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# Nguyễn Văn Khoan(1890-1975)

## An Odd Man out of Vietnamese Anthropology?

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A name and a career, seemingly totally forgotten until the second half of the 20th century when anthropological research resumed in a country that recovered from war and misery, but also from the suffocating grip of scientific orthodoxy under one-party rule that confused science with ideology. That name belonged to the scholar Nguyễn Văn Khoan(1890-1975) who was once a scientific employee of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient's (EFEO–French School of Far-Eastern Studies) elite staff in Hanoi together with Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Trần Văn Giáp and Nguyễn Văn Tố. While these latter's names are recognized today thanks to their post-1945 services to their country, Nguyễn Văn Khoan's name is not well known. His small, but precious collection of articles represent a gem that survived the issues of the day and proved to be important for later generations of scholars. But unlike a number of his contemporaries, his career ended in 1946 when the First Indochina War started on 19 December of that year.

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Fig. 1: Nguyễn Văn Khoan

(Photos reproduites avec l'aimable autorisation de la famille de Nguyễn Văn Khoan).

The recovery of voices like the of Khoan helps us to identify a commonality of direction and focus among Vietnamese and French scholars during the colonial period as well as the hierarchical relations of knowledge production that during the 1930s had kept Khoan's work in a subordinate position to his French colleagues. Who was he and why he seems to be forgotten? His professional career before 1945 is well documented in the archives of the EFEO and his later life is recently brought to light by one of his sons (Đào Viên, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1890 in the village of Yên Mãn in the former Võ Giàng district (now district of Quế Võ) of the province of Bắc Ninh, he shared his birth village with another famous scholar, the writer, poet, musician and researcher Nguyễn Quảng Tuân (born in 1925). Being the youngest child in a family of four brothers, he represented the seventh generation of a lineage that dated back to the end of the 17th century. His eldest brother was a village head (*lý trưởng*), but otherwise the number of mandarins or scholars in his family was limited.

His second son Nguyễn Văn Phác (1930) (aka Đào Viên, his pen name) remembered him as

(A) typical Vietnamese of the last century. He wore a turban, a long robe; he blackened his teeth, but not chewing the betel. He lived in a transitional period between Westernized and Traditional era, from Chinese characters to French language. (Đào Viên 2008.)

Although vertical social mobility for Vietnamese was not a hallmark of the French colonial society at the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Khoan managed to get a scholarship at a very young age for the Collège du Protectorat (later Lycée du Protectorat nowadays the Chu Văn An school, named after a high-ranking official of the Trần

Dynasty in Đại Việt), at the time known among Vietnamese as “Trường Bưởi”, the Bưởi School, because of its location in the village of Bưởi, near the West Lake (Grand Lac) in Hanoi. His excellent grades made him eligible for the appointment as a clerk at the EFEO in 1923. Gradually he worked himself up from secretary to scientific chief-assistant (*assistant principal de 3<sup>e</sup> classe*), a position he received in 1942.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime he had married for the second time. His first wife who came also from Yên Mẫn, gave him two sons. When she died in 1920, Khoan married Nguyễn Thị Tý, by whom he had nine children, four daughters and five sons.

Khoan belonged then already to the so-called ‘*annamitisants*’, the Vietnamese core staff of the EFEO, a position he had earned on the basis of his work about the Vietnamese communal house, the Đình, and its protective spirits.<sup>3</sup> He is best known in the West for being one of the key informants of Pierre Gourou (1900-1999) for his book *Les Paysans du delta Tonkinois*, published in 1936 as his doctorate thesis, but researched in the years between 1931 and 1935 (see Tertrais 1993; Kleinen 2005; Bowd & Clayton 2005).

