

A Survey of Khmuic and Palaungic Languages in Laos and Vietnam

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The remote mountainous areas of Northern Laos and Northwestern Vietnam are home to a number of little-known ethnolinguistic communities speaking languages of the Northern Mon-Khmer family. Separated by imposing geographical obstacles from the riverine lowland centers of population and administrative authority, the region was visited only occasionally by administrators or missionaries during the French colonial era. Ravaged by warfare for the three decades from 1945 to 1975 and isolated internationally since, the area remains until now a virtual *terra incognita* to international scholars of linguistics, ethnography, folklore, and history. Despite their scholarly isolation, Lao and especially Vietnamese linguists, ethnologists, and other scholars have carried out important research in the region, but limited financial and material resources have severely impeded their abilities to conduct systematic field studies, and the results of their research are little known outside of Laos and Vietnam. This paper surveys the state of knowledge of these languages and reports briefly on recent field studies of several languages carried out by the author (Proschan) and others (Gérard Diffloth, Vi Van An, Dang Anh Phuong, Thongpheth Kingsada).

My focus here will be several ethnolinguistic communities whose members speak languages within the Khmuic and Palaungic branches of the Mon-Khmer family (i.e., the Northern Division of Mon-Khmer), including the well-studied Kmhmu (Khơ Mú, 𑜋𑜰𑜫) ethnicity in both countries as well as several other groups heretofore almost unknown to scholars.¹ These lesser-known groups include the Ksing Mul (Xinh Mun), Khang (Kháng), Mang (Màng), and Iduh (Ổ Đu) in Vietnam and the Rmeet (ລະເມັດ), Ksing Mul (ຊິງມຸນ), Phong (ຜົງ), Bit (ບິດ), Thin (ຖິນ), Mlabri (ມລາບຣີ, ຢຸມບຣີ), Saamtaav (ສາມຕາວ), Iduh (ຮາດ), and Theen (ແທນ) in Laos, groups ranging in size from about 20,000 members (Phong) to fewer than 200 (Iduh, Mlabri); see table 1.

¹ For orthographic convenience, a standard romanization of each group's ethnonym is employed throughout this proposal. Insofar as possible, this romanization corresponds to the group's preferred self-appellation or autonym, even where the Lao or Vietnamese authorities have adopted another name or another variant of the preferred name. The classifications used by Lao and Vietnamese do not necessarily refer strictly to languages, but instead to ethnic groups; while there is generally a relation between language and ethnicity they are not assumed to correspond exactly (see the discussion of the umbrella category "Saamtaav" below).

Table 1: Ethnolinguistic communities speaking Northern Mon-Khmer languages

Romanization Used Here	Population in Laos, 1985	Official Name in Laos	Transcription (IPA)	Preferred Autonym (IPA)	Also Known As
Kmhmu	389,694	ກຳມຸ	/kammu?/	kmhmu?, khmu?	
Phong	18,165	ຜົງ	/phoŋ/	kniang, phoŋ	tay phoŋ
Rmeet	14,355	ລະເມດ	/la?met/	rmeet	
Thin	13,977	ຖິ້ນ	/thin/	lua?	mal, pray
Saamtaav	2,359	ສາມຕາວ	/saamtaav/	??	col, kior, con
Ksing Mul	2,164	ຊິງມຸນ	/singmun/	ksin mul	puok, pou hok
Bit	1,530	ບິດ	/bit/	phsin	khaabit, khbit
Mlabri	24	ມລາບຣີ, ຢຸມບຣີ	/mlaabri?/	mila?bri?	phii toŋ luang
Theen	200	ແທນ	/theen/	theen	khaa saam liam
Iduh	200	ຮາດ	/haat/	?iduh	tay hat
Romanization Used Here	Population in Vietnam, 1989	Official Name in Vietnam	Transcription (IPA)	Preferred Autonym (IPA)	Also Known As
Kmhmu	42,853	Khơ Mú	/khəmu?/	kmhmu?, khmu?	Xá Cầu
Ksing Mul	10,890	Xinh Mun	/sinmun/	ksin mul	Puộc
Khang	3,921	Kháng	/khaang/	khaang	Xá Khao
Mang	2,200	Mảng	/maang/	maang	Mang U
Iduh	194	Ơ Đu	?iduh/	?iduh	Tây Hạng

