

THE MAJOR ROLE OF THE MONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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In prehistoric times the whole of Southeast Asia seems to have been a wilderness, a vast El Dorado down to which various primitive people had migrated since time immemorial. Such early waves of migration had flooded not only Southeast Asia but had also penetrated Assam and reached right up to central India. As a matter of fact, it is obvious that the Negritos who still survive in the northern Malay Peninsula and the Nicobar islands were the earliest inhabitants of the long coastal strip of this region.

Concerning the original homeland of the Mon-Khmer people, Professor G.H. Luce once told me that he was present at a discussion at London University where Professor A. Christie suggested that the Tonkin basin was the swarming ground of the Mon-Khmer people. The view, he said, found general acceptance. That was four decades ago. For more than ten years now I have been proposing that the actual original homeland of the Mon-Khmer people was none other than the valley of the Yangtze Kiang (Chiang). They must have been dwelling there long before the coming of the Chinese from the north to that part of the land. (While traveling in China in 1976 as a member of the Burma Archaeological Delegation, I noticed that the Chinese farmers were using buffaloes in their paddy fields exactly the same as in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. At the time I was crossing the Yangtze by train. In the early morning I felt like getting down and going up stream and down stream and then joining the farmers ploughing the fields. The landscape was extremely pleasant.) My hypothesis was based on an article, "Chinese and Indo-Europeans," by E.G. Pulleyblank, Professor of Chinese at Cambridge University. He writes: "We can begin to recognize very early language contacts with the non-Chinese languages of China and perhaps get a clearer idea of the linguistic affinities of the various barbarian peoples who were living in China in early historical times. For example, the word *chiang* 'river' 江 can now be shown to have been pronounced something like **karwŋ* or **krawŋ* in old Chinese. It is no doubt cognate to the Mon-Khmer word for river, Mon *kruŋ*, Bahnar *kroŋ*, Cham *krauŋ*, Moung (Uy-lo) *kroŋ*, Vietnamese *song*. *Chiang* was specifically the name of the Yangtze, in contrast to the northern word for river, *ho* 河, which meant primarily

the Yellow River. *Chiang* was also applied to other streams in central China but never in the north. There is good historical evidence that the Yangtze region was non-Chinese in language and was only drawn into the circle of Chinese culture during the first millennium B.C. The etymology of this word now definitely points to the original non-Chinese language having had Mon-Khmer affinities. Linguistics will, I am convinced, ultimately prove one of the most fruitful and enlightening methods of inquiry. Stones and potsherds are notoriously silent and language is after all one of the most basic elements in a people's culture" (Pulleyblank 1966).

Ten years after Pulleyblank's assertion as stated above, Professors Jerry Norman and Tsu-lin Mei gave fourteen more words besides the term for river, such as the words for dog, tiger, fly, tooth or tusk or ivory, crossbow, child or son, crab, salted fish, duckweed, scum or froth, damp or moist or wet, to know or to recognize, shaman or medium or spirit, and to die, in their paper "The Austroasiatics in Ancient South China: Some Lexical Evidence" published in *MONUMENTA SERICA* VOL. XXXII, 1976.

Well, I agree with Prof. Pulleyblank absolutely, for I believe that in the absence of written documents and archaeological evidence the main reliance in the study of history must rest on linguistic affinities. Though languages were usually changing they still carried their roots to some extent. Mon and Khmer are very closely akin to each other and they are cognate to most of the hill tribe languages along the Annamite Chain. At first the linguists started calling the group Mon-Annam because Annamese, the language of the Tonkin plain, is basically akin to Mon; however, it has been overlaid with Chinese. Hence the term was changed to Mon-Khmer. Mon-Khmer is also basically akin to the Semang and Sakai languages of the Malay Peninsula and is distantly connected with the long-isolated language of the Nicobar Islands. Mon-Khmer also has affinities with the Khasi of Assam, the Puman of Yunnan, and the Munda, Santali, Mundari, Kurku, Savana and Gadaba of India.

