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## Postcolonial Museums and National Identity in Vietnam

### Abstract

Following the Vietnam Wars, the nation of Vietnam used museums to construct its identity for both national and international audiences. This paper first investigates the colonial origins of Vietnam's museum landscape, stemming from French ethnographic museums in colonial Indochina. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* then serves as the theoretical framework to understand Vietnamese nation's collective, historical memory of the French and American Wars. This paper concludes that the Vietnamese national identity is based on the shared trauma and socialist solidarity that arise from anti-colonial resistance. Museums both construct and preserve this national identity, and it leads Vietnamese nationals to imagine a community between space and time with people they may never meet.

### Keywords

Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities, Vietnam Wars, Museum Studies, Historical Memory

# Postcolonial Museums and National Identity in Vietnam

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In his influential 1983 monograph *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson analyzed the origins of nationalism as a social construction. Anderson came to the conclusion that nations were collectively imagined communities based on common languages, cultures, ethnicities, and territories. The community is imagined because a country's subjects believe they live in fraternity with those who share their nation, despite the fact they will never meet most of their fellow countrymen.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the nation is both designed by collective experience and shaped into a tool of political power. The imagined nation is a modern concept, and it has been reinvented in the postcolonial age. While it may not always be obvious, nationalism enlaces our collective psyches and our society.

In one chapter, Anderson investigated how nations use maps, censuses, and museums to establish themselves more concretely. While he concluded that “together, they profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion -

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7.

the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry,” this paper argues that postcolonial nation-states use these three means to the same end.<sup>2</sup> Within Vietnam, museums have been significant channels to reimagine the united Vietnamese nation’s collective identity and historical memory.<sup>3</sup> After North and South Vietnam merged to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the newly unified state used museums and monuments to reimagine its identity and shape the historical memory of the nation. The three major tenets that arise from Vietnam’s “official” history of the French and American wars are anti-colonialism, shared trauma, and socialist solidarity, all which construct the modern Vietnamese identity and its linear national history.

### **Colonial Origins of Vietnam’s Postcolonial Museums**

The modern museum is a product of colonial society, for ethnographic collections arose from the Orientalist desire to extensively catalog subject races in the name of anthropology.

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163-164.

<sup>3</sup> Because this project explores museums and monuments inaccessible by both spatial and language barriers, I heavily rely on academics’ and tourists’ reports of these memorialized spaces as secondary sources. I am treating the official websites of each museum and memorial as primary sources, for they provide photographs alongside official institutional histories, interpretations, and descriptions of their exhibits.

Benedict Anderson claimed that colonial rulers in Southeast Asia were seldom interested in antique remnants of subjected civilizations before the early 1800s. Eventually, “Colonial Archeological Services became powerful and prestigious institutions, calling on the services of some exceptionally capable scholar-officials.”<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan museums collected and showcased antiques from across the empire, further justifying imperial action in the name of world culture and social science. In the peripheries, museums and archeological restorations were a similarly powerful tool for domination: “the formal ideological programme of the reconstructions always placing the builders of the monuments and the colonial natives in a certain hierarchy. (...) Seen in this light, the reconstructed monuments, juxtaposed with the surrounding rural poverty, said to the natives: Our very presence shows that you have always been, or have long become, incapable of either greatness or self-rule.”<sup>5</sup> Many of today’s museums in post-independence Vietnam were originally colonial institutions, but with a new, nationalist ethos instead of a colonial one.

The History Museum of Ho Chi Minh City was formerly known as the Museum of (Paul) Blanchard de la Brosse, a French colonial governor in 1929’s Cochinchina. The building is beautiful,

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 178-179.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 181.

built in an “innovative Vietnamese style” by the French, and it incorporates both Western and Southeast Asian architecture styles. The museum was renamed to the “Vietnam National Museum” in Saigon after the expulsion of the French in 1954, and twenty-five years later, the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City gave the institution its current title.<sup>6</sup> The museum’s changing names demonstrate how the regions’ identity transformed from a colonial one to a national one.

