



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Thailand : Mon and Khmer

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Profile

The Mon are mainly concentrated along Thailand's northern border with Burma (Myanmar) and around Bangkok, while the Khmer live primarily in the eastern provinces of Surin and Srisaket along the Cambodian border. Together they are estimated to number around 1.2 million. The languages of both groups are from the Mon-Khmer group of Austro-Asiatic languages, though many of them today appear to have adopted the Thai language and intermarried with Thais. Both are also predominantly Buddhists. Estimates of speakers of Mon (as opposed to individuals who recognize themselves as Mon) are of perhaps 100,000 people, while Khmer-speakers are much more numerous at over 1 million.

Historical context

Mon have been settled in what is now Thailand since at least the ninth century BCE, and are among the earliest recorded inhabitants of the area. They were to dominate this part of Asia for centuries, until the mighty Khmer kingdom of Angkor expanded westward into the area after the eighth century. It was also from the eighth century that the Mon became the conduit for Theravada Buddhism in the region. Ethnic Thais are thought to have started moving into and mixing with the already established Mon and Khmer communities from the eleventh century, establishing control under the first Thai kingdom at Sukothai in the thirteenth century.

The Mon subsequently became absorbed into the Thai population, though there were to be additional influxes of ethnic Mon fleeing Burmese oppression from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, as well as in more recent decades after the military takeover of Burma and the repression of many of that country's ethnic minorities.

The Khmer minority's presence in Thailand is long-standing, but it was also through continued conflict with Cambodia from the twelfth to the fifteenth century that Thailand was able to gain and then maintain its control over the large tract of territory where the Khmer are today concentrated.

While these long-established Khmer have absorbed many elements of Thai culture, they have been joined by perhaps tens of thousands of more recent arrivals, as Khmer fled the horrors of decades of civil war and Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Current issues

The Mon constitute today a dispersed minority - except perhaps for a few areas bordering Burma - that has been largely absorbed into general Thai society to the extent that relatively few young people speak the Mon language today. They are in many ways indistinguishable from Thailand's ethnic majority and are not targeted for discrimination by the state or other Thais. Mon refugees from neighbouring Burma, however, have a very different experience, as their lack of Thai citizenship leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and excludes them from a number of facets of life in Thai society.

Long-established members of the Khmer minority, for their part, like the Mon do not seem to experience a great deal of discrimination or obstacles in Thai society. Many of them are successful rice growers and own small businesses. Ethnic Khmer who are more recent arrivals, either because they fled Cambodia in the 1970s or 1980s and do not hold Thai citizenship, or because they are more recent economic migrants from Cambodia, are extremely vulnerable and largely unprotected in Thailand. Many of them end up in forced or bonded labour and commercial sexual exploitation, or, in the case of young boys, working in begging gangs.

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