The peoples on the two shores of the Gulf of Thailand—the eastern coast of present-day peninsular Thailand and the coast of present-day Cambodia and Southern Vietnam (historically Cambodian)—have been in contact for a long time, probably since prehistoric times. These contacts have left cultural and linguistic traces, as will be seen via some clues, principally of Khmer linguistic and cultural traits in Southern Thailand.

The populating of southern Thailand

The “Thaization” of Southern Thailand probably begins, at the earliest, in the thirteenth century, as the Ram Khamhaeng inscription mentions Si Thammarat as Sukhothai vassal, while acknowledging that the city was famous as a Singhalese Buddhist studies center. But it is doubtful that Tai-speaking populations arrived en masse in the south at that time. Thus, a Buddhist master from this region, who went to Sukhothai in response to King Ram Khamhaeng’s call could communicate with Sukhothai people in Khmer or in Mon. Moreover, the Khom script (Khmer script) was the Buddhist script in use in the region until recent times. Two generations ago, educated people could still read texts in Khom script. However, it remains to be investigated whether this Khom script had particularities, as compared with the Khom script in use in other parts of Thailand.

According to oral sources, the settlement of Tai-speaking populations in the Southern region occurred in BE 1928 (AD 1385), when king Râmeśvar of Ayuttthaya attacked Chiang Mai and deported its population to the South, settling them in Nakhon Si Thammarat and other southern cities. However, as reported by Pinit Wannangam (1992: 44-45), this thesis has been refuted by Praserth Na Nagara, who could not find any mention of this event in the chronicles. According to another theory, based on linguistics (Brown 1985: 2), “[T]he people of Sukhothai were the direct ancestors of the modern southern Thais.” According to this theory “King Ramkhamhaeng conquered and settled (or at least stationed large numbers of soldiers and administrators in) Nakhon Srithamarat [Nakhon Si Thammarat]. Neighboring people learned the language of their administrators and thus the language spread.” In the meantime the language of Ayuttthaya also spread and eventually replaced the language of Sukhothai in the North. However, another linguist, A. Diller, contends that “[h]istorically, a substantial Tai-speaking population has been in the peninsular area for over five hundred years” (Diller 1985: 320)—that is, since the mid-15th century, two centuries after king Ram Khamhaeng is supposed to have conquered Nakhon Si Thammarat. According to Vickery (1991: 349-50), probably “Southern Thai is simply an offshoot of Ayuttthayan Thai, which reached the peninsula during the gradual domination of the Chao Phraya valley by Thai, and which has undergone further local evolution, perhaps under the influence of non-Thai (Mon-Khmer, Malay) substrata.”
Before the region became Tai-speaking, it was mainly peopled with Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples. There are remnants of such populations in Yala, Trang, Satun and Phatthalung provinces, speaking closely related dialects. For instance, there is a group called Sakai in Malaysia, and Ngoh7 in Thailand (meaning “rambutan” because of their frizzy hair). These people call themselves Moniq or Manni (meaning “human being”).

There is Mon influence in the southern vocabulary, but its date still needs to be further investigated. There are two supposed Mon inscriptions in Nakhon Si Thammarat, but one of them—at Wat Mahathat, Muang Nakhon Si Thammarat (National Library 1986: 38-41)—is very fragmentary, and the other—at Wiharn Po Langka, Wat Phra Mahathat Waramahawiharn, Muang Nakhon Si Thammarat (National Library 1986: 112-118)—is rather illegible. Their Mon origin is questionable (Bauer 1992: 533). While Mon vestiges seem very rare, some linguistic research claims that thirty percent of the common vocabulary in Southern Thai dialects is of Mon origin (Hemmet 1994: 101).

Contacts with the Mon world probably contributed to the introduction of Theravāda Buddhism from Ceylon in Nakhon Si Thammarat. As this region was a crossing point between India, Mainland Southeast Asia and China, Indians, especially Tamils, were probably present, as we know that they settled trading posts and left two inscriptions in Tamil (Cœdès 1929: inscr. 26 and 29; Hultzsch 1913, 1914).

