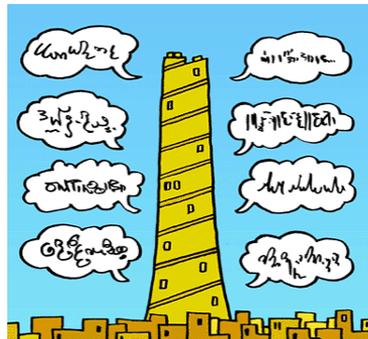


# Indigenous Cultures of Southeast Asia:

*Language, Religion & Sociopolitical Issues*



Eric Kendrick

Georgia Perimeter College

# Indigenous vs. Minorities

- Indigenous groups are minorities
- *Not all minorities are indigenous*
  - e.g. Chinese in SE Asia



Hmong, Hà Giang Province, Northeast Vietnam

# No Definitive Definition Exists

- Historical ties to a particular territory
- Cultural distinctiveness from other groups
- Vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization by colonizers or dominant ethnic groups
- The right to self-Identification



# Scope



- 70+ countries
- 300 - 350 million (6%)
- 4,000 – 5,000 distinct peoples
- Few dozen to several hundred thousand
- ✓ *Some significantly exposed to colonizing or expansionary activities*
- ✓ *Others comparatively isolated from external or modern influence*

# Post-Colonial Developments

- Modern society has encroached on territory, diminishing languages & cultures
- Many have become assimilated or urbanized



# Categories

- **Pastoralists**

- Herd animals for food, clothing, shelter, trade
- Nomadic or Semi-nomadic
- Common in Africa

- **Hunter-Gatherers**

- Game, fish, birds, insects, fruits
- Medicine, stimulants, poison
- Common in Amazon

- **Farmers**

- Small scale, nothing left for trade
- Supplemented with hunting, fishing, gathering
- Highlands of South America



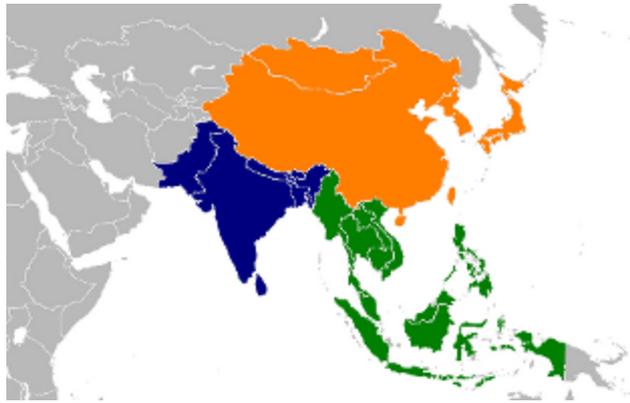
# Commonly-known Examples

- Native Americans (Canada – First Nations people)
- Inuit (Eskimos)
- Native Hawaiians
- Maori (New Zealand)
- Aborigines (Australia)



# *Indigenous Peoples*

## *Southeast Asia*



- east asia
- south asia
- southeast asia



# Mainland SE Asia (Indochina)

- ***Vietnam***
  - 53 / 10 M (14%)
- ***Cambodia***
  - 24 / 197,000 (1.3%)
- ***Laos***
  - 49 / 2.4 - 4.8 M (35-70%)
- ***Thailand***
  - 34 / 1.1 M (1.5%)
- ***Myanmar*** (Burma)
  - 135 / 14.4 -19.2 M (30-40%)



# Maritime SE Asia

- *Malaysia*

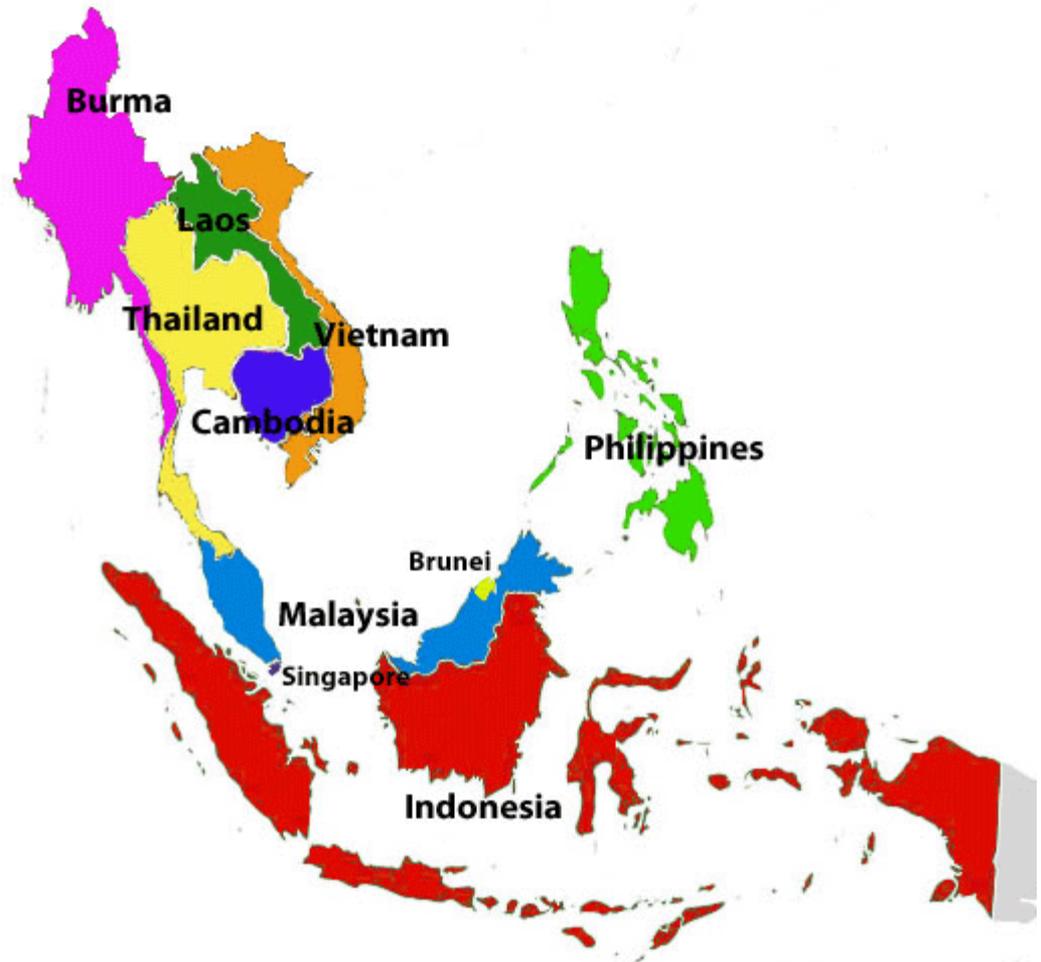
- 97 / 3.4 M (12%)

- *Indonesia*

- 700+ / 50 - 70 M (20-29%)  
✓ (Govt. only 365)

- *Philippines*

- 110 / 12 - 15 M (10-15%)

