

Book Review: Mon-Khmer: People of the Mekong Region

Editors Ronald D. Renard and Anchalee Singhanetra-Renard. *Mon – Khmer: Peoples of the Mekong Region*. Chiang Mai University Press, 2015. 535p. ISBN 978-974-672-928-4

Srisak Valipodom

Lek-Prapai Viriyapant Foundation 397 Phra Sumeru Road, Phra Nakhon, Bangkok 10200

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Scholars and the public alike are increasingly interested in ethnicity and cultural diversity. This holds true for the region surrounding the Mekong River, which runs from Yunnan Province in Southern China through Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam into the China Sea. Large ethnic groups with unique languages have inhabited the region since ancient times. The Austronesian and Austroasiatic peoples are the oldest of these ethnic groups, having migrated from Southern China to the sea. The Austronesian group, currently referred to as the Malay, migrated first, settling down along the coastal areas and islands. The Austroasiatic people followed, known today as the Mon-Khmer language ethnic group based on where they settled (i.e., the Mon from Mon State in Myanmar and the Khmer from Cambodia), and occupied the hinterland.

Most studies of the Mon-Khmer have focused on linguistics, philology, and conflicts or adaptation issues of different ethnic groups residing in the same regions. This historical approach believes that the Mon-Khmer was

native to the Mekong region and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, having settled in the area long before the Thai and Lao peoples migrated from Southern China. This focus overlooks the relationship between ethnic groups and their geographical origins.

The *Mon-Khmer: Peoples of the Mekong Region* is the result of a lifetime of research by Ronald D. Renard and Anchalee Singhanetra. Their research project, financially supported by CESD (Chiang Mai University) and the Rockefeller Foundation, adopted an integrated approach to study the movements of the Mon-Khmer language ethnic group (Austroasiatic group), which settled in the Mekong regions of Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In contrast to the historical approach, Renard and Singhanetra believe that the Mon-Khmer migrated to the highlands and settled as tribes with unique dialects since prehistoric times. The group later settled in the plains with other ethnicities with unique languages, establishing homes, cities, and states. Examples include the capital city of

Cambodia, where the majority of the residents spoke Khmer, and the Mon Empire in Myanmar, where residents spoke Mon. Highland areas were also occupied by Mon-Khmer settlers, where they dispersed into various ethnicities, including the Lua and Karen in Northern Thailand; the Khmu, Kui, and Suai in Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam; and the Palaung and Blang in Myanmar. Researchers associated with this book conducted community studies of these minor ethnic groups in order to observe and understand their social origins, placing significant importance on economics, culture, politics, and social development.

This book effectively builds the reader's interest in the unique languages and ethnicities of these groups, and how they settled together in neighboring communities. The Mon-Khmer are spread across the five countries in the Mekong region: Thailand (1.0 million), Myanmar (2.0 million), Lao PDR (1.3), Cambodia (12.7), and Vietnam (57.0), with most in Cambodia and Vietnam. Linguists believe that the Vietnamese originated from the Mon-Khmer, corresponding with the southern movement of the Austroasiatic people from Southern China. This ethnic group grew rice, creating the belief that the growing and consuming of rice derived from the movements of the Austroasiatic people. This belief conflicts with the common Thai belief that Thais originally migrated from Southern China, and planted rice as their primary crop. Renard and Singhanetra believe

that Thais migrated with glutinous rice, while the Mon-Khmer migrated with white, or non-glutinous, rice. These conflicting theses have yet to be resolved.

Besides growing rice, the Mon-Khmer also grew tea and smelted iron. The tea was planted by those who settled in the highlands – used both as food and drink. Other tribes, such as the Suai at Kampong Cham in Cambodia, smelted iron and migrated to southern Lao PDR (e.g., Salawan), as well as Surin and Sisaket in Thailand.

Community research into changes in the Mon-Khmer's settlement locations enables the book to portray a clearer picture of this ancient ethnic group's lifestyle. Although the book did not research all of the ethnic groups residing in the region, the migrants' decision to settle at a location and build plantations led to adaptation and cultural exchange between ethnic groups. Examples include the Palaung in Myanmar, which originated from the Mon-Khmer residing at 1,500 meters above sea level, as well as the Blang ethnic group in Sipsong Panna and Hai City in Southern China, who adapted to become part of a larger society.

This book is one of the best and most up-to-date sources of information on the ethnicities of the Mon-Khmer ethnic group. The book focuses on both the diverse languages and characteristics of the Mon-Khmer peoples. Unfortunately, the book lacks images and diagrams displaying the locations of the ethnic groups.