This trend of colonial institutions turned Vietnamese is not exclusive to the South; the Vietnam National Museum of History (VNMH) in Hanoi was founded on the grounds of the Louis Finot Museum, a 1926 museum owned by the *École Française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFEO). Academic Orientalists created the EFEO in 1898 “to encourage researchers to stay on the ground in Asia - like what is done already in Athens, Rome or Cairo - the second wants the foundation of an institution that can take charge of the inventory and preservation of Indochinese cultural heritage.” Their main goal was archeological exploration, monument conservation, manuscript collection, and the philological and ethnographic study of Vietnamese ethnic groups. The EFEO even overlooked the restoration of Angkor Wat in modern-day

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<sup>6</sup> The History Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, “About Us,” *Bao Tang Lich Su Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh*, <http://www.baotanglichsutphcm.com.vn/en-US/about-us#intro-1> (accessed November, 2021).

Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> By every means, the Louis Finot Museum was an Orientalist and imperial undertaking. So after Vietnam earned its first taste of independence, the Vietnam Government overtook and renamed the institution in 1958. The VNMH is also composed of a second museum that opened the same year: The National Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution, which inhabits the original building of the Department of Indochinese Commerce.<sup>8</sup> While Vietnam, of course, has a multitude of original museums founded in its post-war and *Doi Moi* eras, the nation reclaimed colonial institutions as their own.

Benedict Anderson also saw this trend while authoring *Imagined Communities* for its 1983 release, but even he did not know what postcolonial museums in Indochina would look like. Anderson analyzed a 1968 ceremony commemorating fifteen years of Cambodian independence. Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian Prime Minister at the time, unveiled a massive wood and papier-mache recreation of the Angkor Wat's Bayon temple in Phnom Penh's national sports stadium: "The replica was exceptionally coarse and crude, but it served its purpose -- instant recognizability

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<sup>7</sup> École Française d'Extrême-Orient, "History," École Française d'Extrême-Orient, <https://www.efeo.fr/base.php?code=7> (accessed November, 2021). ; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Vietnamese National Museum of History, "Introduction: History," Bao Tang Lich Su Quoc Gia, <https://baotanglichsu.vn/en/Articles/3152/history> (accessed November, 2021).

via a history of colonial-era logoization. ‘Ah, our Bayon’ -- but with the memory of French colonial restorers wholly banished.”<sup>9</sup> The EFEO conserved the temple, but that did not matter to independent Cambodians. They would have seen the iconography of the temple and thought “this is a part of me, *my people* built this.” Museums and cultural heritage sites have a powerful effect on collective imagination, for they make people relate, empathize, and associate with people whom they could never meet. The modern Vietnamese museum is a product of the colonial era, transformed to fit the nationalist needs of an independent and united Vietnam.

Generally, Vietnamese museums split the country’s national history into three periods: ancient/pre-colonial (pre-1945), resistance against the French and Americans (1945-1979), and post-independent restoration and culture (1986-present). The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) in Hanoi is the premiere museum of Vietnam’s pre-colonial period; it uses ancient artifacts that form a specific ethnographic history of the modern Vietnamese nation. The Vietnamese government created the museum in 1986 alongside the *Doi Moi* economic revitalization project. The museums’ self-history reflects the socialist orientations of the reformed Vietnamese identity, one that

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 183.



represents the fifty-four ethnic groups of Vietnam. The museum plans to represent more ethnic groups from Southeast Asia in the future, but it remains focused on groups within the nation of Vietnam itself.<sup>10</sup> The multi-ethnic narrative initially seems to conflict with ideas of nationalism, but the entry foyer reaffirms to guests that certain ethnic groups are distinctly Vietnamese. The foyer displays maps of the major ethnolinguistic groups of Southeast Asia and within Vietnam, and “passages explaining the main ethno-linguistic groups shift between situating each group within the Vietnamese nation state and relating the position and history of each group within the region (e.g., noting which groups “created nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines).”<sup>11</sup> These maps not only constrain fluid ethnic groups within artificial, modern borders, but they also differentiate between which groups are Vietnamese and which are Others. Still, the VME is one of the few museums in the country that give much consideration to the multi-ethnic makeup of Vietnam.