French and Vietnamese experts and assistants provided Gourou with a wealth of information from district and provincial offices and archives. Excellent knowledge of the French language enabled many of these Vietnamese assistants to work closely with their French “superiors”, whose mastering of the Vietnamese language was comparatively lower.<sup>4</sup> It was with the help of local mandarins that Gourou managed to organize a survey to collect data from 2,000 villages. Together with a population census, this survey data served as the backbone of his 1936 study. Furthermore, while Gourou had a sufficient knowledge of the Vietnamese language, he still relied on Vietnamese friends, field assistants and, occasionally, an interpreter who understood local dialects. How extensive his Vietnamese network exactly was is difficult to reconstruct from Gourou’s publications—especially given that he seldom quoted the works of Vietnamese scholars.<sup>5</sup> But at least one man is mentioned as his teacher and key informant: Nguyễn Văn Khoan (Gourou 1936: 176).

Gourou’s Collège de France’s close colleague Paul Mus, who in the 1930s was an interim director at EFEO, called Khoan among others his “workmate” and “an original analyst of village ceremonies and rituals” and who in excellent way revealed “the mysteries of the Vietnamese village cults” (1977: 18). Another scholar, archaeologist and member of the EFEO, Jean-Yves Claeys (1896-1979), regarded Khoan as “a friend” and hailed his study (about the communal house) as “well documented” in such a way that it had revealed “an ethnic fact that was completely secret and jealously hidden before European observers” (Claeys quoted in Nguyen Phuong Ngoc 2012: 48). In 1930 Khoan was appointed as research assistant, a position he acquired for his publication about the *đình*, the communal house, in EFEO’s prestigious *Bulletin* (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930). He also was responsible for the European section of the library of the EFEO including the works written in *quốc ngữ*.<sup>6</sup>

As said Khoan, taught Pierre Gourou Vietnamese, but proved equally valuable as a colleague in the field; his writings on local rituals display his unique knowledge of a world that was relatively inaccessible to outsiders and includes what is commonly regarded as the best description of the Vietnamese institution of the *đình*, the communal house, where villagers worship the guardian spirit and in which the worldly power of the male notables is ritualized. South-Vietnamese historian Le Văn Hào

regarded the study as the “best documented monograph in his kind” (Le 1962: 41; also quoted in Nguyen Phuong Ngoc 2012: 92).

Nguyễn Văn Khoan’s research focused on the ceremonial and political aspects of the *đình*, its associated buildings and religious objects, and of course the various rituals that were performed. He also had a keen eye for gender aspects when he pointed to exceptions of the general rule of the communal house as a place for males, saying that there are special occasions when “notables came to kowtow before the Buddha, and the women before the Protective Spirits” (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930: 110). He also revealed a tabooed ritual (*hèm*) regarding the Protective Spirit in case the Guardian is a common person or a social outsider, e.g. those responsible for emptying the cesspools, a thief or an adulterer. Such practices refer to older traditions before Confucianism as a state ideology was introduced in Vietnam. Unlike the critical writer Ngô Tất Tố (1893-1954), Khoan was not discussing the social significance of this institution, which over the years became a bone of contention among elites and led to an involution of village rituals, including the costly custom of banqueting, once depicted by communist historians as “a social club for on the best mats eating feudal class” and thus “an instrument of colonialists and feudalists” (Tuan Chau 1962 quoted in Luttmmer 1999: 12; see also Endres 2000).

Khoan lived long enough to have witnessed the change in interest among Vietnamese (art) historians, when in 1972 the *đình* was partly rehabilitated as an important institution not only for the elites. It would take another twenty years before the position of the *đình* was reintegrated into the state-ideology as a traditional symbol of Vietnamese culture at the village level (Boudarel 1991: 207-218). Nowadays, communal houses are frantically restored, renewed and served an important function in nearly every village in the Red River delta that was lucky enough to have one, or at least had kept the drawings before the buildings disappeared during the collectivization period and the wars. Without Khoan’s trail blazing study—it was this study that his colleague Nguyễn Văn Huyền after he returned from France, inspired to continue about the village guardians—we would have only had works by Chinese or French scholars (see also Nguyen Phuong Ngoc 2012: 92, 158-164).

