because he describes it as a mutually beneficial relationship, which it is not. He ignores the structural hierarchies of privilege in his writing, along with economic plundering and political subjugation of the native peoples.<sup>77</sup> Groslier also describes his main character ‘going native’, as his need for European contact slowly diminishes throughout the book.

### **The Threat of the *Métis***

One of the biggest threats to the structure of French Empire came through *métis*, the product of Frenchmen and native women. The population of mixed-blood children grew in the

---

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 158.

<sup>75</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 159.

<sup>76</sup> George Groslier, *Le Retour à l’argile*, Paris: Éditions Émile-Paul Frères, 1928.

<sup>77</sup> Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 158.

early twentieth century, which threatened the French assimilationist narrative of wanting to spread the French race across the world.<sup>78</sup> However, it is important to note that the white French population were outnumbered by Asians.<sup>79</sup> *Métissage*, along with concubinage, were threats to racial purity and the “cultural securing of racial identity.”<sup>80</sup> There was also the threat that these métisse would one day grow to hate the French imperial government because of their position in society.<sup>81</sup> Imperialism viewed sexual contact with indigenous women as a place where disease festered, along with immorality and ‘savagery’.<sup>82</sup> French imperialists equated *métissage* with European moral deterioration.<sup>83</sup> The *métis* child represented a confusing problem for the French Empire, as they were not fully French nor fully indigenous. They also represented strained racial relations between colonized and colonizer:

“Her face itself [*métisse*] shows others the collaboration of the Vietnamese with the colonial enemy, as well as the moral downfall of her mother being the “*con gai*” of a French soldier, having sex out of wedlock, losing her virginity in a society in which it is highly prized, and for bearing his child.”<sup>84</sup>

This quote aids in our understanding of the gendered dimensions of the *métis* problem. The native women who were mothers to these *métis* children were social pariahs because their mixed-race children represented their perceived traitorous actions against their Vietnamese society through having sexual contact with the enemy. This is what people thought upon seeing a mixed-

---

<sup>78</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 41.

<sup>80</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 66.

<sup>82</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 68.

<sup>83</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 80.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Lefèvre, *Métisse Blanche* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2001) xii.

race child – the sins of their mother. While Vietnamese people viewed *métis* as European, Europeans viewed *métis* as Vietnamese. It is unfortunate that this same standard did not apply to the father of the child. In this hypocrisy, we see how the perception of Indochinese women as sexually immoral and submissive allowed for the dismissal of not only the mother's rights and place in society, but also that of her child. The French fathers certainly reaped the benefits of imperial success, but in their wake, they left a trail of women, girls, and boys that had to fight to receive acknowledgement, access to work, and a place in the social structure. In playing their role in this, indigenous women were certainly not uplifted by their gender-assigned role in the imperial structure.

A prime example of how people viewed *métisse* comes from French author Kim Lefèvre's autobiography, *Métisse Blanche*. Born in 1935, Lefèvre describes growing up in colonial Vietnam as a *métis* child – her mother a native Vietnamese woman and having never met her French father. The book delves into the hardships she faced as a child, being abandoned by her mother to go to a French orphanage and then reuniting with her later in life. Lefèvre describes in Chapter Eight, a Frenchman she was working for became interested in her when she was dressed in traditional Vietnamese clothing. However, when she dresses more 'French', he loses interest in her.<sup>85</sup> It is also important to note here that she is only 13 when this happens. As a literal child who is being sexualized solely because she is a *métisse* dressed in traditional Vietnamese clothing, Lefèvre represents the sexualized colony of Indochina and the Frenchman sexualizing her represents the conquering nation of France. He no longer has interest in her when she dresses more French, alluding to the fact that he was fetishizing the indigenous side of her *métisse* identity. This could possibly be due to the stereotypes surrounding indigenous

---

<sup>85</sup> Lefèvre, *Métisse Blanche*, 108-110.

Vietnamese women being considered more promiscuous and submissive. When the Frenchman saw her 'French side' upon her wearing European clothes, those stereotypes, and thoughts of sexualizing her went out the window, possibly due to the more moral and respectable views of Frenchwomen in the colonies.

This supports earlier sections in this paper and draws further attention to the intertwining of gender and racial roles and perceptions of women in light of the established norms and expectations. It brings an interesting aspect to the concept of women's sexual role in society. Even French women living in the metropole had expectations from society concerning what was deemed as acceptable behavior, appearance, and morality. The French men had mistresses at home also, so what made their interest in having Indochinese mistresses different? They had children outside of marriage in the metropole and they were given positions in society, so what made the children they had with Indochinese women different? Why were they not accepted into society? Why were they seen as Vietnamese and not French or acknowledged by the father? It seems that the factor that makes the difference is the place that imperialists placed upon indigenous mothers in the colonial hierarchy; the perception that they were inferior and therefore disposable. Safely kept in their place in society, these women and children could continue to be exploited for the success of the colony and its rulers.

