Chapter 3

The Conversion of the Dega

Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of the phenomenon of religious conversion as it has been discussed especially in the evangelical Christian tradition is the personal testimony, proclaimed by a convert, narrating a profound experience of change. In the Protestant evangelical tradition, this experience is often the focal point in believers’ explanations of the truth and certainty of their religious faith. Thus, it is significant that very few Dega in North Carolina have ever told me stories about how and why they became Christians. Most report having not been Christian in their youth, and virtually all of them describe themselves as Christians now. Thus there would seem to be a narrative of change implicit in their religious identity. But although I have tried to elicit these stories from Dega in interviews, very few of them have cared to tell me how this change came about. They show little interest in the topic.

Perhaps we should not expect to hear evangelical conversion stories from Dega. Some of them converted to Catholicism—not evangelical Protestantism—and would perhaps have been taught by their missionaries to represent their conversion very differently from the evangelicals’ narrative of dramatic experience. But in any case, evangelical conversion narratives are not transparent and unmediated accounts of actual experiences. They are, in a sense, a literary genre that has been adopted into verbal forms of spoken autobiography. The genre developed in the specific historical circumstances of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English-speaking evangelism. In any case, the evangelical narrative of a conversion experience would seem to depend on peculiarly modern and Western constructions of an introspective conscience and a developed hermeneutic of one’s own subjectivity.

But if Dega do not offer narratives of their religious conversions they are very much intent on telling me a different kind of story about
the experience of God in their lives: they tell me war stories that pivot on God’s miraculous intervention to save them from certain death. These narratives are told of a period in which they lived for years in small guerilla bands or in degrading prison camps, with only tenuous and uncertain contact with the wider world. Like converts’ accounts of a decisive experience of conversion, Dega seem to tell me these miracle stories in order to explain their Christian faith to me and to witness to the truth of God.

In this chapter I analyze the absence of conversion narratives among the Dega as I piece together an account of how highland people encountered and came to identify themselves with Christianity in the central highlands of Vietnam. Then I analyze the stories that Dega do want to tell me—war stories involving miraculous interventions by God in the FULRO (Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées) army. I argue that the Dega collectivity is created during these years in the jungle through the fellowship of Christian faith and worship as it is narrated in these miraculous war stories.

Thus, if Dega do not offer narratives of their conversion to Christianity, they instead tell stories of their “conversion to Dega.” This conversion occurred when the FULRO army (the Montagnard ethnonationalist resistance force known by its acronym for the Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées, or United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races) began to tell stories that explicitly linked the Christian god to their resistance struggle against the communist regime in Hanoi. A rhetoric that links Christianity and the Dega collectivity continues to animate the politics of the refugee community and its attempts to raise a voice of resistance to the policies of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This chapter concludes with a description of Dega Christian worship in North Carolina refugee exile and the ways that widely expressed fears of religious declension only reinforce the importance of Christian identity to the formation of Dega refugee identity.

1 Prohibitions and Fellowship

“Conversion is a scientifically verifiable experience,” Reverend Charles Long told me. He speaks from fifteen years of experience as an evangelical missionary among the Jarai people in the central highlands of Vietnam. “Wherever you go in the world, people will relate the same experience of being saved by Jesus—the rebirth, new life, forgiveness, and an unbelievable lightness.”