In 1904 Sir George Grierson published volume II of the *Linguistic Survey of India* on Mon-Khmer languages, and in volume IV he deals with the Munda language. Two years

later Charles Otto Blagden published the two volumes of *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula*, revealing the fact that Mon-Khmer has linguistic links with the Negritos—Semang, Sakai and Jakun—of Malaysia. In the same year, 1906, W. Schmidt of Vienna united all the great range of languages of Southern Asia in what he called the Austric family, or languages of the south. He divides this Austric superfamily into two subdivisions. The first consists of the Austronesian languages spoken on the southern islands of Asia. The second, which concerns us, consists of the Austroasiatic languages, spoken mainly on the mainland of South Asia. The Mon-Khmer subgroup of languages belongs to the Austroasiatic sub-family. It is purely a linguistic term since speakers of Mon-Khmer may belong to different races. The Mons, the Khmers and all those on the mainland belong predominantly to the Mongoloid race, whereas the Semang, the Sakai and the Nicobarese are Negroid. It is somewhat like the black and white people in America speaking the same language but belonging to different races.

Regarding the arrival of the Mon-Khmer in India, Nilakanta Sastri, author of *A History of South India*, states: "The Austro-Asiatic is represented by the Munda languages, including Kharia, Savara, Gadaba and Kurku. Though the Indo-Aryan vocabulary shows traces of Munda influence, the number of Dravidian loan-words in it is much larger and the conclusion seems inevitable that the Dravidian group of languages is more recent than the Austro-Asiatic, which is usually recognized as pre-Dravidian" (Sastri 1959). Regarding this fact Luce was of the opinion that Munda probably preceded both the Dravidian and Aryan. It looks as if the Munda once occupied a considerable portion of the Ganges valley before the Aryans pushed them south. Luce considered that if the entry of the Aryans into India is placed around 1000 B.C. the coming of the Mon-Khmer must be fixed not later than the second millennium B.C. Looking at the extraordinary similarity of the basic words for parts and functions of the body, numerals up to 10, common animals, etc. from the China Sea to India, it is likely that the separation took place in the second millennium B.C., which seems roughly the limit of likelihood. According to Luce's theory, this rapid and extensive expansion had something to do with rice, in particular the growing of irrigated rice on a large scale. In China rice was cultivated near the mouth of the Yangtze in the 6th century B.C. At Yangshao, the late Neolithic culture site just south of the Yellow River, J.G. Anderson discovered imprints of *Oryza sativa* at the bottom of an old storage jar. The date of this Yangshao culture is regarded as about 2000 B.C. It is not certain whether rice was grown as far north as the Yellow River. Luce considered that rice cultivation might have been started in the south. In this connection I.H. Burkill's *A Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula* states that when the Aryans entered India, they cannot have known rice, which is not mentioned in their oldest poems, but they soon adopted it and by the 3rd century B.C. rice cultivation had spread west to Persia. The Asiatic species which have been pointed out as parents of *Oryza sativa*, *Oryza fatua* and *Oryza minuta* occur in moist places from the eastern Hima-

layas to Ceylon and from the southernmost edge of China through Burma and Indo-China to Java, Borneo and the Philippine islands. It would be within these limits that the first wet rice cultivation was undertaken (Burkill 1935).

Now all the Mon-Khmer people have their own words for rice—a variety of them, for the plant, the husked grain and the grain when cooked. In *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula* Blagden writes: "...like many of the ruder Mon-Khmer tribes, some of the wild tribes of the [Malay] Peninsula have from time immemorial planted rice in their jungle-clearings. But they have never made the great advance to planting in irrigable swamp-land; that, in South-East Asia, is the Rubicon which a barbarous tribe must cross before it can fulfil the conditions precedent to real civilization..." (Skeat and Blagden 1906). In this respect Luce holds that the Rubicon was first crossed by the Mon-Khmer people in Southeast Asia who occupied the plains of Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma. These four great mainlands are still the major centers of the rice-growing regions of Southeast Asia. Luce's theory goes: "Success and wealth so rapidly attained would naturally provoke hostility. So the Mon-Khmer would have to defend themselves against the envy of less happier lands. Ultimately the more advanced Mon-Khmer people whose whole livelihood depended on broad swampland where they could grow rice and multiply could not stop until they found them. Possibly they had heard of India. For some time they were forced to climb the plateau of Yunnan. It was too cold and rugged for their purpose. Armed with crossbows and pointed bamboo spears, they trekked on and descending down to the plain of Assam, then climbed up the Khasi hills until they reached the Ganges Valley and resumed rice cultivation there, prospered, and later in turn were pushed south by the Aryans. Very likely there was not one invasion but the whole series of migrations were peaceful rather than warlike. Obviously civilization in Southeast Asia began long before the coming of Hinduism and Buddhism and the Mon-Khmer gave wet-rice cultivation to India and in return Indians responded by giving their faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism. That indeed was a truly royal exchange" (Luce, "Rice," 1965, and *History of Ramaññadesa* [draft]).

