

‘Children of the Nation’: Métis Children in Indochina, 1903-1923

Anne-Marie Medcalf

In the 1920s, the head of a Vietnamese ‘orphanage’ introduced a dormitory full of Métis children to Claudine Chivas Barron, a declared feminist of the time, by saying ‘here are the gentlemen’s little sins’.¹ This comment encapsulates a common understanding of Métis children as the ‘original sin’ of colonization. For the colonial government and elites alike the Métis population was a flaw in the image of French colonialism and one very much discussed. This paper looks at the issue of Métis children legally categorised as abandoned in Indochina, and compares them with that of abandoned children in metropolitan France. I look, especially, at the first quarter of the 20th c., a period when colonial society had become increasingly intolerant of mixed unions² and situated before the proclamation of the 1928 decree which was to recognise all Franco-Indochinese Métis children as French citizens. In terms of primary sources, I explore a series of papers from the French colonial archives ranging between 1903 and 1923. Those are papers emanating from the *Société de Protection de l’Enfance* and the *Société de Protection des Enfants Métis Abandonnés*, as well as correspondence and reports concerning Métis children stemming from the office of the Governor-General of Indochina³.

¹ Claudine Chivas-Barron, *La Femme Française aux colonies*, Larose: Paris, 1931

² Greg Muller, *Colonial Cambodia’s ‘Bad Frenchmen’: The Rise of French Rule and the Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840-1887*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 9-10

³ Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer (CAOM), Aix en Provence, Fonds du Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine (GGI), 16771-16773

As is well documented in the Indochinese context, Métis were often perceived in a dichotomous way⁴. On the one hand, they were seen as a threat, as miscegenation transgressed the racial and cultural boundaries between coloniser and colonised through both biological hybridity and cultural métissage⁵, thus blurring the boundaries of colonial rule, endangering the status quo and threatening the very future of the colonial state.⁶ On the other hand, they were also seen, as Stoler puts it, as a potential ‘bulwark of a future white settlers population’, provided of course they be given proper handling.⁷

‘The Métis question’ as it was termed, has been shown to be a complex one, and, on the whole, one solidly grounded in the colonial and imperialist context. As such, as Saada argues, it reflects France’s ‘long colonial history,’⁸ as well as the ‘the colonial origins and the colonial trajectory of the concept of métissage’.⁹ In the case of Métis children, however, I argue that it was not solely a colonial and imperialist issue¹⁰. It also represented the transposition into a colonial context of the question of the so-called abandoned children, a question debated in metropolitan France itself since the Revolution. As a result, I want to illustrate that the discussions that took place and the actions that were taken at least between 1903 and 1923 concerning abandoned Métis children in Indochina indeed echoed the perception that on the one hand they constituted a potential

⁴ See for instance, Ann Stoler, ‘“Mixed Bloods” and the Cultural politics of European Identity in Colonial Southeast Asia’, in Jan Nederveen and Bhikku Parekh (eds) *The Decolonization of Imagination, Culture, Knowledge and Power* London: Zed Books, 1995; Emmanuelle Saada, ‘Race and Sociological Reason in the Republic: Inquiries on the Métis in the French Empire (1908-1937)’, *International Sociology*, Sept. 2002, Vol 17 (3): 361-391, p. 36; Greg Muller, *Colonial Cambodia’s ‘Bad Frenchmen’*, ch.3, ‘rules of Romance and reproduction’, pp. 136-156

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Stoler, Saada

⁷ Stoler, ‘Mixed Bloods’, p. 134

⁸ Saada, ‘Race and Sociological Reason’, p. 362

⁹ *Ibid* p. 362

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 47-50

social and political danger, and on the other that they could made to become, as a colonial official put it in 1923, a ‘national gain’.¹¹ This in turn was linked to problems of depopulation in metropolitan France, labour shortages and first world war effort. As a result, the discussions and the policies adopted in the colony sometimes strikingly resonate, albeit with differences specific to the colonial context, with discussions, debates and resultant laws and policies on abandoned children in France.

