

ON EARLY MONIC, VIETIC, AND BAHNARIC RELATIONS

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I have long wondered how Mon (Burma), Vietnamese (north Vietnam), and Bahnaric (south Vietnam) could all have the same numerals for 7-9, contra all the rest of Mon-Khmer (see Thomas 1976). The present location of these languages makes such an alignment seem unlikely. But some ideas recently proposed may suggest some possible explanations.

1. Bauer (1986) has solidly placed early Mons in the northern half of northeastern Thailand. Ferlus (1979) has proposed, though on less solid evidence, that the Vietic peoples had a strong presence in (were centered in?) northern Laos near the Mekong and perhaps across the Mekong.¹ This would make Proto-Monic and Proto-Vietic neighbouring languages, perhaps even intermingled.

2. Bauer tells me that old names for the Mon include forms like /rmaŋ ~ rmoŋ/ and that there is a possibility that it could have been phonemically /rmeŋ/. Oranuch (1985) reports that meng is still used as a name for the Mon in some parts of northern and northeastern Thailand. Ferlus (1979:9) tells us that Chinese annals from the 3rd to 8th centuries used the name Tao Ming or Tang Ming for a kingdom on the upper Mekong which was strong in the 3rd century but a vassal of Chenla in the 8th. This is the period of attested Mon presence in northern northeastern Thailand (Bauer 1986). Ferlus guessed that Tao/Tang Ming was a Vietic kingdom, but on Bauer's (1986) evidence it could well have been Mon.²

Phonologically Ming could well be representing a form like meng or rmeŋ. The Tao or Tang could possibly be representing an early variant form of the presyllable rə-; presyllable variation like this is found in a number of Mon-Khmer languages (e.g. Chrau). Or, as Bauer has suggested to me, the Tao/Tang might represent some form of the Mon-Khmer word dung/dong 'house, village, city'.

This hypothesis, if true, would make the early Mons a major power (the major power?) along the upper middle Mekong.

3. Katuic remains an obstacle, as it separates the Bahnarics from both the Vietics and from the upper middle Mekong. But Ferlus (1979) has also suggested, though on skimpy evidence, that Land Chenla, on the lower middle Mekong, was Katuic.

If indeed the main Katuic center was a strong kingdom along the Mekong, this would open up a possible scenario of the early northern Bahnarics extending up the coast and mountain ranges to meet the southern Vietics. This would make the early Bahnarics and early Vietics neighbours, and the Katuics would be west rather than north of the Bahnarics. The Chamic invaders from Malaya would soon drive the Bahnarics out of the coastal areas, and later push on up into the central plateau to become the Rade and Jarai. And the strong Katuic kingdom (Land Chenla) may have pushed up into the mountains, separating the Vietics and Bahnarics, as it is today.

The Katuic part of the hypothesis is very tenuous, but if this scenario is somewhere near the truth it could account for the similarity between Bahnaric, Monic, and Vietic.

NOTES

1. I am using the term Vietic, following the suggestion of Hayes (1983), to indicate the wider grouping that includes Vietnamese, Muong, Ruc, Thavung and their congeners, in contrast with the narrower grouping Viet-Muong that includes only Vietnamese and Muong. The term Vietic thus parallels the terms Katuic, Monic, Palaungic, etc., which are in common usage for the parallel branches of Mon-Khmer.

2. I am indebted to Christian Bauer for helpful discussions and information, but this need not imply his agreement with any particular aspects of my suggested scenario (admittedly heavily imaginative).

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