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Peoples of the Mekong Region

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Mon-Khmer
Peoples of the Mekong Region

Edited by
Ronald D. Renard and
Anchalee Singhanetra–Renard

Contents

Preface

Recent Mon-Khmer Studies

Ronald D. Renard

The articles in this book are the results of a research project from 2001-2005 on Mon-Khmer peoples in the six countries of the Mekong Region. Three groups were studied in three countries: Kmhmu' in the Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam; Suay/Kui in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Thailand, and Blang/Palaung in China, Myanmar, and Thailand. The project was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and was carried out from a base at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, in the Social Sciences Faculty, Chiang Mai University. The authors include well-established academics, indigenous Mon-Khmer, government officials, and younger authors who were included in the project in an effort to promote

Mekong at Phnom Penh 1995

Mon-Khmer research in the future. All the authors of articles in this volume very much appreciate this support and hope that their work will contribute to a better understanding of Mon-Khmer peoples and their position in the Mekong Region countries.

Since the finalization of the papers and bibliographies in this collection in 2006, several years have passed. Much research on the Mon-Khmer, including the three main groups studied in this volume, has been carried out from 2007 onwards.

Despite this new work, the research reports in this book remain topical and relevant. The work herein is original, generally using data collected at the village level, often in areas where little academic research has been carried out before or since. The articles are mainly down-to-earth descriptive accounts derived from village work and interviews rather than testing theories as might be expected of academic work at present. This focus results from the work being carried out among many previously unstudied peoples in remote areas, the involvement of indigenous researchers whose focus has been on preserving local traditions, and the participation of several younger scholars.

A number of the authors, namely Suksavang Srimana and Bounnyun Senthavysook both from the Lao PDR, were government officials and also members of the Mon-Khmer groups they studied. The privileged insights and personal connections they possess inform their articles on the Kmhmu' and Suay, respectively, with new information stated from an indigenous point of view. Bounnyun's article, it should be noted, although concise, is essentially the first article on the Suay in Laos (in a Western language) that we are aware of. Dr. Nguyen Van Chinh and his student, Le Manh Hung (now a professionally employed academic in his own right), have carried out years of research on the Kmhmu' in Vietnam, the results of which have rarely been available in any Western language. Their reports objectively assess the impact of economic development activities they were privileged to observe first-hand among the Kmhmu'. Similarly, another academic, Achan Poomjit Ruangdej has through dedicated work and her proficiency in Khmer, won the confidence of the Cambodian Government to study the Kui (Suay) in Cambodia (the trust of whom she also has won), making her the leading outside expert on these people. The results for this book are two articles on Kui culture, one on Cambodia and one on Thailand. Anchalee Singhanetra-Renard,

from the Chiang Mai University Social Sciences Faculty, made use of a combination of access to Nam San, the heartland of the Palaung (and now closed to outside visitors) and library research, to examine the Palaung in Myanmar. Professor Qiao Henrui of the Social Science Academy of Yunnan has used the same ability to access heretofore almost unstudied Blang peoples to present new information on changes in their society.

The Mon-Khmer project recruited younger scholars (such as Hung from Vietnam) to conduct research and write reports. Among those supported were Sakunee Nattapoolwat who explored themes identified in her M.A. thesis work on Palaung (Dara'ung) in Thailand. Two other MA graduates Tivani Wongtongson from Chiang Mai University and Tim Wong from the University of Sydney, carried out research on Kmhmu' in a remote area of Nan Province (itself remote) on people never studied before.

In addition to these articles, a review of previous scholarship on the Mon-Khmer was carried out and presented in the introduction. Bibliographies, through the cooperative effort of all the researchers, were compiled on the Mon-Khmer as a whole and on the three individual groups as well as on the Wa in Myanmar. While it was not possible to update the bibliographies, they collectively represent a significant contribution to scholarship and a resource that can help scholars carrying out research on the Mon-Khmer.

My own experience, as manager of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Wa Project, gave me access to an area in Myanmar whose people are the last remaining major ethnic group in the Mekong Region to not have been described in a detailed ethnography. Travel to the area is banned to anyone not a citizen of Myanmar (except Chinese from border regions of Yunnan). While no ethnography could be drawn up for this volume, several articles, including two interviews of experts (one a Wa elder) were compiled on the Wa.

The articles and bibliographies in this volume will contribute to the new research being carried out. As increased access to areas where small Mon-Khmer groups are found becomes more possible, the articles and bibliographies in this volume will provide useful information that will help further this work on the Mon-Khmer.

