

In Yunnan Province of China, the northern section of the Mekong (Lancang in Chinese) is narrow and cuts through mostly uninhabited mountains. Photo courtesy China Yunnan International Culture Exchange Center



THE MEKONG REGION

Diverse Heritage, Shared Future

Frank Proschan and Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool

One of the world's great rivers, the Mekong begins in the melting glaciers of the Tibetan Plateau, in China's Qinghai Province, and ends some 3,000 miles away, emptying into the South China Sea in southern Vietnam. Passing through Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, the river traverses steep mountain gorges, daunting rapids, and immense alluvial plains in six nations. Its watershed encompasses 85 percent of Laos and Cambodia, one-third of Thailand, and smaller parts of Vietnam, Myanmar, and China.

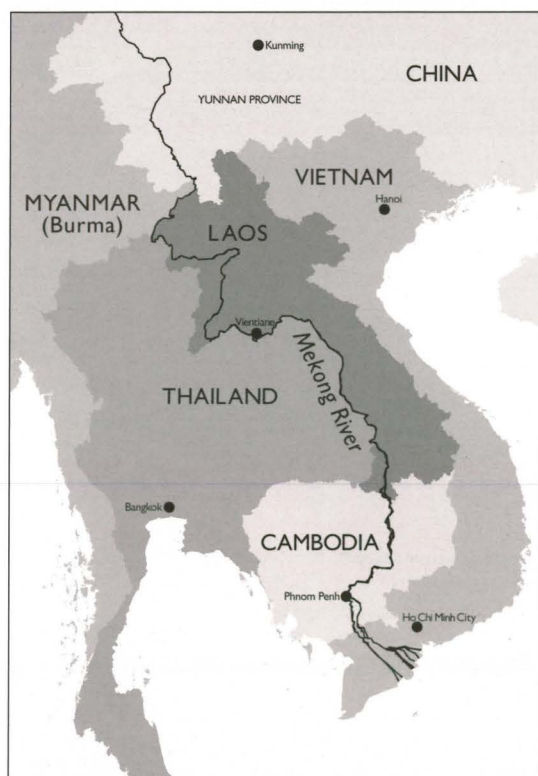
More than 60 million people live in the Mekong basin—speakers of at least a hundred languages. Some of the region's ethno-linguistic groups, such as the Khmer, Thai, and Vietnamese, number in the tens of millions, while others have populations of only a hundred or so people. Their livelihoods are as diverse as their ethnicities: the Mekong region includes tiny mountain villages of a dozen households, where people eke out a living from hillside rice fields, and densely populated plains and deltas, where the river's waters flow into rice paddies, which are harvested three times annually. But the region also includes bustling modern cities of a million or more people and industries ranging from rubber plants and textile factories to high-tech production facilities. Unparalleled in the diversity of its fisheries, the Mekong region is not only the rice bowl of Asia, but also its fish basket.



The Mekong River can be divided into three parts. The Upper Mekong includes the headwaters of the river on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai and its course through Tibet and Yunnan in China to the border with Myanmar. Above the city of Qamdo, it is known by its Tibetan name, Za Qu; below Qamdo and to the border with Laos, it is known by the Chinese name of Lancang. The Middle Mekong flows from China and Burma in the north to the rapids at Kratie in Cambodia; its drainage takes in most of Laos, large parts of Northeastern Thailand, and tiny corners of Chiang Rai Province in Northern Thailand and Dien Bien Province in northwestern Vietnam. Below Kratie is the Lower Mekong, where the river runs through great alluvial plains in Cambodia before splitting into nine channels to form the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam. In Khmer (Cambodian), the river is known as Tonle Thom (Great River); in Vietnam, the nine channels of the delta are known together as Cuu Long (Nine Dragons). A number of major tributaries feed into the river along its way, draining water from the melting snows of Tibet or rainfall from tropical monsoons farther south. Within the watershed is the huge Tonle Sap in Cambodia—1,350 square miles in area during the dry season and 5,600 square miles at the end of the rainy season.

The name by which the river is most widely known, “Mekong,” is a westernization of its name in the Thai and Lao languages in which it is called the Mae Nam Khong. The name itself tells us a lot about the cultural history of the region. According to many linguists, *khong* derives from the ancient Austroasiatic word *khong* (river). In Chinese, that word became *jiang*, the ancient name of the Yangzi (Yangtze) River and the word generally used for “river” in southern Chinese dialects. In modern Vietnamese, the word *song* for “river” derives from the same source. Kmhmu people in northern Laos or Thailand call the Mekong River the Khong, which preserves the ancient Austroasiatic word. The first part of the Lao and Thai name, *mae nam*, combines the word for “mother” and that for “water” to mean “river”; the word *mae* is also used to mean “great” or “primary.” So it would not be far off to say that the name simply means, “The River,” or the “River River,” or the “Mother of All Rivers.” But the history of the name also tells us that the region has always been one of great cultural diversity and exchange, a contact zone where peoples who speak different languages and practice different cultures profoundly influence one another.

How then to introduce this huge, diverse, and complex region to visitors at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival? How to select some two hundred people to



(Left to right) The Mekong River begins on the Tibetan Plateau in China, and flows through Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, before entering the South China Sea in southern Vietnam.

Festival researchers Somsak Sibunreung, Li Yongxiang, and Anupap Sakulngam (l. to r.) interview *khaen* (mouth organ) maker Chaiya Chasa-nguan. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution

A Naxi Dongba priest at Baishuitai Springs in Yunnan explains Margaret Lawrence's horoscope, as Zhao Gang interprets. This field trip initiated a series of research programs throughout the Mekong region. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution

represent tens of millions? How best to give Festival visitors a sense of the challenging cultural choices that confront the Mekong region and its inhabitants at the beginning of the twenty-first century? And how to mobilize the support of governments, funders, researchers, and communities to make the whole effort possible? Such were the questions that faced Smithsonian curators and their Mekong collaborators when they began planning the Festival program more than four years ago. The Smithsonian knew that the answers to such questions could not come from Washington. Instead, they had to reflect the perspectives and the collective wisdom of experienced cultural workers, scholars, and officials from the five featured countries. A unique and complex process of collaborative planning brought together a network of regional experts who shaped the program over several years in a series of consultative meetings, training workshops, and review sessions, made possible in large part by the Rockefeller Foundation.

The Mekong-region collaborators were as diverse as the region itself: Some were scholars with advanced degrees in anthropology or ethnomusicology; others were experienced cultural officials and administrators. There was a playwright, a dancer, a cartoonist, and more than one talented musician on the planning team. Many had themselves grown up

in the Mekong watershed, while others represented national institutions based in capitals far from the banks of the river. Their first task was to identify several themes that would guide the research, planning, and participant selection and would later help Festival visitors gain a coherent sense of this vast and complicated region.

