Chapter 6. 1st Millennium Southeast Asian Kingdoms

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Setting the Stage

Southeast Asia: “Let’s set the stage for the beginning of my historical period. In prehistoric times, Austroasiatic speakers inhabited my mainland, and Austronesian speakers inhabited my islands. The adjoining societies had interacted for so long that they looked similar racially and their languages sounded the same, although belonging to different families. More importantly, it seems that they developed a common culture. The bronze drums of the so-called Dong Son culture stand as mute aesthetic testimony to the long-range interactions of my prehistoric peoples. These drums are found from the Red River Valley in my northernmost regions in Vietnam to the Indonesian islands in my southernmost regions.

While my prehistoric Southeast Asians were relatively homogeneous, there were two ethno-linguistic cultures to the north that were waiting like glaciers to surge into the warmer river valleys to the south. Tibeto-Burman speakers lived in high mountains to the northwest and Tai-Kadai speakers lived on the high plateau to the northeast. Further there were 3 other language families in the vicinity that were to have a huge influence on my peoples although they never moved in – the Dravidian speakers in the south of India, the Aryan speakers in the north of India, and the Sinitic speakers of China.

The relative locations of these language families are shown in the map below. This is a picture of me with my neighbors in prehistoric times. Note that there are 7 primary language families shown in this relatively small area of the globe. For comparison, Indo-European is one and only primary language family of the entire Western Hemisphere as well as most of Europe including Russia.
To better understand what happened next, let us revisit my geography. The gigantic Himalayas define my northern border. Mighty rivers flow down from these stratospheric peaks into the ocean, etching enormous river valleys into my landscape. Proceeding from west to east, these rivers include the Brahmaputra, the Irrawaddy, the Salween, the Chao Phraya, the Mekong, and the Red (Hong) River. Due to the abundance of water and soil that was regularly refreshed, these valleys were ideal places for humans to flourish.

Austroasiatic speakers spread throughout these river valleys from the Brahmaputra to the Red River. Their culture employed rice cultivation techniques and domesticated animals. As food producers, they supplanted the preceding hunter-gatherer cultures. This Austroasiatic culture spanned my entire mainland from Northeast India to Vietnam.

However, each river valley was isolated from the others by high mountain ridges formed by the massive fingers of the Himalayas. After multiple generations of living in the same enormous valley isolated from the other valleys, the common Austroasiatic language family differentiated into many branches. The Munda family was spoken in the Brahmaputra Valley; Mon in the Irrawaddy, the Salween, and the Chao Phraya Valleys; Khmer in the
Mekong River Valley; and Vietnamese in the Red River Valley. While belonging to the same family, internal cultural differences based in geographical factors had already begun to evolve.

Around the beginning of the Common Era, 3 distinct international movements permanently changed the cultural landscape of the Southeast Asian mainland. 1) The Chinese conquered the Red River Valley where the Vietnamese lived. 2) The Pyu culture migrated south from Tibet to occupy the Irrawaddy River Valley of Myanmar. And 3) Buddhism entered from India. Let us discuss each development in turn.

**China’s entry into Vietnam**

In prehistoric times, the Tonkin culture inhabited the southeast coast of China and the Annam culture inhabited the Red River Valley in what is now north Vietnam. Both of these cultures were Austroasiatic speakers, like the rest of the Southeast Asian mainland. While Austroasiatic speakers inhabited the northeast coast, i.e north Vietnam and above, Austronesian speakers inhabited the remainder of the eastern coastline. This was the Cham culture, relatives of the Southeast Asian islanders.

As early as the third century BCE, the Chinese expanded south - pushing the Tonkin culture, who then lived on the southeast coast of China, into north Vietnam. This migration forced the Annam culture, who lived in the north, to move south into central Vietnam. This squeezed the Cham culture into south Vietnam. As China flexes her muscles, her neighbors yield.

Then the flourishing Han dynasty of China reached out, seizing the kingdoms of both Tonkin and Annam. In 208 BCE, Han China forced this small Mon-Khmer kingdom then located in the Red River Delta to become tribute states. Then in 111 BCE, China invaded, creating the province of "Viet Nam" or "Southern Province". Chinese occupation of these territories in the north and central regions of Vietnam lasted until 939 CE – over a thousand years.

During this millennium long rule, China attempted to ‘civilize’ these areas by requiring the Tonkinese and Annamese to write and speak Chinese, to wear Chinese fashions, and adopt Chinese customs. This was her way of including them in her empire. A similar strategy was employed by the Spanish in Mexico and the Philippines nearly 1000 years later. During this thousand-year occupation, the Austroasiatic culture was thoroughly Sinicized. This transformation by containment created the beginnings of modern Vietnamese culture. Henceforth, we will refer to them as such.
The Chinese occupation also transformed their language. Also influenced by Tai migrations, Vietnamese gradually became a monosyllabic, tonal language. Although still belonging to the Mon-Khmer language family, its superficial resemblance to Chinese and Tai increased. This linguistic blending was a source of great confusion for scholars when they initially began studying the language. After examining the content of the language, i.e. the words, rather than how it sounds, linguists realized that Vietnamese didn’t belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family of the Chinese. Instead Vietnamese is a branch of Austroasiatic/Mon-Khmer, the primary linguistic family of Southeast Asia’s mainland at this time. There were two notable exceptions, as we are about to find out.

