

THE
MEKONG

A RIVER AND ITS PEOPLE

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Written by John Hoskin
Photographed by Allen W. Hopkins

POST BOOKS

POST PUBLISHING PUBLIC COMPANY LIMITED

in cooperation with

THE THAI NESTLE GROUP, THE SHELL COMPANIES IN THAILAND AND LAOS, AND THE BANGKOK POST



Bangkok Post

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author and the photographer express their gratitude to the many people who provided generous assistance during the research of this book. Special thanks are due to Meas Kimheng and Chum Bun-Rong, Press Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Phnom Penh; Onesta Carpena, Australia Catholic Relief, Phnom Penh; Assoc. Prof. Cheah Yan-Chong, The Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, Kunming; C. Setthawith, White Elephant Travel Agency, Bangkok; Pham Van Thiet, Ministry of Water Resources, Ho Chi Minh City; Junlaphan and Becky Sitthiwong, Golden Triangle Tours, Chiang Rai; Victoria Navarro; David Yang; the staff of the Mekong Committee's secretariat, Bangkok.

Published by Post Books, Post Publishing Public Co., Ltd.

Managing Director: Nigel Oakins

Designer: Jan Davis

Map illustrations: Pat Latta

Editors: Richard Lair, Collin Piprell

Coordinators: Nartnittha Jirarayapong, John Leicester

Consultant: Ray Oram

Film: Courtesy of Fuji Photo Film (Thailand) Ltd. 

Prints: Courtesy of White Lotus Co. Ltd., Bangkok

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ISBN 974-8261-02-6

Colour separations by B. K. Film

Printed in Thailand by Allied Printers

Distributed in Thailand by D.K. Book House Co., Ltd.

Cover photo: Khone Falls, southern Laos

Back cover: Pictures of light float down the Mekong as the people of Nakhon Phanom, northeast Thailand, celebrate the end of Buddhist Lent with the 'Lantern Boat Procession'.

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TIBET

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Mekong

• Kunming

yunnan

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Hanoi •

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OF
TONKIN

Hainan Is

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FOREWORD

The Mekong: A River and its People is the first book to take on the challenge of exploring the world's 12th longest river. Flowing 4,200 kilometres from the Tibetan plateau to the South China Sea, the Mekong is one of Asia's most intriguing rivers yet, until now, it has received little attention.

The river's long passage passes six countries, and along its banks is met a fascinating variety of peoples who still preserve distinct cultural traditions to a remarkable degree, adding their colour to the natural splendour of the scenery.

Over the centuries, however, the Mekong has undeniably been a troubled river, the mute witness of despair and destruction wrought by war and social upheaval. Yet it is also a river of hope, holding a possible key to regional cooperation and economic progress.

Today, as developers study grandiose plans for harnessing the river's huge potential, the Mekong faces unprecedented change.

The Mekong: A River and its People thus aims to capture the essence of this mighty river before its near pristine and untamed character is lost forever.



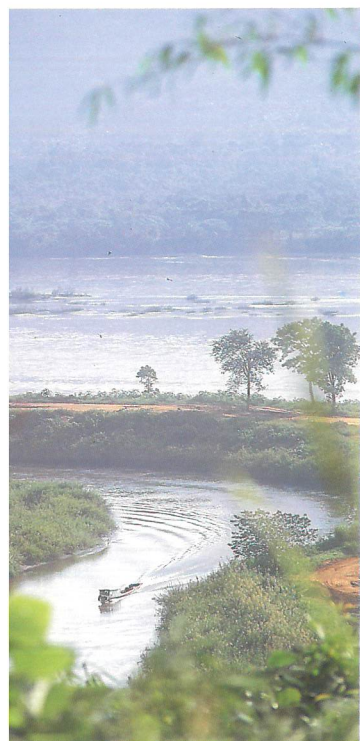
Nigel Oakins
Managing Director

Post Publishing Public Co., Ltd.

say that the Mekong is unknown to us.
... this river ... offers a fruitful field for discovery."

Commission of Mekong Exploration, 1866

CHARACTER OF THE RIVER



of the Mekong and the tiny Ruak
e) forms the Golden Triangle, the brief
i, Burmese and Lao national borders.
ummy (opposite), a Lao riverboat pilot of
ience, the Mekong is a constant
ys changing.

Keeping a wary eye on the water, the skipper said "You walk this part. Every year there are accidents here." For the past two hours our boat had been gliding smoothly downriver. The Mekong had been broad and brown; now narrow its waters were churned white by jagged, half-submerged rocks. It seemed wise to obey the river pilot's instructions.

Standing on the bank, we watched as the 22-metre wooden boat was skilfully brought pitching and rolling through the 500 metres of white water that swirled between a dog leg of rocks.

Back on board and a little further downstream I marvelled as the river lost its angry mien and once again flowed wide and smooth between lush green mountains in a landscape that possesses "almost an excess of grandeur", as one earlier traveller wrote.