The first theme was that of the Mekong River itself—of water as the sustainer of life. The second theme examined rivers and water as the focus of shared symbolic meanings and artistic expressions for the peoples of the Mekong region. The third theme considered the Mekong and its tributaries not only as channels of communication and commerce, but also, in places, as daunting barriers that inhibited contacts between neighbors. Finally, the fourth theme took up the tremendous diversity—geographic, environmental, ethnic, and cultural—that characterizes the Mekong region. Throughout, the organizers and several dozen Mekong-region researchers, who carried out the fieldwork leading to the Festival, were guided by the fundamental understanding that certain core cultural values were shared among the peoples of the Mekong region, despite the great diversity of their languages, religions, and histories. This essay will trace the four themes as they came to life during field research.



THE SUSTAINER OF HUMAN LIFE

Water is, of course, fundamental to life, but those of us who live in cities, where water comes from a tap and food comes from a supermarket, can easily forget how heavily human life depends on a regular supply of water. In the Mekong region, water from rainfall or diverted from rivers into irrigation systems sustains rice fields, vegetable gardens, fruit plantations, and bamboo groves. The immense plains of Northeast Thailand, much of Cambodia, and the Mekong Delta of Vietnam are the world's rice bowl. The peoples living in the region have sculpted the surface of the land to bring water to rice crops. Upriver, this may mean constructing elaborate irrigation systems with waterwheels to bring water out of rivers and into paddies. Downriver, it may involve constructing immense reservoirs like those that once sustained the great "hydraulic civilizations" of Angkor

Wat in Cambodia or Wat Phou in Laos. Or it may mean dredging channels and building dikes, as in the Mekong Delta, to handle the immense floods that inundate the area in the rainy season.

Important as it is to agriculture, water is equally vital for countless varieties of fish, mammals, crustaceans, mollusks, and amphibians that, together with the staple rice, are mainstays of the diet of Mekong residents. Before rice is planted, the flooded paddies teem with small fish, snails, crabs, and frogs, and children are often sent out to the fields to catch the evening meal. In streams, ponds, and rivers, larger fish are caught in all kinds of nets and a dizzying variety of traps. Recent decades have seen intensive aquaculture in the region. This may be carried out in a hand-dug fishpond next to a rice farmer's house or in a shrimp pond carved out by

POTS AND JARS ALONG THE MEKONG

Louise Cort

Potters are at work in villages all along the Mekong River and its tributaries. Women potters make earthenware—porous pots used for cooking directly over a flame without shattering or for cooling drinking water by evaporation. Men make stoneware—nonporous jars valuable for long-term storage. Mainland Southeast Asia is one of the few regions in the world where both kinds of pottery are still made and used in the context of everyday life.

A hypothetical village household along the Mekong may serve to demonstrate uses of earthenware and stoneware. Despite the rapid pace of modernization elsewhere, this home is not yet connected to electricity or running water. It is built of wooden boards, has an earthenware tile roof, and is raised high above the ground on a grid of posts. The enclosed second floor, reached by a staircase, provides living space, while the open area below, shaded and cool, serves for working (including women's weaving and earthenware production), visiting with neighbors, storing tools and household supplies, and sheltering farm animals.

Around the edges of the house, several barrel-shaped stoneware vats are positioned below the roof's edge to collect rainwater and store it throughout the dry months. A storeroom beneath the house contains stoneware jars made with double rims, specially designed for transforming



The utilitarian earthenware pottery of Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia, is fired in the open air, using rice straw as fuel. Photo by Cynthia Vidaurri, Smithsonian Institution

giant earthmovers from a former rice paddy. Or it may take the form of bamboo cages, planted in the middle of small mountain streams or constructed underneath a floating houseboat in the delta. The latter method is especially important in parts of Cambodia and Vietnam, where a small bamboo house may float atop a cage that can hold a ton or more of catfish, fed by the plankton-rich waters of the Mekong and supplemented by rice husks, food scraps, and commercial feed.

The city-state of Angkor, Cambodia, served as the capital of the Khmer Empire from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. The Angkor state constructed huge reservoirs that managed the waters of the Mekong and irrigated vast tracts of land.

Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution



small fish and salt into the dietary staple of fermented fish. A lid rests in the depression between the outside and inside rims, and that space is filled with water to make it impermeable.

At the foot of the stairway, a freestanding post supports a round-bottomed earthenware jar at a convenient height. Anyone—household member, visitor, or passerby—can use the metal cup inverted on the jar's lid to scoop a refreshing drink of cool water. The kitchen is located on the veranda at the rear of the house. A medium-sized stoneware jar holds water for cooking and washing. Just inside the door, a large stoneware vat contains a supply of husked rice. This household eats sticky rice as its staple grain, so the kitchen has a stoneware bowl for soaking the rice grains in water and a long-necked earthenware pot, into which a conical bamboo basket fits, for steaming the rice over boiling water. Smaller, lidded pots are used for preparing soups and stews, and a still smaller pot is kept on hand for steeping herbal medicine. A conical stoneware mortar is paired with a wooden pestle for preparing food staples, such as green papaya salad, that involve grinding or mashing ingredients together. A squat stoneware jar with ventilation holes on the shoulder keeps small fish in water, ready to prepare for the evening meal.

When a festival approaches, a stoneware jar is brought out to prepare beer by fermenting cooked rice with yeast. A pair of earthenware pots composes a still for distilling liquor, which is stored in a stoneware bottle with lugs for a carrying strap.

The women of this household, engaged in textile production, use earthenware "steamer" pots for simmering silkworm cocoons and extracting the silk thread. Other

earthenware pots simmer dyestuffs. Inside the house, large stoneware jars store woven textiles, safe from dust and insects.

Among her personal possessions, the grandmother keeps a palm-sized stoneware grating dish, used for grinding turmeric root into a beautifying skin lotion and received as a courtship gift. When a member of the household dies, some of the cremated remains are placed in a new earthenware pot and wrapped in a white cloth for burial.

In recent decades, many of these earthenware and stoneware vessels have been replaced by metal, plastic, or glass. Water can now be drawn from a tap and chilled in a refrigerator. Home distilling is illegal in many places. The last mainstays of village-based ceramic production are stoneware mortars and small earthenware pots for simmering medicine or burying the dead. While earthenware is marketed by foot or by truck, the Mekong's enduring role as a "highway" for distribution of goods has helped maintain communities of stoneware-jar makers in Laos, Northeast Thailand, and northeast Cambodia. Traces of older kilns surrounding these living communities map the continuity of technology over centuries.

Louise Cort is Curator for Ceramics at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. She is the author of Shigaraki: Potters' Valley (1979, reprinted 2000). She received (with Leedom Lefferts) a grant from the Nishida Memorial Foundation for Research in Asian Ceramic History to document village-based production of earthenware and stoneware ceramics in mainland Southeast Asia.