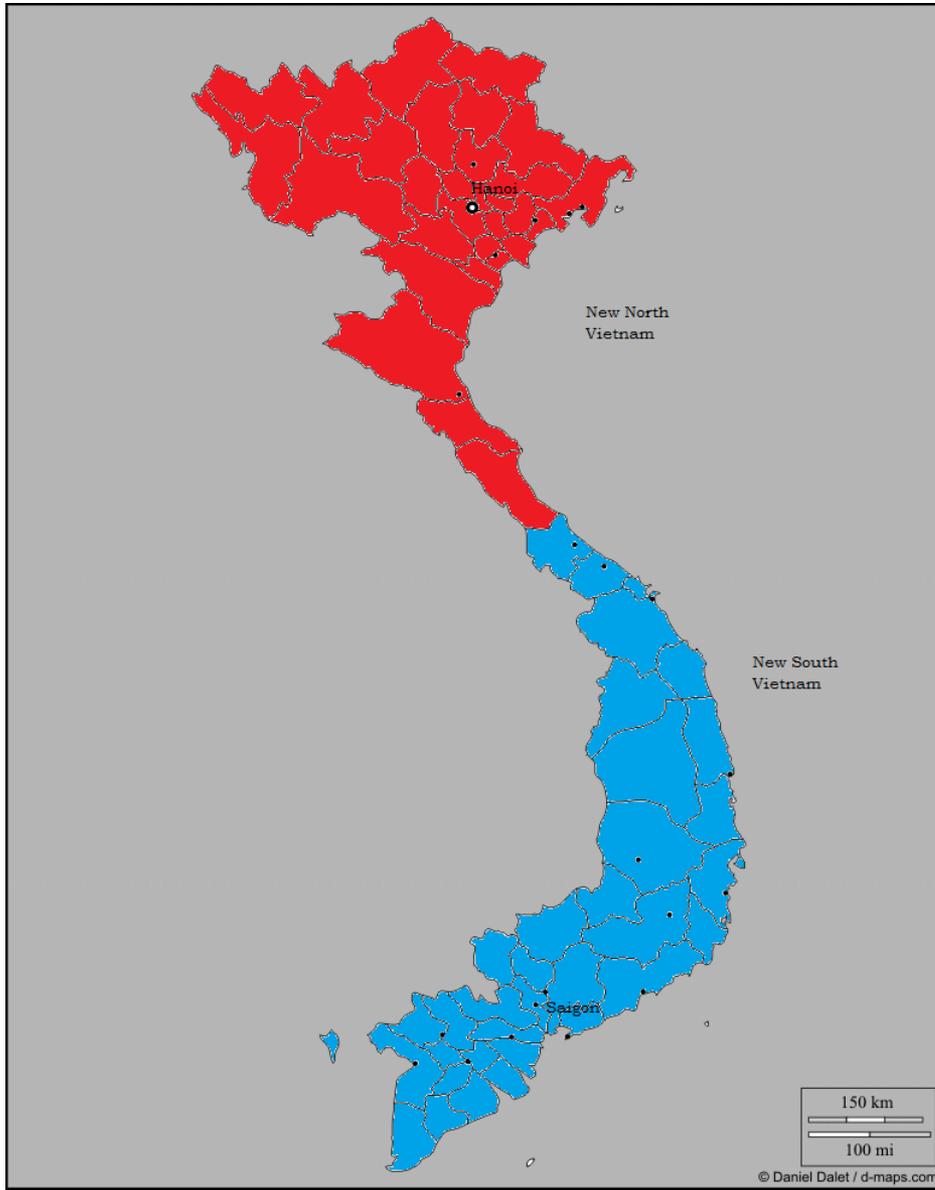


# Vietnam

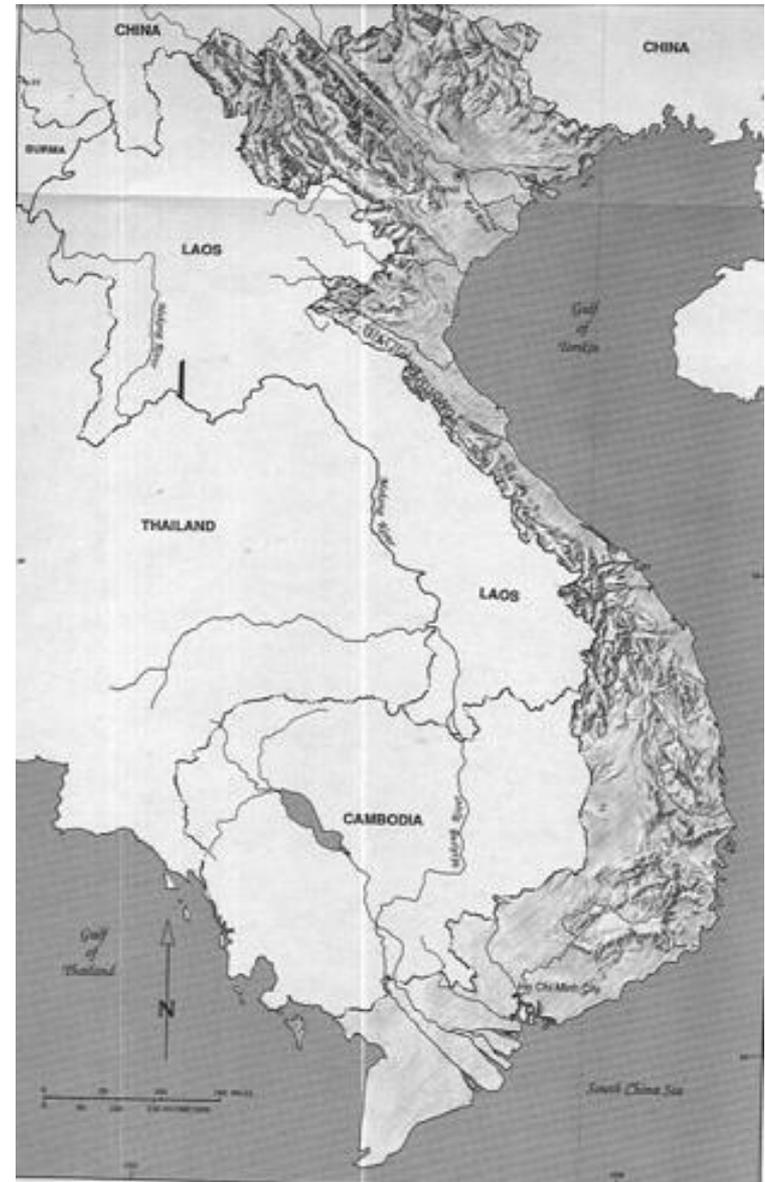
- Total Population – 90 M (2012 estimate)
- Ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) 85%
- Indigenous 14%, 10 M
- 53 officially recognized tribes



# Political Landscape

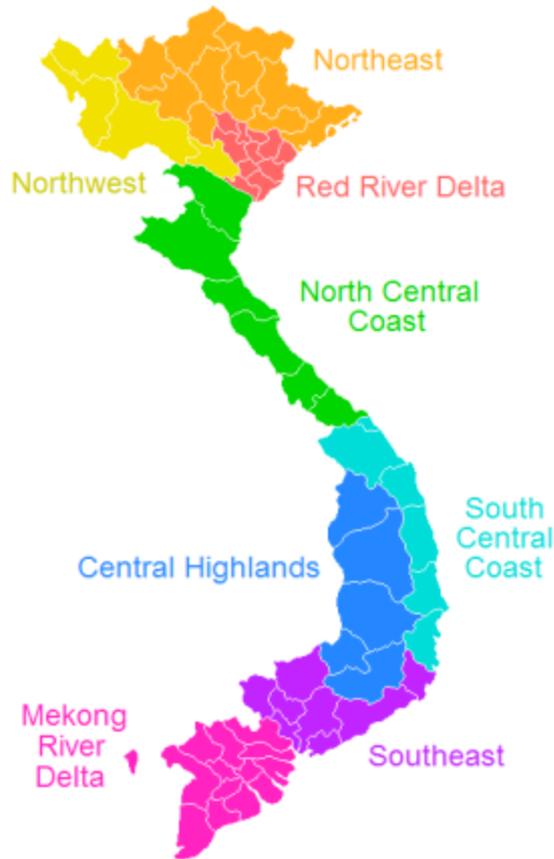


# Topography



# Regions

- North
- Central
- South



# Northern Highlands

Northern groups have long had contact with Vietnamese and Chinese

- *Rice paddy cultivation*
- *Cattle and poultry*
- *Sophisticated handicrafts*

Pa Then grow flax to get threads for weaving sophisticated costumes, which takes about one month for a complete set.



# Central Highlands

Until recently, central groups lived in relative isolation with only limited interaction with lowlanders – *Traditionally subsisted mainly on nature*

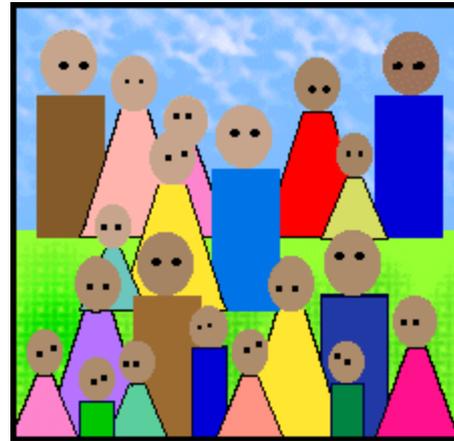


# 2009 Statistics

- Tay (N) – 1,626,000 (Zhuang in China)
- Muong (N) – 1,268,000 (close to Kinh)
- **Khmer Krom** – 1,261,000
- **H'mong** – 1,068,000 (4-5 million; China/Laos)
- Nung (N) – 968,000 (Zhuang in China)
- Hoa (Ethnic Chinese) – 823,000
- Yao – 751,000 (3.1 M; remainder China)