Three years later, in 1933, Khoan presented another important piece of research about one of the most enigmatic phenomena of lowland Vietnamese, the believe in supernatural spirits and the existence of malicious and benevolent spirits and the way spirit mediums expressed parts of a folk tradition in which no gender-specific restrictions are made (see Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1933).

His article was about a topic that currently is very fashionable in Vietnam: necromancy (see Kwon 2008). Many Vietnamese believe that in the dead person there is something that will not die and that there is a sort of a soul. This believe is in line with many other world traditions, religious or not. Khoan described a ceremony to call back the soul of somebody who had suffered from an unnatural death, (in Vietnamese *bắt đấc kỳ tử*) e.g. drowning or another accident like killing (also during a violent conflict). To appease the souls of those victims is imminent for the living for several reasons. A special ceremony “*Lễ chiêu hồn*” or “*gọi hồn*” which in Vietnamese literally means “to call, to evoke or to beckon the souls of the dead to come home” is organized any time when people feel that misfortune can happen to the living members of the lineage (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1933).

Khoan discussed thus at an early stage a phenomenon that in a country where later more than 3 million Vietnamese died during the “American” war (1964-1973), and out of which an estimated ten percent are believed to have been physically disappeared (cf. The term for soldiers “missing in action”), would become a central key to understand a hallmark of Vietnamese ancestor worship. Furthermore, and this was not the topic of Khoan’s research, the ritual he described involved a pretended way of magical communication with the deceased—either by calling their spirit as an ghost or meeting them bodily—for the purpose of divination, imparting the means to forecast future events or to discover hidden knowledge. The fervor of “waking the dead” in the late nineties and early tens of the 20th and 21st century and the reappearance of medium ship in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam can be better understood by rereading Khoan’s pioneering work from the 1930s (Fjelstad & Nguyen Thi Hien 2006).

In her rich and valuable history of the early days of Vietnamese anthropology, the French-Vietnamese author Nguyen Phuong Ngoc deals also with the Institut indo-chinois pour l’étude de l’homme (IIEH), one of the first attempts in the Southeast Asian region to combine the study of anthropology with medicine through its link of physical anthropology. The installation of the Institute is a real “recognition of Vietnamese competences” (Nguyen Phuong Ngoc 2012: 49). Nguyễn Văn Khoan soon joined the staff. In a few years time, he published a number of important articles about several customs of the lowland Vietnamese regarding the care of young children at various moments of their life cycles in relation to their place in the ancestral tree (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1938; 1939; 1940). Well known is the worshipping ritual of “*lễ bán khoán*”, literally “selling somebody’s child to a god or a goddess”, a ritual that takes place in a pagoda to sell in a fictive way a child to Buddha or to a protective Bodhisattva like Trần Hưng Đạo. The custom fits into a larger cultural practice to protect young children for all kind of bad influences including the disguise of names or giving nicknames to shield them against bad spirits. Khoan also discussed a traditional way of adopting children (*con nuôi*) who are taken from others to guarantee a male inheritance, prosperity, or just for economic reasons to augment the number of workers in a household. Other publications show Khoan’s pliancy in absorbing topics or themes like a lengthy article of 15 pages about the confirmation of oath by Vietnamese (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1942) or about ceramics “*Le céladon*” (n.d.).

In a number of photographs, the so-called ‘*annamitisants*’ of the EFEO figure prominently often with their European colleagues and on the occasion of important events regarding the EFEO. Mostly Nguyễn Văn Khoan is absent. In a 1937 photograph in which Nguyễn Văn Tố and Trần Văn Giáp sided with some French members of the EFEO, such as then incumbent director, George Coedes, Madeleine Colani, Victor Goloubew and Louis Bezacier he is not present (Clementin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 37). A photograph taken circa 1957-1958 in front of the office of the former EFEO (Viện Đông Bắc Cổ học Viện), already re-baptised the Institute for Scientific Research of the Orient (Phương Đông Bắc Cổ học Viện; later transformed into the Committee for Literary, Historical, and Geographical Research, (Ban nghiên cứu Văn học, Lịch sử, Địa lý), presented its personnel, there is also no sign of him.<sup>7</sup> But more than ten years earlier, in 1945, he is present, clad in a black *áo dài le* and *khăn xếp*, behind president Ho Chi Minh, who paid a visit to the EFEO. He is standing at the same level behind the new president of the DRV Nguyễn Văn Huyên. The photo was