Before the French and American wars, colonial entities brought with them both the western/imperial museum and the objectifying study of Orientalist ethnography. Once France and the

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<sup>10</sup> Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, “History,” Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, <http://vietnammuseumofethnology.com/posts/history> (accessed November, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Eric C. Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2012): 54–83, 64–65.

United States were defeated in Vietnam, independent Vietnam adjusted these institutions to reclaim a specific national identity. The Vietnamese government reclaimed these colonial museums and redeveloped them into powerful tools of inspiring nationalism. Of course, this moment makes sense, for it is common for postcolonial states to use museums to redefine the nation.

### **Remembering the French and American Wars**

When Benedict Anderson analyzed the transition of national identity after the wars of independence, he realized that “the model of official nationalism assumes its relevance above all at the moment when revolutionaries successfully take control of the state, and are for the first time in a position to use the power of the state in pursuit of their visions.”<sup>12</sup> When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam overtook the nation, Vietnam’s museum landscape reperiodized the region’s long history. The most important date in Vietnamese national history is September 2, 1945. On that date, President Ho Chi Minh read the declaration of independence to celebrate the victory against the French after the August Revolution. This date splits Vietnam’s colonial era from its modern, national history. When talking about the current nation, Vietnamese museums highlight anti-colonial victories, the traumas

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 159.

of war, and the socialist solidarity that led to Vietnam's success today. These official histories are important because they are tools of nationalism that foster a powerful communion between citizens who will never meet.

The most prominent museum pertaining to the French and American wars in Vietnam is the War Remnants Museum (WRM). Originally titled the Exhibition House for U.S. and Puppet Crimes in 1975 (renamed to the War Crimes of Aggression Gallery in 1990), the museum lies in a reclaimed US Information Agency building.<sup>13</sup> Their English website, which has not been updated since July 2012, offers an incredibly patriotic view of the war:

On 31.8.1858 the French attack[ed] Da Nang start[ed] wars of aggression [which began] the colonial rule of Vietnam. For almost 100 years the heroic Vietnamese people waged war [for] national liberation and independence for national freedom. (...) But the French and then the U.S. imperialists continue[d] waging [a] war of aggression, attempted to restore the rule and set [a] new kind of colonialism in Vietnam. During the past 30 years, the Vietnamese people have resilience to fight with so many sacrifices and hardships to protect its independence and freedom.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 163-167.

<sup>14</sup> War Remnants Museum, "General Introduction," *War Remnants Museum*. <http://warremnantsmuseum.com/posts/introduction-general> (accessed November 26, 2021).

Similarly, their web page “On ‘Historical Facts’” highlights how the Vietnamese people “smashed the yoke of French colonialism.”<sup>15</sup> First, note how the museum consistently uses antagonistic language when describing the historical facts of the matter. This museum is not an exceptional case: modern war museums define their nation with revolutionary origin stories. The museum also attempts to win the moralistic war. Here, the Vietnamese nation fell victim to wars of aggression. Accordingly, nowhere does the museum mention the Republic of Vietnam and its army, ignoring the fact that some Vietnamese people had agency when it came to installing and preserving colonialism.

The Vietnam Women’s Museum (VWM) similarly overlooks those who were not on the “right” side of Vietnamese national history. The VWM claims that “In 1946, during the re-invasion of Vietnam by the French, the entire nation joined the resistance.”<sup>16</sup> Logically, there were some Vietnamese people who supported the French, as decolonization is a complex political battle. It seems the VWM defines the Vietnamese nation not by a certain ethnic group or limited region, but by anyone who joined

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<sup>15</sup> War Remnants Museum, “On ‘Historical Facts’,” *War Remnants Museum*. <http://warremnantsmuseum.com/article/on-historical-facts> (accessed November 26, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Vietnamese Women’s Museum, “1930-1954,” *Bao Tang Phu Nu Vietnam*. <https://baotangphunu.org.vn/en/1930-1954/> (accessed November 25, 2021).

the resistance. This tells those visiting the exhibit that no matter what, their foremothers and forefathers created the modern Vietnamese nation for them, and it leads museum guests to imagine themselves on the right side of the narrative.