Lefèvre also experienced a commonality amongst *métis* children in Indochina: being put up for adoption. Lefèvre was put up for adoption by her mother to an orphanage when she was young, mainly because her mother was too poor to keep her.<sup>86</sup> The French established orphanages for abandoned *métis* throughout the Indochinese society.<sup>87</sup> Society viewed the abandonment of *métis* children as a 'social death', upon which *métis* were essentially banished

---

<sup>86</sup> Lefèvre, *Métisse Blanche*, 27.

<sup>87</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 69.

from both Vietnamese and European society.<sup>88</sup> However, it was still thought that *métisse* girls could be ‘rescued’ in time; they could be educated to become *bonne ménagères* (good housekeepers), wives, or domestics.<sup>89</sup> Other *métisse* girls were encouraged to take on stereotypically-female jobs, such as chambermaid service, tailoring, ironing, candy-making, and cooking.<sup>90</sup> Lefèvre also experienced this at the orphanage, as they taught her French customs and language from a young age.<sup>91</sup> Much like white women being encouraged to teach native women French ‘civilized’ culture, these orphanages sought to teach *métisse* girls the same, so that they would grow up to be more French than Vietnamese. This was one way the French would try and ‘save’ the *métis* from their supposedly ‘morally corrupt’ Vietnamese side. Even Vietnamese language women’s newspapers published in favor of the colony’s new child-care institutions, seeing this as a way to solve some of women’s problems with being able to find employment outside of the home.<sup>92</sup>

It is also important to discuss the fact that not all indigenous mothers wanted to give up their children. This brings forward the question of maternal consent. Many mothers might not have been willing to give up their children if they had been in better financial conditions. Colonial administrators even understood this, stating: “The complete abandonment of a child today is rarer in the Annamite countries than one would believe; it is only in times of famine or epidemic that they sell their children.”<sup>93</sup> This reflects the truly desperate measures these indigenous mothers had to take in order to survive, as giving up a child must not have been an easy choice. There was also great pressure to give up *métisse* children as they were considered

---

<sup>88</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 88.

<sup>89</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 90.

<sup>90</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 54.

<sup>91</sup> Lefèvre, *Métisse Blanche*, 33.

<sup>92</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 63.

<sup>93</sup> “FOEFI, Exercice 1963, Assemblée Générale Ordinaire du 31 Août 1962.”

shameful to indigenous society. These two factors combined explain why some women felt forced to give up their children. Lefèvre cites this in a section of her book:

“The [identification] paper attested to the fact that my father was indeed French and that he was forced to remain with his regiment, leaving my mother behind with a child she was unable to raise properly on her own. The document also stated that my mother wanted to give her daughter to the French government, which would be much better than she at preparing her for the future.”<sup>94</sup>

This is a clear example of the reasons so many mothers would give up their children to orphanages. Lefèvre’s mother gave her up due to her inability to care for her financially; she feared she would not be able to provide her daughter with the resources that would give her a promising future.

The question of granting citizenship to *métis* was also a difficulty for French Empire. Granting citizenship could not be based upon race alone, considering *métis* had partly French blood in them.<sup>95</sup> France passed a citizenship law on *métis* children in 1928, which allowed citizenship to those who were born with one French parent.<sup>96</sup> This law was unique in the fact that it used the term ‘race’, which contradicted the usual French narrative. It was difficult for this law to be put into place though, as the category of *métis* was vague and flexible. Though girls were a concern in terms of the orphanages set up, the *métis* law was primarily a male problem. This is due to the fact that women were excluded from a full French citizenship (voting) until 1944, so when discussing a full French citizenship, it was primarily males that were being discussed.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Lefèvre, *Métisse Blanche*, 25.

<sup>95</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 83.

<sup>96</sup> Emmanuelle Saada, *Empire’s Children: Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>97</sup> Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 3.

However, granting citizenship was still not that easy, as proving that one had a French parent proved more difficult than initially thought. With many French fathers abandoning their children, it was hard for native mothers to prove who the father of their child was. It is also interesting to note that native women could not claim they had been raped and be believed. Native women were almost never considered victims, and the Frenchmen were rarely ever at fault: “Because she offered herself publicly to colonial men in societies where concubinage existed, as in Indochina, there was allegedly no occasion for seduction or rape.”<sup>98</sup> If the situation were reversed, however, with a white woman claiming a native man had raped her, people would have believed her because of the assumption that native men were more morally corrupt and openly sexual.

Frenchmen, on the other hand, were seen as heroic soldiers who had perhaps gotten drunk and been seduced by a native woman of ‘low extraction’.<sup>99</sup> This is how the narrative of interracial relationships played out: while Frenchmen’s reputation was essentially untouched by such an event, native women’s lives were essentially destroyed. They were deemed outcasts of both French and Vietnamese society, and it was suggested that many of these women did not even have an interest in their children or that they sought to profit from them in some ways.<sup>100</sup> But not all native women wanted to give up their children to the orphanages. It was also common to blame these mothers for raising their children badly, reflecting the negative views surrounding these native mothers in general. But despite the fact that Frenchmen were rarely involved in their *métis* children’s lives, the fact of their citizenship rested solely upon the French father, as his role was a central issue in the *métis* debate. It is also intriguing to note that French authorities of this

---

<sup>98</sup> Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 156.

