

Studies in Viet Nam on Austronesian Languages and Peoples

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VIETNAMESE SCIENTISTS TAKE a keen interest in studying Austronesian languages and peoples. These studies aim not only at an understanding of the history and civilization of Southeast Asia, but also at shedding light on the reality of Viet Nam in the past as well as in the present.

About half a million Austronesian speakers now live in Viet Nam. The composition of the Vietnamese national community has only recently, however, been determined in definite terms. After long studies and hard discussion in ethnography, specific theoretical foundations have been determined for the classification of the ethnic nationalities, and on this basis we recognize by consensus that the Vietnamese community is composed of 54 "nationalities." Five of these speak Austronesian languages and inhabit a large stretch of land in the central part of the country. They are intermixed with people of various other ethnic groups, especially the Viet or Kinh, the majority people. The Austronesian speaking groups are as follows:

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| 1. The Gia Rai (Jarai) | approximately 180,000 persons |
| 2. The E De (Ede or Rhade) | approximately 150,000 persons |
| 3. The Cham | approximately 70,000 persons |
| 4. The Ra Glai (Raglai) | approximately 40,000 persons |
| 5. The Chu Ru (Churu) | approximately 10,000 persons |

These figures are the result of the 1979–1980 census, when the total population of Viet Nam was in the neighborhood of 53 million. Today, the total population has surpassed 58 million, so allowing for an average population growth rate the Austronesian-speaking population has probably now reached half a million.

Thus five ethnic groups, with a population of half a million (less than 1% of the total population), occupy an area of no less than 15–20 percent of the country, chiefly in the provinces of Gia Lai and Cong Tum (Jarai, Kontum), Dar Lac (Darlac), and Thuan Hai.

As it cannot do otherwise, Vietnamese science has so far approached, from various angles, only those Austronesians who live in Viet Nam.

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I shall expose the main results of our works in four separate fields, which together provide a general framework for further studies, more profound and more comprehensive. Considerable importance is attached by Vietnamese scientists to the origin of the Austronesians in Viet Nam.

LINGUISTIC DATA

The languages now spoken in Viet Nam belong to three families: Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan (including Chinese), and, most importantly, Austroasiatic. The latter family has two principal subgroups, Mon-Khmer and Tay-Thai. The major Mon-Khmer languages are those of the Viet-Muong subgroup, which includes Viet (or Vietnamese), the mother tongue of over 80 percent of the Vietnamese population and the national lingua franca.

A frequent linguistic phenomenon in Viet Nam is heavy borrowing between different languages. Some, including many in the Mon-Khmer branch, have resisted borrowing and can be classified with ease. Others, however, although retaining their fundamental structures, have assimilated not only lexical elements but also structural mechanisms from other languages. This is the case with the Cham language, which has a basic Austronesian structure with many Mon-Khmer features. The other Austronesian languages in Viet Nam have also borrowed heavily from Mon-Khmer languages.

Another observation made by Vietnamese linguists in their contrastive analysis of the three major language families in Viet Nam (and in Southeast Asia at large) is that they have originated from a prehistoric Southeast Asian language with a CCVC linguistic structure. In the Tay-Thai branch this structure has developed with affixes into a CVC structure, hence the integration of syllable with word and morpheme and the concurrent appearance of the tonal system. Vietnamese linguists similarly explain monosyllabism and the tonal system in Vietnamese. However, while accepting the hypothesis of an ancient common Southeast Asian language, they do not recognize a separate Kadai subgroup with specific characteristics apart from Tay-Thai and Austronesian.

BIOLOGICAL DATA

Vietnamese scientists consider that the inhabitants of Southeast Asia (including Viet Nam) belong to three racial groups: the Negrito, the Veddoid, and the Austro-Asian. The Negritos and the Veddoids are both Australoid populations, as are the Melanesians who inhabit the eastern fringes of Southeast Asia. Biologically, almost the total population of Viet Nam today is Austro-Asian, and Southern Mongoloid.

Many Vietnamese scientists who study human morphology also support the contention of the French scholar, Bernard, and some other early twentieth-century European anthropologists, that it is necessary to separate from the Austro-Asian another Southern Mongoloid population, generally termed Indonesian, on the basis of craniometric indices. However, they point out that the terms "Indonesian" and "Austro-Asian" (and others like "Austronesian") are both vague and ambiguous. When used it should be stated clearly whether their meanings are linguistic, biological, and with what geographical connotations.

Nguyen Dinh Khoa has made a detailed contrastive analysis of the Indonesian and Austro-Asian populations of Viet Nam, excluding the Negritos and the Veddoids. Factors which characterize the Indonesian group and separate it from the Austro-Asian

include an average or long (but not round) facial shape, a broader nose, less-developed eyelid angle (only from 20 to 40%, not 45% or more), curlier hair, darker complexion (standard indices of 18–23% and not 15–18% of Lushan sample), and shorter stature.