Where there are fish, there are fish traps. And the greater the biodiversity of a fishery, the greater the variety of traps, each one specialized to a particular species or habitat. When the diversity of fish is reduced by environmental change, folk knowledge is threatened. The Mun River, the largest tributary of the Mekong, was one of Thailand's richest rivers, supplying a large part of Northeast Thailand. A complex riverine ecosystem, consisting of rapids, islands, channels, underwater caves, and wetland forests, it was home to more than 250 different fish species. Many of the fish species migrated along the Mun River, its tributaries, or the mainstream of the Mekong at different times of the year. Communities along the Mun relied on the river for food. The cultural life of the region was defined by a complex network that managed communal fishing activities and exchanges of fish among communities.

Villagers along the Mun River have over seventy kinds of fishing gear: nets, hooks, and bamboo fish traps in every shape and size. The sophisticated knowledge

and skill in making and using each type of gear are a rich heritage of the Mun River fishing communities. The most spectacular is a giant bamboo trap called *tum pla yon*, which can be up to fifty feet long and is used for catching *yon*, a catfish species.

The building of the Pak Mun Dam beginning in 1991 took away the pride and joy of the villagers. "Our lives have been destroyed by the dam," one villager told researchers for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The ecology of the river was turned upside down, and fish migration was severely disrupted. Today, the number of fish species has dropped to just forty-five. Some 200 villages were also profoundly affected by the dam, so their residents mobilized to defend their local heritage and their very livelihoods. After lengthy protests and negotiations, the Royal Thai Government agreed to open the dam gate four months each year, a decision vindicated subsequently by the partial return of the fish and recovery of the river ecology. The *tum pla yon* traps—if not the full 40–50 foot size—began to reappear.





In Dong Thap Province in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, Festival researchers encountered other environmental changes that affected local fish-trap traditions in two villages of Hoa Long commune. Until recently, farmers planted two rice crops a year, according to the natural cycles of low and high water. When rice paddies were flooded, they also provided a home to aquatic life—fish of many kinds, crabs, shrimp, frogs, and snails. Villagers fashioned a wide variety of traps suited to the small animals and shallow waters of the flooded paddies. But a socioeconomic development project brought many changes to the local rhythm of life: A large canal was dug to bring water to the area throughout the year. Every year, farmers now plant three rice crops, resulting in larger harvests and increased family income. But with the natural cycle disrupted, paddies no longer stay flooded as long between plantings; the diversity of fish and other aquatic life has been reduced. Farmers now work the paddies year-round rather than

Many people, such as these Cambodian fishermen, still earn their livelihoods from the Mekong River, which has been called the fish basket of Southeast Asia. Photo © 2007 Jorge Vismara, all rights reserved

seasonally, which leaves little time for catching fish. And with the reduced biodiversity, villagers no longer fashion the variety of fish traps they once did.

Adaptable people, they have taken advantage of the changed circumstances to develop their trap-making skills into a thriving cottage industry. Instead of making a dozen different kinds of traps, families in Long Buu village have specialized in making one: the *lo*; villagers in nearby Long Dinh have specialized in a different trap, the *lop*. These products, made by families who organize their labor so each member produces one piece of the trap, are now sold throughout the Mekong Delta, even if they are hardly used anymore in the two villages.

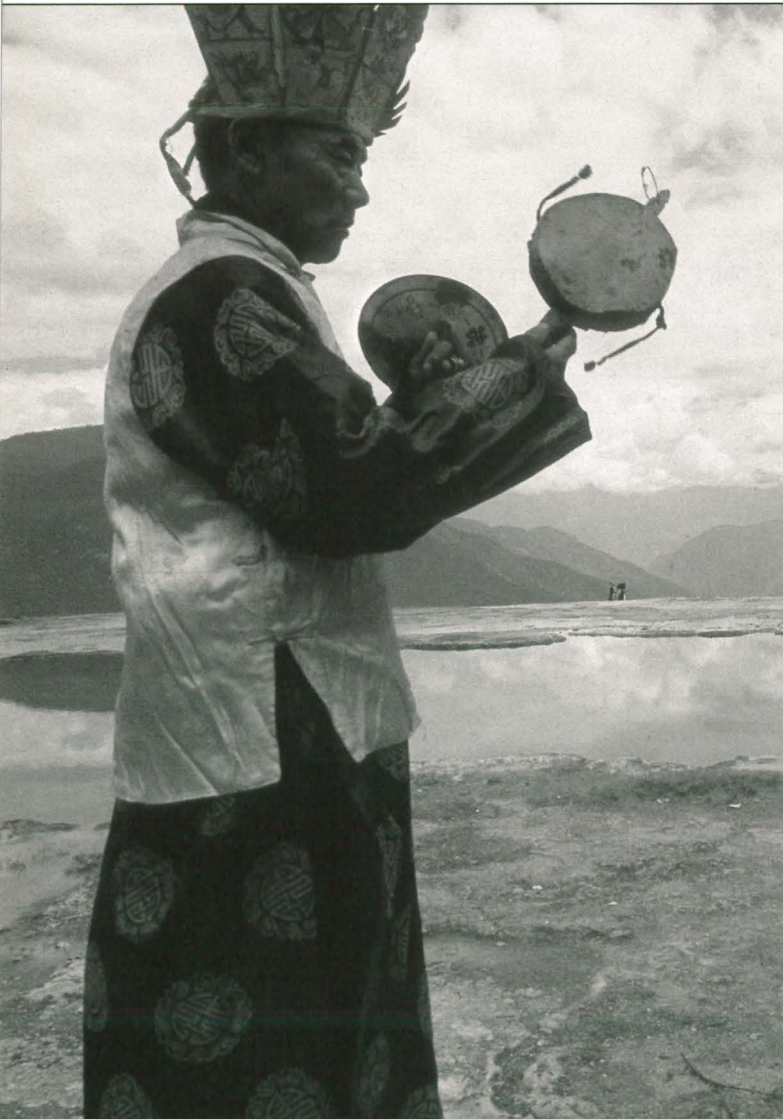
Pan Maneepak works on a bamboo fish trap in Tha Sala Village, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand.
Photo by Pham Cao Quy, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

A FOCUS OF SYMBOLIC MEANING

Considering the vital role that water plays in sustaining their lives, we should not be surprised to learn that the peoples of the Mekong have developed elaborate systems of beliefs and rituals to influence the natural forces that surround this essential element. In the animist belief systems common to many Mekong residents, every stream and rivulet is animated by a spirit, whose aid can be enlisted to ensure safe passage or plentiful fish. The heavenly spirits can be appealed to for sufficient—but not excessive—rains. For many ethnic groups, animist beliefs are reinforced by Brahmanist or Buddhist cosmologies. When the rainy season has overstayed its welcome, Khmer people send singing kites of bamboo and paper high into the sky to summon the hot winds and chase away the rain clouds, so people can get on with the work of planting the

year's crops. Lao and Thai send rockets skyward each year to ensure sufficient rain and plentiful harvests. They ornately decorate the rockets with the heads and scales of the sacred *naga*, a mythical dragon-serpent that is the master of the waters. During the annual rocket festival, which is intended to ensure fertility of rice fields and humans alike, the phallic imagery of the rockets is mirrored in ribald verses, obscene props, cross-dressing, and other rites of inversion.