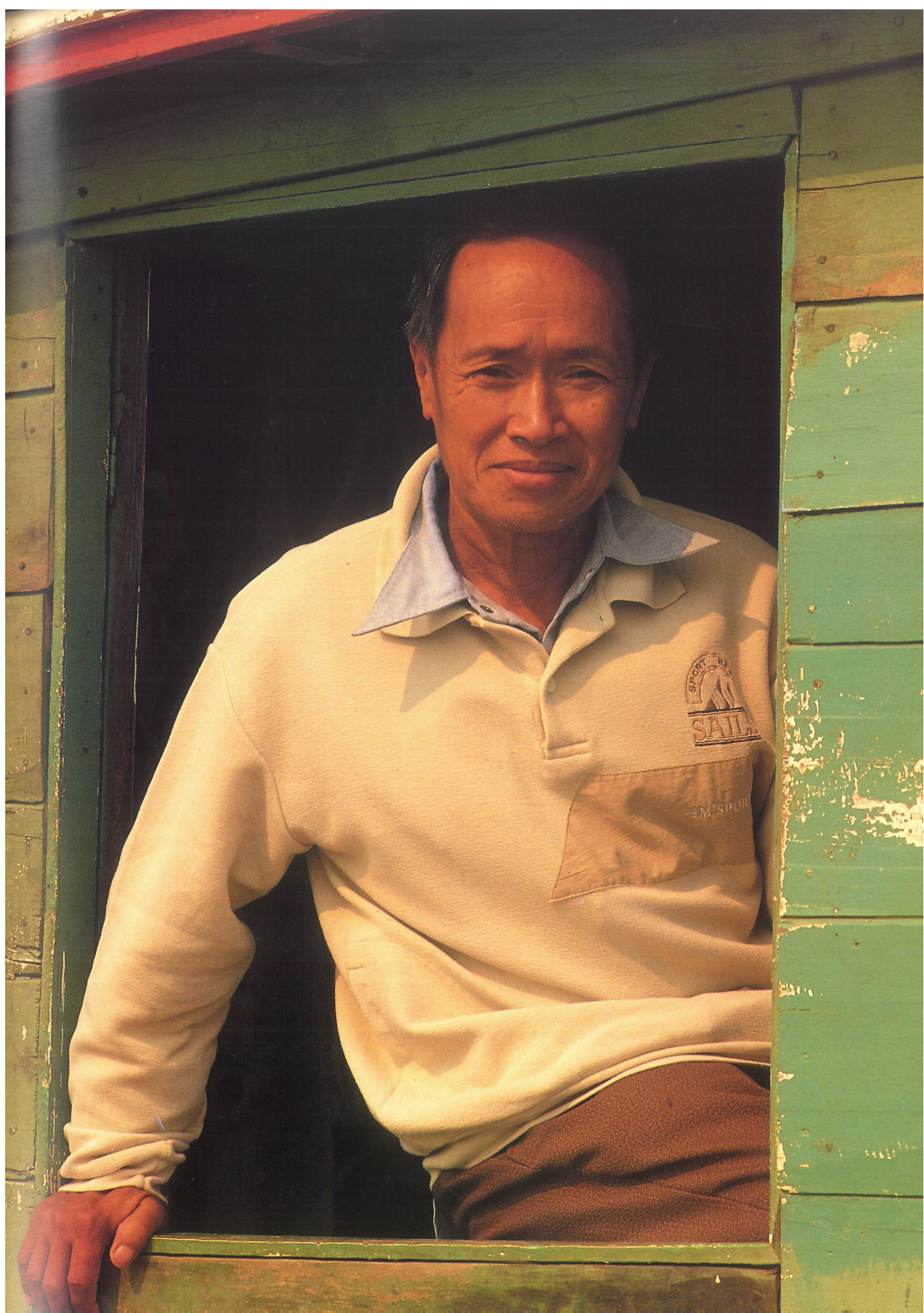
The Mekong's sudden shifts in mood and appearance are symptomatic of its dual nature. Both a blessing and a blight to its people, the same waters that give, by irrigating rice fields and depositing rich alluvial soil, also take, overflowing their banks and spreading disastrous floods.

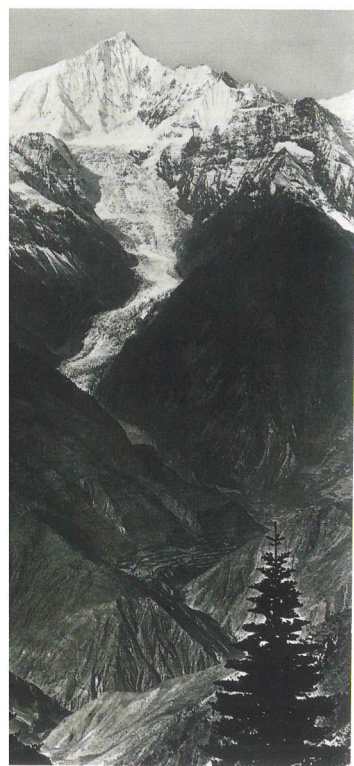
The river's human history is equally doubled-edged. Man often used the valley to advantage as a migratory route and a conduit for cultural dispersion, but the river has also been favoured by invading armies wreaking havoc. Wars have long punctuated the passage of time, and never more so than in the modern era when Indochina has been in almost constant turmoil. To many people the modern Mekong is a "river of evil memory," to use Colin Thubron's mordant phrase.