Besides Luce's hypothesis I would like to add that in the ancient past the Mon-Khmer were pioneers not only in wet-rice cultivation but also seemed to be skilled in bronze casting. The early report on the Ban Chiang excavation conducted by Pisit Charoenwongsa and Chester Gorman said that the finds from Ban Chiang provided the earliest bronze casting technology yet discovered, which radiocarbon C14 analysis at that time placed at 3600-2900 B.C., antedating both the bronze metallurgy of China and the Middle East (Charoenwongsa and Gorman 1976). This radiocarbon date, if valid, would indicate the presence of bronze in Northeast Thailand some 1500 years earlier than in mainland China, giving rise to the thought that perhaps bronze metallurgy actually spread from Thailand to China. In connection with this Professor Paul Benedict's paper which appeared in *Austroasiatic Studies* pt. 1, 1976, Hawaii University, says: "We come now finally to the one cultural item....in Munda, viz. *lu(y)an* 'copper/brass',

yielding Proto-Munda *luan* 'iron', the final piece in the puzzle (the missing *y*) being supplied by the Mon *sluy* 'copper' (cf. *slāk* 'brass' from *sluan*... Thus it appears that the 'culture word' of greatest antiquity in all Southeast Asia should designate the metal (copper/bronze) that was probably first produced in history by the people of this region." Therefore I would like to hold that the Mon-Khmer played a major role in Southeast Asia both in the prehistoric and historic periods.

The next wave of migrations into Burma and Thailand comprises numerous members of the Sino-Tibetan super-family. This super-family has also two sub-divisions known as Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Thai. Sino-Thai, or Thai-Chinese, has been called Austro-Thai by Professor Benedict because he thinks Thai is more or less related to Austroasiatic, but his theory is not as yet accepted by other scholars (Benedict 1975).

In addition to major waves of migration in the remote past there were constant flows of smaller groups by smaller tribes speaking different languages and dialects. Since the first great migration of peoples to the south and south-west of Asia some 5000 years ago the region of Southeast Asia was inhabited by the Mon-Khmer people, and to the north of this region dwelt the ancestors of the Thai and Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples. Due to the pressure of the Chinese within the last twenty centuries or so, it seems apparent that the Thai and Tibeto-Burman peoples flooded both Burma and Siam respectively after conquering and breaking up the political organizations of the older Mon-Khmer people.

Obviously the Mons who belong to the Austroasiatic subfamily were the old inhabitants of both Burma and Thailand who had contacts with India from very early times. The Mons were known as a seafaring people. If Professor Luce's theory is correct and is to be accepted, the Mon-Khmer introduced India to the art of wet-rice cultivation and the Indians supplied them reciprocally with the Hindu and Buddhist religions as well as with cultural elements, such as alphabets with vowels and consonants and with literature, including the Manu Dharmaśāstra (code of laws), which they in turn passed on to their neighbours. Significantly, the Mons had played a major role as the most prominent agent in spreading and propagating Indian civilization in Southeast Asia in the historic period.