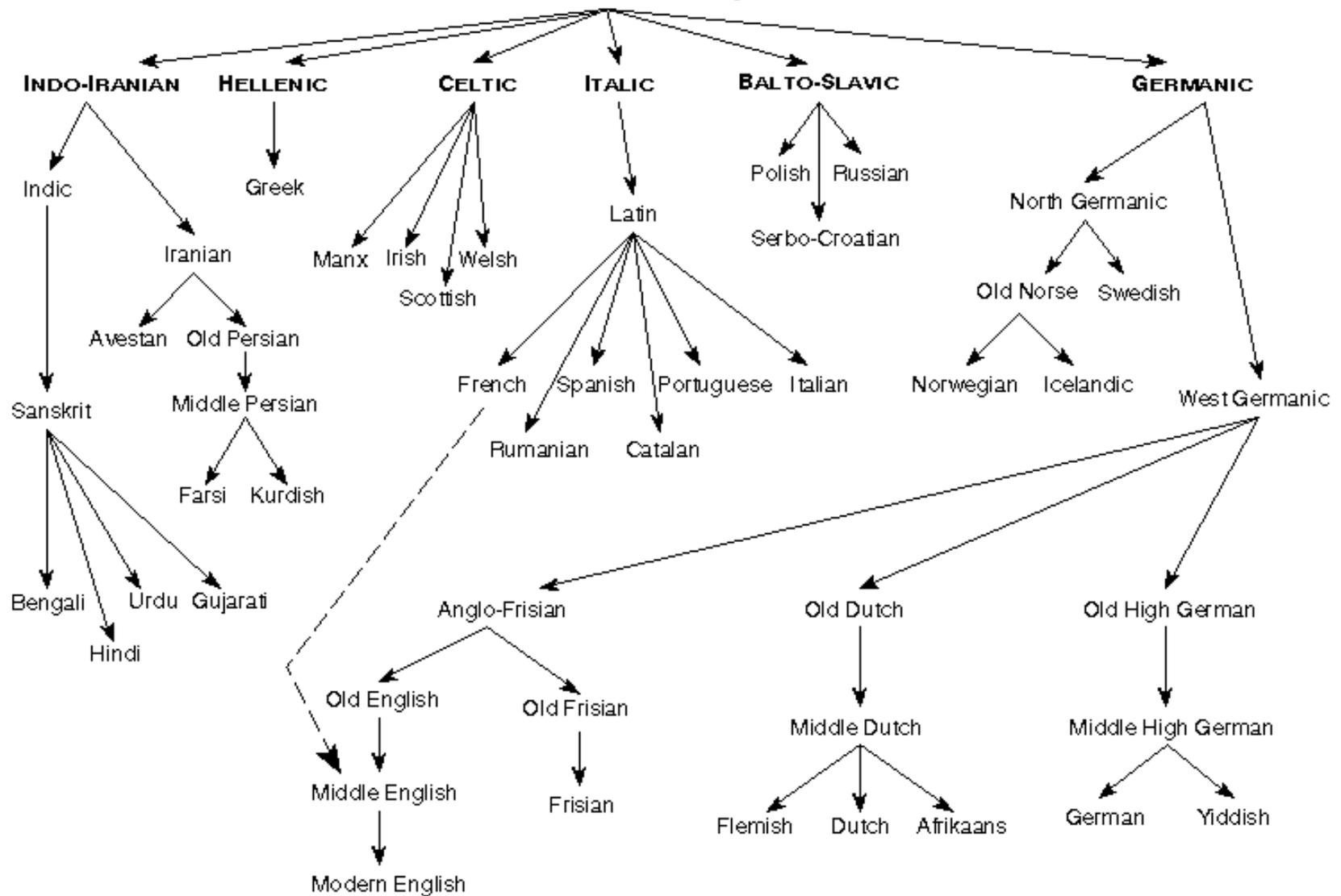
# Language Families

- Based on “genetic” relationships
  - Phonology – sounds
  - Morphology – words
  - Syntax – grammar