There were also Austronesian populations such as sea nomads and probably the Malays.

The influence of the Śrīvijaya power—which was a sea power from the seventh century AD to the fourteenth century—was also felt in the eighth century as the sovereign of Śrīvijaya is men-
tioned in the Wat Sema Muang inscription (Nakhon Si Thammarat province), bearing a date corresponding to AD 775 (Cœdès, 1989: 334-335).

**Khmer in southern Thai dialects and in toponymy**

There is a Khmer substratum in the linguistic landscape of the Thai-speaking part of present-day southern Thailand. This can be detected in the modern dialects and in toponymy. Mr Premin Karawi—in his Ph.D. thesis defended at the Linguistics Department, Chulalongkorn University, in 1995—has made a list of about 1320 Khmer borrowings in southern Thai, and a fair number of them are used only in that part of the country. These borrowings have been perfectly adapted to the phonological system of the borrowing language, and have often undergone semantic changes. Take, for instance, some common words such as /kæŋ/ “to speak”, which comes from Khmer *thlaen* “to declare”; “to drink in gulps” is /mūk/ from Khmer *phûk* “to drink”; /ŋaŋ/ “a half day” from Mon-Khmer *thnâi* “sun, day”, etc. These words are not found in the common vocabulary of Thai dialects spoken in the Central Plain, so it is probable that at some stage they were directly borrowed from Khmer.

Khmer words attested to in the toponyms of this region have an interest of their own, as in many cases they do not belong to everyday vocabulary any longer.

As regards their dating, vowel and consonant analysis of these toponyms enables us to identify more or less the period when we think they became established. For instance, the word *bān* /phaN/ “water tank”, from Old Khmer *travān / travān*, found in the name of many water-tank sites, has an initial consonant and a vocalism which reveal that it was borrowed before the end of the Angkorean period.

From a semantic viewpoint, these toponyms are diverse. They are drawn from geographical features, flora, fauna or cultural elements.

The geographical references of these toponyms send us back to the original Khmer meaning. For instance, /lampam/, which is the name of a stream that flows into the lake (or lagoon) of Songkhla, probably comes from Old Khmer *amvām* “confluence, estuary” (bām in Modern Khmer) (Daoruang Wittayarat 1999: 29). Another example is *dahle* pronounced /lee/, which means sea or lagoon in the common language, but which is also found in some fresh-water placenames. In such cases it is preceded by a Thai element whose meaning is close to the Khmer one, such as *hnâÝ* “pond”. Such examples reveal that in times past, Khmer-speaking and Thai-speaking people lived alongside each other and went through a stage of bilingualism.

Toponyms referring to social, economic and religious life can also provide us with important information on the Khmerization of this region. We collected four toponyms in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Songkhla provinces, which refer to the titles of dignitaries and the social organization of ancient Cambodia. Some of them are found in documents prior to the nineteenth century such as: *jâñ / jâñ* (monastery name), from OK *chloîn; kâñlon* (village name), from OK *kamloîn; phateeñ* (monastery name, and appellative of Brahmans in Nakhon Si Thammarat), from OK *mrâññ / kmrâññ; vàññ* (village name) from OK *rrnoc* (Modern Khmer *ranoc*) “fortnight of the waning moon”, perhaps alluding to the fact that the villagers performed corvée each fortnight of the waning moon, as was often the case in ancient Cambodia.

Thanks to these toponyms, we can advance the hypothesis that there used to be a social and religious organization in the southern part of present-day Thailand inspired by the model used in the ancient Khmer empire.
Some historical data which might explain the context of Khmerization

The Malay Peninsula was a melting pot for peoples speaking languages belonging to different linguistic families: Mon-Khmer, Austronesian, Dravidian, Indo-European etc, especially during the so-called “Indianization” process in the first centuries AD. The Kra Isthmus—the narrow part of the peninsula—was a favoured stopping-off place for people travelling by sea from India to China and thus performed the role of disseminator of Indian civilization to the Indochinese Peninsula. The story told in Chinese chronicles about the origin of the Funan dynasty, born out of the union of a Brahmin who came from India via a country which might be located somewhere on the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula, and a local princess, seems to suggest that mutual contacts between the two shores of the Gulf of Thailand are nearly two thousand years old.