Conducting the research for these articles already provided the opportunity for new cooperation between scholars from neighboring countries. As will be seen in the articles on the Kmhmu', even though Suksavang Simana was a Lao government official who had been educated in Vietnam and spoke the language fluently, he was never able to visit Kmhmu' villages in Vietnam until this project provided the opportunity. Similarly, the Vietnamese scholars learned through this project of the many works Suksavang had written enabling them a much greater field of literature on the Kmhmu' to explore.

This increased research has been facilitated by the gradual end of insurgencies in Myanmar, as well as the opening up of areas throughout the Mekong Region to tourism. This has made it possible to visit heretofore inaccessible groups, such as the Palaung (Ta-ang) in the Hsipaw (Thibaw) area. In both Myanmar and the Lao PDR, where social science research is essentially prohibited, access to remote groups is provided through innovative combinations of work with international agencies and NGOs as well (in Myanmar especially) of multiple entry business visas (which the government apparently has been quietly allowing for nearly a decade). Several master's theses and doctoral dissertations are being prepared (or have recently been completed) on Mon-Khmer groups such as the Mon and the Wa. Furthermore, graduate level research is being carried out in Myanmar increasingly as new doctoral programs are being launched and students write theses to complete degree requirements.

Two examples of new research on Mon-Khmer peoples using innovative techniques, one in a previous conflict zone, show that much can still be learned about these peoples.

The first example is the archaeological work being conducted on the Phnom Kulen plateau, about 40 kilometers northeast of Angkor. The Sdok Kok Thom inscription in Sa Kaeo Province of Thailand tells that this plateau was where the kingdom of Angkor was founded in 802 by Jayavarman II. Since 1900, French archaeologists have suspected that the ancient capital city of Mahendraparvata really was located on the plateau due to its proximity to Angkor and due also to the many temples in the area.

However, research of the area proceeded slowly due to initial French interest in Angkor itself and it was not possible to confirm their suspicions. From World War II through the coming of independence to Cambodia, and decades of war thereafter, which left much unexploded ordnance, all serious study in the area was precluded and the Kulen Plateau remained covered by dense forest and populated by shifting cultivators.

This has changed recently as peace has come to Cambodia. With the formation of a consortium based in Sydney University including French, Japanese, and other scholars along with the Australians an intensive study of Phnom Kulen is being undertaken. One main objective of the study was to conduct an aerial survey of the plateau using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology. This remote sensing technology, involving airborne imaging linked with GPS, creates 3D topographic models of the ground even where there is dense vegetation.

In 2012, evidence was found indicating that Phnom Kulen was almost surely the site of Mahendraparvata and that it was far grander than previously imagined. The research team identified what they believe are broad highways several kilometers long that are oriented along cardinal points and that appear to be linked to sacred sites. The operation also identified a complex water supply and distribution system. Further research is forthcoming since the actual urban area extended beyond the 30 square kilometer area surveyed with LiDAR in 2012.

How the Khmer center moved down to the Angkor region remains a matter for future study. However, the second example of new research being done is yielding ideas on how the kingdom came to an end. In this, a team of scientists has reconstructed 759 years of climate change in the Angkor region through the examination of growth rings on a cypress tree, *Fokienia hodginsii*, in Vietnam's Bidoup Nui Ba National Park, about 700 kilometers away from Angkor.