The issue of depopulation is certainly raised by some authors as an important factor in the treatment of Métis children. Emmanuelle Saada, in particular, points out that the ‘Métis question’ eventually led, with the 1928 decree on citizenship, to the extraordinary construction of a legal category based on race, not because it was an ordinary racist move, but because it was a practical one, and to follow Foucault, a populationist and imperial expansionist move¹². What I want to develop here, however, is the link between this move and parallel practices in France at the time. In this context, I argue that in spite of the major differences between these children, the treatment of so called abandoned Métis children in Indochina and their counterparts in metropolitan France had important similarities relevant both to ideology and historical circumstances.

Who were the so-called abandoned Métis children? Number-wise, the children this paper is concerned with represented an extremely small proportion of the respective French and Vietnamese populations. They were probably no more than a few hundred in the period

¹¹ CAOM, GGI, 16772, Lettre du président de la Société de Protection de l’enfance au Cambodge au Gouverneur Général d’Indochine, 5 Février 1917

¹² Saada, ‘Race and Sociological Reason’, p.19

considered.¹³ In most cases they were the offspring of French fathers and Indochinese mothers. Their fathers could be anything from the early French merchants of Phnom Penh described by Muller¹⁴, to French government officials, soldiers and ‘petits blancs’. By definition, fathers of abandoned Métis children had either not recognized them or had died or disappeared, or both. Their mothers could have been in a longstanding relation with their fathers or short term concubines of petty officials or garrison soldiers who had moved on. Whatever their relation to the father, though, mothers were rarely recorded on birth certificates.¹⁵ As in similar circumstances in other countries, many such children were removed from their mothers, and placed in philanthropic and church institutions known as orphanages. These institutions were, to various proportions, financed privately and through the colony’s budget.¹⁶

Whatever their particular circumstances, what characterized these children in the public eye, was that they were illegitimate, hybrid, and déclassé.¹⁷ In other words they were defined as inferior and outsiders in social, economic and biological terms. Not so though the children of mixed unions whose fathers had recognized them and who as a result had the legal status of French citizens. Significantly, those were rarely called Métis.

Conversely, illegitimate children of mixed blood had only the status of subjects of the French empire and kept the nationality of their mothers even though these mother were not recognised legally as such. The term Métis applied mostly to these children, and

¹³Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie, les Métis de l’Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté*, Paris: La Découverte, 2007, pp. 51-53.

¹⁴ Muller, *Colonial Cambodia’s ‘Bad Frenchmen’*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.127

¹⁶ CAOM, GGI, 16771, 16772, 16773

¹⁷ Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie*, p.29-30; Ann Stoler, ‘Mixed Bloods’, p. 134-135

especially to those amongst them deemed abandoned. The two categories Métis and abandoned were in fact often made to virtually overlap.¹⁸

It is not only in the colonies that the issue of children without families, or considered to be without families, preoccupied authorities and elites alike. In France, foundlings, abandoned and orphan children had been, up to the 1789 Revolution, the responsibility of religious institutions. Bringing in its wake concepts of human rights, duty of care and responsibility both of the state and of its citizens, the Revolution transferred this responsibility to the state. The right of abandoned children to be educated by society was inscribed in the 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.¹⁹ This was followed by a 1793 law proclaiming that ‘the nation will from now on take in charge the physical and moral education of the children known as abandoned and *who will hereafter indiscriminately be called orphans*²⁰. The same law claimed them as ‘children of the Nation’.²¹ In 1799, the parliament of the Convention affirmed that ‘The nation must ensure the physical and moral education of abandoned children’, thus arguably hinting at the social danger these children could represent if left without republican moral values.²² Throughout the 19th century, a series of laws set out with increasing precision the mechanisms for the care for these children. Finally, the law of the 27 June 1904 made familyless children wards of the state. The same law, also defined six categories of such

¹⁸ Emmanuelle Saada, *Les Enfants de la Colonie*, p.30

¹⁹ Monique Maksud et Alfred Nizard, ‘Enfants trouvés, reconnus, légitimes ; les statistiques de filiation en France aux XIXe et XXe siècle’, *Population*, 32e année, no.6, (novembre - décembre 1977), p.1163