taken at the main entrance of the Library of the EFEO in 1945 (the present-day Head Office of Institute of Social Sciences Information at 26 Lý Thường Kiệt).



Fig. 2: Standing behind Ho Chi Minh, third from left, Nguyễn Văn Khoan.

Source: Ngô Thế Long, 2008.

More than a year later Khoan was reported missing because of the violent clashes between French and Viet Minh forces that led to the first Indochina War on 19 December 1946. Had he become one of the “*compagnons de route de Ho Chi Minh*” (Trinh Van Thao 2004) like Nguyễn Văn Tô, who died in battle at Bắc Kạn in 1947? And if so, did he join the resistance as a member of a generation or as a family member like Nguyễn Văn Huyền and his wife or medical doctors like Hồ Đắc Di and Tôn Thất Tùng? Nothing of this all. Khoan’s family left Hanoi for Bắc Ninh as a result of the heavy fighting during the battle of Hanoi that erupted on 17 December 1946. “Tens of thousands of residents fled to the countryside” just to discover like in the case of Khoan’s family that Bắc Ninh and Nam Định became a few days later part of the war as well (Logevall 2012: 160 ff). His son remarked about this forced departure when he reminded the many books of his father in a special bookcase:

It is very regrettable that when my family had to leave Hanoi because of the war at the end of 1946, our house was completely destroyed, including that bookcase and other belongings.

His wife and three of the children, two daughters and his eldest son, returned to Hanoi in 1949, and Khoan together with two younger sons followed them in 1951.<sup>8</sup>

After the fighting stopped, Vietnam was (temporally) divided into two parts. The Geneva conference enabled people to choose for either the Republic of Vietnam or the Democratic Republic in the North or when they lived already somewhere stayed where they were. Khoan's wife and her children had for some reason gone to the south and didn't return after the elections did not take place in 1956. Khoan remained in the North and decided at a certain moment to return to his native village in Bắc Ninh.

He lived through the difficult periods of Land reform, though he was not a landowner, the *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* movement, in which he did not partake, and forced collectivization, not to mention the war that erupted again and was felt by everyone since 1964.<sup>9</sup> From what the children later perceived as painful was the complete lack of communication between the northern and the southern part. Letters arrived through channels as far as Paris. Some of his children worked as medical doctors or were involved in one of another with the activities of the Republic of Vietnam. Like Duong Van Mai Elliot wrote in her *The Sacred Willow* (1999: 263): "(C)ontacts between the two sides of the conflict brought suspicion, so we stopped writing. (X.) in Paris became the conduit of news [...]."

Khoan never returned to his writing table. He apparently gave up any scholarly activity devoting himself in a mandarinal tradition to tend as his son recalled:

[...] (F)lower plants mostly the hortensia. Hortensia flowers bloom only at night, very slowly. Each time that happened, my father invited friends and family to watch the event, while sipping tea, munching sweet cookies under the moonlight and savoring the light aroma of the blooming flower all over the place. What a perfect, peaceful night. (Đào Viên 2008, website.)