Strangely enough, the oldest records of the ethnic name of the Mons were found not in Burma or Thailand but in Khmerland. In Khmer inscriptions of 6th-7th century A.D. the term was written as *Ramañ* and *Rmmañ* (K66A25/K76-5) and in the 9th-10th century as *Rāmanya*. Next it was found in Java in 1021 A.D. as *Rmen*. In the 11th century Mon inscriptions of the Burmese King Kyanzitha it occurs as *Rmeñ*. Later, in the 15th century, in Mon inscriptions and on a Mon copper plate now in the National Library of Bangkok, the spelling had changed to *Rmañ*. Such a name had never occurred in the earlier Mon epigraphs both in Thailand and Laos. However, the earliest Mon inscription on stone was found not in Burma but in Thailand, though we have discovered contemporary Mon writing on a terracotta votive tablet at the site of the old Mon city at the foot of Mt. Kelasa which dates back to the 6th century A.D. In Thailand, Old Mon inscriptions on stone have

been found at Nakhon Pathom (Nagara Pathama = the first city), Lopburi (city of the Lawas), Narai Cave, Haribhunjeyya Mahānagara (Lamphun) and in the Isan. In one of the short inscriptions in Old Mon found recently in the Isan, Dr. Uraisri Varasarin of Silpakorn University showed me a Khmer loan word, "*kamraten*", a royal title. This is quite new information as far as I am concerned. In 1964 a stone inscription in Mon was discovered at Ban Thalat in Laos. It consists of fourteen short lines and dates back to the 9th century A.D. It is now at Wat Phra Keo in Vientiane, marked No. 1098. My reading of it and translation are as follows:

<i>Text</i>	<i>Translation</i>
1. ll wo' punya	1. These are the meritorious deeds of
2. trala waṅṅa...	2. Lord Waṅṅa
3. jin ta kyāk	3. offering made to the Pagoda of
4. ko' bi hā	4. Kyaik Ko' Bihār
5. r preñ moy	5. one pair of
6. lañ gar jlo	6. water buffaloes
7. w moy lañ gar	7. one pair of bulls;
8. wo' dek mā	8. these slaves
9. ñ ju' imo'	9. namely Māñ Ju' one
10. ta nhā pa ba moy	10. Tanhāpaba one
11. riggā witi moy	11. Riggāwiti one
12. ...ya now	12. ...Ya Now
13. moy (deh te-en) a	13. one who are
14. bā la ll	14. not young.

The engraving of this stone inscription is not very clear. There are a few words which cannot be deciphered. The last name indicates a female slave as it begins with Ya. Names beginning with Mañ or Māñ denote male names in the Old Mon at Pagan. Observing the style of alphabet and spelling used in the inscription, it is obviously dated to the 9th century A.D.

With respect to the major role played by the Old Mons in Southeast Asia, Dr. Reginald le May wrote in his *The Culture of South-East Asia* (p. 36): "The Buddhist art of Funan (or at least of pre-Angkor Cambodia) is similar to the art of Dvaravati, as the old kingdom of Central Siam occupied by the Mon people was called, and it is possible that this early style of Buddhist art was brought to Funan through the intermediary of Dvaravati. From the history of Funan it does not seem likely that that country was often in direct contact with India, but rather that it received its Indian character through the Indian states of the Malay Peninsula and, as far as this type of art is concerned, from the Mon state of Dvaravati."

In *The Making of South East Asia* G. Coedès wrote: "The delta of Burma was occupied by the Mons. Their main center was Sudhamavati (Thaton). According to a Buddhist tradition, the Emperor Asoka, in the 3rd century B.C., sent two monks to the country of Suvannabhumi, which is usually identified with the country of the Mons. The existence of a kingdom situated between the Khmer kingdom of Kambuja

and the Pyu kingdom of Sriksetra was attested by the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang, who called it Tolopoti in his accounts of his travels. This name corresponds to Dvaravati. Perhaps it was at one time one of the vassal states of the Fu-nan Empire which flourished in Indo-China from the 1st to 5th centuries A.D. It seems reasonable to suppose that the Buddhist archaeological remains that are scattered over the lower valley of the Menam, from Lopburi in the north to Phra Pathom in the south and from Rajaburi in the west to Prachinburi in the east, belong to the Dvaravati Kingdom. It is paramount that the people of Dvaravati were the Mons as supported by the stone fragment of an inscription in South Indian script found at the chief site of Nagara Pathama and by another text engraved on an octagonal pillar at Lopburi. Both texts are in the archaic Mon language and the first dates perhaps from the sixth and the other perhaps from the seventh century A.D." (Coedès 1966).