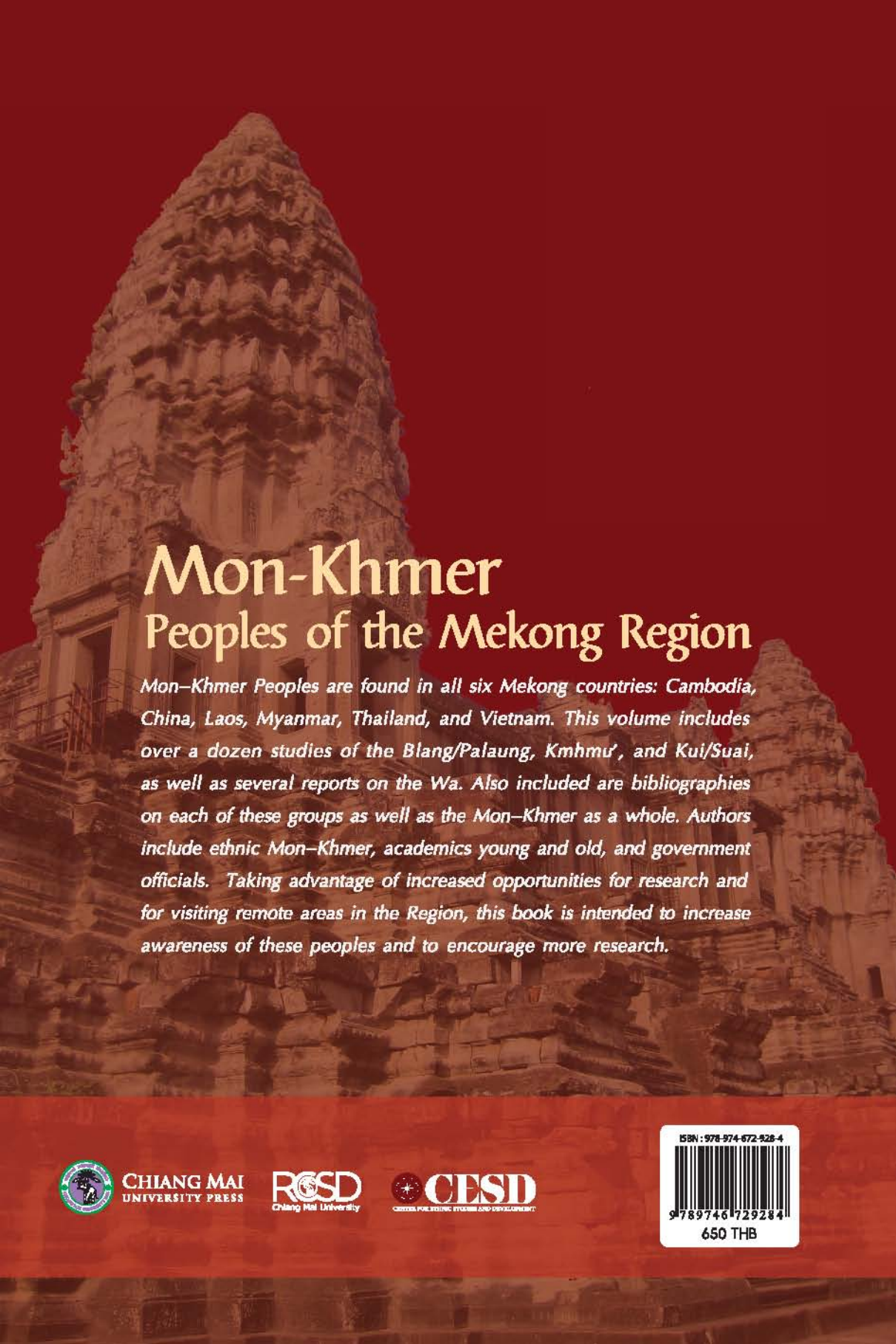
Normally this sort of research is not possible in tropical areas because growth rings do not exhibit annual variations because the climate does not change significantly from season to season. However, this species of cypress does, enabling the researchers to date moisture levels from 1250 to 2008. The researchers discovered that there were two long droughts, from the 1330s to the 1360s and from the 1400s to the 1420s.

These droughts, especially the latter period which was more severe than the first, may have compromised agricultural production of the area weakening the resilience of the Khmer population to resist invaders. In the 1350s, Siamese from Ayutthaya laid siege to Angkor. Then in 1431 they conquered the Khmer capital. The evidence from the tree rings raises the possibility that environmental change may have been an important factor.

The authors of these research reports and bibliographies as well as the staff of the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development at Chiang Mai University hope that the work in this volume will contribute to future research. Understanding the Mon-Khmer people is essential to make sense of all the countries of the Mekong Region. Increased work on these peoples, both past and present, is sure to provide a more comprehensive conception of local cultures and ways of life.

The authors wish to thank the director of the Center, Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaputi, for his support and encouragement throughout this lengthy endeavor. Thanks are also due to Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen, Chanida Puranapun, and Fongjan Chaithima of RCSD who provided extensive administrative support throughout the project. Joe Rickson edited an earlier version of the manuscript for which we are most grateful. Acarima Nanthanasit provided indispensible assistance in the final editing and proofing and pre-publication preparation of this lengthy volume. We are also indebted to John O'Toole, Rosalia Sciortino, and Alan Feinstein, all of the Rockefeller Foundation when this project was being formulated and funded.

These papers were edited so as to conform to a common standard and formatting protocol. However, the individual authors set the basic format for whether they used footnotes or endnotes or some combination of the two. A certain amount of editing was carried out on the footnotes so that the same amount of information appeared in the footnotes or endnotes in the body of the text. All the bibliographies in the individual papers as well as the ethnic group bibliographies follow a common format.