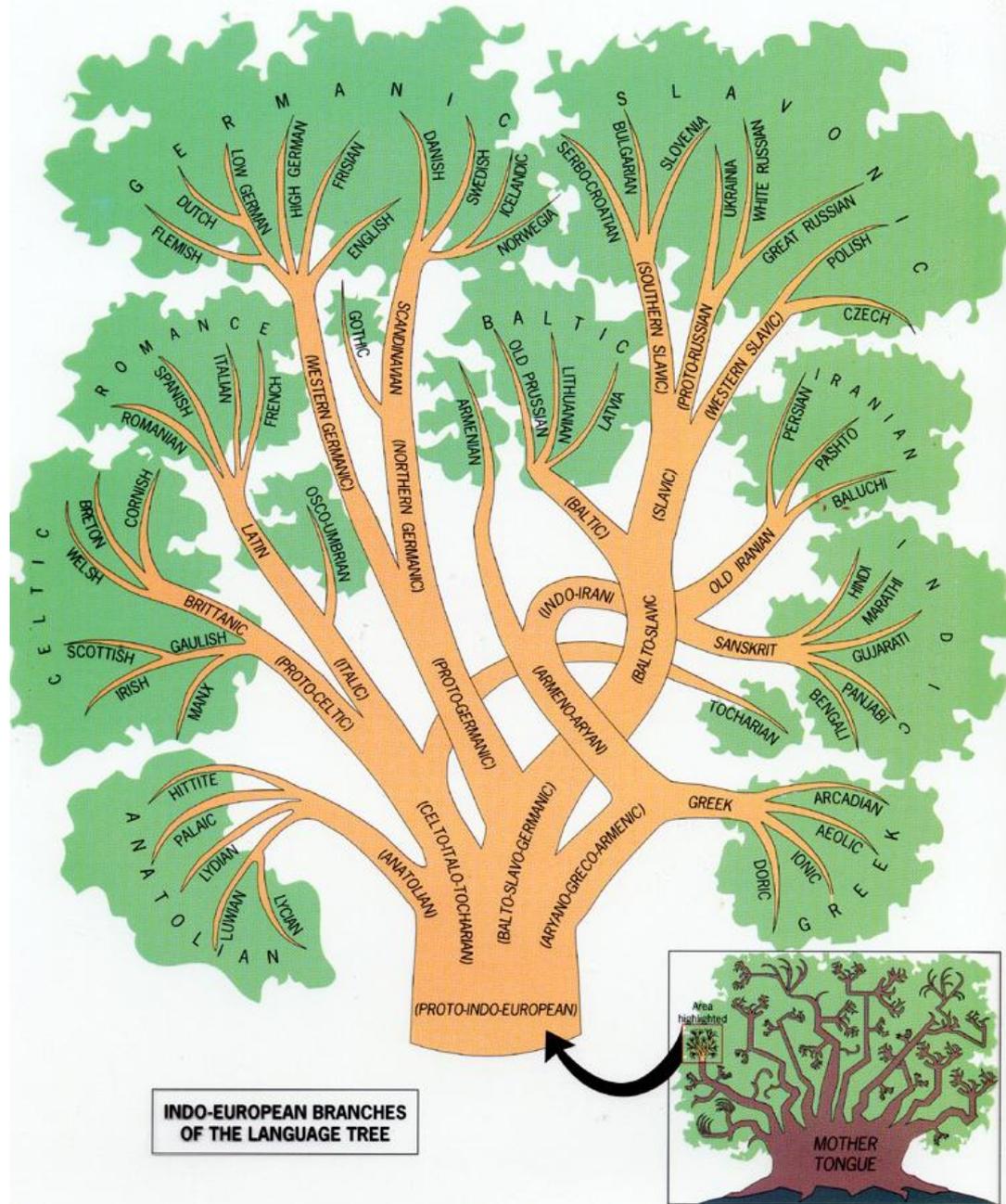


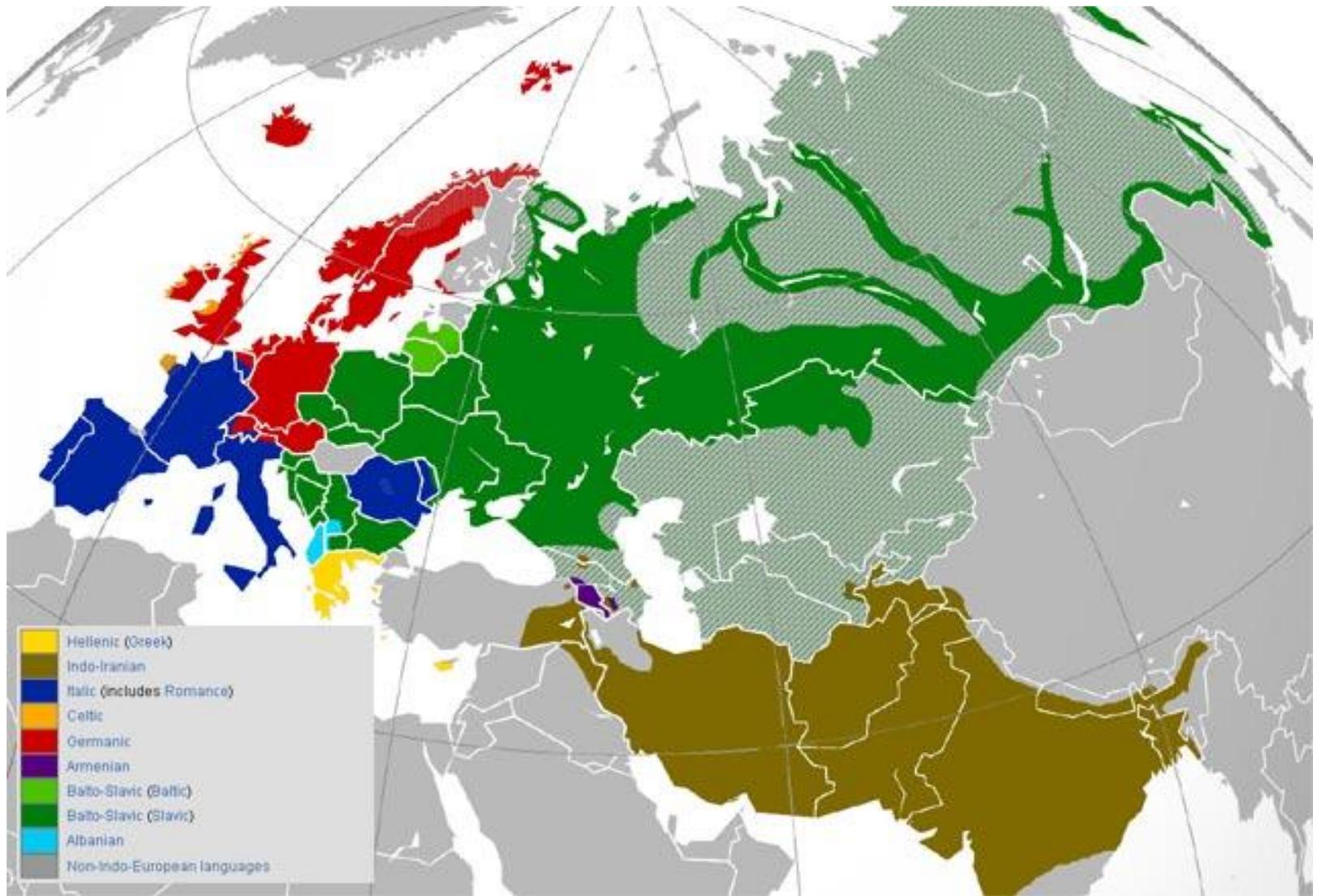
- ***Language Contact*** – the influence when two or more languages or “varieties” interact