G. Coedès had edited almost all the Mon inscriptions of Thailand. The Thai Chronicles known as the *Cāmadevivamsa* of Bodhiramsi (fifteenth century) and the *Jinakālamālīnī* of Ratanapañña (1516 A.D.) relate interesting historical facts about the Mon. Haribhunjjeya Mahānagara was founded by Queen Cāmadevi after the fall of Lopburi. In the middle of the eleventh century Cāmadevi and her people fled en masse from Haribhunjjeya to escape a severe epidemic of cholera. They went first to Thaton, but being harassed by the king of Pagan, they went on to Pegu where they were warmly welcomed by the Peguans because their speech was identical. The story says Cāmadevi was daughter of the king of Lopburi and married the king of Rammañña. On her return to Haribhunjjeya her two sons became kings of Lamphun and Lampang. The memory of Cāmadevi is preserved at Lamphun where a pagoda is named after her. One of the Mon kings of Haribhunjjeya was known in Mon inscriptions as Sabbadhisiddhi. After building the Jetavana monastery he prayed thus: "As the results of my virtues and meritorious deeds, may all creatures be free from suffering and attain Paradise!"

Historically, Haribhunjjeya Mahānagara was the smallest and the last dynasty of the Mons in old Siam and the last king was known as King Yiba, whose country was invaded by the Thai King Mangrai in 1292 A.D. after which the Mons had no further role to play in Thailand as rulers of an independent kingdom.

The identification with Dvāravatī of the toponym Tolopoti in the Chinese records of the 7th century A.D. had remained conjectural until two silver medals bearing the Sanskrit words "Sri dvaravatiçvara punya" were excavated at Nōnhin in 1943. The meaning of the Sanskrit is: "The meritorious deeds of Srī Dvāravatī" (Boeles 1964).

The above supports the old theory of identifying the Chinese Tolopoti with Dvāravatī, which means "city with gates." It duplicates the name of a city in India supposedly ruled by King Śiva. The major role of the Mons has been mostly described by G. Coedès and the archaeological evidence of the Mon Kingdom of Dvāravatī has also been established by P. Dupont, who conducted excavations in 1950 (Dupont 1959).

However, it is to be regretted that G. Coedès, the authority and pioneer of Dvāravatī Mon epigraphy, did not live to read a later find at Narai Cave in Saraburi—the oldest Mon inscription. It is a three-line inscription in Old Mon at the entrance hall of the cave about eight feet above the ground. Because of the smooth surface of the rock, the letters are quite clear and easy to read. Palaeographically and orthographically, I consider that this beautiful inscription is the oldest Mon inscription so far discovered in both Burma and Thailand. It is contemporary with the stone fragment bearing Mon writing found at Nakhon Pathom that is dated to the 6th century A.D. Consequently this Mon inscription of three full lines is the best epigraphical evidence in the study of Mon history in Southeast Asia. My decipherment and translation are as follows:

Text

1. ᩣ ᩠ "Klan anurādhapuraklo'ku.....kandar jan jih
2. ran leh komñah ðon pa'ut nāyasinādha
3. hāngah toy lop ðey wo'



The Narai Cave inscription, Saraburi.

Translation

The Governor of Anurādhapura and wife together with all the people of the city crossed [the cultivable land] with singing and dancing. After chanting together "God bless our victorious lord!" all entered into this [cave].

Note: The subscript *la* with the first consonant *ka* is rather peculiar. The subscript *la* at *klo'* and at the word *klam* in the Nakhon Pathom fragment are very small symbols. The two *la* consonants used in this inscription for *leh* in the second line and *lop* in the third line are identical with *lam* in Nakhon Pathom face B. In the gap between the *klo'* (cf. *clo'* in Pagan) and *kandar* the word *ti'bria* (=cultivable land) should be added. The words chanted by the people, "*nāya sinādha*," actually mean: *nāya* = *nāyaka*, master, lord; *si*, auspicious (cf. *śrī* = success, victory, majesty, royal dignity); and *nādha* = asking, begging, refuge, seeking help (cf. *nāda* = roaring, praising; *nātha* = lord, protector); vide the Sanskrit dictionary by Monier-Williams.