<sup>99</sup> Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 44.

<sup>100</sup> Saada, *Empire’s Children*, 45.



time encouraged white women to become mothers because of their pro-natalist stance but discouraged Asian women from having children because it did not align with their 'French race' ideologies.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, while women in the metropole were encouraged to have children, women in the colonies were not as encouraged by contrast.

The Vietnamese press stated that French men had disrespected their Vietnamese partners by referring to them as *ma congaie* (my girl) instead of the more respectful *ma femme* (my wife), which is how they would have addressed French women.<sup>102</sup> They also pitied the children of *métissage*, blaming both the parents: the fathers as irresponsible and the mothers as manipulative.<sup>103</sup> In fact, part of the reason for the growth of interracial relationships was due to the Vietnamese press itself. Vietnamese popular culture had posed a new question of whether young people should allow their parents to choose a match for them, or if they should marry for love.<sup>104</sup> With this contemplation of romantic love came more interracial matches, and subsequently more *métis* children.

The most mainstream woman's magazine, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, encouraged women to take on a nationalist viewpoint when raising their children.<sup>105</sup> They compared producing a family to strengthening the nation, which caused a rise in both the population and nationalism. However, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was also appealing to indigenous mothers. The ICP used mothers as imagery of the 'oppressed worker and colonized nation'.<sup>106</sup> The ICP was clearly a threat to the French nationalist rhetoric, as it opposed colonization and worked for class struggles. The ICP was tempting to many mothers because they fought for maternity leave,

---

<sup>101</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 42.

<sup>102</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 65.

<sup>103</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 65.

<sup>104</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 64.

<sup>105</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 67.

<sup>106</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 67.

maternal rights in divorce cases, the prohibition of polygamy and forced marriages, and infant care at the workplace.<sup>107</sup> These causes were clearly important to indigenous mothers, but the ICP fell short in ignoring important issues such as female victimization in the home and male privilege.

## Conclusion

Overall, what these sources show is the importance of gender in imperial discourse. Women, both indigenous and French, clearly played a central role in colonialism and how it functioned. The hierarchal relationship between French and indigenous women was complicated, but important to understand. French women's position as colonial wife and mother placed them in the position of taking care of their French husbands, along with teaching indigenous people the ways of French civilization. They were meant to create a little France within their own home, spreading the French metropole wherever they went. Indigenous women, on the other hand, were victims of stereotypes such as being seen as submissive and promiscuous. This meant that in cases of miscegenation, the indigenous women were blamed, while Frenchmen were viewed with little to no responsibility for the incident. The *métis* that resulted from these relationships also dealt with a great deal of harassment, from both sides of the aisle. They were not accepted into indigenous communities for looking too European but were also not accepted into French communities for looking too Indochinese. This caused a complicated and confusing place for *métis* children, as they didn't really belong anywhere.

What did these relationships contribute to the imperial structure? French women's position as colonial wife and mother created the perfect counterpart to Frenchmen, used to

---

<sup>107</sup> Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 67.

uphold their husbands, keep them in place, and police indigenous peoples through assimilationist policies. Indigenous women were used as a scapegoat by Frenchmen: as a spoil to be conquered through expansionism, and then abandoned and shamed when they got pregnant and had children. *Métis* children provided the biggest threat to the imperial system, as they represented a population that could grow to resist the colonial empire. The difficulty in trying to grant citizenship to *métis* was also a problem because of the inability of proving French fathership. *Métis* children proved a complicated category in which to situate someone both French and Indochinese in the colonies, and their mere existence displayed the various gendered and racial stereotypes surrounding their indigenous mothers. In conclusion, these gendered and racial relationships created a colonial structure in which French imperialism functioned for about ninety years but would eventually cause rifts in Indochina that were irreparable, leading to the eventual end of the empire.

## **Bibliography**

### *Primary Sources*

- Chivas-Baron, Clotilde. *La femme française aux colonies*. Paris: Larose, 1929.
- Chivas-Baron, Clotilde. "Le milieu colonial," in Fédération Française de l'enseignement ménager, ed., *La vie aux colonies*, 197.
- "FOEFI, Exercice 1963, Assemblée Générale Ordinaire du 31 Août 1962."
- Groslier, George. *Le Retour à l'argile*. Paris: Éditions Émile-Paul Frères, 1928.
- Lefèvre, Kim. *Métisse Blanche*. La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2001.
- Valran, Gaston. "L'éducation colonial des jeunes filles," *BOCFF* (November 1906), 207.

### *Secondary Sources*

- Chafer, Tony, and Sackur, Amanda. *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Conklin, Alice L., Sarah Fishman, and Robert Zaretsky. *France and Its Empire Since 1870*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Cooper, Nicola. *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001.
- Firpo, Christina Elizabeth. *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.
- Ha, Marie-Paule. *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Saada, Emmanuelle. *Empire's Children: Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Towns, Ann. "The Status of Women as a Standard of 'Civilization'." *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): p. 681-706.