

Place Names in Laos:
In Search of Khmer and Upland Khmer Toponyms

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This paper is a first pass at mapping Khmer and Upland Khmer toponyms in Laos proper. The data for this study comes from the 1973 publication *Laos: Official Standard Names Approved by the United States Board on Geographic Names* prepared by the Defense Mapping Agency Topographic Center in Washington, D.C. The date and agency of publication tells us that it was prepared for military purposes, but here we use it for historical and linguistic study and a kind of crude snapshot of the ethnolinguistic mosaic of Laos. This gazetteer contains about 21,000 entries for places and features in Laos and includes the geographical coordinates of each location. The names are listed in English alphabetic order, the quality of which varies widely because, at that time, fewer than fifty percent of the names were available in Lao script in official source materials, since many names derive from languages other than Lao. Of the 63 “generic parts” (Head Nouns) of standard names in the gazetteer, 16 have been designated as “Khmer” or “Upland Khmer.” It is a common cultural practice in the region to name places, especially villages, after geographic features, and this is no less true of the Mon-Khmer. Four Vietnamese terms are also among the list of 63 and will be placed with the Mon-Khmer under the Austroasiatic umbrella.

The study aspires to paint a geomorphological portrait of major features in the landscape the Mon-Khmer have chosen to settle and name. Their land is their map. Place names that are readily identifiable as Mon-Khmer will be subject to GIS analysis to answer general questions about the general distribution of Mon-Khmer populations and patterns of linguistic and cultural import at that moment in Lao history.