Graceful yet powerful images of *nagas* and majestic *naga* heads decorate important monastic architecture, such as ordination halls or *vihara* (halls for Buddha images). Veneration of *nagas* is important to Lao, Thai, and, especially, to the Khmer. When Khmer people marry today, they invoke the mythical marriage of Prah Thong and Nagi Soma, a female



NAXI CULTURE

Yang Fuquan

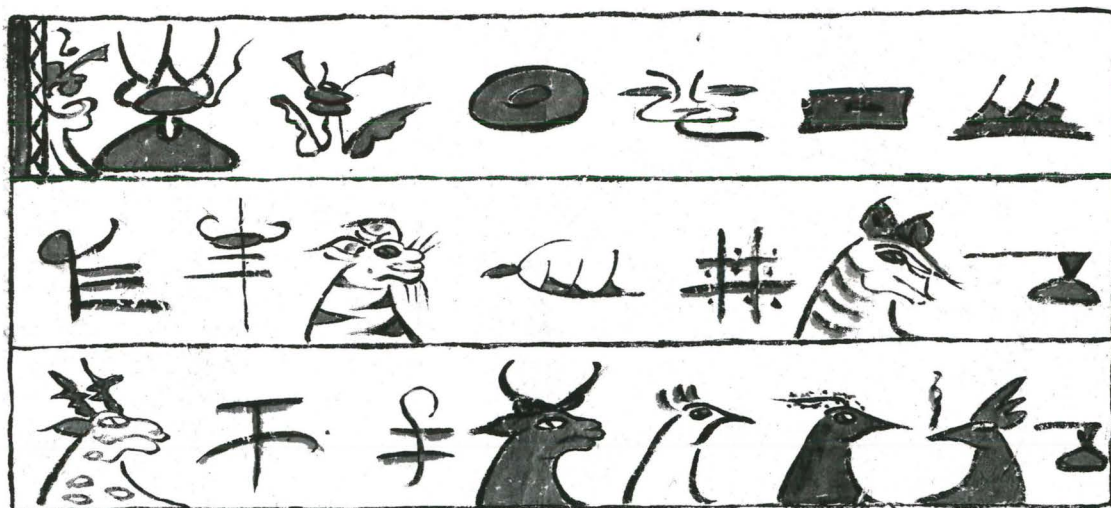
The Naxi people are descendants of the ancient Qiang tribe, which inhabited the Huanghe and Huangshui valleys in northwest China and then migrated south to their present-day location at the juncture of Yunnan Province, Sichuan Province, and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Today, approximately 300,000 Naxis live in China, most in Lijiang City in Yunnan. Despite their lack of material wealth, the Naxi people have created a very rich and distinctive culture rooted in the Bon religion of Tibet.

The indigenous Naxi religion, known as Dongba (literally “wise man” in the Naxi language), features more than thirty rituals related to various aspects of daily life. The Naxi people pray to the heavens, mountains, forests, rivers, stars, ancestors, gods, and spirits for a peaceful life, good family relations, and an abundant livelihood. “Dongba” also refers to Naxi priests and their language and places great emphasis on maintaining a balance between human beings and nature.

In northwestern Yunnan Province a Naxi Dongba priest performs at the sacred Baishuitai Springs, revered as the birthplace of Dongba culture. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution

naga. The bride gives *areca* (palms) to the groom as Princess Soma did to Prince Thong. She must also give him a silk *sampot hol* (tube-skirt), whose tie-dyed motifs evoke the scales of the *naga* and recall how Prah Thong donned the guise of a *naga* to pass safely with his new bride through the kingdom of the *nagas*. As the newlyweds enter the bride's room, the groom must hold onto the end of her scarf, as Thong did Soma's. Wedding musicians play the song, "Prah Thong and Nagi Soma."

The seven-headed *naga*, which sheltered the Buddha from rain, serves as a gateway to Wat Phnom in the center of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by Som Prapey, courtesy Smithsonian Institution



Only fifty or so Naxi Dongba priests can read the approximately 2,000 pictographs that make up the Naxi Dongba script (see translation below). There are efforts, however, to teach younger priests and even children in the schools. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution

A Naxi person, Sai ma nee chei mi, lets a red tiger act as his riding horse, lets a white stag act as his farm cattle, lets wild pheasants and white pheasants act as his cockcrow.

The pictographic writing used by the Naxi people, known as the Dongba script, is one of the few pictographic systems still in use. Consisting of more than 2,000 separate characters, Dongba pictography has been used primarily to record what is read or chanted at Dongba religious rituals. But the pictographs have also been used to document history and culture—creating a virtual encyclopaedia of the Naxi people. Because the pictograms are so distinctive,

Dongba texts have been collected and preserved by many museums and libraries around the world since the 1920s. An estimated 20,000 unique texts are said to exist.

Yang Fuquan is currently Professor and Vice President at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences. He is an expert on Chinese ethnic history with a focus on Naxi studies. He has also held positions at Cologne University in Germany, the University of California–Davis, and Whitman College.

Throughout the Mekong basin, rice is the major crop and staple diet. People offer rice—cooked or dry—to appease the spirits and restore health and well-being. Spirits and other non-human entities that have power to influence nature and human destiny need to be fed just as human beings do. Common, especially in the Lao and Thai-speaking communities from southern Yunnan into northern Cambodia, is the ritual offering called *basi* or *bai-si*. This is basically a cooked-rice offering presented in a banana leaf container, elaborately decorated with flowers and often topped with a boiled egg.

A common occasion for offering a *bai-si* is a ceremony for calling the *khwan*, a life essence that breathes vitality into a body. When a person needs some physical or moral strength, such as when departing on a long journey, moving into a new house, getting married, or suffering from illness, a *bai-si su khwan* ceremony is performed to bind his or her life essence securely to

his or her body. During the ceremony, the subject of the ritual and members of his or her family or community sit around a *bai-si* offering. The ritual is led by a *khwan* master, usually an elderly person regarded as a specialist in communicating with the life essence, who chants traditional texts inviting the *khwan* to reside in the body. The master of the ceremony binds the *khwan* by tying a piece of cotton thread around the wrist of the person in need of strength; the master then ties the wrists of other guests, who in turn tie the wrists of the ritual's subject.

Generally, women make the *bai-si* offering. Some offerings are simple; others, highly elaborate, made from tiny pieces of banana leaves rolled tightly into little cones and attached to bamboo or wooden frames to form several tiers. Larger and more elaborate offerings are usually for important celebrations and require a lot of time and several hands to complete.

