The complex ethnic landscape of the Mekong region is the result, in part, of past conflicts that gave rise to large-scale migrations. Over time, immigrants often crafted new identities in their new homes. The Hmong, Mien, Lisu, and other groups, who now live in the highest mountains in parts of Yunnan, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, immigrated to the Mekong watershed in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion in China in the mid-nineteenth century. Lowland Han, Lao, Thai, and Viet traditions are rapidly influencing their culture.

In many parts of the Mekong region, ethnic groups straddle the borders of two or more nations because international boundaries were drawn according to geography and political history. The river itself separates several communities. The Lao people on the left bank of the Mekong in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the Thai Lao on the right bank in the Kingdom of Thailand share a language and many cultural traditions. Beyond the borders of Cambodia, more than one million Khmer live in Northeast Thailand; another million-plus call Vietnam’s Mekong Delta home.