Reading this oldest Mon inscription I would like to suppose that a city with the name of Anurādhapura might have been in existence near Lopburi in those days. The name certainly duplicates that of the great and famous city in Sri Lanka. The sense of the text obviously points to a local city in old Siam. Historically the Mons had close contacts with Sri Lanka as well as India. In connection with this point Dr. Le May wrote: "Pong Tūk is on the Meklong river only one day's journey distant from both the important early center of P'rapathom to the east and Kanburi to the west. Kanburi itself is an old town on the route to the 'Three Pagodas pass...' leading to Burma and India. As regards its style the plinth of the sanctuary found in the banana garden of Pong Tūk is similar to the early type of platform found at Anurādhapura in Ceylon..." (Le May 1964).

In support of the fact that the Mons had early contacts with Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka chronicles *Dipavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa* composed in the 4th and 6th centuries A.D. respectively describe the deputation of a Buddhist mission by Asoka to Ramaññadesa in the 3rd century B.C. The *Mahāvamsa* says: "At this time, whenever a boy was born in the king's palace, a fearsome female demon came out of the sea to devour the child and vanish again. And at that very moment a prince was born in the palace. When the people saw the monks they thought 'These are the companions of the demons!' and carried arms to kill them. And the monks asked 'What does this mean? We are pious ascetics, in no wise companions of the demons!' Just after that the female demon came up from the sea with her following. When the people saw them they raised a great outcry. Then the monks created twice as many terrifying demons and surrounded the demons on every side. Panic-stricken, the demons fled down to the sea. Then the monks made a bulwark round the country and preached in the assembly the Brahmajala Suttanta. Sixty thousand were converted to the true faith." This legend was repeated in the Kalayani Mon inscriptions engraved by Dhammaceti at Pegu in 1476 A.D. King Dhammaceti, known as Ramadhipati, sent a Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka. This king was very famous for purifying the Buddhist religion in Southeast Asia. His Kalyānisimā Mon inscriptions read in part: "When Sonathera and Uttarathera arrived, a king named Sirimāsoka ruled over the city of Suvannabhumi. His capital was situated to the northeast of Mt. Kelasa. The eastern half was on the hill and the western half was built on the plain. This city was called Goḷamattikanagara because it contained many mud and wattle houses resembling those of the Goḷa people. The Ramans (Mons) who came there after called it Tuikgala. The city was near the seashore."

Writing in the 2nd century A.D., Ptolemy, the Greek geographer of Alexandria, mentioned that he saw cannibals at the Gulf of Besynga. Neighbouring Besynga island was the Chryse Chora. The Gulf of Besynga is identified as the Gulf of Martaban and Chryse Chora is the Greek counterpart of the Pali Suvannabhumi—the Golden Land. The Jataka tales such as Mahā Janaka and Sussondi (No. 360) mention voyages across the sea to the country of Suvannabhumi where the ships were wrecked. The *Milindapanha*, the Pali work on the questions

posed by the Greek King Menander and answered by the Buddhist monk Nagasena, makes reference to Suvannabhumi across the high seas along with Takola and China. The Arab writer Alberuni describes Suvannabhumi thus: "You obtain much gold as deposit if you wash only a little of the earth of that country" (Ray 1946). Malalasekera's *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* defines Suvannabhumi as follows: "Suvannabhumi is generally identified with Lower Burma whose chief city was Sudhammavati at the mouth of the Sittang river. The distance between Ceylon and Sudhammavati was seven hundred leagues and could be covered in seven days and nights with a favourable wind." At modern Thaton (Sudhammavati) there are two stone slabs bearing Old Mon inscriptions of the early 11th century engraved by the Mon King Makuṭarājadhira. Both begin with Sanskrit words saying: "Ādikāle raksanāma pure....." meaning "Formerly the city of the raksa (demon) by name" (Malalasekera 1960).

At the mouth of the Salween river just below the gulf of Martaban there is a big island known in Burmese as "Bilugyun," meaning "island of the demons." Apparently this indicates that the Semang Negritos who now live in the northern Malay Peninsula had once lived in this island. They might be the cannibals (demons). Linguistic affinities between Mon and Semang also prove that the two people had dwelt side by side in the prehistoric period.