Two women from the Laihin Temple in Lampang Province, Thailand, make a *bai-si* offering of banana leaves and flowers. The offering takes the shape of a *krathong*, a small structure with three, five, seven, or nine tiers. Photo by Panita Sarawasee, Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre



Weaving is the main source of income for Taliang women living in Attapeu Province, Laos. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution



TEXTILES ALONG THE MEKONG

Leedom Lefferts

Women from uplands and lowlands along the Mekong River and its tributaries produce some of the world's most beautiful and technically sophisticated weaving. The interaction between weaver, loom, and yarn results in textiles that are artistic treasures suitable for daily life.

Many weavers from cultures of the Mekong region use back-tensioned looms: the weaver sits on the floor or ground, while her back, extended legs, and feet place tension on the warp for inserting the weft yarn into the shed. The upright loom came to Southeast Asia about 1,000 years ago when members of Tai cultures migrated from southern China. The wooden frame of this loom creates tension for the weaving elements suspended within it, which gives the weaver enough flexibility to create long pieces of cloth.

Traditional fibers include hemp, homegrown cotton, and silk from silkworms raised in villages. Today, some weavers use durable synthetic yarn; however, local, naturally dyed yarns are returning to the Mekong region as consumers request them.

The traditional dress for men and women of most cultures in Southeast Asia was a wraparound skirt and a separate shawl to cover the chest. Lowland women made men's skirts of higher quality silk than they used in their own skirts. Men of the hills tended to wear loincloths that local women carefully designed and wove. Tailored clothing was more common among the Chinese of the northern Mekong, the Vietnamese, and recent immigrants to the Mekong region, such as the Hmong, Akha, and Nung, who were heavily influenced by Chinese practices. The blouses, shirts, and tailored trousers found throughout the region

today are sartorial additions inspired by Western definitions of modesty and modernity.

Often the simplest Mekong River textiles are the most treasured. They include the robes of Theravada Buddhist monks, the elegant textiles of the Cambodian and Thai rulers and elite, and the garments worn by ordinary people to religious services. These textiles can be difficult to produce because they require high quality yarn, subtle dyes, and complex weaving.

At the other extreme, decoration on mainland Southeast Asian women's skirts and shawls can be very intricate. Today, these designs continue to employ some of the extraordinarily complicated weaving techniques found in older textiles of the Mekong region. The patterns range from subtle "pinstripes" of twisted yarn to dazzling, compound designs that incorporate tie-dyed yarn, continuous supplementary warp striping, and continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft. Such textiles show off the weaver's accomplishments and the wearer's prestige.

The women of the Mekong continue to weave beautiful textiles amidst the proliferation of shoddier products that sell cheaply. Discerning buyers directly support the continuation of a great regional textile tradition.

Leedom Lefferts is Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, and Research Associate, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. He has researched in mainland Southeast Asia since 1970, initially focusing on the peoples of Northeast Thailand and, after 1990, on those throughout the Mekong River area.

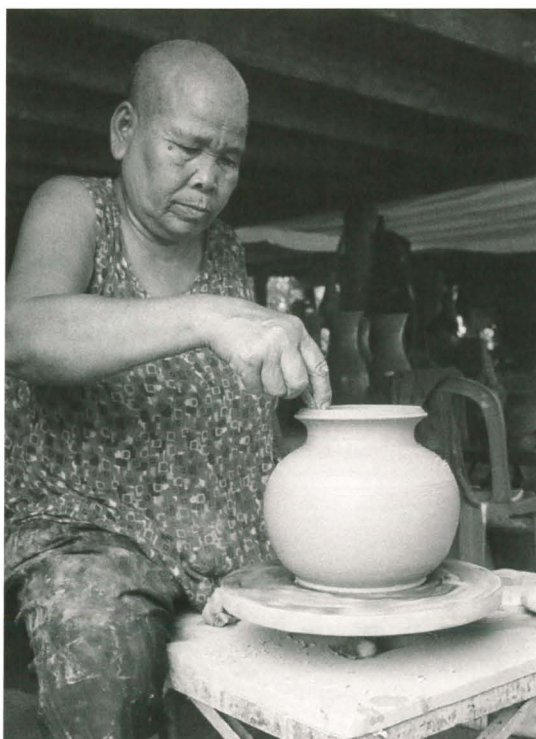
CROSSROADS AND BOUNDARY, CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION AND COMMERCE

Along its length, the Mekong grows from a small river threading its way between steep mountains to a huge torrent passing over a vast alluvial plain, where, at flood season, one cannot easily see from one bank to the opposite. In its upper reaches, there is no question of navigating the river—its rushing waters and twists and turns make boat travel impossible. Farther downriver, long stretches are navigable by boats and barges, but they are interrupted periodically by formidable rapids that impede travel over longer distances. In Cambodia and Vietnam, the Mekong remains a primary highway for moving people and freight. The rice that grows in the fertile floodplain of the Mekong Delta begins its journey to world markets, not on trucks or trains but on barges or large boats. The main tributaries that flow into the Mekong up and down its length are also vital arteries for moving goods and passengers. Even smaller streams may be navigated by the swallowtail canoes characteristic of the Lao and Thai, by dugout canoes in the highlands, or by the plank boats of the Vietnamese.

For centuries, peoples in the Mekong region traveled along the rivers to get to and from markets on the riverbanks, to carry goods to waiting customers, and to seek better farmland or new economic opportunities. Along these routes, history has seen sometimes-massive migrations that have shaped and reshaped the ethnic landscape of the region over the millennia. At other

moments in history, large tributaries and, especially, the mainstream of the Mekong have served as barriers to travel. Where today bridges span the Mekong, travelers once relied entirely on ferries that might range from simple canoes to large vessels with room for trucks and buses. A natural boundary, at times the Mekong has served to separate peoples with very similar cultures and traditions. Today, the region is increasingly integrated economically; huge highway- and bridge-construction projects tie the countries together as never before. The third theme of the Mekong program considered the river and its tributaries as channels of communication and commerce, focusing particularly on the recent economic dynamism of the region.

Earthenware pottery has a long history in Andong Russei, Ban Chkol, and other villages in Kampong Chhnang, an hour's drive northwest of the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. Potters fashion simple but striking utilitarian ware: cookstoves, cooking pots, jars for storing water and food, and jars for making the famous Khmer fermented fish paste, *prahok*. Using an ancient technique of hand-shaping pots with a paddle and anvil, village women took advantage of the rich clay deposits on nearby Krang Dei Meas Mountain to develop a craft industry that gained a reputation beyond Phnom Penh. Although women are the producers, their husbands and brothers carry the pottery to market, loading oxcarts



Chev Un of Kampong Chhnang was recognized by the Royal Academy of Cambodia in 2004 as *Proeudthiacar Vappakthor Sellapak Khmer* (Emeritus Artist of Khmer Arts and Culture). Photo by Korakot Boonlop, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

high before setting out on selling trips that might take them to the farthest corners of Cambodia, the region, and the world. Some enterprising families now truck several cartloads of pots to buyers. Vendors return weeks later with news of the outside world, ideas for new products, and feedback from customers so that ongoing production can respond to market demands.