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Performers from Rattahakiri in Phnom Penh

Mon-Khmer Peoples and Thai Culture

Ronald D. Renard

You see them at the heights of civilization, their broad faces carved from stone at the Bayon, staring across the centuries from when Mon-Khmer peoples dominated Mainland Southeast Asia. From old Mon sites such as the Shwedagon in Rangoon to Hariphunchai in the Ping River Valley to temples the entire length of Vietnam, their images endure.

Khmer at the Bayon

Bayon 1996

Mon-style Chedi
at Wat Phrathat Hariphunchai 1991

You see them in the rice paddies practicing an agriculture that started flourishing when these people dominated the landscape and when their culture was supreme. All the elements of paddy rice cultivation were in place in Mon-Khmer areas two thousand years ago. Although no one knows who in the world pioneered lowland rice agriculture, Mon-Khmer peoples must have been the first in Southeast Asia. From them the practice spread to other groups entering the region afterwards.

Their millennia-old stone jars in Xieng Khouang and the menhirs at Hin Tang to the northwest on the road to Xam Neua hold their dead and mark their role in the past. The Old Lua graves along the Thai-Burma border yielding outstanding northern Thai celadon and Ming Blue and White symbolize their prosperity. The finds at Ban Chiang, even with much lost to the illegal artifacts trade, were so rich that many Thais began wanting to change their history. Instead of saying that they were descended from migrants fleeing Dali after a Mongol invasion, they suggested that the Thais were always in Thailand and, by implication, places like Ban Chiang had been Thai.

Plain of Jars 2003

The iron and bronzeware of the region bespeak their advancement at a time when most others in the region were hunters and gatherers. The Mon-Khmer built cities. They conveyed Indic culture to the peoples of the region. Wat Phu on the Mekong south of Champasak was an early Saivaite temple that later became Buddhist, similar to what happened at Angkor and the other Khmer sites.

All the Tai and Lao groups that became Buddhist did so after being influenced by different Mon-Khmer groups. After Hariphunchai, where Mon Buddhism flourished, came Chiang Mai and other northern Thai states, many of which adopted the belief in Buddhism. Similarly, Sukhothai was a part of the Angkor Empire before it was an independent state.

You hear their voices in all the region's languages. Besides national languages like Khmer and Vietnamese, the vocabularies of many local languages are rich with Mon-Khmer borrowings from common words such as for nose and bridge to loftier "civilized" terms. For years, students at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University took a course on Khmer

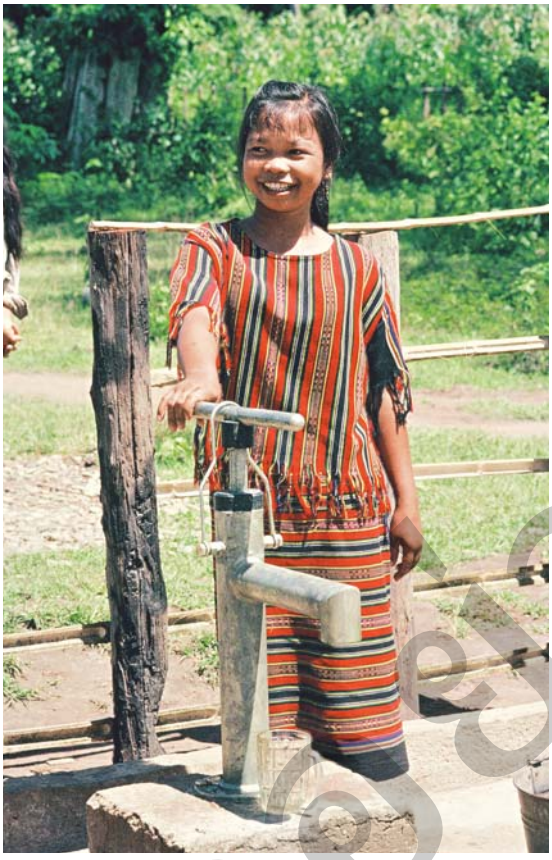
Lopburi Phra Prang Sam Yot 2010

influences on the Thai language. So many are the borrowings and re-borrowings through continued interactions between Khmer and Thai that is quite unlike any other Tai dialect, making it all but unintelligible when traveling among small Tai groups in China, Shan State, and northern Vietnam, where even Southern Thai would be more functional.