My guess is that Khoan opted for a kind of internal migration being disappointed with the powers that be and the way the expectations of the August revolution waned. Unlike his colleague Nguyễn Văn Huyền, Khoan was not a revolutionary. He never joined the Communist Party or the Committee for Literary, Historical, and Geographical Research (*Ban nghiên cứu Văn học, Lịch sử, Địa lý*), which in 1959 was politically reorganized as the Institute of History. Khoan was not an historian and apparently human geography was not the object of the party's control over intellectual life. His close relationship with Pierre Gourou might have been an objection to his fellow scholars who worked for the new institute, but Gourou's work and that of Robequain were not completely discredited. Maybe, Khoan didn't like to adapt to "Marxish" texts like many of his colleagues who appropriated and reworked in a Vietnamese style the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and others (Pelley 2002: 32-40). It is also possible that Khoan's strict adherence to a form of empirical social science was at odds with the politics of scholarly representations that became the order of the day in those years. He did not produce any text that can shed light upon this matter.<sup>10</sup> Khoan just disappeared from the scholarly scene. The end of his life came in 1975 at the age of 84 years, just a few months before the North-Vietnamese army took Saigon. In a repelling memory of his father his fourth son, Nguyễn Văn Phác, writes:

My father missed this historical important day, a day he had wished to see in order to reunite with his children on the other side of the river. We were unfortunate not to be next to him when he passed away. In a letter sent to us, announcing his death, my



young sister told us that he died peacefully and quickly after the dinner. (Đào Viên 2008, website.)

With Nguyễn Văn Khoan's death, a remarkable scholar of Vietnamese culture and tradition disappeared. His writings, however, are a firm reminder of an excellent field-worker and a devoted anthropologist *avant-la-lettre*.

## Notes

1. I like to thank Nguyễn Phương Ngọc for sharing so kindly the archival sources with me about Nguyễn Văn Khoan, that she collected during her research for her thesis (Nguyen Phuong Ngoc 2012). Khoan's son Nguyễn Văn Phác and his nephew Đàm Thanh Sơn (1969) proved to be precious witnesses of a life that nearly seemed to be forgotten. They shared with me every relevant aspect of Khoan's life they remembered.
2. The salaries and benefits connected to this ranks are fascinating. Khoan started with an annual salary of 1074\$ (piastres), but in 1928 this amount was reduced to 996\$. Cost-of-living statistics are not abundantly available, but between in 1928 e.g. an annual income of a five-member household of a day-labourer in Cochinchina was 135\$ (slightly lower in the Red River delta). A Frenchman was able to buy for 100 \$ nearly one kilo of meat. Rice was about 3\$ per 100 kg in 1933 (*Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, Hanoi, 1927, p. 196-97).
3. The term "*annamitisants*" is discussed in Nguyen Phuong Ngoc (2006; 2012: 132-144).
4. There was a strict hierarchy between members and those described as *Personnes associées* like "*Détachés, chargés de mission, mis à disposition, collaborateurs, correspondants, membres d'honneur*" (see e.g. for the differences). Unlike Huyen, Khoan, Giap and To do not figure until today in the list of scientific members of the EFEO, due to their position as assistants. See also Pierre Singaravelou (1999) and Nguyen Phuong Ngoc (2012: 30-31).
5. In a long interview that I had with Gourou in Brussels in August 1994, he was much more communicative about his scholarly network than in his books about Vietnam (see my report in Kleinen 2005). A year earlier, in a conversation with Hugues Tertrais, he recalled Khoan "*un très chic type*" possible because of Khoan's traditional outfit and his refined manners (1993). He also remembered that he had assisted together with Khoan at a special ceremony of a drowning victim. Khoan collected empirical evidence for his later article about the same subject (1936).
6. Khoan was appointed as "*assistant de 4<sup>e</sup> classe*" and moved up to "*3<sup>e</sup> classe*" in the same year. In 1933 he reached the rank of "*assistant de 2<sup>e</sup> classe*" (*arrêté 21* in December) followed in 1937 by 1st class assistant. In 1942 he became "*assistant principal de 3<sup>e</sup> classe*" (EFEO Archives Registres DA). Ranks in the French public administration system are difficult to compare. Like his colleagues Nguyễn Văn Huyền and Trần Văn Giáp, he was entitled to receive the French Order of Chivalry, the Order of Academic Palms (Ordre des Palmes Académiques) for academics and cultural and educational figures, but is not sure that he received the medal. *The Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine* (1943) does not mention Khoan, though he as in the same "category" as Giap.
7. Members of the VN Oriental Institute (Phuong Đông Bác Cổ học Viện) at the time were Cao Xuân Huy, Công Văn Trung, Đặng Thai Mai, Hồ Đạt Thang, Hoàng Xuân Hãn, Lê Du, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, Nguyễn Đức Nguyên, Nguyễn Thiệu Lâu, Nguyễn Văn Khoan, Nguyễn Văn Tô and Trần Văn Giáp. Some stayed in the DRV, others went South and joined similar institutions in the Republic of Vietnam (see Ngo 2008 and 2009).
8. Khoan got two sons by his first wife Cap (1893-1920) and five sons and four daughters by his second wife Nguyễn Thị Tý (1906-1978). His youngest sister Nguyễn Thị Hảo became the grandmother of physicist Đàm Thanh Sơn (born in 1969) and the first Vietnamese scholar who is admitted at the American National Academy of Sciences.
9. We don't know how many of his former EFEO colleagues were involved in the Nhân Văn-