Pottery villages have recently been recipients—but not passive ones—of international development assistance. A German aid organization introduced foot-kicked potter's wheels to supplement the traditional paddle and anvil technology. The first wheels were built according to expert German specifications. But villagers quickly concluded that Cambodian potters' bodies were not built according to German specifications, so they began adapting the wheels to Cambodian women. They also made an important decision as a community: Before beginning to learn how to throw pots on the wheel, young villagers would first master the traditional paddle and anvil technique. Only after they had gained experience working the clay in the age-old manner could young potters try their hand at the new potter's wheel. Village potters took a similar pragmatic approach to the introduction of kilns and new products suggested by the Germans. They stuck with some, abandoned others, and designed still others to respond to the tastes of their ever-increasing network of customers.

One textile tradition in Laos offers another example of the far-reaching ties of commerce in the Mekong region. In northeastern Laos's Xiang Khouang Province, near the provincial capital Phonsavan, Hmong embroiderers in Ban Khangdon practice the distinctive *paj ntaub* (flower cloth) needlework, which calls for cross-stitch embroidery and reverse appliqué. Even thirty years ago, this might have been done on handwoven cotton or hemp fabric, but today the needleworkers buy industrially woven cotton, synthetic fabric, or blends in Phonsavan market, along with embroidery thread from China or Thailand. Beside their racks of needlework-adorned wedding or festival dresses, Hmong shopkeepers display pleated skirts decorated with batik (wax-resist) patterns. Villagers in Ban Khangdon no longer make the time-consuming batik skirts, preferring those made by Hmong and Miao across the northern border in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces of China. Their own needlework products are sold locally, transported to Vientiane's Morning Market to sell to international tourists, or shipped to Hmong relatives in Minnesota or California. While textile collectors prize the indigo-dyed hemp fabric and naturally dyed embroidery threads, Hmong prefer and find convenient the brighter, chemically dyed, and ready-made polyester-cotton fabric.

A SITE OF DIVERSITY

As researchers prepared for the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, they were reminded time and again of how diverse the Mekong region is—geographically and environmentally as well as ethnically and linguistically. Relations among its peoples were not always generally friendly and peaceful as they are today. Only four decades ago, much of the region was engulfed in war. Peace returned to some areas only in the last fifteen years. Although ethnicity was rarely the main cause of strife, many conflicts had ethnic dimensions. One ethnic group aligned against a neighboring group, or a single ethnic group divided along regional, clan, or familial lines.

The ethnic landscape of the region is partly the result of conflicts, which, over the centuries, gave rise to large-scale migrations as ethnic groups fled from war or turmoil to seek new homes, sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles from their former land, or were taken in large numbers as prisoners of war or as

conscripts. Over time, such immigrants often crafted new identities. The Lao Song communities in Central Thailand, for instance, can trace their ancestry to the Black Tai homeland of northwestern Vietnam, the area now known as Dien Bien Phu, but have created a new ethnic identity since their arrival in provinces to the southwest of Bangkok at the end of the eighteenth century. The Hmong, Mien, Lisu, and other groups, who now live in the highest mountains of Yunnan and northern Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, migrated into the Mekong watershed in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion that engulfed much of southern China in the mid-nineteenth century, during the Qing Dynasty. The Cham weavers who come to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival from Chau Phong in Vietnam's Mekong Delta have counterparts north of Phnom Penh in Cambodia and as far away as Bangkok. In the 1950s, Jim Thompson relied upon the skilled hands of Cham weavers to build his now-famous Thai Silk Company.



(Left) Some Phu Tai people migrated from Laos to Northeast Thailand roughly two hundred years ago and brought with them a variety of weaving traditions. Mrs. Paei from Ban Phone, Kalasin Province, is a weaver of the *phrae wa* textiles that are popular throughout Thailand. Photo by Supara Maneerat, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

(Upper right) The instruments in this Khmer ensemble represent the confluence of Indian, Chinese, and indigenous influences. Photo by Robin S. Kent

(Lower right) Wherever you find Khmer people, musicians—like these in An Thuan village, An Giang Province, in Vietnam's Mekong Delta—are an indispensable part of weddings. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution

Sam-Ang Sam

Khmer music is a vital aspect of Khmer life and culture, epitomizing Cambodia—its society, arts, customs, and beliefs. Khmer music in Cambodia and in the Khmer communities in Thailand and Vietnam has been shaped by four very different influences: Indian, Chinese, European, and indigenous traditions. Hinduism and Buddhism inspired local religious music; the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana* influenced dance. The oboes and double-headed barrel drums of Khmer ensembles originated in India. The Chinese introduced two-stringed fiddles, hammered dulcimers, drums, and cymbals; the Europeans, musical notation.