# Proto-Indo-European

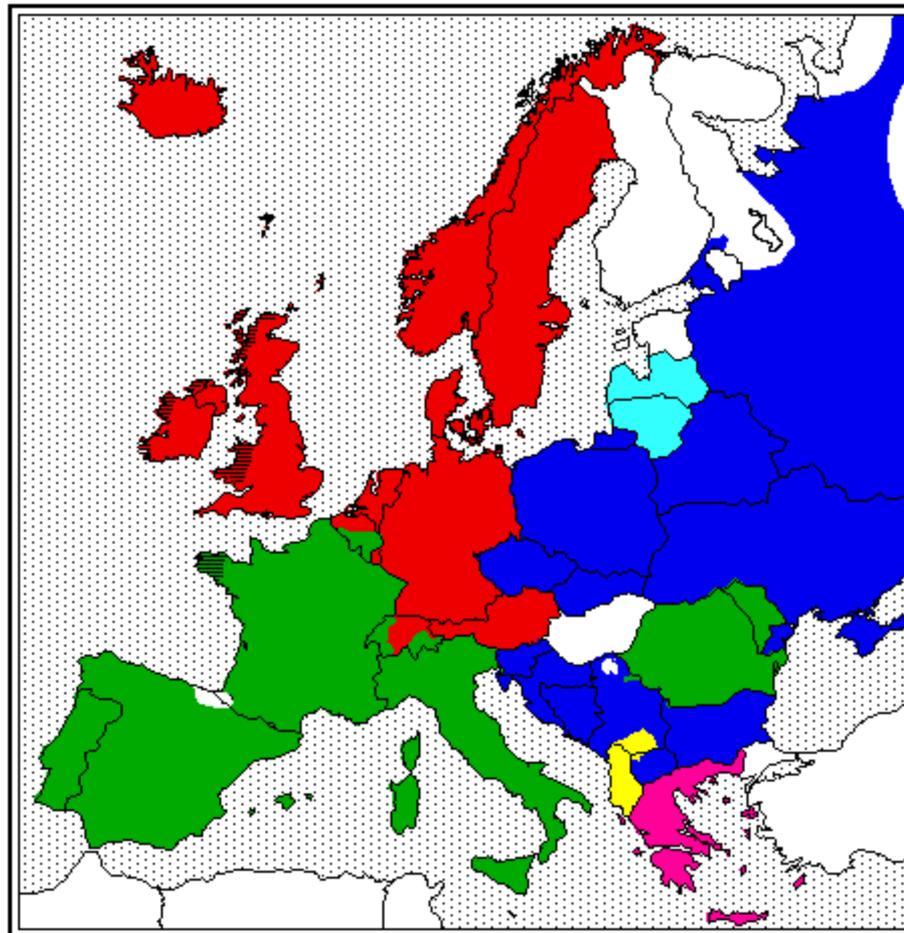


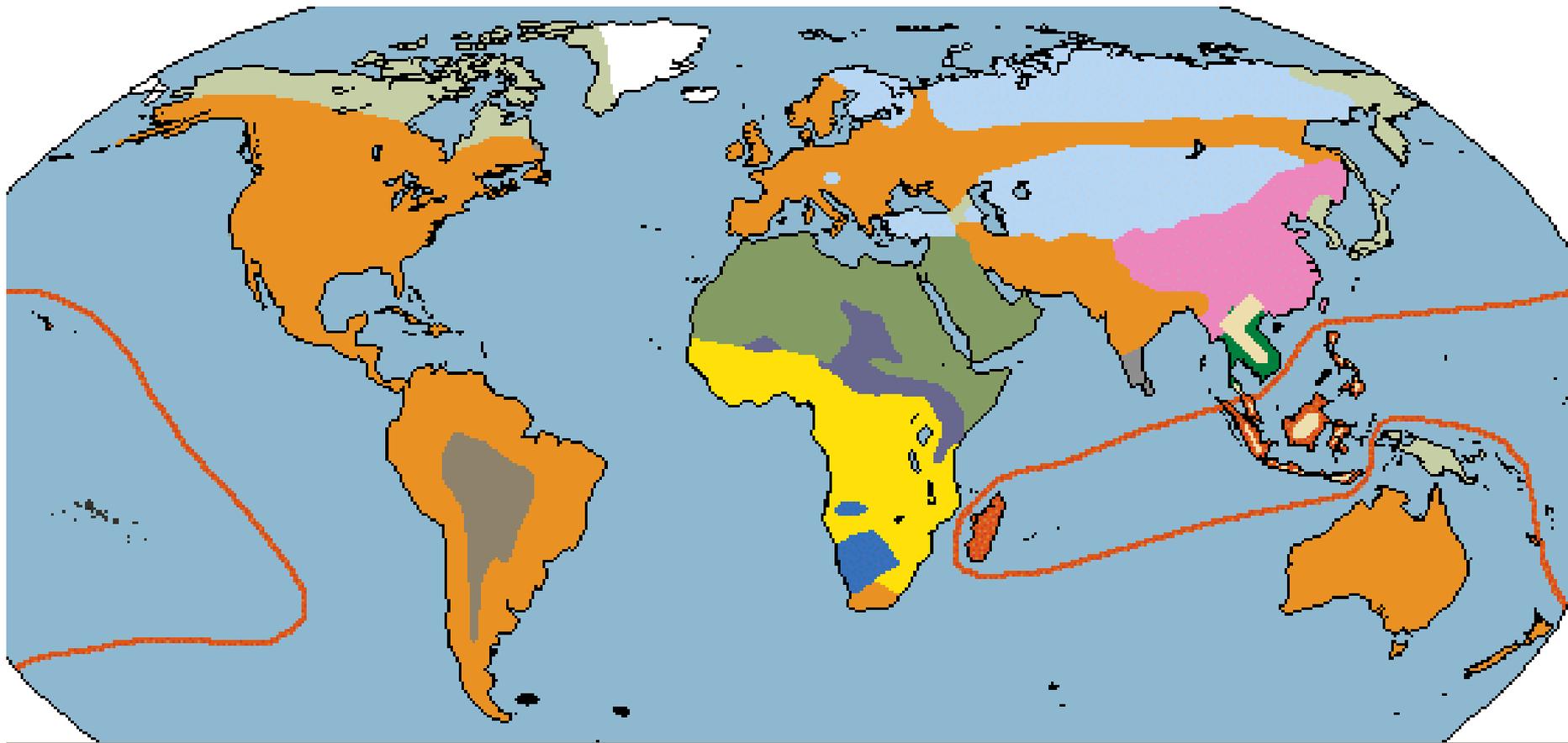






# Indo-European Subfamilies in Europe





Indo-European

Afro-Asiatic

Nilo-Saharan

Niger-Congo

Khoisan

Uralic and Altaic

Sino-Tibetan

Austro-Asiatic

Austronesian

Dravidian

Native American

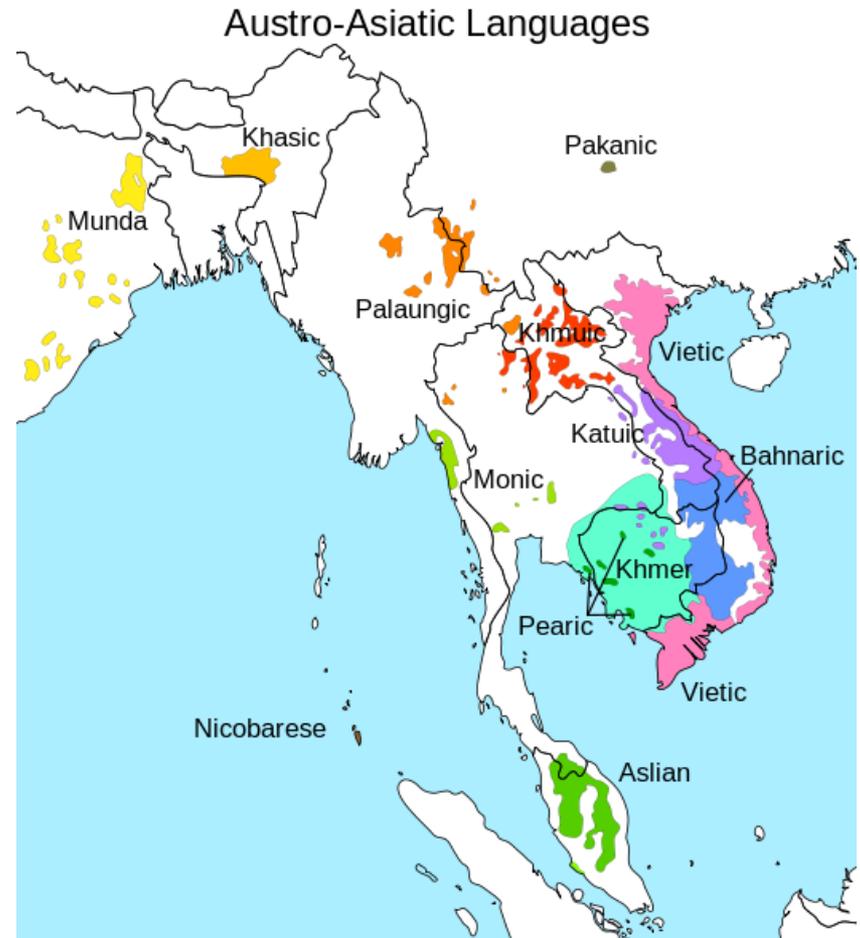
Tai-Kadai

Other

2,000 km  
mi

# Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) Family

- 13 branches
- 168 languages
- Only 3 recorded history
- Khmer & Vietnamese official status
- Remainder spoken by minorities



# Vietnamese

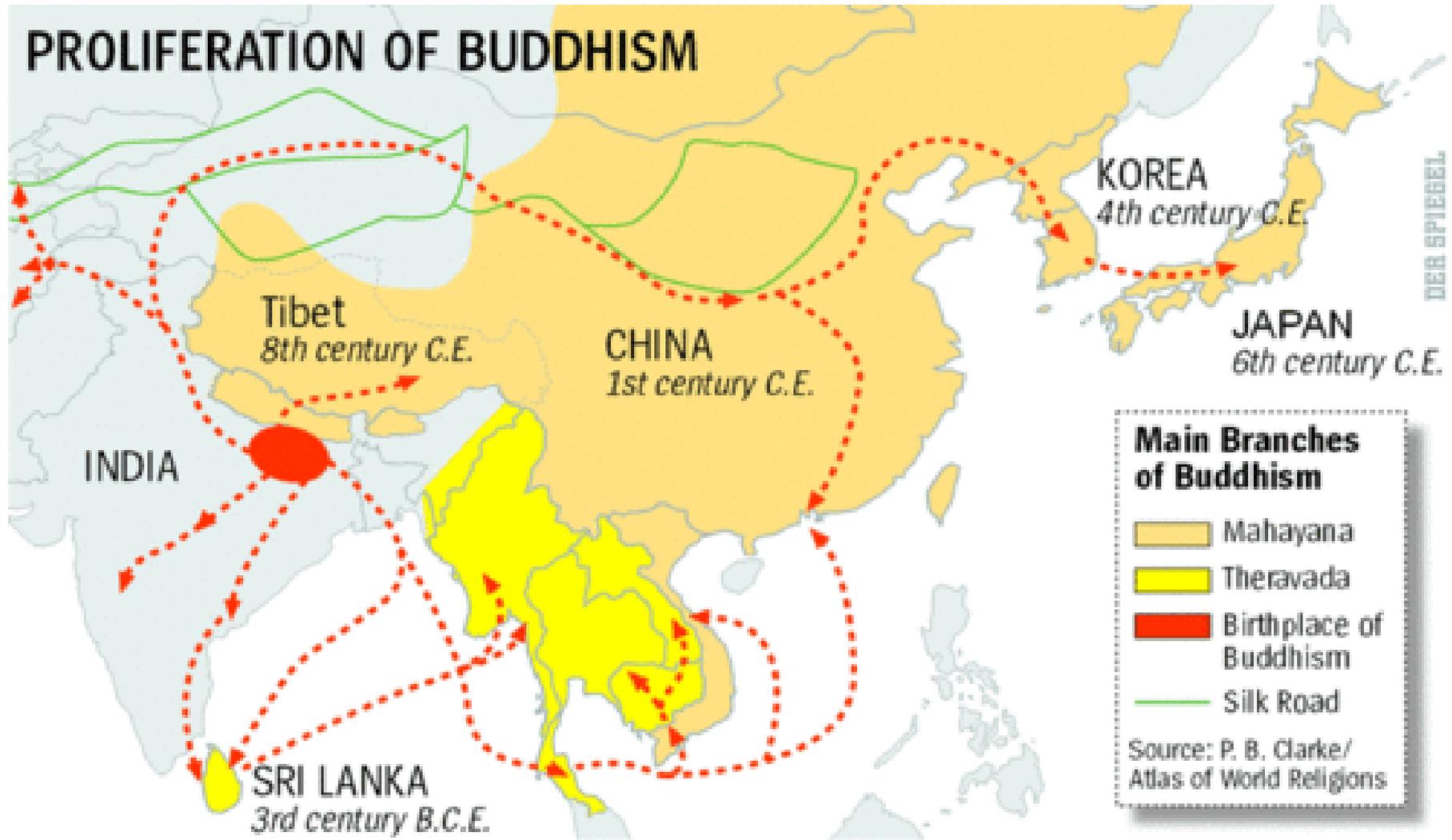
- Several times the size of others combined
- Vocabulary borrowed from China
- Formerly used Chinese characters
- Tonal (diacritics, or “accent marks”)



# Khmer

- Official language of Cambodia
- Distant 2<sup>nd</sup> to Vietnamese (16 M)
- Influenced by Sanskrit and Pali
  - Sanskrit = liturgical language of Hinduism
  - Pali = liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism
- ***Theravada Buddhism*** – Most of population in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia; 2/3 in Laos and Sri Lanka; Khmer Krom in Vietnam
- ***Mahayana Buddhism*** – China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, Singapore

# PROLIFERATION OF BUDDHISM



# Khmer Phonology & Alphabet

- Not tonal like Vietnamese, Lao and Thai
- Consonant-Vowel sequences written as a unit (syllabary, or syllabic alphabet)
- One of earliest scripts in SE Asia (7<sup>th</sup> Century), descended from ancient Brahmi (Indian) script, one of most important in history
- Thai and Lao use similar writing system (although in a different language family)

Handwritten text in an ancient script, likely Tamil, inscribed on a stone slab. The text is arranged in approximately 12 horizontal lines. A prominent vertical crack runs down the center of the slab, and a circular hole is visible on the right side. The script is finely etched into the stone surface.