affair. Đào Duy Anh (1904-1988) had never worked for the EFEO, though the research for his famous Pháp-Việt Từ điển was facilitated by access to the library he received from Leopold Cadière (Nguyen Phuung Ngoc 2012: 136).

10. *Tạp san Nghiên cứu Văn Sử Địa (Journal of Literary, Historical and Geographical Research)*, which contained contributions from Nguyễn Văn Huyền and Trần Văn Giáp, did not publish any contribution by Toan between 1954 and 1959.

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**Abstract:** Nguyễn Văn Khoan (1890-1975), an almost forgotten scholar, but still quoted by contemporaries: there is the great enigma of a man forgotten outside his family, but as an author still present in the scientific literature on Vietnam. This article examines the life and the career of an anthropologist before this term was coined who studied the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese of the Tonkinese delta during the French colonial period. According to the web site of Google (included Google Scholar) the entry of its name results into numerous counts between 136 and 240 results. His articles on the dinh and the recovery of the soul (after a drowning accident) have not lost their timeless value. John Kleinen (emeritus professor at the University of Amsterdam) followed the tracks of this mandarin-scholar during and after the colonial period, with the help of his relatives (a younger brother and a nephew, the grandson of his youngest sister Nguyen Thi Hao). At the same time, this narrative presents an intellectual history of a Vietnamese who devoted his talents and his personality to the emergent social sciences during a difficult time of his country.

***Nguyễn Văn Khoan (1890-1975). Un représentant peu orthodoxe de l'anthropologie vietnamienne***

**Résumé :** Nguyễn Văn Khoan (1890-1975), un grand savant presque oublié, mais qui n'a jamais cessé d'être cité par des contemporains : voilà la grande énigme d'un homme oublié, mais auteur toujours présent dans la littérature scientifique sur le Vietnam. Cet article

*expose des recherches faites sur la vie et la carrière d'un anthropologue avant la lettre qui a étudié la vie culturelle et spirituelle des Vietnamiens du delta tonkinois pendant la période coloniale. Selon le site Internet de Google (inclus Google Scholar) l'entrée de son nom compte entre 136 et 240 résultats. Ces articles sur le Dinh et le repêchage de l'âme font preuve d'une actualité sans précédent. John Kleinen (professeur émérite à l'université d'Amsterdam) a suivi les traces de ce mandarin-savant pendant et après la période coloniale, avec l'aide de ses proches parents, comme son frère cadet et son neveu, petit-fils de sa sœur cadette. Parallèlement, ce récit trace une histoire intellectuelle des Vietnamiens qui lui ont donné leurs talents et leurs personnalités à une période difficile de leur pays.*

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Red River delta, anthropology, Nguyễn Văn Khoan, colonial period.

**Mots-clés :** Vietnam, delta du Tonkin, anthropologie, Nguyễn Văn Khoan, période coloniale.