The VWM also places the 980,000 women who fought as guerillas for the North under the spotlight, and it presents audiences of Vietnamese women with the tools to imagine themselves in the traditionally male-dominated communion of revolutionary war.<sup>17</sup> In the American war in the South, the museum states, women made up 40% of militia and guerilla forces, with over 50 female squadrons. Women also suffered and shared the trauma of war directly and indirectly. The VWM recalls Ms. Nguyen Thi Dung's imprisonment in the Tiger Cage of Con Dao, where Vietnamese political prisoners were held, beaten, and electrocuted:

On top of the ceiling, there was always a barrel containing lime powder. If a prisoner showed any sign of dissent, the guards would pour down the powder immediately – burning our skin. We didn't bathe for three months, because we were only given two small cups of water to drink every day. The tiger cage was hot like an oven, and we came up with a way of washing ourselves – we would use a nylon bag to cover our body until we were sweating.

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<sup>17</sup> Vietnamese Women's Museum, "1930-1954," *Bao Tang Phu Nu Vietnam*, <https://baotangphunu.org.vn/en/1930-1954/> (accessed November 25, 2021).

We would then undo the bag, and use it to scrub the hated dirt off.<sup>18</sup>

The VWM reminds its guests of the human cost that gained their independence within the Vietnamese nation. Moreover, it only highlights the action and suffering that those fighting for the North and NLF underwent; women who aided the Republic of Vietnam are erased from this national history. Even though guests may have had grandmothers and great-grandmothers who aligned with the South, this victor-written history was designed to make nationals empathize with those who fought to create a specific vision of the nation.

The VWM places women back into the national origins of the Vietnamese nation, where socialist duty against outside oppressors was the key to the nation's longtime success. The VWM highlights the continuity of the women who defended the nation: "In the 3rd Century, 23-year-old Trieu Thi Trinh of Thanh Hoa fought against the oppression of the Wu Chinese. King Quang Trung's female General Commander-in-Chief of the elephant-mounted troops, Bui Thi Xuan, contributed to a victory against

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<sup>18</sup> Vietnamese Women's Museum, "1954-1975," *Bao Tang Phu Nu Vietnam*, <https://baotangphunu.org.vn/en/1954-1975/> (accessed November 25, 2021).

290,000 Qing Chinese invaders in 1789.”<sup>19</sup> Vietnamese national history has a Viet (Kinh) dominant narrative of conflict with external enemies, especially the Chinese.<sup>20</sup> One TripAdvisor from Hanoi agrees, “Vietnamese women have been full participants [in] Vietnam's struggle for independence. Through centuries of domination by China and France along with the civil war of the 60s, Women have fought alongside the men, This Museum celebrates the culture, strength, and determination of the Women of Viet Nam.”<sup>21</sup> The VWM, alongside other Vietnamese national museums, employ stories of unity and national solidarity to make their visitors envision themselves fighting for the Vietnamese nation throughout time.

By far the most common theme across Vietnamese exhibits on the French and American wars is the collective trauma and suffering. The WRM displays a thematic exhibition on “Agent Orange in Vietnam” by British photographer Philip Jones Griffiths. The exhibit is incredibly shocking, with dozens of images of

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<sup>19</sup> Vietnamese Women’s Museum, “Historic Personages,” *Bao Tang Phu Nu Vietnam*, <https://baotangphunu.org.vn/en/historic-personages/> (accessed November 25, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 73.