ក គ ខ ឃ ង ង  
ka ko kha kho nga ngo

ច ជ ឆ ឈ ញ ញ  
ca co cha cho ña ño

ដ ឧ ត ទ ថ ធ ថ ឆ ណ ន  
da do ta to tha tho tha tho na no

ប បី បី ព ផ ភ ម ម  
ba bo pa po pha pho ma mo

យ យ រ រ ល ល វ វ  
ya yo ra ro la lo wa wo

ស សី ហ ហី អ អី  
sa so ha ho qa qo

ហ្គ ហ្គី ហ្វ ហ្វី ហ្ស ហ្សី  
ga go fa fo ža žo



Approximate Location  
of Khmer Dialects

- \* Standard (Central) Khmer
- \* Northern Khmer
- \* Khmer Krom
- \* Western Khmer

# Khmer Krom (“lower” Cambodia)

- Indigenous Khmer people in Southern Vietnam – lower Mekong Delta region
- 1.3 M (VN govt.) vs. 7 M (Khmer Krom)
- Once part of the Khmer Empire; isolated from Cambodia in Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century by Vietnamese colonization
- Pret Nokor was the most important seaport; became Sai Gon, then Ho Chi Minh City

# Human Rights

- NGOs report Khmer Krom forced to speak Vietnamese and adopt VN family names
- “Under the radar” compared to other VN indigenous groups, despite political action by *Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation* (KKF)



# Two major markers of cultural identification

## Language

مرحبا العالم! Hallo Welt!  
Hej Värld! Hello World!  
Ciao Mondo  
ハローワールド!  
¡Olá mundo! 世界您好!  
Salut le Monde!

## Religion



# Khmer Krom Language

- Khmer Krom forced to speak Vietnamese for *school*  and *work* 
- Little opportunity to formally learn language due to government restrictions, despite its long history as a written language
- Influence of Vietnamese through loan words (language contact) is “diluting” Khmer Krom and will gradually make it unintelligible from Standard Khmer



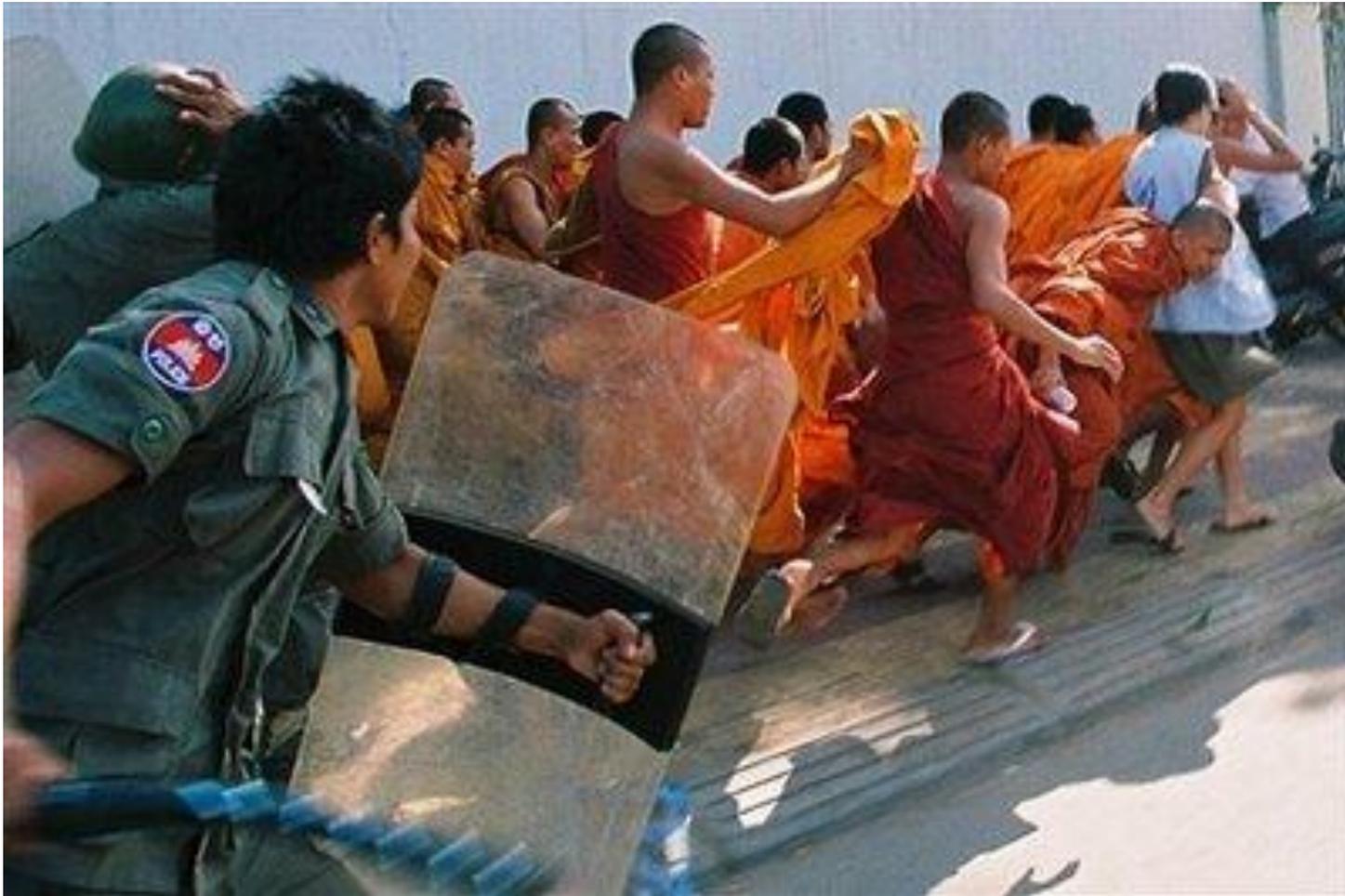
# Khmer Krom Religion

- Khmer Krom practice Theravada Buddhism
- Ethnic Vietnamese practice Mahayana Buddhism (about 85% of population)
- Various agencies and NGOs report that Khmer Krom are not allowed to practice their religion as desired
- Many sources report monks publicly defrocked
- Vietnam's restrictions on protest (disrupting social order) leave few options for recourse









**Cambodian police chase and beat Khmer Krom Buddhist monks after they try to deliver a petition to the Vietnamese Embassy in Phnom Penh**

# Websites

[Khmer Krom Network](#)

[Human Rights Watch](#)

[The Nowhere People](#)

[Nowhere to Call Home](#)

[Unrepresented Peoples & Nations Organization](#)

[Council of Indigenous Peoples in Today's VN](#)

# Cham: Vietnam & Cambodia

- Cham are remnants of the Kingdom of Champa (from 7<sup>th</sup>) in Central and Southern Vietnam
- Most likely came from island of Borneo (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei)
- Malay-Polynesian (Austronesian) language
- Culture was Indianized
- Many fled to Cambodia in 15<sup>th</sup> Century (and converted to Islam)
- Conquered and annexed by Vietnam in 1832

# Population

- **TOTAL** **400,000**
- ***Cambodia*** ***217,000***
- ***Vietnam*** ***162,000***
- *China* *5,000*
- *Thailand* *4,000*
- *Laos* *800*
- *U.S.* *3,000*
- *France* *1,000*