Transcending the bitter images of the recent past, nevertheless, there remains the grandeur of a mighty river. With a total course of 4,200 kilometres, the Mekong ranks as the world's twelfth longest river. Measured by annual flow, it moves up two places to be the tenth greatest river. It has a drainage basin covering 795,000 square kilometres – an area larger than France – and every year it pours some 475 billion cubic metres of water into the South China Sea.

Such a huge and powerful waterway naturally poses enormous possibilities for hydroelectric power and irrigation, as well as for other economic advantages in terms of transportation, tourism and industry. Yet virtually none of this vast potential has been tapped.

The most startling fact about man's use of the Mekong is the extent to which the river has been neglected. There was no coordinated exploration until the mid-19th century, and the river's source was not pinpointed until much later. Even today parts of the Mekong lands have barely been explored. Ancient kingdoms have flourished here and then vanished, but our understanding of such historical mysteries remains slight even today.





*Ascending to the Mekong in northern
photographed by explorer Joseph Rock
roduced courtesy of National
ifies the inhospitable terrain of the
ches. By contrast, the Mekong's
viewed from Nakhon Phanom in
'te) presents a tranquil scene.*

Unlike some other great rivers, the Mekong has not served to unify human activity along its course. In part this is due to topography, since much of the river flows through rugged, remote terrain that both deters movement and separates peoples. Beyond the natural barriers, however, man-made divisions exist, national boundaries having in places been drawn up with scant regard for existing cultural and social realities.

Mysterious and majestic, the Mekong is one of the last great rivers to retain a near pristine character. Awesome in its topography, intriguing in its cultural fabric, and varied in its demography, the river continues to inspire a sense of wonder.

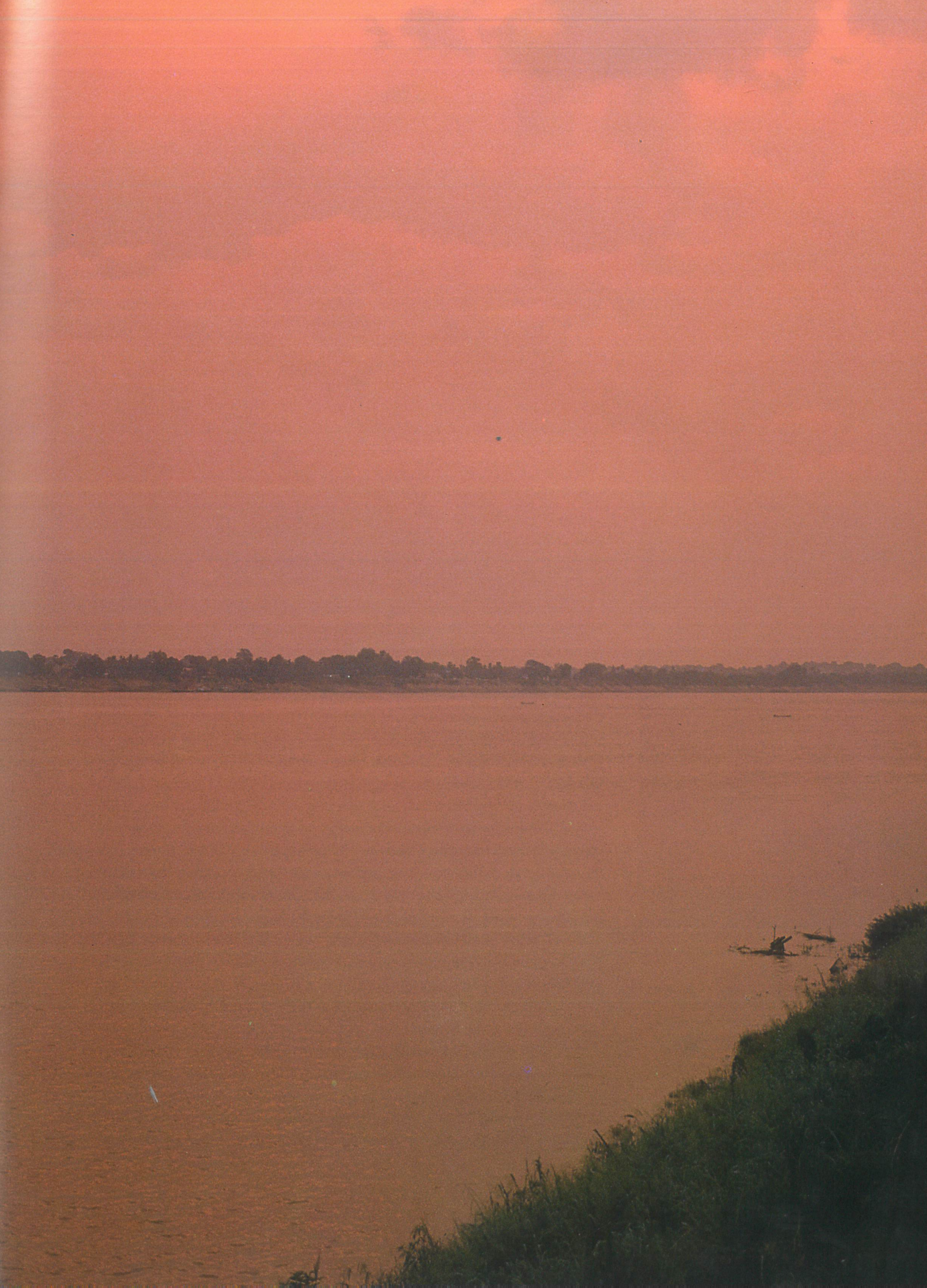
With its snow-fed headwaters lying 5,000 metres above sea level, the Mekong rises on the roof of the world, the Tibetan Plateau beyond the Himalayas. Here, given the first of a succession of local names, it is known as the Dza Chu, or "Water of the Rocks." Swirling past the isolated Treshi Gumpa monastery, 85 kilometres downstream from its source, the river begins to assume the southerly course which it will follow, with few deviations, on its passage to the sea.