The location of the actual region of Suvannabhumi remains a great problem. Many questions and arguments have been put forth by scholars regarding this matter. Observing the archaeological, epigraphical and linguistic links and various historical facts, I am of the opinion that the region of Suvannabhumi would cover both Burma and Thailand and perhaps the whole wide area of Southeast Asia.

Regarding the Mon people in Old Siam, the eminent Thai scholar Phya Anuman Rajadon wrote: "It is a historical fact that the central part of Thailand, the Menam basin, a thousand or more years ago was peopled by a Mon-speaking race who later mixed freely, racially and culturally, with the Thai, late comers from the north of Thailand and beyond. Historians tell us that the Mons at those times were a relatively civilized race as compared to the Thai and other neighbouring races" (Phya Anuman Rajadon 1965). In this connection G.H. Luce comments in *Old Burma, Early Pagan*: "The pioneers in civilization both in Old Burma and Old Siam were the Mons. Strongest in the deltas near the coast where they grew their irrigated rice, they had contacts with India from very early times..." (Luce 1969). Regarding the rise and fall of the Mons in S.E. Asia, Quaritch Wales wrote in *Dvāravati*: "The kingdom of Fu-nan came into existence in the 1st century A.D. in the lower reaches and delta of the Mekong. The people were almost certainly of Mon-Khmer stock. In the 3rd century, Fu-nan's territory was expanded to include much of Siam and the Malay Peninsula by the conquest of a ruler known to the Chinese as Fan Man. Dvāravati, whose culture came to embrace virtually the whole area of modern Siam, was formed from the break-up of the ancient empire of Fu-nan in the middle of the 6th century A.D. For most of 500 years its culture dominated the western half of Fu-nan's territory, as Kambuja



The author with a Nyah Kur lady, descendant of the Dvāravatī Mons.

did the eastern, and then early in the 11th century it fell a victim to the latter's imperial expansion" (Quaritch Wales 1969).

Since that invasion of the Mon kingdom of Dvāravatī by the Khmer in the early 11th century A.D., no one had ever imagined that a remnant of the Dvāravatī Mons might still survive in the remote jungles of the Korat Plateau. Unexpectedly, I was amazed and excited when in 1980 Gérard Diffloth, the French scholar, brought me striking information about this rediscovery of the Dvāravatī Mon people. Diffloth, now a professor at Cornell University, is a specialist in the study of the Mon-Khmer languages and at that time was tackling the language of the Nyah Kur. By reading his collection of Nyah Kur words I certainly agree with him in saying that the Nyah Kur people, who are known by the Thai as the Chaobon, are the remnants of the Dvāravatī Mon people. The Nyah Kur are found scattered in 25 villages in Korat, Petchabun and Chaiyaphum Provinces. It seems that they have had no close contacts with the outside world, which is why they have not been assimilated by the Khmer or Thai up to now. They represent the oldest historic people in Thailand. However, because of the progress and development of the country the dying Nyah Kur language would become extinct sooner or later. Fortunately Diffloth recorded their language in time, and compiled *The Dvaravati Old Mon Language and Nyah Kur*. The Thai scholar of linguistics, Dr. Theraphan Thongkum of Chulalongkorn University, who has also studied the Nyah Kur language, has compiled a *Nyah Kur-Thai-English Dictionary*. Both the books were published in 1984 by the Chulalongkorn University Press. Diffloth states: "The Nyah Kur language spoken today between the Central Plain and the Northeast of Thailand is an off-shoot of Old Mon: Old Mon was spoken in the Dvaravati Kingdom of Central Thailand in the 6th to 7th centuries A.D.; therefore the Nyah Kur

people are probably the direct descendants of Dvaravati society; and by comparing the Nyah Kur language with various stages of Mon, we can start reconstructing the Dvaravati Old Mon language itself." However, certain linguists did not share the notion that Nyah Kur was actually a dialect of Mon. Over half a century ago, Phra Petchabunburi and Major Erik Seidenfaden contributed articles on Nyah Kur to the *JSS*, vols. XII/XIII, 1918-21. Both of them thought that Nyah Kur was a dialect of Lawa. In 1935 Credner regarded Nyah Kur as representative of Kui/Kuoy (*Ethnic Groups of Mainland S.E. Asia*, 1964). H.L. Shorto, the Mon-Khmer professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, who compiled dictionaries of spoken Mon and of the Mon inscriptions, was also silent on the Nyah Kur although he refers to them as the Niakul of Korat in giving cross references. In 1970 Professor D. Thomas placed Nyah Kur together with Mon, calling it a Monic branch ("More on Mon-Khmer Sub-grouping," *Lingua* 25). The notion was well accepted by Professor F.E. Huffman in 1977 and was finally confirmed by G. Diffloth in 1980.