# Cham Religion

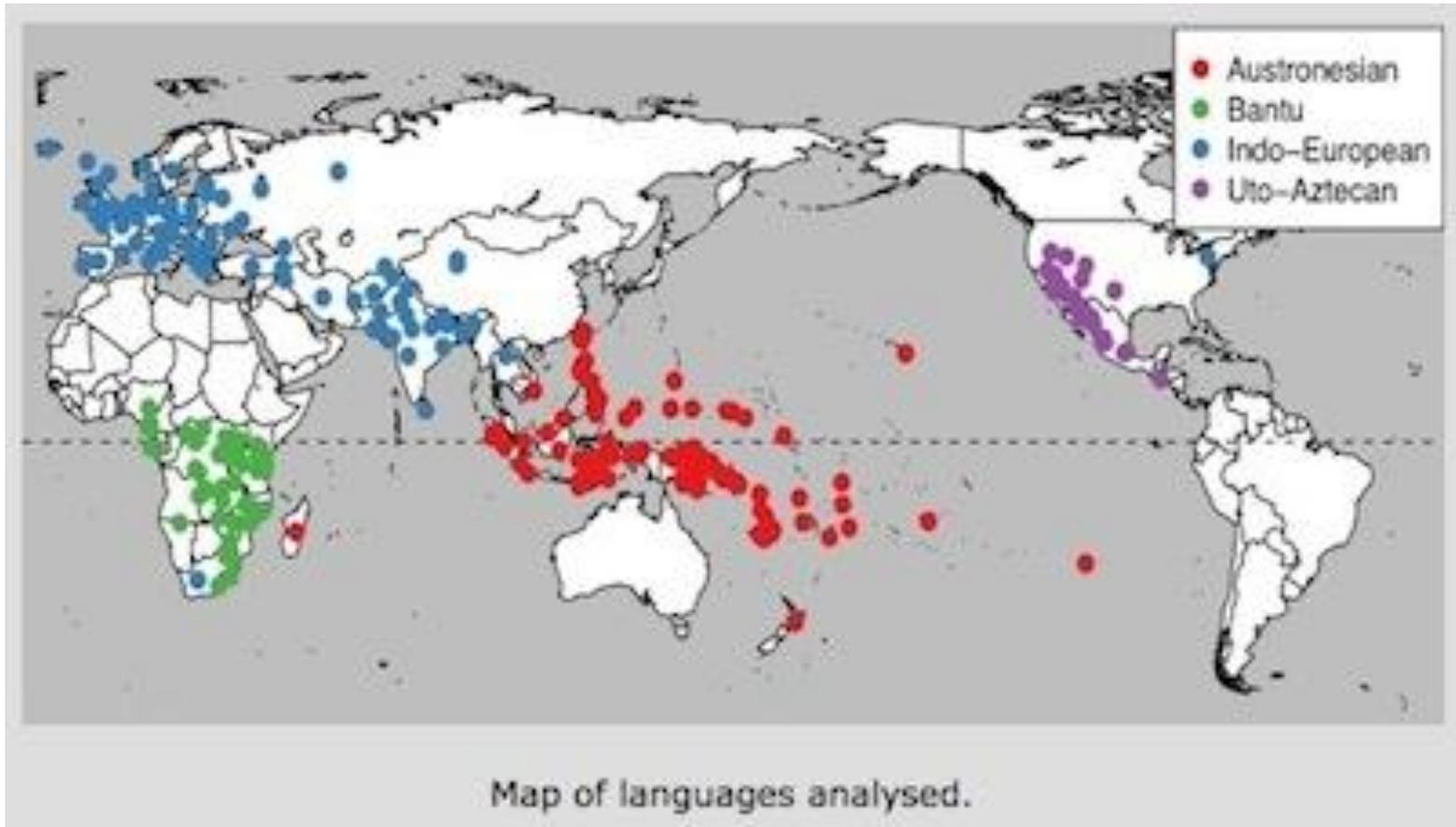
- Most Cham in Vietnam are Hindu
  - Some are Muslim
  - Some are Mayahana Buddhist
- Most Cham in Cambodia are Muslim

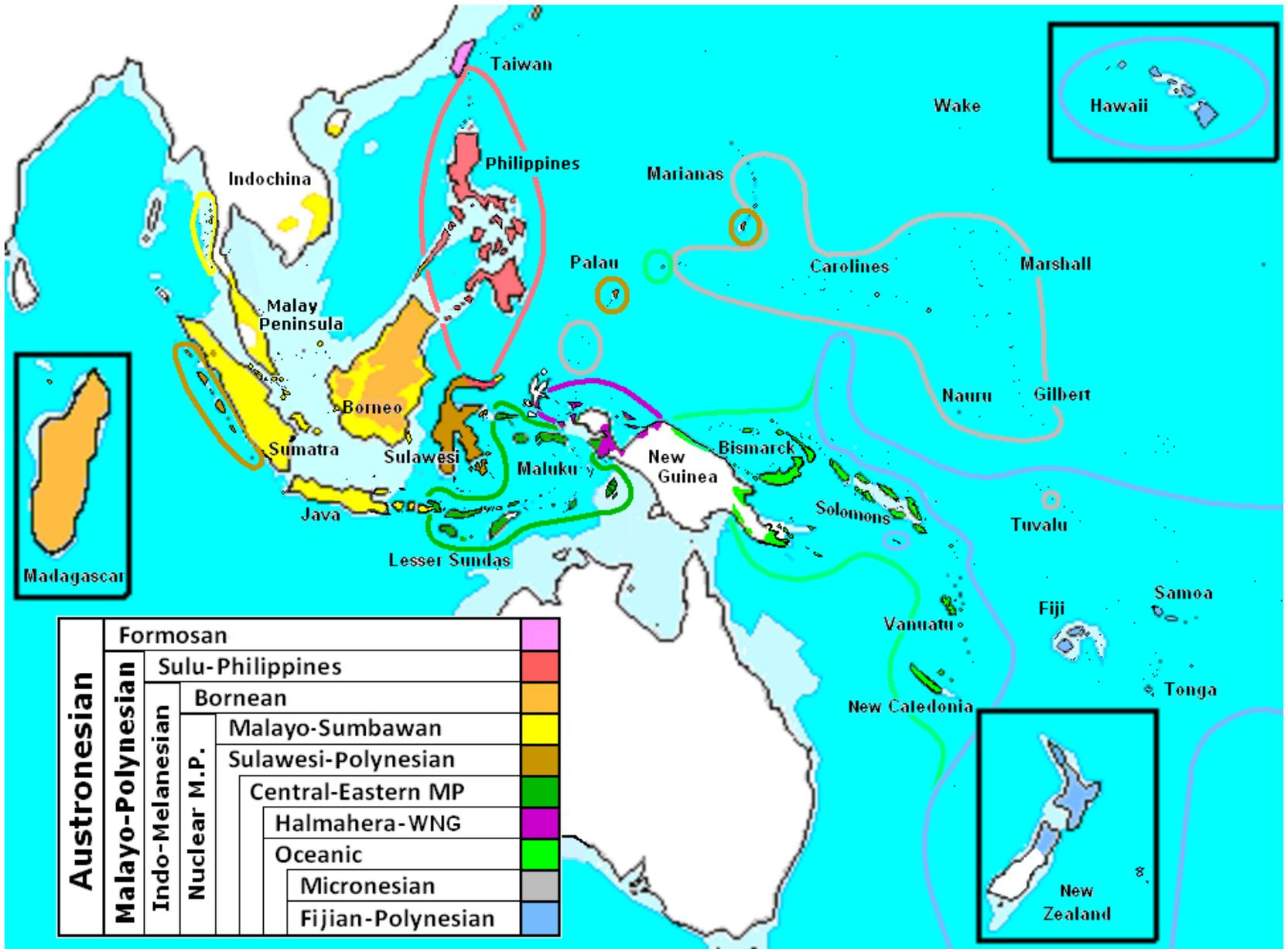
The isolation of Cham Muslims in Central Vietnam resulted in syncretism with Buddhism until recent restoration of contacts with other Muslims in Vietnamese cities.





# Austronesian Languages





# Cham Language

- Western Cham
  - Cambodia & Western Vietnam
  - Arabic script or Western Cham script
- Eastern Cham (Coastal Vietnam)
  - Eastern Cham Script
- Two versions no longer mutually intelligible

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ဝံ့ ဟ် ဟ် ဟ် ဟ်, ဟ် ဟ် ဟ် ဟ် ဟ် ဟ် ဟ်,  
ဟ်, ဟ် ဟ် (ဟ်) ဟ် (ဟ် ဟ် ဟ် ဟ်).

# Cham Sociopolitical Issues

## Vietnam

- The Cham in Vietnam are only recognized as a minority, and not as an indigenous people by the Vietnamese government, despite being indigenous to the region.
- Both Hindu and Muslim Chams have experienced religious and ethnic persecution and restrictions on their faith under the current Vietnamese government.

# Cham Sociopolitical Issues

## Cambodia

- Cham Muslims are able to practice their religion normally and out in the open. This commenced in the People's Republic of Kampuchea era (1979) where Islam was given the same freedom as that of Buddhism.
- The Cham also enjoy democratic rights like all Khmer citizens, with the right to vote and be elected as politicians.