The rate of descent in these upper reaches is startling. By the time it reaches Qando, where an ancient trade route bridges the river, the Mekong has dropped nearly 2,000 metres. So propelled, it tumbles on through bleak gorges to enter the Chinese province of Yunnan, where it traverses some of the grimmest, most inaccessible terrain in the world – the product of a titanic geological collision between the Indian subcontinent and Asia some 40-50 million years ago.

For the next 1,200 kilometres the Mekong maintains a course due south, and over much of this distance it is flanked by the Salween to the west and the Yangtze to the east. Although the mountains now begin to drop in altitude, the topography is still hostile, the river still aloof from man.

Having completed roughly half its passage to the sea, descending 4,500 metres on the way and reaching a width of some 400 metres, the Mekong exits China at Yunnan's southern border. Curving southwest, it constitutes the border between Laos and Burma for more than 200 kilometres before reaching the Golden Triangle, the point where the river, joined by a small tributary, momentarily brings together the borders of Thailand, Burma and Laos. This junction registers the beginning of what is usually termed the 'Lower Mekong'.

The Mae Nam Khong, as the river is called in Thai (from which comes the contraction 'Mekong'), has only 500 metres left to descend on its way to the sea. This slower drop allows for a more leisurely course, though not always an easy one. At the Golden Triangle, the river's passage continues through deeply folded mountains which often funnel it into narrows.





At Khone Falls (top) blocks navigation on the southern Laos, the river upstream is a communication link for the Lao, its importance in the blue stripe of the national flag. Travellers on the Mekong near Luang Prabang respects to the Buddhist shrine at Pak Ou

For a little way beyond the Golden Triangle, the Mekong briefly delineates the border between Laos and Thailand, but it shortly swings east into Laotian territory. Near the old Lao capital of Luang Prabang the river makes another abrupt turn, this time southwards. After covering about 250 kilometres it rejoins the Thai border near the town of Chiang Khan and then heads east to Vientiane.

The river now follows the northern rim of the Korat plateau in a long curve, all the while describing the border between Thailand and Laos until its confluence with the Mun, the major tributary on the Thai side.

Leaving behind the tumultuous nature of its mountainous reaches, the Mekong now assumes a majestic mien, flowing smoothly if swiftly through a broad valley, in places attaining a width of up to 1.2 kilometres. But the river likes to surprise, and it strikes a final dramatic pose before exiting Laos and entering the lowlands of Cambodia.

Upon leaving the Korat plateau, the river splits into several channels as it tumbles over the Khone Falls, a series of cataracts which can inspire horror and despair in anyone striving to navigate a passage.

Beyond Khone the Mekong passes into Cambodia, where it is traditionally known as the Tonle Thom. Leaving behind the last of its rapids at Sambor, it finally settles into its lower course and enters a broad flood-plain. The last important tributary, the Tonle Sap, joins the river at Phnom Penh,

the Cambodian capital. Immediately after the confluence the mainstream forks into two broad arms, the Mekong proper and, flowing out of it, the Bassac distributary; this point forms the apex of the Mekong delta, a triangular area with its base along Vietnam's southernmost coast.

Below the Cambodia-Vietnam border, the Mekong and the Bassac split yet further and the waters gradually fan out over a richly fertile area of nearly 50,000 square kilometres. The river finally empties into the South China Sea through numerous mouths, auspiciously counted as nine (superstitiously regarded as a lucky number) from whence derives the Vietnamese name *Cuu Long* or 'River of the Nine Dragons'.