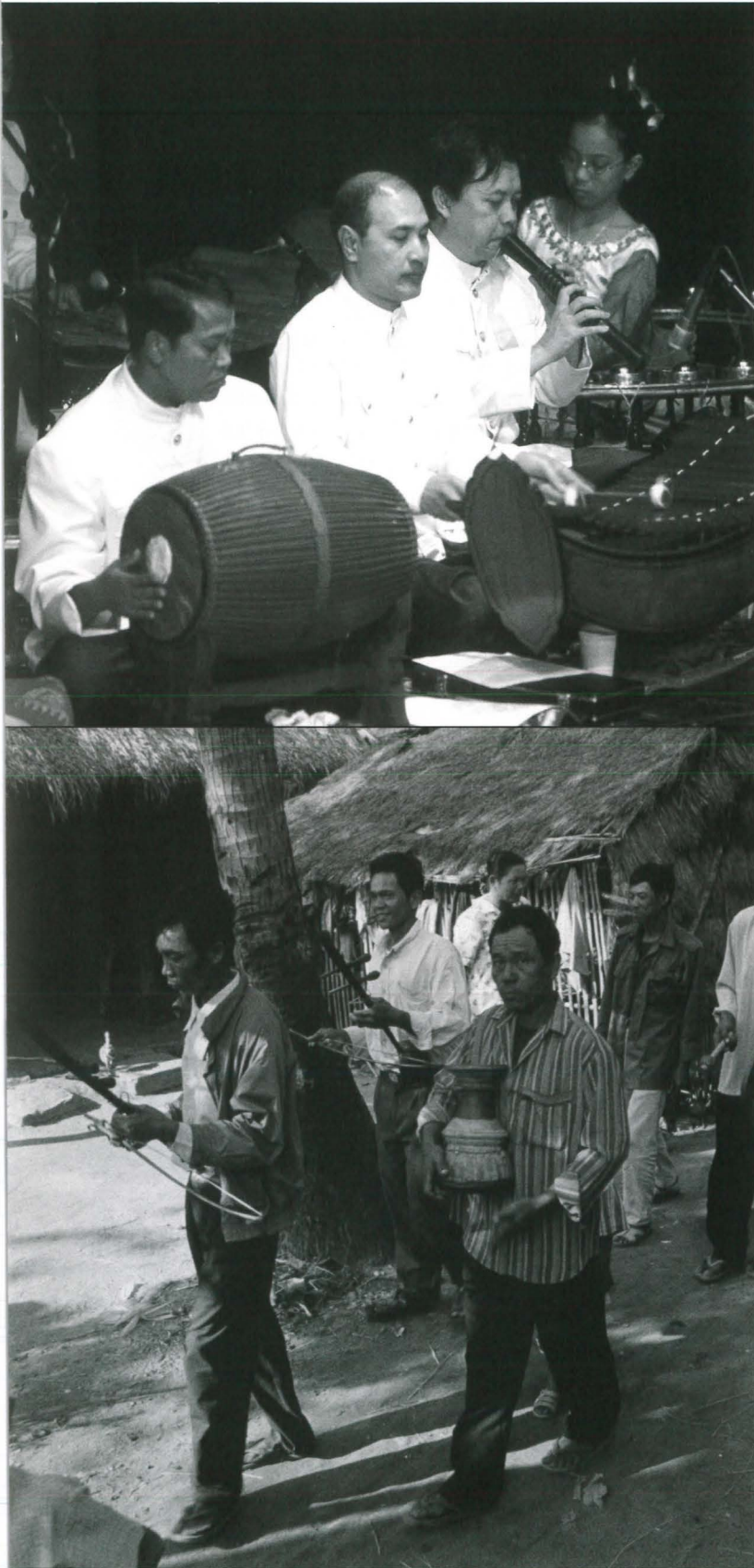
Not surprisingly, ancient Khmer civilization, which reached its peak during the Angkor period from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, had a great influence on all aspects of culture including music. In the cities of Angkor stand gigantic structures that symbolize the union of celestial beings with earthly ones. Carved on the walls of those great temples are figures of the *apsara* (celestial nymphs or dancers) and musical instruments, such as the *pinn* (angular harp), *memm* (bowed monochord), *khse muoy* (plucked monochord or musical bow), *sralai* (quadruple-reed oboe), *korng* (gong), *chhing* (small finger cymbals), *sampho* (small, double-headed barrel drum), *skor yol* (suspended barrel drum), and *skor thomm* (large, double-headed barrel drum)—all still played today. Because instruments of contemporary Khmer music are similar to those on the bas-reliefs of Angkor, we have every reason to believe that present Khmer musical forms are the continuation of the ancient Khmer musical traditions.

Khmer music is still passed on orally from master musician to pupil as it likely was in ancient times. Virtually every village in Cambodia has a group of these musicians. In these ensembles, female vocalists are the norm; however, women are rarely musicians.

The musicians have a melody in mind but do not play it straight; instead, they embellish it. This ornamentation is inherent to rendering Khmer music.

Khmer music is varied. Some is ritualistic; other music is primarily entertaining. Ritual music has the power to put a medium into a trance or please the spirits. Other less serious forms of music, such as that played at weddings, enliven the atmosphere and the mind. Music accompanies every Khmer from the cradle. It reflects the soul and character of the Khmer people.

Sam-Ang Sam is a Cambodian American ethnomusicologist and a MacArthur Fellow. As founder of the Sam-Ang Sam Ensemble, he has released several albums to stimulate interest in the various Cambodian performing arts. He now serves as dean at Pannasastra University, Phnom Penh.



In many parts of the Mekong region, ethnic groups straddle the borders of two or more nations, not because the people migrated but because international boundaries were drawn according to geography and political history rather than culture or language. Beyond the borders of Cambodia, more than one million Khmer live in Northeast Thailand and another million-plus in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The Lao people on the left bank of the Mekong in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Thai Lao on the right bank in the Kingdom of Thailand share a language and many cultural traditions. At the same time, there is tremendous diversity even within a group that identifies itself as sharing a single identity. The Lao of the capital city Vientiane, those of the ancient royal capital Luang Prabang, those of downriver cities such as Savannakhet and Pakse, and those of Attapeu in the southeast or Sam Neua in the northeast are proud of their distinctive local foodways, musical styles, weaving patterns, and accents. The *lam* singing of Salavan and Mahaxay and the *khap* singing of

the Phouan people or the Tai Daeng, all from Laos, have their counterparts in the *lam* singing of Northeast Thailand. All part of one grand tradition, each type of singing is quite distinct in style and instrumentation and is instantly recognizable to local audiences and international fans.

Where people of different ethnic groups live side by side, they often engage in specialized craft production and exchange their goods through complex networks. Thus, in northern Laos, Kmhmu are known for bamboo and rattan basketry, their Lao and Tai neighbors for cloth, and the Hmong for metalwork. At a highland market, Kmhmu artisans sell their sturdy and beautiful baskets and buy silk or cotton skirts from Lao or Tai Daeng weavers; the Lao weaver turns to the Hmong silversmith to purchase a bracelet or necklace, and the jeweler returns to the Kmhmu basket maker to buy a Hmong-style rattan back-basket. In Ban Chok village in Thailand's Surin Province, Khmer silversmiths produce goods to appeal to local Khmer buyers, Cambodians, and urban consumers in Bangkok jewelry shops.



Festival researchers encountered an interesting situation in Binh An village in the Mekong Delta province of Long An, not far from Ho Chi Minh City. The village has been famous for its wooden drums for five generations, since the late nineteenth century when villager Nguyen Van Ty traveled to a nearby province and learned the craft. Today, villagers travel periodically to Ho Chi Minh City to buy water buffalo skins to cover drumheads. The buffalo are raised in the Central Highlands; hardwood for the drum bodies comes from the Central Highlands or from across the border in Cambodia. Although the drum makers themselves are ethnically Viet, their customers are Viet, Khmer, or Hoa (Sino-Vietnamese). The drums they make are as diverse as their customers. For Viet buyers, the Binh An drum makers fashion large barrel drums to hang in village schoolyards to summon children to classes or in local shrines and temples for use in annual agricultural rituals. They also make small single- or double-headed frame drums for musical performances or mediumship rites. For Hoa customers in Ho Chi Minh City or smaller cities and towns around the Mekong

Delta, they make special barrel drums for dragon- and lion-dance teams. Khmer musicians come to Binh An from nearby provinces to order *skor thom* barrel drums, *sampho* double-tension drums, or goblet-shaped drums for the *chayyam* mask dance.

Today, the drum makers in Binh An village are busier than ever because of two seemingly unrelated policy decisions by the Vietnamese government. In recent years, increased religious freedom and reforms in cultural policy have encouraged a widespread revival of village festivals and family rituals in Vietnam. Simultaneous economic reforms have brought previously undreamed of prosperity to many, allowing them to spend money on festivals and rites and buy better-quality drums. A few widely known master drum makers command high prices, but some twenty households produce lower-priced drums for sale in shops in Ho Chi Minh City and the Delta. When the master drum makers get an order too large to fill themselves, they enlist neighboring families to share the work as subcontractors.

