Chapter 2
Representing the Montagnards

Many of the Dega refugees in North Carolina also refer to themselves as “Montagnard”—and in that dual name there is a complicated story to tell about how people from the Vietnamese highlands came to think of themselves as “a people,” as a group with a shared history and a common and distinct tradition. Prior to French colonization of the highlands there had been no lasting political or social structures above the level of the individual village and none of the dozens of languages spoken in the highlands had a word to designate highland people as a single collectivity. The collectivity known as Montagnard, or “Dega,” emerged only with the invention of its name(s) in the context of French and American interventions in the highlands.

Montagnard is a French creation, both in the sense that it is a French word meaning mountain people or “mountaineers,” but also in the sense that the Montagnard collectivity was first imagined and described by French colonial discourses. Highland people began to refer to themselves and imagine themselves as “Montagnards” in response to French colonial administrative strategies. Montagnard is the name under which highlanders organized an ethnonationalist movement that rose against the South Vietnamese state during the Vietnam War. A militarized faction of this movement called FULRO—an acronym for the Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées, or United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races—continued to fight for political independence after the American withdrawal and the fall of Saigon. Apparently, the word Dega came into wide use in this guerilla army. In any case, it is during these years in the remote mountain jungles that this band of guerilla fighters forged the collectivity that came to North Carolina as a refugee group, referring to themselves by the name Dega. The name Dega never appears in Vietnam War era literature.
and is not used in the highlands to this day. Dega are refugees, not highlanders.

Dega would seem to be an indigenous term, but its origins and referent are uncertain. Some Dega claim that the term has no semantic history in any of the highland languages but simply arose simultaneously with the FULRO army. They are perplexed when I recount for them the derivation suggested by Gerald Hickey, an American anthropologist, who claims that Dega means “sons of the mountains” (without specifying in which language). A former Protestant missionary to the highlands told me that the term derives from the name for the “Rhadé” people—a name for one of the highland “tribes” that is actually a French mispronunciation of the self-ascribed Edé. He explained that “ga” is a syntactically meaningless syllable added to complete the sound of “Edé”—producing “[E]dé-ga.” By this account, Dega would seem to extend the appellation for the Edé collectivity to name all the highland people—which may be an appropriate narrative given the prominence of Rhadé speaking highlanders in the FULRO movement where the name Dega seems to have come into common use.

Many in the refugee community use the term Montagnard because they feel it is the name most likely recognized by Americans. But some object because it is a French term. Others do not like “Dega” because they consider it a Rhadé term. Some combine both names together to produce “Montagnard-Dega.” The point is that even though this refugee community has a strong sense of itself as a single, distinctive, easily identified group, it cannot agree on its own name. And appropriately, this contested and unstable nomenclature is a reflection of the complicated colonial processes through which the group came into existence.

The only “origin myth” I know that narrates the origins of the highland people as a collectivity was handed to me by Hip K’Sor, a Dega refugee community leader. Hip is a native Jarai speaker. Thus it is interesting that he uses the (apparently) Rhadé name Dega in this “history taught by the elders.” Hip’s narrative seems to quite purposefully account for French ethnographic constructions by placing the original Dega ancestors in the “islands of Malaysia” (where people speak languages belonging to the same Malayo-Polynesian linguistic family as the languages spoken in the highlands). It also acknowledges and purports to overcome the French-identified ethnon-linguistic differences within a highland population that speaks both Malayo-Polynesian as well as Mon Khmer languages (the language family shared with Khmer people living in the Cambodian lowlands). Hip’s account is worth quoting at length because its dependence on