Despite the vast extent of territory covered, the Mekong lands are generally not densely populated, although the delta is intensely cultivated and has several sizeable towns. Human habitation is sparse in the high mountains of the north, while the lower basin, the section best suited to human settlement, has a population of some 50 million. Of the two capital cities sited directly on the river banks, Phnom Penh has a population of less than a million while Vientiane numbers little more than 350,000.

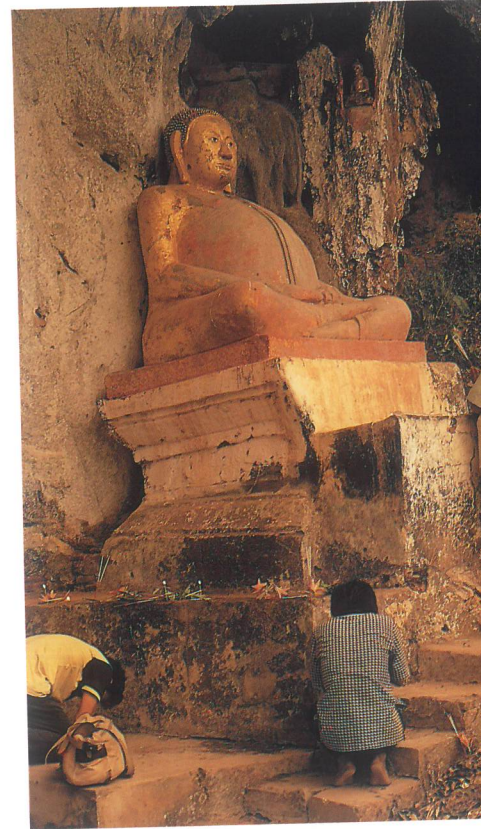
The demography of the river is nonetheless fascinating, and what is lacking in numbers is made up by cultural diversity. Altogether the Mekong passes or flows through six countries: China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Many cultural distinctions survive, linguistic differences being the most obvious. Art and temple architecture are also varied in style, form and decorative detail.

It is not only the regional nation states which account for these cultural distinctions. Because the Mekong flows through many areas that are relatively inaccessible, and because the river does not lend itself easily to navigation, a great diversity of minority groups have homelands within its vicinity. These minorities have to a large extent been able to maintain their separate ways, especially in the highlands flanking the valley.

The richest ethnic pattern of all is found in the Mekong's remote upper reaches, where numerous tribal groups to this day retain their individual identities, in spite of living within the Chinese sphere. Some of these hilltribe people have also filtered down into the highlands of the Lower Mekong countries, where they live in quasi-autonomous villages barely touched by the 20th century and the influence of mainstream society.

Time passes slowly along the Mekong. Motorboats, irrigation pumps, radios, televisions, bicycles, modern dress and other trappings of contemporary life are becoming increasingly widespread, but the old ways do not give in easily and keep a tenacious grip.

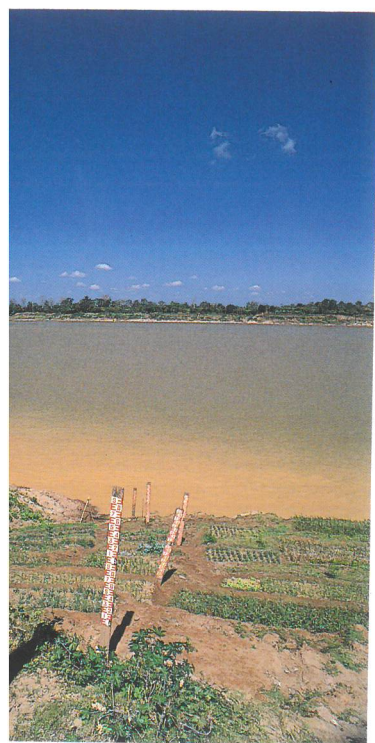
Sampans and pirogues of ancient design are common sights on the river, as are lone fishermen casting their nets or placing ingeniously designed





Peoples belonging to various ethnic minorities, such as the Yao (above and opposite), preserve separate lifestyles and add distinctive colour to the human geography of the Mekong's upper and middle reaches.





arkers (above) stand as graphic reminders
idely fluctuating flow. But if the waters
ble, fishing (opposite) remains a constant
people of the Mekong.

bamboo fish traps. Traditional homes of wood or bamboo, raised high on stilts to avoid flooding and to provide stabling for the family's livestock, are recurrent features along the riverine landscape.

There is change, of course, but it is slow in coming, and living standards remain low. Thailand, historically luckier than its neighbours, is the most economically advanced of the Mekong lands. Nonetheless, Thailand's North-east, the part of the country tied most strongly to the river system, is Thailand's poorest, least developed area.

