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### Family Diversity and the Austroasiatic Homeland

When and from where did the Austroasiatic language disperse? The issue has received renewed attention of late, especially in the context genetics, archaeology, and interdisciplinary studies, seeking to understand the pre-history of the region. Among linguists, recent discussions by Van Dreim (2001) and Diffloth (2005) place proto-Austroasiatic by the Bay of Bengal as far back as 7,000 years ago. Another tendency (e.g. Schuessler 2007) suggests that Austroasiatic was spoken in central or southern China, perhaps associated with the Yeuh polity. It may be difficult to reconcile these ideas.

Linguistic arguments have hinged on the suggestion that Munda represents an archaic coordinate branch of Austroasiatic, and is thus indicative of an origin in South Asia. However, the overall family structure of Austroasiatic is far from clear; Munda may be typologically innovative (restructured along the lines suggested by Donegan & Stampe 2004) and lexicostatistical studies consistently indicate that Munda basic vocabulary is just as Austroasiatic as other branches.

Both Shorto (2006) and Diffloth (ms.) have identified a sound correspondence that indicates a shared innovation between Munda, Khasian, Palaungic and Khmuic branches. This implies a phylogeny in which Munda is effectively a Mon-Khmer sub-branch. In that case, perhaps 7 out of 9 Austroasiatic branches are located on or adjacent to the Khorat plateau/Mekong river. Given that rice cultivation did not arise there before 4300 BP, and Austroasiatic is rich in rice terminology, we can suggest a dramatic dispersal event around 4000BP, broadly consistent with the suggestion of Thomas (1973). Perhaps the adoption of rice was the trigger.

#### References:

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