(Left to right) These novice monks in Tra Set village, Soc Trang Province, are part of the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The Tra Set Buddhist temple teaches young novices Khmer writing as well as Buddhist teachings. Photo by Le Hoai Lan, courtesy Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

Many Lisu have migrated from Myanmar or southern China to northern Thailand in the past seventy-five years. These musicians still perform traditional songs but wear a mix of traditional and Western dress. Photo by Panita Sarawasee, Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre

"Dancing the drum" helps to stretch the drumhead, which is made of water buffalo skin. After stretching, the drums of Binh An village, Long An Province, Vietnam, will resound loudly. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution



DIVERSE HERITAGE, SHARED FUTURE

While preparing for the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, nearly 100 Mekong-region researchers fanned out across five countries (omitting Myanmar because of U.S. laws that would have made its participation impractical). The researchers visited mountain villages and lowland cities, from northern Yunnan to southernmost Vietnam. They visited rice farmers and fishing families, potters and weavers, woodcarvers and silversmiths to conduct hours of interviews and take almost 20,000 documentary photographs. All of the researchers were citizens of the five featured countries, and most were lifelong residents of the Mekong watershed. During their research, they were reminded time and again of the core cultural values that peoples of the region share and of the many ways in which they express them. Distinctions of language, foodways, clothing, and lifeways mark each environment, each locality, and each community.

The Mekong region is one whose citizens attach great importance to their cultural heritage; they relish

the taste of home cooking and the sounds of familiar music. Even if many people proudly maintain age-old traditions, nowhere has time stood still. The region today is one of dizzyingly rapid socioeconomic change, as regional economic integration, rural development, urban migrations, and revolutions in communications bring huge changes to people's daily lives. Many are experiencing a prosperity that they could not have imagined even a decade ago. But not all changes are positive, and developments that bring advantages in one direction—increasing the yields of rice paddies through improved irrigation systems, for instance—may diminish the variety of cultural traditions that characterizes the region. Dams on major tributaries or even the mainstream of the Mekong may be important to generate electricity to fuel the region's economic growth, but they also diminish the diversity of fish and affect water levels upstream and downstream. Bridges and highways now span the Mekong region. They tie its peoples together, permit increased trade, and provide access to once-

THE MEKONG FLOWS INTO AMERICA



There are more than two million Americans who trace their ancestry to the Mekong River region of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan, China. A vast majority of these immigrants and refugees arrived in the United States between 1975 and 1995.

The conflict known in the United States as the Vietnam War (1965–1975) caused the dislocation and death of millions from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. During the uncertain years that followed the war and the barbaric rule of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, hundreds of thousands of refugees came to the United States, where government agencies, churches, and nongovernmental organizations settled them. While they have adapted to their new life in the United States, many of these refugees actively work to keep their cultural traditions alive. Buddhist temples, community cultural centers, and annual celebrations serve to pass on long-held community traditions to the second and third generations of immigrants. In the past decade, thousands of refugee families have returned to the region to reconnect with the villages and towns of their birth. Many of these new Americans have also developed economic and cultural ties with the countries they fled only decades ago.

Cambodian students practice at Vatt Buddhikarama, a Cambodian temple in Maryland. Communities retain identity and encourage pride among second-generation Cambodian Americans through dance and music classes. Photo by Viseth Dy, courtesy Cambodian Buddhist Society, Inc.

isolated areas, but they may in the long run diminish local diversity as newly available industrial goods supplant locally produced, handmade products.

Visitors to *The Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program will not hear the sounds of cocks crowing to welcome the rising sun or of kites singing to chase away the clouds. They will not smell the pungent fumes of burning gunpowder as rockets in the shape of *nagas* loft skyward to ensure sufficient rain or the heady odors of fish fermenting in pots to make Cambodian *prahok*, Lao *pha daek*, or Vietnamese *mam ca*. They will not see the pockets of fog settling into Yunnan mountain passes in the morning sun, the flood waters stretching from one horizon to the other at the end of the rainy season, or the verdant green of rice paddies as far as the eye can see. But we hope that the two hundred musicians, singers, cooks, craftspeople, ritual specialists, and dancers who have come to the banks of the Potomac from the banks of the Mekong will, nevertheless, give visitors a sense of the region and its remarkable people.

Frank Proschan is Program Specialist for UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in Paris. He began his career at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in 1970, serving as its first archivist (1975–1978) and as a staff folklorist (1986–1989 and 2000–2006). A specialist in the ethnology and folklore of mainland Southeast Asia, Proschan carried out his Ph.D. research with Kmhmu highlanders from Laos living as refugees in the United States.

Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool is Director of the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok, Thailand, a public organization that promotes data collection and research in anthropology and related human sciences. Her doctoral dissertation—written at Cambridge University in England—examined the shadow puppet tradition in southern Thailand. Her research interests cover performing arts, dance and culture, cultural identity, anthropology of the body, indigenous knowledge, material culture, and local museums.

FURTHER READING

- DAVIS, SARA L.M. 2005. *Song & Silence: Ethnic Revival on China's Southwest Borders*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- EVANS, GRANT, ED. 1999. *Laos: Culture and Society*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- GITTINGER, MATTIEBELLE, AND H. LEEDOM LEFFERTS. 1992. *Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia*. Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum.
- HARRELL, STEVEN. 2001. *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- KEYES, CHARLES F. 1995. *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- LEFFERTS, H. LEEDOM. 1994. "Women's Textiles and Men's Crafts in Thai Culture." In *1994 Festival of American Folklife*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, pp. 43–46.
- LEFFERTS, H. LEEDOM AND LOUISE ALLISON CORT. 1999. "Women at the Center of an Industrializing Craft: Earthenware Pottery Production in Northeast Thailand." *Museum Anthropology* 23 [1].
- _____. 2003. "A Preliminary Cultural Geography of Contemporary Village-based Earthenware Production in Mainland Southeast Asia." In *Earthenware in Southeast Asia*, edited by John Miksic. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

- NGUYEN VAN HUY AND LAUREL KENDALL, EDS. 2003. *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- OSBORNE, MILTON. 2000. *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- PHONGPHIT, SERI AND KEVIN HEWISON. 2001. *Village Life: Culture and Transition in Thailand's Northeast*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- REES, HELEN. 2000. *Echoes of History: Naxi Music in Modern China*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- SAM, SAM-ANG. 2002. *Musical Instruments of Cambodia*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.
- SLUITER, LIESBETH. 1992. *The Mekong Currency: Life and Times of a River*. Bangkok: Project for Ecological Recovery/TERRA.
- VIETNAM MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY. 2006. *Tai Textiles in the Mekong Region: Continuity and Change*. Hanoi: Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

- SAM-ANG SAM ENSEMBLE. 1997. *Mohori: Khmer Music from Cambodia*. Music of the World. LAT-50609.
- _____. 1996. *Echoes from the Palace: Court Music of Cambodia*. Music of the World. CDT-140.