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Between Citizens and Strangers:
On Laïcité and Minority Rights among Hmong Populations in France

Introduction:
As the school year began in 1989, three Muslim girls, Samira S. and Fatima and Leila A., started the ninth and tenth grades, insistence upon wearing their Islamic veils (Cardoso 2000). Problems arose when the girls refused to attend class at the beginning of the school year and on Saturdays, citing religious reasons. The girls were suspended from school, and eventually appealed the decision, prompting major upsets across schools in France. Schools began to act independently, issuing bans on the veils. In 1990, Jean-Juarés High School specified that “the wearing of all distinctive symbols, clothing or otherwise, religious, political, or philosophical, is strictly forbidden” (Philippe 1992). A national policy followed, which eventually banned the wearing of Muslim headscarves in French public schools.

This study is based on three months of ethnographic research in France. During my stay, I attended class at the beginning of the school year and on tenth grades, insistent upon wearing their Islamic veils (Cardoso 2000). Problems arose when the girls refused to attend class at the beginning of the school year and on Saturdays, citing religious reasons. The girls were suspended from school, and eventually appealed the decision, prompting major upsets across schools in France. Schools began to act independently, issuing bans on the veils. In 1990, Jean-Juarés High School specified that “the wearing of all distinctive symbols, clothing or otherwise, religious, political, or philosophical, is strictly forbidden” (Philippe 1992). A national policy followed, which eventually banned the wearing of Muslim headscarves in French public schools.

My study is based on three months of ethnographic research in France. During my stay, I interviewed French government leaders and Hmong residents to understand why French national policies regarding minority populations do not seem to apply as they do to Muslim French. The following results are based on my interviews, my studies of French legislation, and the subsequent analysis of interview data.

Background Literature and Brief Summary of Findings
Recent scholarship characterizes secularism not as a line drawn between religion and the state, but as an active process whereby the state grooms religious subjects, compelling citizenship to supplant ethnicity or religion as the transcendent identity (Taylor 1998, Asad 2003). Secularism becomes an “abstraction” where minority populations surrender their idiosyncrasies upon entering France. In her 2014 work The Republic Unsettled, Mayanthi Fernando argues that the tensions surrounding Muslim headscarves reveals an instability in the French republic itself, not in the Muslim presence in France. This study complicates the view that laïcité takes the form of an active governmental project aimed at curtailing religious influence. The political particularities of the small town in the Loire Valley (where around fifty Hmong families have settled) suggest that legislation under the banner of laïcité results in the suspension of Hmong residents in a state of liminality—somewhere between between full French citizens and chronic visitors. By treating these Hmong residents as quasi-French and immutably foreign, the ethnic French community leaders satisfy both the demands of laïcité (which was designed to produce an unproblematic and cohesive French identity) and the desire for respect and freedom for Hmong cultural and religious expression. This arrangement remedies various problems relating to minority-differentiated rights (Kymlicka 1995, 2001) but fails to recognize the unadulterated French citizenship of the Hmong residents—most of which have been citizens for more than three decades.

Methodology
My study is based on three months of ethnographic research in France. During my stay, I interviewed French government leaders and Hmong residents to understand why French national policies regarding minority populations do not seem to apply as they do to Muslim French. The following results are based on my interviews, my studies of French legislation, and the subsequent analysis of interview data.

Data and Results
Hmong residents of Aubigny are not treated as abstracted citizenry. Local governmental leaders have not attempted to reduce communitarianism like in other parts of France. According to the mayor, France’s policies regarding Muslim refugees are reacting to the trauma of World War II caused by communitarianism, but in this town, “[minority populations] exist!” This disregard of national directives to eliminate cultural or religious difference is evidenced in many instances, three of which are pictured below.

In a speech inaugurating the annual Hmong festival, the mayor said, “You, that have been chased from your land, you know better than anyone the importance of roots...You are always welcome here in our home. Long live the Hmong festival. Long live the Hmong.” Apparent in the mayor’s statement is her lack of interest in eliminating any notion of disparate communities.

Another instance of the cultivated communalism is exemplified in the Hmong monument1, a small monument erected in the city to pay tribute to Hmong soldiers during the Vietnam War. In a ceremony to place flowers on the monument, the mayor recognized the importance of the Hmong community in their French home.2 In her speech she referenced another instance of factionalism: Hmong participation in the Franco-Scottish festival. Every year, to celebrate a history of fraternity with a Scottish “twin” town, the French residents dress up in Scottish garb and march in a large parade.3 Bringing up the rear of the parade every year is a tight grid of Hmong men and women dressed in their traditional costume, dancing to Hmong reed instrument music. This contrasts starkly with national policies banning “ostentatious” displays of religiosity.

Conclusions:
While I do not disagree with Fernando, Asad, and others, who see secularism (and French laïcité specifically) as a pattern of active governmental control, I am less convinced that outside of the Muslim context, laïcité generates power by pruning religious citizens into a new generation of abstracted French citizens, without problematic religious or cultural excess. This limited view of laïcité, I argue, takes for granted the controlling aspect of government as aimed towards stifling religious expression to ultimately abstract its citizenry. While I noticed blatant projects of governmental control among my time with Hmong citizens in France, the expressed intent [and outcome] of the policies enacted in the name of laïcité did not, I argue, result in religious abstraction, cultural suppression, or group right infringement. On the contrary: The policies enacted by the government maximized religiosity and encouraged factionalized group solidarity, increased Hmong representation in the local government, facilitated passive coexistence [while respecting difference], and de-emphasized French identity.

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