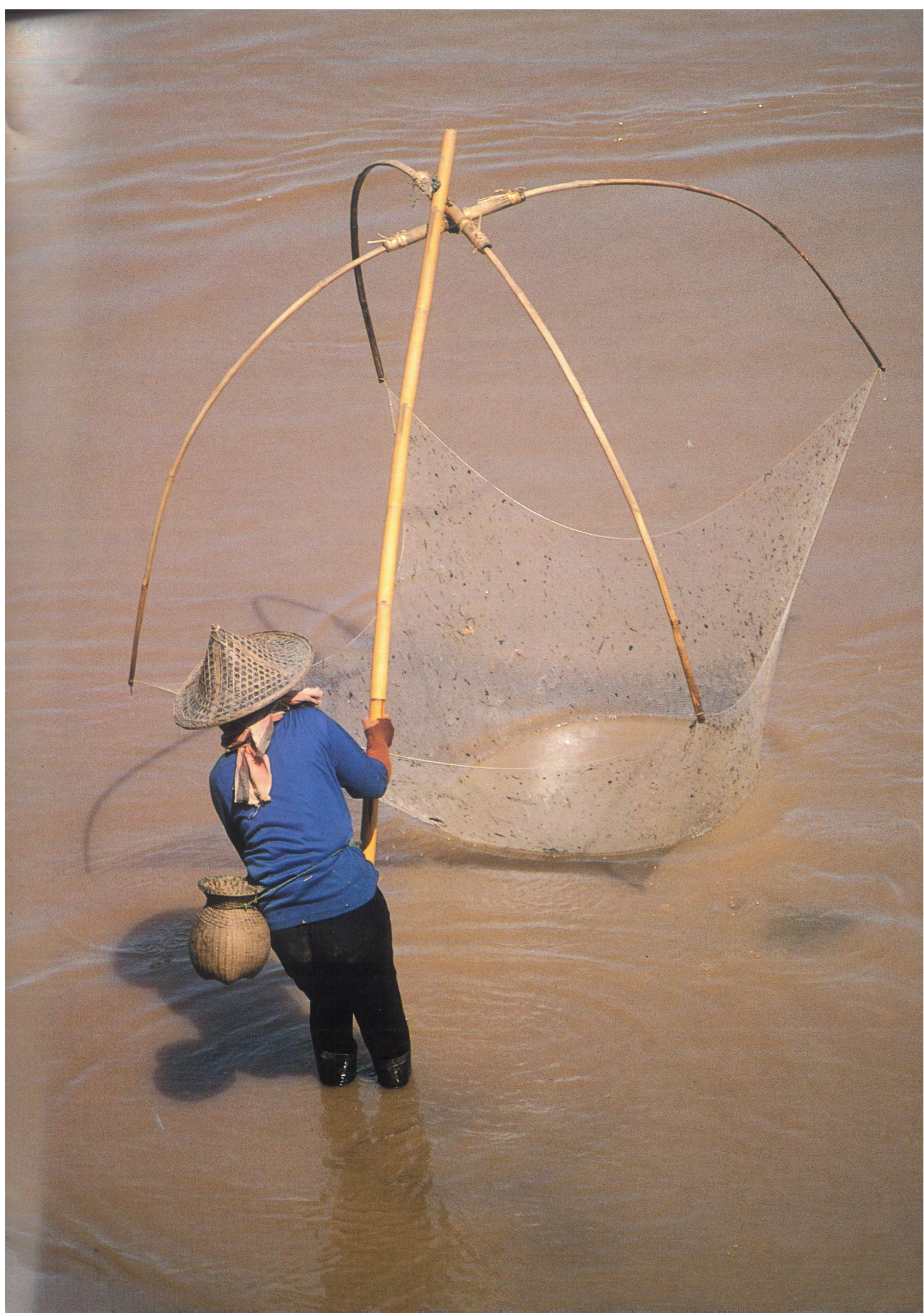
An anachronistic, somewhat poetic quality still attaches to the river in ways many and ubiquitous. Old folk recount legends almost as if they were historical fact, and you can scarcely remark on some salient feature – an island or perhaps a knoll – without the villagers telling you how it relates to the tragedy of luckless lovers or some other sad tale. Nor does it come as a surprise to hear the river mentioned in folk songs. The Thais have what are called *long khong* – literally translated as 'going down the khong', or Mekong – joyous songs which tell of happy, carefree young lovers boating blissfully down the Mekong.