The Kingdom of Champa

Although China ruled the north of Vietnam in the 1st millennium of the Common Era, Champa continued to rule the south. They were not sinofied at all. Instead they were one of the many Indianized kingdoms that sprouted up in Southeast Asia at this time. In addition to Champa, the kingdoms of the Khmer, Sumatran, Javanese, and Mon were all of this variety. Each country had a high level of culture - artistic, literary, and architectural. The religion of the ruling classes in each of these territories was a combination of Buddhism and Brahmanism. The tribes continued their local traditions, which always seemed to include some type of spirit worship, both ancestral and environmental.

The Chams of Champa were Austronesian speakers like the peoples of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Pushed down from the north by the Chinese, they spread west to control sections of Cambodia and Laos by the late second century CE. With the Vietnamese in the north under China’s thumb, the first millennium was the Golden Age of Champa.

The Pyu migration into Myanmar/Burma

We’ve seen how China conquered Vietnam in my northeast corner. Something equally significant was happening at the same time on the northwest side of my mainland in Burma/Myanmar.

By way of the great river passages of the Himalayas, the Pyu tribes of Tibet, speaking languages in the Tibeto-Burman family, migrated down these watery roads from the north. These Tibeto-Burman speakers were the first to isolate the Austroasiatic speakers into linguistic pockets. Specifically,
the Pyu migration permanently separated the Munda culture of India from their Mon-Khmer cousins on Southeast Asia’s mainland.

The Pyu were the first culture to dominate Burma’s northern plains. They ruled an empire of sorts. It lasted for 1000 years - from the 1st century BCE until the 9th century CE. They even had loose control of 18 kingdoms. To indicate their relative importance, a Roman embassy visited them in the 1st century CE. According to Chinese accounts, the culture had a very humane nature - filled with elegance and grace - no chains or prisons. They were Buddhists who developed vaulted temples, which were to find their full flowering at Pagan in the following centuries. As with the other Buddhist cultures of Southeast Asia, the Pyu were highly literate - with both their sons and daughters educated in the monasteries. They even had their own written language, based upon the Mon script. While the ‘humane’ Pyu ruled the north, the ‘cultured’ Mon ruled southern Myanmar.

**The Mon kingdoms of Southern Myanmar**

It is hard to know which set of humans was the first to inhabit Myanmar. Most of the migrations occurred before written records. As with the rest of Southeast Asia, the first written accounts of the culture come from the Chinese traders. However, we can be fairly certain that Myanmar’s southern delta region was populated by the Mon, an Austroasiatic culture. They presumably migrated in from the east - from what is now Thailand and were cousins to the Khmer in Cambodia.

Because of Myanmar’s proximity by water to the great cultures of India, the Mon were heavily influenced by her traditions. These merged with local practices to create a lasting synthesis. Note that the Indian influence was based upon trade, not military action. The rest of Southeast Asia, including both the mainlanders and the islanders, had the same harmonious relationship with India.

Thaten was the Mon capital from the 1st to 4th century CE. Like most of the Southeast Asian kingdoms - the Mon kingdom with its center at Thaten was a commercial center. Their relationship with India was centered upon business. As the Mon kingdom evolved, its capitol shifted to Pegu on the Pegu River - another port town on the eastern side of my delta. It’s about 50 miles northeast of Rangoon, Myanmar’s present capitol. The distinctive societies of the Pyu and the Mon eventually merged to create one of the most culturally advanced kingdoms in Southeast Asia, if not in the world at that time.
Buddhism certainly played a part in this cultural synthesis. As a brief preview, the Mon kingdom was the first to receive the Buddhist teachings from India. This was due to proximity. The Mon inhabited Myanmar’s delta with all its international ports, which were just across the Bay of Bengal from Sri Lanka and India. In turn, the Mon disseminated the new religion and accompanying culture of Buddhism first to the Pyu, then the Khmer, and later to the Tai speaking cultures.

In summary, in the 1st millennium of the Common Era, China ruled the Vietnamese of the Red River Valley in what is now North Vietnam. The Austronesian Cham ruled South Vietnam. The Tibeto-Burman Pyu founded an empire in northern Myanmar, while the Mon established a cultural center in southern Myanmar. Mon-Khmer speakers inhabited the area in between. Adjacent to their brothers in southern Myanmar, the Mon inhabited the west in what is now Thailand, while the Khmer lived in the east in present day Cambodia. Let’s examine the Mon culture of Thailand.