At a later period, a Chinese text tells us about the country of Gia-lo-hi bordering the southern part of Suryavarman II’s empire (AD 1113 -c.1150) (Cœdès 1989: 35). This country is certainly Grahi, whose name is found in an inscription engraved on the pedestal of a Buddha statue at Wat Hua Vieng in Surat Thani province. This inscription bears the date 1105 śaka (AD 1183) (Dupont 1942: 109). It supplies fundamental evidence of the Khmerization of this region as, although written in a script rather different from those in use in the Khmer area of that time, it is nevertheless written in Old Khmer. Moreover, it uses a royal title which is a mixture of both Angkorean and Śrīvijaya titles: kamraten aih mahārāja, as well as a Khmer dignitary title: mrate. These epigraphic data confirm our hypothesis of the existence of a social and religious organization along Khmer lines, as suggested by toponymy.

Old Khmer was therefore used by the aristocracy in the twelfth century, and this situation was to last for centuries, as we have a deed of donations (kalpanā) made to monasteries, which is written in the Khmer language with a strong admixture of Thai words, and which is dated BE 2242 (AD 1669) (Sāmnāk Nāyak Rāṭhamantrī 1967: 1). This mixture of the Khmer and Thai languages confirms our impression that the two peoples were living side by side and went through a period of bilingualism. Moreover, this document, which originates from Wat Khian, Bang Kaew, Phatthalung province, is written in a script called kāmbujāksar (Cambodian characters) in the text but does not look like the Mūl or the Iriēn script in use in Cambodia. It was probably a local variation specific to the region, and this kind of document, as with other Buddhist manuscripts of this region, uses a Mūl-type script similar to the one of Central Siam.

From an art-historical perspective, the influence of Khmer, or Khmerized, art can also be felt in this region, especially in the bronze statuettes representing Mahāyānic divinities and in votive tablets (Jacq-Hergoualc’h 1996: 411). These remains have been mainly found in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Sathing Phra (Sdūn Brahṭi).

Perhaps the abundant presence of sugar-palm trees in Sathing Phra district can be seen as evidence of an ancient Khmer occupation, as some people like to think that, in Thailand and Vietnam, such trees are found in regions which were occupied—or still are—by Khmer populations. However cultivation of sugar-palm trees probably originally came from the south of India, where they are still abundant. They are also prolific in Burma.10

Moreover, if we compare some of the rituals and arts of the Southern Thais and Khmers, we come across some strong similarities suggestive of ancient relationships. For instance, one of the most important religious rituals in Peninsular Thailand is called /bun duan sip/ “festival of the
tenth month.” It is performed during the tenth lunar month for two weeks, the last day of which, the fifteenth day of the waning moon, is called /chiŋ preet/ (to seize the preta-s or ghosts) (Hemmet 1994: 116-118). This festival, which is held to pay respect to deceased ancestors and to feed them, can be compared to the Kān’ Piñḍ festival (with Bhįm Piñḍ, the last day of the Kān’ Piñḍ) (called fête des morts by the French), is of tremendous importance in Cambodia. Central Thai people call this festival Punya sārad /bun saat/ “Autumn festival”, and Lao people /bun hoɔ khaw saak/ or /bun hoɔ khaw salaak/ “festival [which consists in cooked] rice wrapped in lots [and offered to monks]”, but it does not have the same range as in Peninsular Thailand or Cambodia, and is hardly celebrated. Curiously the Songkran, or New Year’s celebration, is not celebrated with pomp by Southern Thais, contrary to the profusion of merrymaking by Khmer, Central Thai, Lao, Mon and Burmese populations.