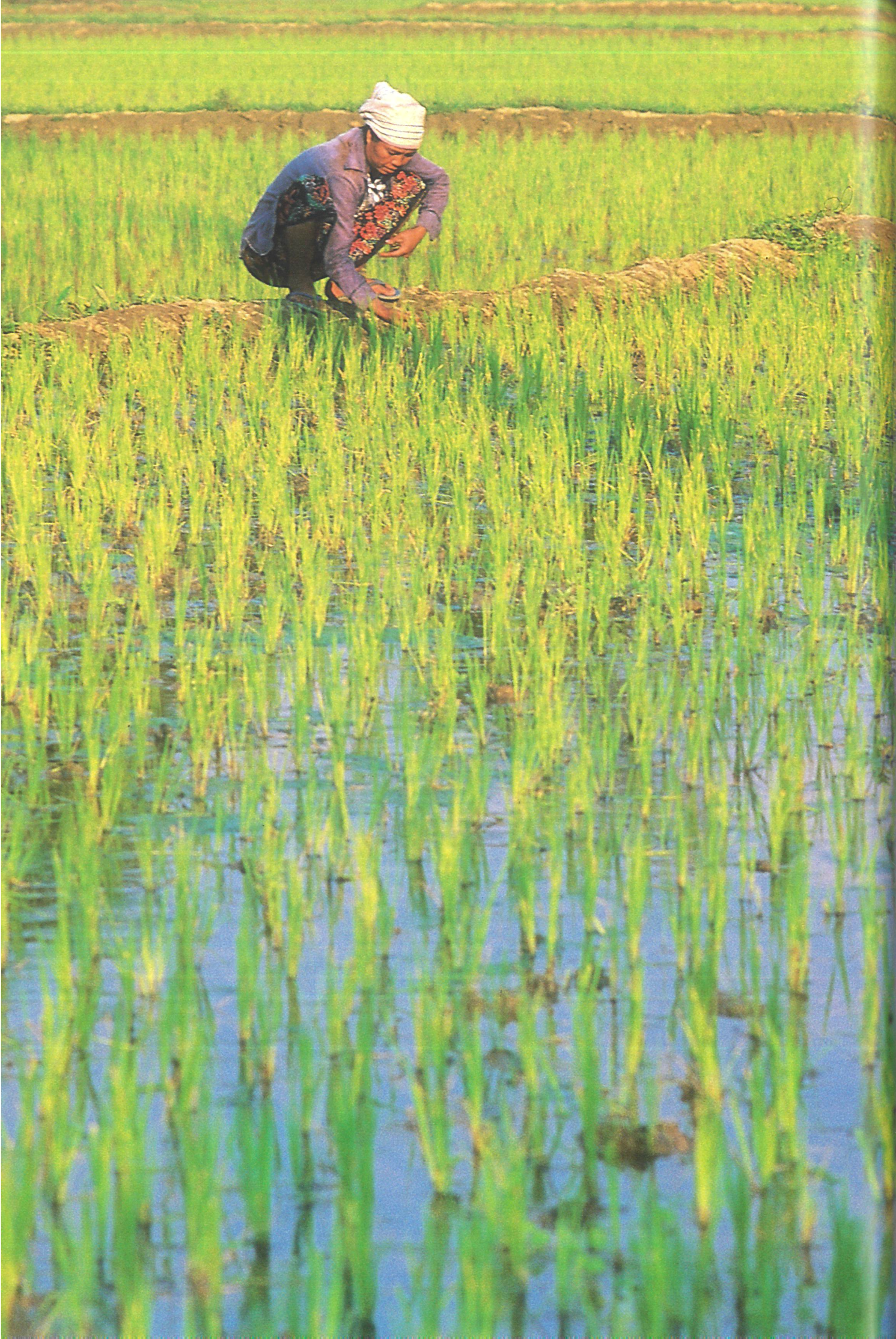
A symbol of tranquil happiness though it may be, the Mekong also commands respect and awe. Its swift currents claim lives, and unpredictable floods have over the centuries been accepted as part of life's inevitable hazards. People may be masters of water – they could not grow rice otherwise – but they have never been masters of the river.

The darker face of the river in its middle and lower reaches derives from climatic conditions. From southern Yunnan to the delta, the Mekong traverses subtropical and tropical regions, and it is consequently much affected by seasonal rainfall patterns brought about by the monsoons. These steady winds blow alternately from the northeast and the southwest, each for six months or so of the year, causing wet and dry seasons. About nine-tenths of the monsoon rains fall between May and October.

Consequently, there are dramatic fluctuations in the river's flow, causing the water level to rise and fall alarmingly. In the dry season, it is possible to stand on the top of the bank and peer down at the water 10 metres below; at the same spot in the monsoon season the river would be swirling round your feet.

The uneven flow causes severe problems for the Mekong people in various ways. All too often there is either too little or too much water, and periods of drought may be followed by floods. Calamitous floods in years of abnormal rains have been known to put both Vientiane and Phnom Penh under a metre of water. Insufficient water can have equally disastrous effects, causing crop failure and famine. In the delta, low water flows are so weak as to enable sea water to encroach on agricultural land.





The ups and downs in water level also affect navigation. Basically the Mekong has two navigable stretches, the first from the mouth to a point near the Cambodian-Lao border where the Khone Falls impedes river transport, and the second beginning in southern Laos and continuing up to Jinghong in Yunnan. Seasonal differences in water level plague both stretches, making some reaches at certain times of the year particularly hazardous or even impassable, especially for larger craft.