For the Kmhmu, whose 500,000 members span the area from Northwestern Vietnam to Northern Thailand, there has been extensive previous work with Kmhmu language, verbal arts, and ethnohistory carried out by a number of Swedish, French, Vietnamese, Thai, Swiss, and U.S. scholars. Despite this, there remain numerous Kmhmu dialects and local groups that have not heretofore been studied. The other ethnicities are far less known than the Kmhmu and the previous scholarship on each ranges from a substantial linguistic monograph (for the Ksing Mul) or a number of articles (for the Phong), to brief ethnographic sketches or lists of a mere handful of poorly transcribed words (for the Bit, Theen, and Iduh). The last two groups raise a particularly urgent concern, as their languages are spoken by only 200 persons living in two villages (Theen) or by a mere 7-10 persons in two villages within Vietnam and about 250 persons in two villages in Laos (Iduh; there are another 187 persons classified as Iduh in Vietnam who do not speak the ancestral language).

Studying the smaller languages and ethnicities detailed here is of urgent importance, precisely because the ethnohistorical evidence suggests that processes of acculturation and assimilation can be expected to lead to their eventual disappearance or incorporation into larger ethnolinguistic communities. Even sizable groups such as the

Rmeet demonstrate a tendency to intermarry with the more numerous Kmhmu and adopt the language and traditions of the latter group. In other cases, sociocultural pressures lead to a gradual reduction in the occasions on which the mother tongue is used and an increase in the occasions on which the national language or a local trade language is used in place of the mother tongue. This seems to be the case for Phong and Ksing Mul, for instance, where Lao or Vietnamese is the predominant language of younger people (at least in many villages) and the occasions for using the mother language are few and infrequent. For smaller groups such as the Iduh in Vietnam, the ancestral mother tongue is used only by a few older persons in very limited sociocultural contexts—when a researcher arrives in the village or an elder is called upon to represent the group in an official cultural event—while younger persons speak Vietnamese, Tai Meuy, or Kmhmu in everyday interactions. It should be noted that many members of these language groups are at least bilingual and in many cases speak as many as four or five languages, in a region of tremendous linguistic diversity and widespread multilingualism.

At the same time, tiny populations such as the Theen pose the interesting question of how, why, and to what extent isolated speakers of a distinct language may preserve their mother tongue and cultural traditions despite their small numbers. Information on the sociolinguistic situation in the only two villages of Theen speakers is still preliminary, but the mother tongue is still used in daily speech, according to Theen informants with whom Proschan conducted research (1994). Province officials in Luang Prabang report another group known as Naam, who also inhabit just two villages and are said to preserve their own distinct language (*p.c.*). Finally, nomadic hunter-gatherer groups such as the Mlabri (the so-called “yellow leaf” people) are quite literally in danger of extinction; an epidemic or other catastrophe could easily eliminate those few persons who speak a given dialect of the language (cf. Rischel 1995).

Previous Research and Current Research Issues

Of the various ethnic groups speaking Northern Mon-Khmer languages, the Kmhmu are both the most numerous (500,000 people in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, China) and the best known to scholars. Among French colonial-era accounts the most important ethnographic sources are Roux and Trần Văn Chu (1927), Izikowitz (1951), Pavie (1898, 1906, 1911), and Raquez (1902, 1905–06), and for linguistics Cuaz (1904), Lefèvre-Pontalis (1892–96), and Maspero (1955). During the American involvement in Laos, both Halpern (1957, 1958, 1960, 1961a, 1961b, 1963, 1964, 1983) and LeBar (1965, 1967a, 1967b) made important ethnographic studies. Smalley's linguistic monograph remains a key work (1961), complemented by the French linguist Ferlus's several studies (1972, 1974a, 1974b, 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1980b) and the dictionary of Delcros (1966). In recent years, indigenous researchers such as Đặng Nghiêâm Văn in Vietnam (1971, 1972, 1973, 1975), Suwilai Premasrat in Thailand (1982, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b), and Li Daoyong in China (1982, 1984) have made invaluable contributions, both in ethnography (Vân and Li) and linguistics (Suwilai).