And when they voice their rolling "r's", a characteristic of Mon-Khmer speakers from Phnom Penh to Pang Kham in the Wa Region of Shan State, you are hearing sounds that have resonated here for centuries. Lost when the Mon-Khmer lexicon is borrowed, they still echo across Mainland Southeast Asia.

The expressiveness of Mon-Khmer languages, the many ways to denote motion, sound, feeling, emotion and gesture, resonate in all the languages indigenous to the region. In some Mon-Khmer languages, these "expressives" are so common that they form a separate lexical category,[1] and this also reverberates throughout the entire region.

[1] DiCanio. 2005. "Expressive Alliteration in Mon and Khmer."



Sekong Katu 1995

Wa village 2003

Rattanakiri people in Phnom Penh 1995

Tampuan and their house Rattanakiri 1995

Stories—there are stories told by Mon-Khmer throughout the area that repeat old traditions and relive ancient accounts. Take, for example, a story the Kmhmu' in Laos and Vietnam tell. After a three-year pregnancy, the woman delivered two large gourds. After some days, she fell asleep against one of gourds. When she awoke, she discovered people: Tai, Lu,

Lao, and others who had come out of that gourd. Curious, she took a hot iron from the fire and pushed it inside the other gourd, at which time the Kmhmu' emerged but whose skin had been blackened by the iron. This, the Kmhmu' say, is why their skin is darker than the others. Near Dien Bien Phu there is a "giant gourd" *(plé' gôôk rmwng)* one can see. At a temple the Tai call Wat Nam Tao (Gourd Monastery), there is a big stone shaped like such a *rmwng* (gourd) with traces of a tool that had cut it open.[2] In recognizing the diversity of the region and seeking to explain why the peoples are not the same, these stories show that the people living here in the past did not divide themselves into individual groups and that there was little or no overly-refined sense of ethnicity.

At the other end of the Mon-Khmer world, there are Wa who also tell that their people originated from a gourd. Such accounts are old, generations and generations have told and retold them. When the same stories are found in disparate locations, they might well be point to a shared Mon-Khmer ancient past.

Nye Teh, Nam Kham Wu

Many places in the region speak names heard from Mon-Khmer times. "Mekong" surely comes from an old Mon-Khmer term, maybe "Si Khrun", which is how the Wa refer to the river ("Si" means river, much as "Mae" does in Thai). Provinces in Thailand such as Chachoengsao and Prachinburi are old Khmer. The latter, meaning "western city" is called so because it lies

Wa in Southern Command Near Mae Sai at Health Station 2004

[2] Based on information from Suksavang Simana, following a trip to Vietnam in 2004.

west of Angkor. More humble sites such as Umphang and Omkoi are old Lua places, with *om* meaning "water" in some Mon-Khmer dialects. Distantly the Mon-Khmer are heard in names no longer used but not forgotten - the name in Chinese for Mandalay is *Wa Cheng,* equivalent, perhaps, to "Wa City" (although this character for "Wa" does not signify the Wa people, at least in modern Chinese, so this might be apocryphal).

If you look, you can still see them in remote nooks and crannies. Although only two national languages in the region are Mon-Khmer, there are dozens of Mon-Khmer languages. Through them, many of which are endangered, breathe the voices of the Southeast Asian past. It is harder to hear these since they often remain beyond the changes creating widely spoken national languages, such as Thai. When outsiders talk to members of these groups, they hear Lao or Thai or other major languages. Some such groups, such as certain Bulang communities, refer to themselves by one name and by another with outsiders. Take for example, the Tai Loi in Eastern Shan State. Meaning "mountain Tai," they are Buddhist living in the hills, swiddening rice, and avoiding powerful neighbors. The appearance they wish to project to the outside world is that of the Buddhist *tai* ('free', as opposed to a *kha*, or 'wild') lifestyle,[3] making it all the more difficult to hear their own inner expressions. Only among themselves do they admit to being Bulang and speak their language.

You have to listen carefully to hear some small groups, such as the Nyah Ker (called Chao Pon in Thai—the people above). Sometimes these groups barely cling to existence, as in the case of the Sapuan (Sapuər) whose language is spoken only by the people of one village about 40 kilometers north of Attapeu in Laos.[4] Among the Wa there are in Burma dozens of dialects spoken by groups often wearing different costumes (and about which no serious study has ever been conducted). There are estimates that approximately two-thirds of the Mon-Khmer languages are endangered or on the brink of extinction.