The people accept both floods and drought as the unalterable ways of the river, and in spite of the occasional calamity there is considerable continuity to life along the Mekong.

More than three-quarters of the people are farmers. Although there are clear differences in agricultural methods between, say, the uplands of Yunnan and the flatlands of the delta, farming is everywhere the constant and overriding pursuit. Vegetables and other crops are grown, particularly on the silt-enriched banks of the lower reaches. But the staple for the vast majority of Mekong people is rice. There are regional variations – Yunnan's Xishuangbanna area has purple rice, while from northern Burma down to the Khone Falls sticky rice is the staple. In Cambodia and Vietnam, on the other hand, plain rice is favoured.

Methods of cultivation vary, too; some rice fields are irrigated, others are located in flood land (around Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake and in parts of the delta, long-stalked, "floating" rice is a local phenomenon), but most paddy is rain-fed. Without irrigation, one crop a year is normal, and better water management could increase crop yield and raise the number of annual harvests to two or perhaps even three.

Rice-growing soil is typically clay, as hard as concrete when dry but turning to a very soft mud after the rains. The advent of the June-October wet season, when the earth begins to soften, spells the beginning of a new crop. Each field is a neat patch surrounded by low dykes to hold the water in, and the year's first task is to repair any damage to the retaining banks.

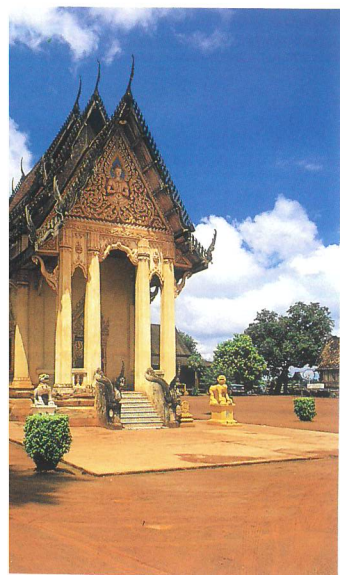
After more rain the soil is soft enough for ploughing, a task still dependent in most places on buffalo power. Then comes the back-breaking task of transplanting the young emerald-green rice shoots.

Once the crop is established there is a lull in the work, and this is the traditional time for young men in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia to enter the Buddhist monkhood temporarily, a one-time act of merit-making for one's parents and a mark of transition into adulthood.

Two or three months later the rice is ripe for harvest; and by December or January every stalk has been gathered. The hottest months – March and April – bring a period of relative inactivity, but village girls keep busy weaving cloth on primitive hand looms while the men hunt or fish.



Wet rice cultivation (opposite) dominates the economy of the Mekong lands, while the agricultural labourer (above) is a recurring figure in the landscape.



The dry season is also good for growing vegetables. Along much of the river's length, fertile banks are exposed as the water recedes after the rains. These strips can be terraced and turned into productive little plots yielding lettuce, onions, tomatoes and similar cash crops. Watering must be done by hand, and figures with twin cans slung from a shoulder pole are commonly seen silhouetted by the river's edge.

The calendar is punctuated by time-honoured festivals, most of them related to the agricultural cycle. The May Rocket Festival in Laos and Thailand, for example, is designed to prompt the sky god into sending the annual rains. Water, crucial to rice cultivation, may also feature directly in festivities. During traditional New Year celebrations (which follow the lunar year), many of the Mekong peoples – the Dai, the Burmese, the Thai – take delight in splashing water over one and all. Other annual events, such as boat races marking the end of the rainy season, are actually held on the Mekong at various places along its course.

Today people may view these occasions primarily as times for making merry, a welcome break from work in the fields, but the deeper significance of what are undoubtedly ancient rituals has not been completely lost. Food,



flower garlands and incense offerings made to spirits, as well as other rites with animistic origins are still observed.

There is a complex weave to the fabric of life along the river. Secular ceremonies are interwoven with the near-constant thread of Buddhism, the religion pervasive throughout the Mekong lands from Tibet to Vietnam. Other religions co-exist: Christianity, Islam and a host of minority faiths each have their followers, and more than one form of Buddhism is practised. Nevertheless, it is Theravada Buddhism which dominates as the faith of the majority of people in four of the six Mekong countries: Burma, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Even in Vietnam, where several religions have shaped spiritual life, Theravada Buddhism is common in the delta.

The tangible impact of Buddhism on the Mekong lands is, as befits such a gentle religion, soft and graceful. The temples of Xishuangbanna, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and the Vietnamese delta all possess, albeit with architectural variations, a delicate beauty. Soaring, multi-tiered roofs with curling eaves and glittering golden gable ends rise above palm fronds to enliven the skyline of even the smallest village. In historic towns, such as Luang Prabang, whole clusters of Buddhist temples stand as monuments to

Buddhism is practised by the majority of Mekong peoples and images of the faith abound. Clockwise from far left: Wat That Phanom, northeast Thailand; a Lao temple mural; Khmer Krom Buddhist monks in the Mekong delta; a typically ornate Thai temple.