Another example is a kind of shadow theater called nang talung (pronounced /naŋ taluŋ/) in Peninsular Thailand, that is extremely popular among villagers—even more than television programs (Hemmet 1994: 121-22). This kind of theater, performed as far up as Petchaburi Province, is not popular at all in other parts of Thailand. This puppet theater is called wayang kulit gedek in Malaysia,11 and there is a similar kind of theater called spaek tüc /sbaec tooc/ in Cambodia – similar but not identical to nang talung.12 Moreover, in Cambodia, other local names are used for spaek tüc: ayang /ʔajøøN/, nang talung /naŋ taluŋ/ or nang kalung /naŋ kaluŋ/ (Marchal 1956; Pich Tum Kravel [2000]: 37). Ayang might derive from Malay and Javanese wayang, itself perhaps derived from bayang meaning “shadow”,13 Nang means “skin, leather” in Thai languages. The original meaning of talung is still unclear. These names are very interesting as they reveal that cultural influences were from both sides, i.e. not only from Cambodia to the Kra Isthmus, but also from the Kra Isthmus to Cambodia. The words nang talung or nang kalung are obviously borrowed from Thai, and it is known that Thai words entered Khmer after the Angkorean period14 until the end of the nineteenth century. So we can hypothesize that the Khmers borrowed the art of spaek tüc directly from the southern Thais or from the Malays, and not via Siam in the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya or Bangkok periods.15 The Malays who set up small communities in Cambodia (called Jvā or “Javanese”) are skilled navigators and have had long-standing contacts with Cambodia. Moreover from the 14th to the 17th century, Cambodia pursued a maritime vocation (Vickery 2004: 50-51). Thus, the Khmers probably borrowed—or took back—the art of nang talung in the middle period.

The last example is the fact that until the first part of the twentieth century, it was unusual to cremate corpses immediately. People dying a cruel or violent death were wrapped in mats, enclosed in bamboo structures, and then hung between two trees or branches instead of being buried or incinerated. When the corpse was well decomposed, the bones were picked up from the ground and suspended again. Only Buddhist monks would come and pick them up in order to burn them according to Buddhist rites (Hemmet 1994: 116). Hemmet also says that in Pattani Province, even the corpses of naturally deceased persons were hung in the forest this way. Perhaps this can be related to Tcheou Takuan’s report stating that, in thirteenth-century Cambodia, “there are no coffins for dead people; some kind of mat is used only, and they are covered up with fabric […]. People take the corpse out of town to some isolated and uninhabited place where it is abandoned and then people leave” (Pelliot 1951: 24) (our translation from French). Nowadays in Cambodia, it is still usual in the countryside to bury in the forest people
who have died a violent death, and in some places it is still usual to perform ceremonies in which corpses are exhumed and the remains transferred elsewhere. This was also the case in southern Thailand until the twentieth century for corpses which were not suspended\(^1\) (Hemmet 1992: 261). These double funerals also exist among Malayo-Polynesian peoples.

We are unable at this time to say whether the Khmerization process of Peninsular Thailand stems from a direct relationship with the center of power of ancient Cambodia or whether it stems, rather, from relationships between Lopburi—itself deeply Khmerized—and the southern part of present-day Thailand, especially Nakhon Si Thammarat, as we find related in the Pāli chronicles composed in Chiang Mai (Cœdès 1989: 248-252). Nor do we know whether there are any historical documents in Cambodia that mention or allude to this region.

At the moment we have the impression, given the borrowings and toponyms, that Khmerization—as a linguistic phenomenon—penetrated the elite as well as the masses. Why did the Khmer language spread so easily? We know that Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples who called themselves Moniq or Manni have lived in this region since prehistoric times, but they are very few in number nowadays. Might their presence not have served as one of the vectors for the Khmerization process? Did small Khmer communities settled here since the beginning of history come from one of the maritime trading polities making up what 20th-century scholars have collectively labeled Funan (Chandler 2000: 15), which is thought to have been centered around the Mekong delta, and in the southern coast of modern Cambodia and Vietnam, and which we can suppose was Khmer-speaking? Indeed, Khmer influence—which was exercised not only in the Menam Chao Phraya valley—might have lasted for at least over a millennium and a half.