**The Mon’s Dvaravati period in Thailand**

The history of Thailand can be broken into three very general periods - Dvaravati, Khmer, and Thai. The Dvaravati culture was at its peak from about the 6th century until about the 11th or 12th century. It consisted of many small city-states of uncertain ethnicity. Although there are no written records, it is clear that the inhabitants of the area were not of Thai descent. Rather than being Thai speakers, it is thought that these people spoke a language in the Mon-Khmer family. They probably belonged to the Mon culture.

They left behind many examples of magnificent art - including temples, Buddha images, giant terra-cotta heads, sculptures, and terra cotta relief on walls and caves. It appeared to be a thriving culture as the Indian merchants referred it to as the Land of Gold. Dvaravati itself is a Sanskrit word used to refer to the city of Shiva from the Indian epic poem *Mahabharata*. It literally means 'place having gates'.

The inhabitants probably worshipped both Buddha or Shiva, like the rest of Southeast Asia at this time. It seems that Indian culture was much more influential in the area than was Chinese culture. It is even thought that the Mon, the probable residents, are a mixture of indigenous and Indian blood. It makes sense as Indian culture is overlaid upon the indigenous cultures all over Southeast Asia.
India’s Brahmanism had already exerted a strong influence on the local culture. They were already producing the high quality art, which was to be characteristic of the area up until the present day. Their artists were using gold extensively, making temples and sculpting larger than life size figures.

The Dvaravati period ended in the 12th and 13th centuries CE with the expansion of the Khmer of Angkor into Thailand. It would be natural to discuss the Khmer civilization at this time. However due its cultural preeminence in the region which, of course, included its magnificent architectural achievements at Angkor, we’re going to examine their culture in much more depth in subsequent chapters.

The Nan Chao kingdom of the Tai speakers

Southeast Asia: “My cultural composition changed from its prehistoric configuration during the first millennium of the Common Era. Austronesian speakers still inhabited my islands; the Khmer and Cham continued to rule the eastern mainland; the Mon remained the dominant culture on the western mainland. However, the Chinese now ruled the Vietnamese on my northeast coast; and the Pyu ruled the northwest plains of my mountainous rivers in Myanmar. But there is one character missing - who was about to enter my picture in a big way. In keeping with our language theme, the Khmer, Mon and Vietnamese were speakers of the indigenous Austroasiatic languages; the Cham and my islanders spoke Austronesian languages; and the Pyu a Tibeto-Burman language. The Tai speakers had not arrived yet.

They were still moving south. In the first century CE, they lived at the mouth of the Yangtze River, but the aggressive Han Chinese pushed them into what is now the Yünnan province in southern China. This province is located just to north of the Himalayan Mountains that define my northern border. They eventually congealed into the kingdom of Nan Chao, which means Southern Princedom. They developed a high level of culture. Those who speak languages in the Tai family trace their origins to Nan Chao with Yünnan as their ancestral homeland.

Nan Chao belonged to China’s political mandala. The Tai-speakers of the kingdom provided China’s imperial court with tribute in exchange for presents. The tributary relationship was a blessing, not a burden, as the gifts were worth far more than the tribute.

In the 8th century, Nan Chao became a dominant kingdom with the unification of 6 kingdoms under one ruler. This occurred in 729 CE. The Tai speaking princedoms joined as one to fight successfully in alliance with
China against Tibet. After they found their power, they began flexing it. China became afraid. To neutralize Nan Chao’s growing power, China launched a punitive expedition against them. The kingdom of Nan Chao repulsed them twice - in 751 and 754.

The Tai-speaking people grew rich as they dominated the overland east-west trade routes from China through Myanmar to India. Their wave was gaining momentum. They expanded to the southwest into Burma, capturing the Pyu capital in 832. They also marched eastward into Vietnam, conquering Hanoi, the capital of the Tonkin kingdom, in 861. In Myanmar, Tai speakers replaced the Pyu in the northeast. They were called the Shan. This was the first, but not the last, migration of Tai speakers onto my soil.

Here is a picture of Nan Chao about 750 AD with her powerful neighbors. Note the Chinese T’ang Empire to the north and the Tibetans to the northwest. The Tai speakers fought with the Chinese against the Tibetans. One of Tibet’s relatives, the Burmese, migrated into Myanmar to compete with their relatives, the Pyu. Then there is the Khmer Empire of Chenla to the south. Little did we know that the Mongol invasion would force Nan Chao south to conquer the Khmer some 500 to 600 years later.
How cute. Everyone was so young then. Khmer was still a teenager. He hadn't moved to Angkor yet, but was still a major entrepôt between the Chinese in the East and the Indians to the west. And look at Sri Lanka. She was still a thriving center of Theravada. Then there is the Mon culture of southern Myanmar and Thailand. Of course the Cham still had their Hindu kingdom of Champa in present day Vietnam. Little did we know that population pressures would eventually squeeze the Cham and Mon to near extinction. Ah those were the days. We were all so young and had so much to look forward to. Little could we anticipate all the trials and tribulations that were coming.

Now that we've discussed the cultural composition of my mainland in the 1st millennium of the modern era, let us shift our attentions to the Buddhist entry into Southeast Asia. It was to have a long-term and growing religious influence on my mainland cultures."