After studying the two books on Nyah Kur by Professors Diffloth and Thongtham as mentioned above, I had a strong desire to meet the Nyah Kur people myself. Luckily on my way to Japan in 1989 I had the welcome opportunity to study in Thailand for six weeks, visiting various historical sites.

During my short stay in Thailand I made a trip to Korat and visited Phra Bung village about 50 km south of that city. It is the nearest Nyah Kur village to Korat—about 5 km off the sub-main road. Upon arriving at the poor settlement, I felt as if I were back in my own native village. The houses of the Nyah Kur are built on high wooden posts about eight feet tall and have a ladder that one would use to climb trees. They keep fowl and pigs under the houses. Granaries are found nearby where they store paddy. Everything I found there had exactly the same characteristics of my own native hamlet where I had lived before World War II near the Thai border.



The Nyah Kur village of Phra Bung, near Korat.

The Nyah Kur are illiterate. Most of them look like other hill tribes and it seems if they have gone back to the primitive stage almost at the time of their migration from the valley of the Yangtze Kiang before they came under the influence of Indian civilization. This would be because they had been left behind in remote places after the invasion of the *Dvāravatī* kingdom by the Shaivite Khmer. The Khmer invasion of *Dvāravatī* and the Burmese capture of *Sudhammavati* (Thaton), both in the 11th century A.D., are very different from each other. This historical perspective is quite interesting. Since the Khmer invaders were Brahmanists, they did not care to preserve the Buddhist Mon literature and culture. Unlike the Khmer, the Burmese king Anirudha, who captured the Mon kingdom of *Sudhammavati* in 1057 A.D., carried off to *Arimaddanapura* (Pagan) all the learned noblemen and skilled craftsmen together with the Mon king Manuha and his royal family and treated them with respect. Indeed, the Burmese king appointed *Dhammadassi* (Shin Araham), the most venerable Mon monk, as his preceptor. The Burmese kings professed the Mon form of Buddhism and used Mon as the court language in recording all official matters. *Dhammadassi* was the leading monk among 4108 in reciting *Paritta* at the ceremony of Palace Construction.

Surprisingly the Burmese king *Kyanzitha* (1084-1112 A.D.) wrote not in Burmese but always in Mon. His inscriptions are mostly very long and they are couched in prose which is prophetic, flowery and poetical in style. Most have the quality of highflown literature. For example, an extract from his Mon inscriptions at the *Shwezigon* pagoda reads: "The tears of those who are parted from their beloved ones, by a

course of benefits, by loving kindness which is even as a hand, the king shall wipe away. The nasal mucus of those who are sick at heart, by a course of benefits, by compassion which is even as water, the king shall wash away. With his right hand rice and cakes, with his left hand clothing and ornaments the king shall give to all his people. All the people shall be comfortable like children resting in their mother's bosoms; so shall the king keep watch and reward them with benefits. Every day when the king instructs his people, the sound of praise, the sound of acclamation which the people make, shall be like the sound of a great rainstorm that occurs at midnight. From the seven cities, virgin daughters of the princes, bright with the brilliance of jewels, shaded with white umbrellas, fragrant with the fragrance of jasmine flowers, splendid as the splendour of the spouse of King Indra named *Alumbusa*, all shall attend the king. The king shall be seated on a lion-throne made of gold and adorned with gems of various kinds, and shall enjoy the splendour of royalty."

NOTE

This paper was originally presented at the Siam Society on 28 June 1989 with Mrs. Virginia M. Di Crocco, the Honorary Secretary, in the chair. It was also read at the Special Seminar held on 25 September 1989 at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, with Prof. Dr. Yoneo Ishii, Director of the Center, in the chair.

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