

## I. Introduction: The Khmu people of Laos and their dialects

### 1. Ethnonyms, population number, geographical distribution, and sociolinguistic setting

Khmu is one of the major ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. They are found in a wide area of northern Southeast Asia which covers parts of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China (Yunnan). The majority of the Khmu live in Northern Laos. There are also the Khmu who have migrated to Europe, United States and Australia. The total Khmu population is around 600,000. In Laos alone there are not less than 500,000 speakers. The Khmu language belongs to the Khmuic branch of the Mon-Khmer subfamily within the Austroasiatic language family. The word *kə̌m<sup>h</sup>mu?* and its variants of *k<sup>h</sup>ə̌mu?*, *kammu* or *kə̌mu?* 'human being' is used to refer to their own group and language. Apart from that in Laos they are called *kha:* 'slave' or *Lao thə̌ŋ* 'highland Lao people'. However, the word *kha:* is not at all accepted by the Khmu.

In Laos, the Khmu are found in eight provinces (Luang Namtha, Udomsaj, Bokeaw, Sayaburi, Phongsali, Luang Prabang and Chiengkhwang). There are also a few villages in the area near Vientian. The Khmu are normally found in the same area as various Tai groups. For example the Khmu Lue in the northern part of Udomsaj live in the same area as the Tai Lue, in Hua Phan the Khmu live in the same area as Tai Daeng, in Luang Phrabang they live in the same area as Lao speakers and in Chiang Khwang they live in the same area as Phuan speakers etc. The Khmu and the Tai, therefore, have much linguistic and cultural influence on each other. The Khmu have been influenced by the Tai culture in many aspects, such as in the style of dressing and houses. The Khmu women normally dress themselves in a similar way to the Tai women who live in the same area. The outside structure of the house also looks similar, although the usage and function of various parts of the house are different. Khmu people in Laos can speak Lao and the Tai variety spoken in the same area. At the same time the Tai and other ethnic groups living in the same area as the Khmu can also speak some Khmu. The Khmu are generally believed to be indigenous people of northern Laos. However they were forced to work as labor on the land for the Lao and other Tai groups for very small compensation. A 72 years old Khmu man from Udomsaj said that his family received only two used shirts and trousers and a can of salt each year. Most of the Khmu are poor. The old are mostly illiterate. The young now have some formal education. Many villages have been resettled on the low land since the communist government administration. The Khmu is the biggest ethnic minority group in Laos. In some areas they are in need of better quality of life. The Khmu are animists. They worship the ancestor spirit and various kinds of spirits in natural environments such as land, mountain, water, and sky spirit, etc. apart from house and village spirits. They make and drink rice wine as a part of their spirit worshipping ceremony. They have the hand-tying ceremony for good fortune, animal sacrificing ceremonies for healing sick people, including traditional Khmu singing *tá:m*, bronze drum beating and folktale or story telling.

Different Khmu dialects in their homeland in northern Laos have specific names. They are the Khmu Yuan in Luang Namtha area near the Chinese border, Khmu Lue in the North of Udomsaj, Khmu Rook in the central part of Udomsaj, Khmu Khroang in the

southern part of Udomsaj or Parkbang area, and Khmu Cuang or Khmu Uu in Hua Phan, Luang Phrabang and Chiengkhwang. The names refers mainly to the name of the rivers in their settlements such as Mae Khoang river, Rook river and Uu river, or refers to the people the Khmu has special relationship with such as the Tai Lue people or Cuang, the Khmu hero and ancestor. The Khmu in different areas in Laos have slightly linguistic and cultural difference from one another. Because of the close contacts between the Khmu and the Tai-Lao pople, the Khmu language in Laos obviously illustrates the influence of its neighboring Tai languages and also Lao which is the official language especially in the use of the lexicon and certain phonological and grammatical patterns.

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