Philip Taylor


*The Khmer Lands of Vietnam*, by Philip Taylor, is a beautifully written and meticulously researched ethnography of the Khmer population that lives in the Kampuchea Krom (lower Cambodia) in the Mekong Delta of modern-day Vietnam. This study is absolutely necessary, as the area has historically been a sensitive political issue for both Vietnam and Cambodia. Claimed by Vietnamese kings since the late seventeenth century, colonized by France in the nineteenth through mid-twentieth century, and ceded to Vietnam in 1949, the area is still home to a sizeable Khmer population, as well as Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese, and Cham, among other groups. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Mekong Delta-Kampuchea Krom was the site of multiple wars.

This study, which investigates seven Khmer communities located on the Vietnamese side of the border, is a brilliant treatise on the relationship between people, their land, and their historical cosmology. Taylor found that the Khmer Krom communities’ settlement patterns as well as their cosmology reflected the distinct environment in which each of these populations resided: coastal dunes, river dunes, fresh water rivers, saltwater rivers, flooded mountains, ocean-side mountains, and uplands. Each community faced specific environmental challenges that limited access to freshwater. The pursuit of freshwater resulted in unique settlement patterns and rendered sources as holy sites around which *wats* (Buddhist temples) developed. Communities developed around *wats*, with their water source, shared resources, and protection from wild animals. The centrality of *wats* in the Khmer Krom communities reinforced the Khmer language, provided male education and literacy, and propagated Khmer culture. The seven Khmer Krom communities that Taylor has identified each constructed unique cosmologies to make sense of their community’s relationship with its environment and the patterns of settlement that each community developed. The result was a localized Buddhism that reflects the unique geography of each area.

Taylor’s research is based on seventeen research trips over more than a decade to hundreds of Khmer villages in the Mekong Delta-Kampuchea Krom area. What makes this study exceptional is Taylor’s fluency in Vietnamese and Khmer languages, as well as his thorough understanding of environmental sciences. The oral histories that Taylor collected reveal information about migrations, violence, and settlement patterns that are absent from the historiography...
of the lower Mekong yet crucial to understanding both Cambodian and Vietnamese history.

The chapters of The Khmer Lands of Vietnam are organized around the seven communities that developed to adapt to the ecological environments in the Kampuchea Krom-Mekong Delta area. Chapter 1 begins where the Mekong River delta meets the South China Sea and covers parts of the Vietnamese provinces of Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, and Bac Lieu. The area is characterized by phno, ancient sand dunes created by ocean currents and have since formed into highland areas that are protected from saltwater invasion, and the unique land formation offers access to freshwater. Khmer populations settled on the phno, forming a feather-shaped sort of archipelago of high-land settlements. Chapter 2 investigates the environmentally and ethnically diverse costal river dunes area in parts of Soc Trang and Bac Lieu, where phno are interspersed with fresh water rivers, and Khmer people co-mingle with Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese communities. As a result, the Khmer population of the costal river dunes is the most open to outsiders and new innovations. Taylor shows that this population of Khmer made sense of their disjointed yet communal identity through the myth of Neang Chan, a Khmer queen who escaped the royal palace, fled down the river system that is now named after her, and shed body parts along the way, symbolizing the disintegration of the Khmer Krom populations among the Vietnamese and Chinese. The communities that developed in that area took on the names of the body parts that fell in their location.

Chapter 3 takes readers inland to the freshwater rivers of Vinh Long, Can Tho, and Hau Giang and into parts of Tra Vinh and Soc Trang provinces. There, fertile land and access to fresh water provides for rich, highly coveted land. This area has been the most seriously affected by Vietnamese settlements since the seventeenth century. During the wars of the twentieth century, the Khmer population was displaced and resettled, and many Khmers lost their land.

The saltwater river region areas of Ca Mau, Kien Giang, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, and Bac Lieu that Chapter 4 examines are sparsely populated with Khmer, most of whom reside by the rivers, which are a source of freshwater for drinking, farming, and marine food sources. Community solidarity formed around shared resources and its cosmology incorporated stories of the waterways. In the last century, French and Vietnamese innovations in irrigation made fresh drinking water available, but consequently reduced the population’s dependence on the communal system and thus disintegrating the community. Fertilizers and pesticides that travel through the canals have poisoned drinking water and killed off wildlife that the Khmer population depended on for food.