²⁰ In Jacques Tremintin, ‘Les maisons d’enfants à l’épreuve du temps’, *Lien Social*, no 807, 7 Sept.2006, p.1. My emphasis

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Serge Oudart, ‘Quelques rappels sur le dispositif français de protection de l’enfance’, *Empan*, no. 49, 2003/1, p. 12

children. According to this definition, abandoned children were those who were deemed to have been patently neglected by their parents or their representatives for more than a year, and had, in consequence, been taken in by the relevant authorities. A companion law set out directives for those children amongst them who were defined as ‘difficult or vicious’²³, thus suggesting an overlap between abandonment and delinquency.

The law of 27 June 1904 carries with it the idea that neglectful parents are those who cannot be found, or have been deemed unsuitable. Abandonment in this sense could be physical or moral, or both. The children categorized as abandoned in metropolitan France came mainly from poor families and, more often than not, were illegitimate. In public opinion discussions, this was pitted against a definition of the family within which suitable parents were married, the father was employed and never failed ‘his duty to the nation’²⁴ and the mother was occupied at home with multiple children and thus kept far from amoral temptations.²⁵ A good mother, in addition was one who was ‘healthy of body, mind and was of sound heredity’.²⁶ Poverty and hardship were seen as breeding undesirable people. This indeed was to become very relevant in the colonies. Legitimacy, duty to the nation, hard work and good heredity were normative criteria for a ‘good’ family defined both in socio-economic, political and biological terms.

²³ Tremintin, ‘Les maisons d’enfants’, p.1

²⁴ Pierre Guillaume, quoting Fernand Boverat, 1913, in ‘Politique de la famille et protection de l’enfant’, *Revue de l’Histoire de l’Enfance Irrégulière*, no2, 1999, www.rhei.revues.org/, downloaded 12 June 2008

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.* quoting Paul Robin, 1902

The way abandoned children were treated in metropolitan France were relevant to two issues, that of social danger and that of national interest. The public perception was that abandoned, illegitimate and poor children were potential delinquents²⁷, and therefore potential dangers to society and the nation. To be turned into useful elements of society and into good workers – albeit kept at the lower end of the class system - they needed to be imparted with republican values and discipline through family care, primary education and apprenticeships. The issue of national interest also had to do with the problem of depopulation which plagued France at a time of low birth rates and which was seen, especially, to affect agricultural production. From the end of the 19th century, the debate about what to do with abandoned children was often directly linked to this issue. Hence the pressure, eventually successful, from the 1890's onwards, to establish laws which would allow taking children away from family situations deemed both unsuitable and favorable to infant mortality. In practical terms, abandoned children were placed by preference with families but also in 'orphanages'. Those judged dangerous were placed in corrective institutions. After primary school, they could be placed as professional apprentices, but the first choice was to send them to the countryside where they could relieve labour shortages. When of age, the army also appeared like a suitable solution. In any case, their situation was often one of hardship, bad treatments and very poor pay.²⁸

If we turn back to the case of Indochina, we find the same idea of duty of care and right to assistance towards abandoned children prevalent in the legal texts of the French revolution reflected in colonial documents. In 1912, for instance, a high ranking public servant of the

²⁷ Guillaume, 'Politique de la famille', p.2

²⁸ Maksud and Nizard, 'Enfants trouvés...', p.1163-64

colonial government, referring explicitly to the work of the Revolution and to that of the Third Republic, wrote about Métis children in an interdepartmental note that ‘in France there is for the government a duty to exercise assistance and solidarity [...] especially at a time when solidarity is more and more often presented as a social duty, a duty which is that of the state in the first place’.²⁹ That this duty was performed in the colonial context by philanthropic and church organizations was perceived as a delegation of responsibility. Therefore, it was argued, it was the government’s obligation to help finance these organizations.³⁰ As the repeated demands from philanthropic organizations show, though, this duty was not always fulfilled.