Outside of Cambodia and Vietnam, Mon-Khmer groups constitute the cultural majority only in the most remote areas, such as Wa areas along the Shan State-Yunnan border. So out of the way is this that the border

[3] For a fuller explanation, see my "The Differential Integration of Hill People into the Thai State". In Turton, ed. *Civility and Savagery*, pp. 63-83.

[4] Pascale & Sidwell. 1999. *Sapuan (Sapuər).*

Shifting Cultivation near Nam Kam Wu, Wa Region

Tai Loi Yang Ngoen Villager, 2005

Man Ton Youth

Ma Tieh Girl and Baby

was left undelineated for decades before being settled in 1960. Even at present, because of travel restrictions and other obstacles to going there, it is unlikely that you will be in a position to hear or see any of them at all.

Scholarship on the Mon-Khmer

Although, the Mon-Khmer have made their mark everywhere in Mainland Southeast Asia, cultural practices introduced by other peoples or from other places have obscured the importance of the Mon-Khmer's original contributions.

The Mon-Khmer peoples moved into a vast area over at least a millennium. As they settled in they forgot their connections and grew locally oriented. If they had writing systems their literature described the history of their own kingdoms and the peoples in them. Where their literature was oral, this was also locally specific. There was no literature that recognized a Mon-Khmer group, either linguistic or cultural. When Westerners, who were often interested in tracing such connections, arrived, there was little indigenous recognition of any overall Mon-Khmer grouping.[5]

Further blurring knowledge of early Mon-Khmer contributions arose because, as Michael Vickery notes, early scholarship on the region was dominated by Indology experts. Many scholars coming to Southeast Asia in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were grounded in Indic studies which had developed earlier than Southeast Asian studies.

Roused by the impressive and ancient cultures of India that gave rise to major religions, these scholars were quick to notice that much from India-religions. Literature-writing system, and architecture, had been borrowed by the peoples of Southeast Asia, a process Coèdes called "Indianization."[6] They did not recognize that the diverse linguistic, cultural, and political groups of Southeast Asia had long and rich traditions and that "Indianization" was more adaptation than copying.

Because many early scholars attributed cultural development to imports or stimuli from the subcontinent, they tended to overlook the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia. Also because the languages of Southeast Asia are so varied, few individuals managed to learn more than one local language.

[5] However, among some Mon-Khmer groups from the Wa to Khmhu', stories are told of when they (that is, Wa or Khmhu') controlled the region. This might be a memory of a time millennia ago when Mon-Khmer were the dominant group here.

[6] Actually he called it Hinduisation—his translators rendered it as Indianization.

Not only did this prevent scholars from gaining a deep understanding of the local area and recognizing indigenous contributions to civilization here,[7] those who were interested in the region mostly studied only one country. All these factors discouraged the scholarly community from studying the region's groups more closely and in failing to appreciate the Mon-Khmer peoples as any kind of interrelated group.

Thus it was that early Western scholars in Southeast Asia did not recognize the Mon-Khmer peoples as a language family. This only changed when colonial officials and missionaries noticed similarities between the speech of different groups. Since these individuals were not primarily engaged in academic research, their findings did not quickly spread to the scholarly world.

One of the first to make such a connection was Francis Mason, an American missionary-scholar. While studying Mon in the mid-nineteenth century, he realized that there were similarities between Mon and Vietnamese, with which he was also familiar. Later scholars, such as James Logan and Wilhelm Schmidt, traced more relationships between these languages so that a general understanding of the Mon-Khmer family began to take shape.

The limits these factors placed on recognizing the Mon-Khmer as a group were reflected in 1937 by the erudite Danish policeman, Major Erik Seidenfaden. In a paper he read before the Siam Society, he commented that linguistic evidence indicated that the Mon-Khmer people "came from the west, though some students argue that they came from the north and some even deny the existence of such a race at all."[8]

Conditions facilitating research on Mon-Khmer groups would not grow easier for another half century. After World War II, conflicts continued. The wars in Indochina as well as insurgencies in Burma, and Thailand, directly affected Mon-Khmer areas so that scholarly investigations could barely be done.

Although the region is largely peaceful today, travel to some areas remains difficult. Nevertheless, the opportunities that do exist to visit many Mon-Khmer areas, if not overtly conduct research, are increasing.

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[7] Vickery, 2003-2004. "Funan Reviewed: Deconstructing the Ancients," pp. 90-91, 112.

[8] Seidenfaden. 1939. "Siam's Tribal Dresses," p. 171.