These questions may help enrich the field of Khmer-Thai research. It would, moreover, be very interesting in the future to link research on Khmer influence in Peninsular Thailand with research in Malaysia on the Mon-Khmer substratum. Comparisons between Mon-Khmer and Austronesian civilizations should also be conducted.

Notes

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1. There has been a controversy on the authenticity of this stela since the 1980s. The very existence of this king has also been questioned by some (see Chamberlain 1991). Nakhon Si Thammarat chronicles say that a certain bañā Sri Satyanaranga came to rule in 1274, and some historians have understood him to be Braḥi Ruaṅ or king Ram Khamhaeng, but others deny this hypothesis. See Vickery (1991: 344).

2. However, according to Vickery (1991: 33) “archaeological and art historical investigation seem to show that [Nakhon Si Thammarat at that time, i.e. AD 1285] was not [a center of Theravāda Buddhism of the Sinhalese variety].”

3. “Tai” refers to populations of the Tai-Kadai linguistic group covering an area from Southern China, Burma, Assam, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand to the Malay Peninsula. In this text “Thai” refers more specifically to Tai populations and languages from Central and Peninsular Thailand.


5. Nowadays there are still monks, knowledgeable laymen, astrologers and men educated in Buddhist monasteries, who can read manuscripts in Khmer characters. However their number, as well as the standard
of reading skills, are declining, as instruction has been given in official schools all over the country since the reign of Rama V (1868-1910). See also Ingon Patamadit (1999).

6. Name of a Thai capital and kingdom (14th-18th century).

7. These Mon-Khmer tribes are called /hoʔ/ (tones are not noted in our transcription) in Thai Peninsular dialects, this word also meaning rambutan.

8. His thesis is based on the Songkhla province dialect.

9. Tones are not noted in our transcription.

10. According to what we know, other palm trees producing sugar grow in Indo-Malayan regions, different from the species commonly represented in Cambodia and in Sathing Phra, which, although called sugar-palm tree, is actually Palmyra-palm tree or Borassus flabellifer. For instance there is the toddy-palm tree or Caryota urens, and another species commonly called sugar-palm tree or Arenga pinnata (also called Arenga saccharifera). The latter is abundantly cultivated in Malaysia to produce sugar. Both species are also found in Cambodia (see Dy Phon 2000: 49, 99, 136).

11. Some say that wayang kulit gedek “is a probable derivative from the Thai nang talung, although contrary to this view, a Malay origin has been postulated for nang talung” (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof 1994: 282).

12. We are indebted to Mr. Robert Fowler, a specialist of puppet theater in Southeast Asia, for this clarification on the similarity between, but not sameness of nang talung and spaek tūc.

13. We are indebted to Ms Pascaline Truc, a specialist of Bahasa Indonesia, for her information on this word.

14. Some Thai words penetrated Khmer at the end of the Angkorean period, such as cau kā (meaning “my master, my lord” and used to call Buddhist monks), but Thai borrowings were very scarce at that time.

15. Although, as Pich Tum Kravel suggests ([2000]: 37-38), another supposition would be that the Thai name nang talung could have been borrowed by the Khmers when arts taken away by the Thais after the sack of the Angkorean capital and later on of the capital Lovek (middle period) came back to Cambodia.

16. According to Chinese sources, in the third century AD, in the kingdom of Tenasserim, which was probably Mon-speaking, corpses were left to the vultures. If they were not eaten, they were considered impure and cremated (Guillon, personal communication. See also Wheatley 1965: 17-18). This custom is different from the Peninsular Thai one but looks the same as the one in Chenla (see Pelliot 1951: 24).

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