The definition of abandoned Métis children was consistent with that outlined in the metropolitan 1904 law which defined abandoned children as children uncared for by their parents. As already mentioned, abandoned Métis children were those illegitimate children with no father to take care of them. They were also claimed by the administration to be the children of mothers who had ‘disappeared, had become unworthy or were too poor’.³¹ Although writers and officials are often full of praise for the ‘courageous Annamite mother’,³² and although financial help was occasionally given by institutions such as the Société de Protection de l’Enfance or the Société de protection des enfants Métis abandonnés to mothers who kept their children at home, the general feeling was that their race made them unfit, morally and biologically, to bring up children with French blood in

²⁹ CAOM, GGI 16771, Chef de service administratif au directeur des finances du gouvernement General, 24 juillet 1912, p. 2

³⁰ CAOM, GGI, 16771, pp. 2-4

³¹ CAOM, GGI, 16771, Chef de service administratif au directeur des finances du gouvernement General, 24 juillet 1912, p. 4

³² For instance, CAOM, GGI, 16771, p.4

their veins. Hence the active stance of educators and philanthropists who in fact advocated to take the children from their mothers as soon as it was, in the words of the president of the Société de protection de l'enfance du Cambodge in 1917, 'possible and fitting'.³³ To be successful, it was believed, assimilation had to start early.

Even amongst the proponents of assimilation, however, it was felt that there was 'no comparison possible between the abandoned child in France and the Metis' and that 'The fate of the first, moreover', [was] 'to be envied by the second'.³⁴ There were two main reasons advanced for this. The first reason had to do with hybridity and illegitimacy, the second with the legal position of these children.

As in metropolitan France, there was the conviction that heredity had a huge influence on people's physical and moral being.³⁵ In this context, 'Asiatic atavisms'³⁶, as the discourse of the time would have it, were linked to all sorts of ills, from physical weaknesses to criminality. The situation of the children as illegitimate, in addition, was rightly seen by their educators, in the words of one of them, 'as exposing them to prejudices' and preventing them from getting decent jobs and positions.³⁷ In terms of their legal position, the fact that Métis children unrecognized by their fathers were categorized as French

³³ CAOM GGI, 16772, Président de la société de protection de l'enfance du Cambodge au Gouverneur General, 5 février 1917, p. 3

³⁴ CAOM, GGI, 16771, Chef de service administratif au directeur des finances du gouvernement General, 24 juillet 1912, p5

³⁵ CAOM, GGI, 16772, Note du President de la Société de protection de l'enfance du Cambodge au Gouverneur General, 'Education en France des Enfants mi-français recueillis par les Sociétés de Hanoi, Hue, Saigon, Phnom Penh', 20 janvier 1917

³⁶ CAOM, GGI, 16772, Note du President de la Société de protection de l'enfance du Cambodge au Gouverneur General, 'Education en France des Enfants mi-français recueillis par les Sociétés de Hanoi, Hue, Saigon, Phnom Penh', 20 janvier 1917

³⁷ CAOM, GGI, 16773 ,1, Commandant Reverony, vice-president de la Société des Métis Abandonnés de Hanoi au Gouverneur Général, 8 janvier 1923

subjects, not citizens, and of the nationality of their mothers, effectively meant that, as a public servant put it forcibly in 1912, ‘in legal terms, the Métis does not exist’³⁸. As far as these children were concerned, this meant that on the one hand, there was a will to assimilate them as French, but that, on the other it was in practice impossible to do so except at a cultural level as they did not have any of the rights specific to French citizens. Hence they did not have access to scholarships, could not study in schools reserved to French citizens, or access all professions- or even join the Foreign Legion.

The biological, social and legal obstacles perceived to be in the path of abandoned Métis children in turn aggravated the perception that they were a potential danger to society and to the state. Besides the idea that métissage blurred the colonial boundaries of rule, this danger was perceived as multifold. First, as with abandoned children in metropolitan France we find the idea that both their heredity and their social circumstances established them as outsiders, even pariahs³⁹ and that in itself could lead to resentment, humiliation, jealousy and desire of revenge on society. For Métis children, it was thought, the danger was heightened by their physical appearance and the traits specific to their race, which would always mark them. In that sense, children who had first been brought up in their father’s house but whose father had disappeared or died were seen to be even more at risk because they would both feel French at heart and superior to the colonized whilst partaking of the same legal status as them. In other words, the contradiction between their legal status and the French side of their cultural identity was seen as a second danger in itself. Thirdly, Métis children were seen as potential wedges between the colonized