Working with Kmhmu refugees from Laos living in the U.S., and more recently with Kmhmu in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, Proschan (1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994) has studied language, verbal arts, folklore, and ethnology of several Kmhmu dialect groups. The largest single body of research on Kmhmu, spanning linguistics, ethnology, folklore, economic anthropology, material culture, and a number of related fields is that carried out since 1972 by a team from Lund University in Sweden (see the various works in the Bibliography by Lindell, Lundstrom, Svantesson, and Tayanin). Kmhmu is the fortunate beneficiary of much scholarly attention, signalled by the almost-simultaneous publication of three Kmhmu dictionaries (Suwilai 1993, Svantesson et al. 1994, Suksavang et al. 1994).

The other Khmuic languages and ethnicities (Thin, Mlabri, Phong, Ksing Mul, Theen, and Iduh) and those of the Palaungic branch (Rmeet, Khang, Bit, and Mang) are much less known.² Within the Khmuic branch, the Thin (a.k.a. Mal, Lawa, Lua', Pray) have been the subject of research by several linguists (Filbeck 1976a, 1967b, 1978, 1987; Huffman 1976a; Mingkwan 1989; Sujaritlak 1979; Suwilai 1988; Unchalee 1988) and ethnologists (Cholthira 1987, 1990; Dessaint 1973, 1981; Dessaint and Dessaint 1982) working in Thailand, as well as Elliott (1992) who has worked with Lua' from Laos now living in the United States. The Mlabri (known in ethnographic sources as Phi Tong Luang or Kha Tong Luang "Spirits of the Yellow Leaves") have figured into ethnographic debates for decades, with key works those of Bernatzik (1958[1938]), Boeles (1963), Surin (1988, 1992), and Trier (1986). The dialect spoken in Laos (Yumbri) was the subject of unpublished research by Ferlus (cf. Rischel and Egerod 1987); the dialects spoken in Thailand have been quite intensively studied in recent years (Kraisri 1963; Rischel 1982, 1989a, 1989b, 1992, 1995; Egerod and Rischel 1987; and Theraphan 1988, 1992). The Phong of Laos (pop. 20,000+) were documented prior to the 1960s in only a single published linguistic source (Macey 1905) and several folkloric and ethnographic mentions (Raquez 1902, 1905, Plunian 1905, Guy-Issartier 1948, Hkum 1992), supplemented more recently by Bùi Khánh Thế's essay on language (1975) and recent unpublished linguistic work by Proschan (notes, 1989-95), and Ferlus and Thongpheth Kingsada (notes, 1991). The Ksing Mul in Vietnam (pop. 11,000+) have recently been the subject of a linguistic monograph by a joint Soviet-Vietnamese team (Solntsev and Hoàng Tuệ 1990, cf. Vương Hoàng Tuyên 1963), but the dialect on which they focus is markedly different from that spoken in Laos (pop. 2,500+; see Macey 1905, Proschan notes 1992); ethnographic studies are limited to a few pages (Macey 1905, Phan Hữu Đạt 1962, Nguyễn Văn Huy 1972, 1978). The Theen ethnicity (pop. 200) was previously known only by virtue of a list of 40 words published by Ngô Đức Thịnh and Trương Văn Sinh (1973); unpublished research in 1992 by a

² General bibliographies of relevant research include Ferlus 1974a, Huffman 1986, Parkin 1991, Plam 1988, Smalley 1973, Theraphan 1984, and Thomas 1992(1989-90). Comparative studies covering some of the languages discussed here include Adams 1989, Diffloth 1974, Huffman 1976a, Huffman 1976b, Thomas 1964.