<sup>21</sup> TripAdvisor, “Vietnamese Women’s Museum (Hanoi): Reviews,” TripAdvisor, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g293924-d447354-Reviews-Vietnamese\\_Women\\_s\\_Museum-Hanoi.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g293924-d447354-Reviews-Vietnamese_Women_s_Museum-Hanoi.html) (accessed December 4, 2021).

children with horrific birth defects as a result of Agent Orange.<sup>22</sup> In an account by the first Australian group touring unified Vietnam in 1977, educator Stewart E. Fraser recounts “In Ho Chi Minh City we spent half a day at the spectacularly macabre ‘Anti-U.S. Imperialist War Museum,’ [War Remnants Museum] which portrays in graphic detail the history of American involvement in Vietnam.”<sup>23</sup> The WRM explicitly aims to be graphic and startling:

[Those who joined exchanges] have the opportunity to reach out to ‘living proof’ of the crime, the consequences of aggressive war, [and] to capture the information in a truthful, objective, comprehensive and lively [manner]. So they better understand the country and people of Vietnam. (...) To the witnesses war, sharing, empathy, admiration and respect of many people [will] help them become more confident [and] feel more useful in life, especially [in] educat[ing] the younger generation about the anti-war ideological invasion, to protect peace.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The United States military utilized Agent Orange, a herbicide dropped by air, to clear the jungles of Vietnam. Birth defects were not uncommon for the children of one generation of American veterans. Because Agent Orange is a forever-chemical, it continues to impact new generations within Vietnam.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart E. Fraser, “The Four Rs of Vietnamese Education: Revolution, Reunification, Reconciliation, and Redevelopment,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 58, no. 10 (1977): 730–34, 730.

<sup>24</sup> War Remnants Museum, “Exchange Program,” *War Remnants Museum*, <http://warremnantsmuseum.com/article/exchange-program> (accessed November 26, 2021).



This museum is famous for featuring photographs of dead infants, disabled children, and dismembered bodies.<sup>25</sup> If it is true that shared pain brings people closer together, then the WRM uses historical trauma as a tool to strengthen the nation, not as the primary goal but as a secondary outcome.

Christina M. Schwenkel, a historian who studies Vietnamese museums and national identity, spoke to three U.S. tourists at the Apocalypse Now nightclub in Ho Chi Minh City. One woman criticized the WRM for displaying a photograph of a U.S. soldier posing with the head of a Vietnamese soldier: “It’s one-sided. They should include the North Vietnamese atrocities. A lot of my dad’s friends were here during the war and that’s not what they are doing.”<sup>26</sup> The museum takes all these photos from war and adds captions to turn them into propaganda. Schwenkel argues that the woman’s use of the word “propaganda” denies historical accountability, where her issue was not with the United States, “but that of Vietnamese officials, who borrowed images from the West and inserted them into a ‘distorted’ history.”<sup>27</sup> The woman does not seem to understand that it is not unusual for nations to use graphic images to promote the story of their nation.

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<sup>25</sup> Fodors, “Fodor’s Expert Review: War Remnants Museum,” Fodors, <https://www.fodors.com/world/asia/vietnam/ho-chi-minh-city/things-to-do/sights/reviews/war-remnants-museum-584722> (accessed 2 December, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, 170-171

<sup>27</sup> Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, 170-171.

Coming from an American perspective, the woman Schwenkal encountered seems to believe that the largest takeaway from the museum would be imagining the United States as the enemy. On the other hand, the largest takeaway for Vietnamese audiences is the depth of trauma and suffering that their nation experienced.

When it comes to the presentation of the American and French wars in Vietnam, the museum acts as a creationary agent of national identity. This Vietnamese national identity is based on the shared trauma and socialist solidarity that arise from anti-colonial resistance. Vietnam's national identity incorporates multiple ethnic groups across the north, south, and central regions. This is the power of nationalism, for over 100 years, the Vietnamese nation and identity transformed from a colonial periphery to split Vietnams (Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin) and into one united Vietnam. Museums both construct and preserve this national identity, and it leads Vietnamese nationals to imagine a community between space and time with people they will never meet.

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