³⁸ CAOM, GGI, 16771, Destenay au Gouverneur General, 25 juillet 1912

³⁹ Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie*, p.28

Indochinese people and the French. The first argument along this line, as expressed by Victor Augagneur, an opponent of Métis children education, was that once grown up, those children, because of their semi-french education would feel superior to the Indochinese population and aim to dominate them. This would create resentment amongst Indochinese people who would make the French responsible for the exactions that would no doubt be perpetrated by the Métis population.⁴⁰ Conversely the second argument involving the Indochinese population, was of the opposite view that ‘the Annamites are very attached to their children’. Not looking after Metis children would therefore undermine the prestige of the colonizer.⁴¹

On the whole, the perceived dangers presented by Métis children were seen as powerful reasons for looking them. It was felt that if society did not extend a hand, their resentment and hatred would grow⁴² and that ‘to deny children who had French blood would make them irreconcilable enemy of the state’.⁴³ This certainly accounted for the type of education they were given and which besides providing them with basic primary and professional education, aimed at toning down, even cancelling their Asian side. There were, nevertheless, other reasons for extending the hand of the French state. As in metropolitan France this had to do with the issue of depopulation. In future, it was thought, it would be more and more difficult to populate the colonies with French people. Well prepared and educated Métis would then be useful in filling the gaps left by the colonists. Métis children could also fill labour shortages in metropolitan France itself. This

⁴⁰ Augagneur, ‘Notre devoir...’

⁴¹ CAOM, GGI, 16771, le directeur des finances au Gouverneur General, 7 mai 1912

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ *ibid*

was made clear with the practice, started early the 20th century, of sending the brightest and fittest Métis children to France.⁴⁴ Like their French counterparts, they were either placed in families or in institutions and sent to professional schools in towns, or to the country to become farming labourers. Their strictly one way passage was paid by the colonial government. According to its proponents, this scheme was the universal panacea to the Métis problem, at personal and national level alike. Given the right environment in France, it was thought, and ‘with good examples of courageous work, honesty, righteousness, and dignity as are found in most French families’⁴⁵ they would become independent and honest citizens. They would also contribute to national prosperity in time of labour shortages.⁴⁶ The first world war, in particular, when those of age ‘volunteered’ both as workers for the war effort and at the front was seen as an excellent opportunity to pursue this scheme. In other words, as they grew up, Métis children had become ‘national gains’.

In conclusion, the series of laws promulgated in metropolitan France, and culminating in those of 1904, combined the idea of duty of care and assistance, and even of defense of the state, with a framework fulfilling the wishes of the populationists of the time and providing for a source of cheap labour. In turn, the definition of abandoned children and their qualification as orphans, that of the normative definition of the family in both socio-political and biological terms, and the concepts of social dangers and potential usefulness

⁴⁴ Saada, *Les enfants des colonies*; CAOM, GGI 16773.16776

⁴⁵ CAOM, GGI, 16771

⁴⁶ CAOM, GGI, 16773, 5 février 1917; 16772, 20 janvier 1917

to the nation attached to abandoned children which were implicit in these laws and overtly expressed in parallel discussions in metropolitan France, partially came to frame the way the issue of Métis abandoned children was tackled in the colony. The major differences lie, obviously, with the question of race and the emphasis given to questions of biology and heredity, as well as with the legal question of citizenship status. What was seen for a while as the best solution to the Métis question, even if at the time it concerned only a small number of children each year, was nevertheless the same as the one applied to their metropolitan counterparts. In practice, this fused the policies and practices towards both abandoned French and Métis children in the name of duty of the state and national prosperity and sealed their fate as an underclass. Eventually, moreover, the irreconcilable contradiction between the cultural and legal status of illegitimate and non recognized Métis children led to the clean sweep populationist move of the 1928 law giving them French citizenship, provided they could demonstrate their mixed race status.