Among the Austronesian speaking peoples the Cham alone are considered to belong to the Austro-Asian group. The Gia Rai, the E De, the Ra Glai and the Chu Ru belong to the Indonesian group, although all five populations are classified as Southern Mongoloid. The Gia Rai and the E De have shorter statures than the Cham, darker complexions, and more frequent occurrences of curly hair.

ANCIENT SKELETAL REMAINS

Strictly speaking we have not yet discovered any ancient skeletal remains in the Austronesian-speaking regions of Viet Nam. But it may be useful to refer to ancient human remains across the whole country, and also outside Viet Nam. The Southeast Asian region is considered by Vietnamese anthropologists to represent a “*trait d’union*” between Australoids in Oceania and Mongoloids in Asia. The preceramic skeletal remains found in Indonesia, though far from abundant, bear strong Australoid characteristics, while the materials found in Laos and in Kampuchea, and recently in Thailand, are mostly Southern Mongoloid (Indonesian or Austro-Asian).

In Viet Nam, the Institute of Archaeology, where ancient skeletal materials excavated in Viet Nam are preserved, is aware of the existence of about 80 skulls from pre-Neolithic, Neolithic, and Metal Age contexts. Only 29 were excavated before the August Revolution in 1945. During 1984 alone, two early Hoabinhian skulls and four Dong Son skulls were excavated. The Hoabinhian skulls were unearthed in Thanh Hoa, and were found in the best condition ever reported in our country. Observations on these important new materials show that the appearances of the various human types on Vietnamese soil occurred successively: first the Melanesian type (very close to the pure Australoids), after that the Indonesian type, and then the Austro-Asian type.

Thus a simple palaeoanthropological succession can be mapped out:

Immediately before/during the Neolithic Age	the Melanesians and Indonesians
The Metal Age	the Indonesian and Austro-Asians

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS

For a long time, archaeologists—from Heine-Geldern in the 1920s to Bezacier in the 1970s—chose the stone axe as a major indicator for tracing migrations of various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. Three major types of ax were identified, of which the type with a rectangular or trapeziform cross section was branded as made and used by early Austronesians. Numerous hypotheses have been based on the presence or absence of this type of ax to make up pictures which are now considered as groundless.

So, can a study of early ceramic materials lead to clearer and more significant conclusions? Many scholars hold the view that cord-marking is the simplest and most rudimentary form of pottery decoration, and also the oldest in Southeast Asia (from Hoabinhian contexts). This, however, is not true. As with the earliest pottery in the Southeast Asian islands, the oldest Vietnamese pottery is plain, without decoration, and often with a red slip. Such assemblages are known from Quynh Van (Nghe Tinh Province) and Bau Tro (Binh Tri Thien Province).

From observations on early ceramic assemblages found on the Southeast Asian mainland and in the islands, and because of the possibility of post-Hoabinhian and Bacsonian contacts between the two regions, Vietnamese archaeologists advocate careful comparative analyses of regional assemblages. These analyses assert the originality of the island cultures in terms of their non-Hoabinhian stone tool assemblages, yet also show that, with the birth of technologies for grinding stone, making pottery, farming, and seafaring, these two areas of Southeast Asia developed closer contacts with each other.

Only with this background of culture contact between the mainland and the islands in the period of the “Neolithic Revolution” can we understand their similarities in later millennia. The Sa Huynh culture appeared and flourished in Viet Nam in territories historically and presently occupied by Austronesian speakers in parallel with the Kalanay culture in the Philippines. Whether the features common to both these cultures originated on the mainland or in the islands is not very important. What is important is the fact that both were developing to a high level in a situation of assumed cross-fertilization.

In archaeological and historical studies in Viet Nam the relations between the Sa Huynh culture and the Cham ethnic nationality (including the Champa Kingdom of historical times) constitute a key topic of debate.

THE ORIGIN OF THE AUSTRONESIANS

Today, Heine-Geldern’s hypothesis of a nonnative origin for Austronesian ethnic groups in Southeast Asia has been proven to be groundless. There remain two different voices: one belonging to Levin and Tchekobksarov who believe that the Austronesian homeland lay in southeastern China; the other belonging to Solheim who thinks it was south of the Philippines in eastern Indonesia [but see Solheim paper on this subject, this issue, *ed.*]. In fact, these two arguments are not necessarily contradictory. There may have been different directions of migration, with that from the mainland taking place first, and then after Austronesian languages developed in the islands they had some reflections back on the mainland.

The oldest racial composition of the inhabitants of Southeast Asia is considered to be Australoid. Then the course of changes led to the tendency towards a Mongoloid phenotype. The Mongoloid factor made a special contribution to the formation of the Austro-Asian populations, and also to those ethnic nationalities who speak Austronesian languages.