# Montagnard of Vietnam

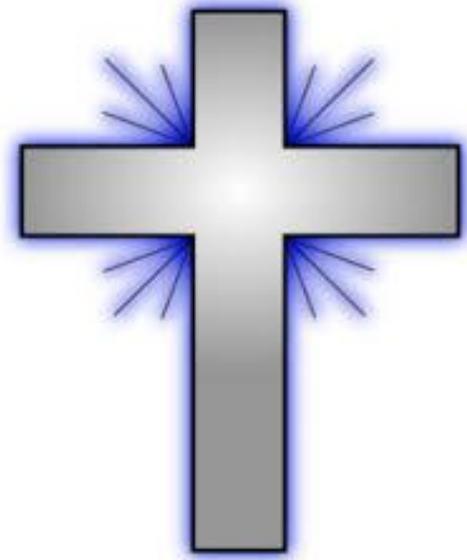
- The Degar, also known as Montagnard, are the indigenous people of the Central Highlands
- Means "mountain people" in French (from the colonial period)
- Before the Vietnam War, the population of the Central Highlands, estimated at between 3 or 3.5 million, was almost exclusively Degar
- Today, the population is approximately four million, of whom about one million are Degars

# Language & Culture

- 30 or so Degar tribes in Central Highlands comprise more than 6 different ethnic groups
- Languages drawn primarily from Austronesian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tai language families.
- The main tribes, in order of population, are Jarai, Rhade, Bahnar, Koho, Mnong, Stieng

# Montagnard Religion

- French Catholic missionaries converted some Degar in 19<sup>th</sup> century
- American Protestant missionaries made greater impact in 1930s
- Of the one million Degar, about half are Protestant, while around 200,000 are Catholic



# Suspicion • Tension • Challenges

- Communist Party suspicious, particularly during Vietnam War, since it was thought they would be inclined to help American forces (mainly Christian) – about 40,000 did!
- The Degar have a long history of tensions with the heterogeneous Vietnamese majority
- The Degar do not share a common language or heritage, so they have faced challenges in uniting against oppression

# Sociopolitical Issues

- Important issues include land ownership, language and cultural preservation, access to education and resources, and political representation.
- The government has steadily displaced thousands of villagers from the Central Highlands, to use the fertile land for coffee plantations.
- It has also moved in ethnic Vietnamese and Northern Highlanders







**Montagnard Americans**  
the proud indigenous people of the  
Central Highlands of Vietnam,  
Honor Freedom and Honor the U.S.

# Hmong

- 1, 068,000 Vietnam
- 460,000 Laos
- 151,000 Thailand
- 3 million China
- 260,000 U.S.



# Refugee Status

- Fought in “Secret War”
- Many in refugee camps
- Some came to the U.S.



# Religion

- Christianity
- Shamanism
- Ancestor Veneration





Chronicle / Michael Maloney



# No Written Language

- Robert Cooper, an anthropologist, collected a Hmong folktale saying that the Hmong used to have a written language, and important information was written down in a treasured book.
- The folktale explains that cows and rats ate the book, so, in the words of Anne Fadiman, author of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, "no text was equal to the task of representing a culture as rich as that of the Hmong."



- Therefore, the folktale states that the Hmong language was exclusively oral from that point onwards.

# Devised Writing Systems

- Since the end of the 19th century, linguists have created a number of Hmong writing systems, including systems using Chinese, Russian, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese characters and alphabets.
- Other experiments by Hmong and non-Hmong orthographers (including missionaries) have been undertaken using invented letters.
- In addition, in 1959 Shong Lue Yang, a Hmong spiritual leader from Laos, created an 81 symbol writing system called Pahawh. Yang was not previously literate in any language.





Special to the Chronicle / Nelson Rand

# Burmese Refugees in Atlanta

- From late 2006 to the present, one of the largest groups of refugees to Atlanta has been Burmese minorities. Most of the early arrivals came from two distinct groups: the **Karen** and the **Chin**.
- The more recent majority are an ethnic group called the **Karenni**. Other arrivals from Myanmar have come from the many other ethnic minorities in the country (**Mon, Shan, Pa-O**).
- In some cases, are ethnic Burmese (**Bamar**) also fleeing from oppression from the government.

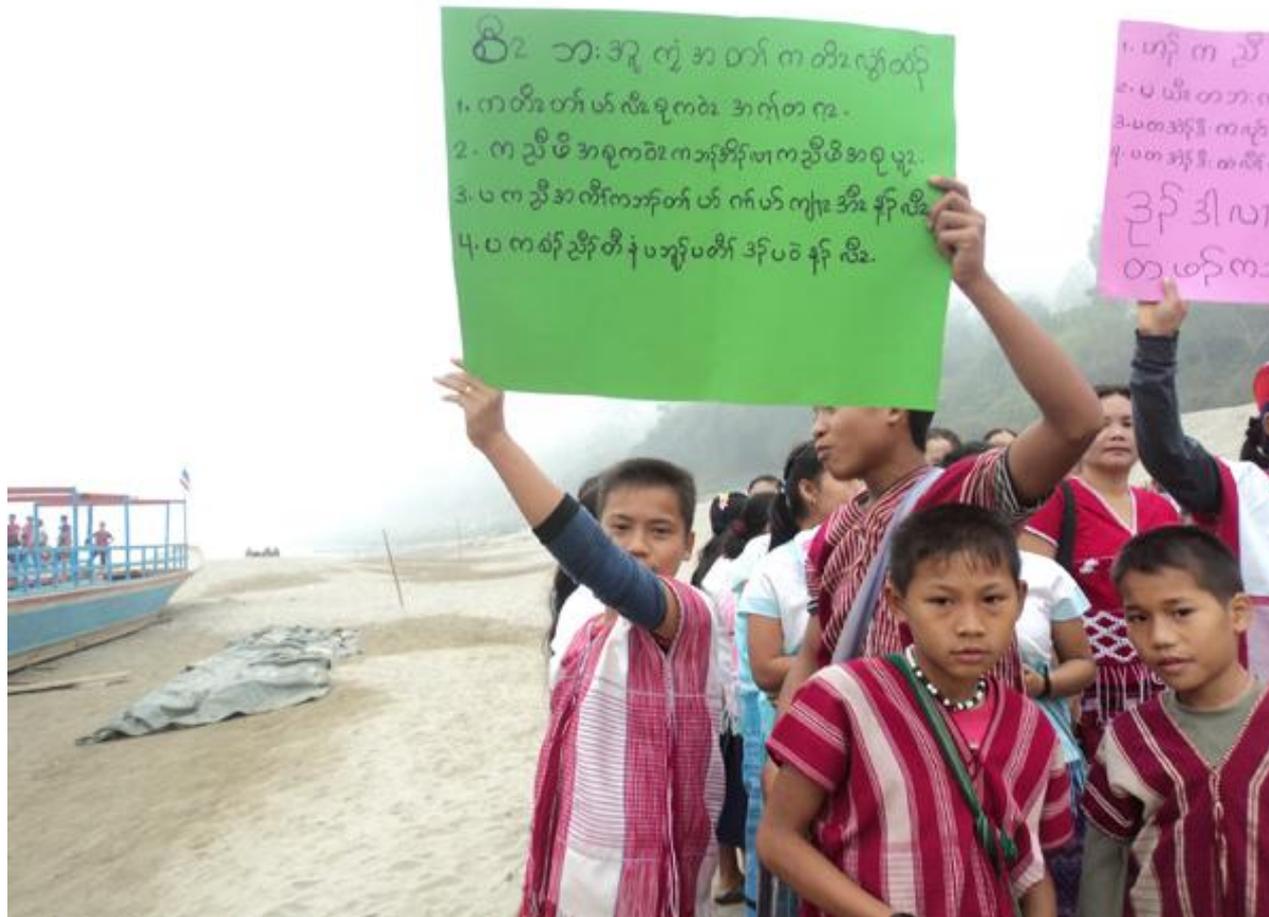
# Oppression & Diversity

- Most have faced a long history of abuse by the Burmese military as forced labor or undergone dislocation as the army has taken over village areas for its own use.
- Despite coming from the same country, they have different languages and traditions which make for different refugee experiences in their new homeland.

# Karen



# Demanding Independence



# Karen soldiers guarding camp



# Refugee Camps



# Life on the run





# Fleeing Fighting

- In this photo taken Tuesday, June 9, 2009 released by Free Burma Rangers, Karen villagers board a pickup truck as they flee the fighting between Myanmar soldiers and Karen guerrillas into Thailand's Tha Song Yag district of Tak province.
- More than 4,000 ethnic Karen have abandoned a camp and villages in eastern Myanmar to seek refuge in Thailand following government attacks on ethnic insurgents, a Karen spokesman and aid groups said. (AP/Free Burma Rangers)





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