Observations on the uses of reduplication as a poetic device in Khmer

The constant use of alliterative and other reduplicative forms is a striking feature of Khmer poetry. The purpose of this short study of a vast subject is to analyse some of the forms of reduplication which occur in traditional Khmer poetry. The reduplicative structures of modern spoken and written prose (Gorgoniyeu 1963: 58-61; Huffman 1967: 129-40; Jacob 1968: 188-93; Jenner 1969: 63-73; Nacaskul 1971: 354-62) are taken as a basis for the examination.

The Khmers enjoy using an elaborate language style in descriptive, consciously literary prose and tend to adopt the poetic vein quite suddenly and rather more readily than we do now in the West. Lewitz (1970: 108) remarks on the occurrence of rhyme in prose in her introduction to No. 3 of the "modern" inscriptions of Angkor. Many of the poetic compound words which will be discussed below are to be found in descriptive prose writing. The contrast which is to be borne in mind, then, with regard to the vocabulary described in the following pages, is rather between the "plain language" of speech and factual prose and the "poetic language" of stylish literature and poetry. Where devices other than the choice of vocabulary are concerned, it will be clear from the citations and references that only poetry is involved.

The poems which have been consulted are listed at the end of the paper with, where possible, dates or approximate dates. The material has been arranged under six headings:

1. Reduplication in the structure of simple words
2. Reduplication in the structure of compound words
3. Grammatical categories of reduplicative words
4. Reduplication in syntactical structures
5. Reduplication and lexical meaning
6. Reduplication in relation to style.

Under each heading comment and examples are given, first for the plain language and then for the poetic language.

1. Reduplication in the structure of simple words

Reduplication occurs in the extended initial sequences of monosyllables and in the sequences of consonants which precede the vowel nucleus in restricted disyllables (Henderson 1952: 164-173).
Plain language

/kaka:y/ to scratch or dig with hands or paws constantly < /ka:y/ to scratch or dig with hands or paws
/koka:k/ with repeated sounds of laughter < /ka:k/ with a laughing sound
/tuontean/ close on the heels of < /tən/ to catch up, be in time for

Poetic language

/lolo:t/ to spring about < /lɔ:t/ to jump
/sāsraoc/ pouring all over < /sraoc/ to sprinkle

A poetic example of a restricted disyllable with reduplication has not been noted but the form is not of very common occurrence in Khmer at all. No special development of reduplication in simple words has been noticed in the poetic language. There is a tendency, perhaps greater than in the plain language, to use a reduplicative initial consonant before each of the two components of a reduplicative compound, however:


2. Reduplication in the structure of compound words

In reduplicative compound words, the two components are usually structurally alike, i.e. both are monosyllables with simple initial consonant or both have a two-place initial sequence, etc. It is only in the second of the following patterns that the components often have different forms.

Plain language

Normally one component is a free form (+) and the other bound (O).

i. Repetitive compound (with reduplication of the whole form).
/toːc-toːc/ small and numerous, < /toːc/ small + + very small

This live word-forming process is applied with great frequency to attributive verbs and to nouns with concrete meaning.

ii. Rhyming compound (with reduplication of vowel nucleus and final consonant)
/mēːn-tēːn/ really (true /O)
/sruːal-buːal/ with ease (comfortable, easy /O)
/cralaːh-baːh/ disrespectful (to overdo, go beyond the limit /O)
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iii. Chiming compound (with reduplication of initial and final consonant)

/kaen-kaon/  very contemptuous (O/ haughty)
/kme:n-kma:n/ children, a crowd (young /O)
of children
/bontec-bontu:ɔc/ to a certain extent, (a little /O)
a few (plural)

iv. Alliterative compound (with reduplication of initial consonants; one bound form)

/li:ɔy-lɔm/ jumbled up (mixed /O)
/prɔɔ-prah/ to use generally (to use /O)
(suggests plurality)
of things used)
/prənap-prənal/ bustling along (to hurry /O)
/bondɔh-bondaɪ/ to use an excuse (to free v.tr. /O)
to avoid some (cf. /dɔh-day/
commitment to shake of responsibility)

v. Alliterative compound (with reduplication of initial consonants; two free forms)

/cat-caen/ to organise (to send people/to clarify)
/slɔn-slaɔ/ to show signs of (to feel faint/with eyes widely open)
great shock
/pralak-pralo:h/ very dirty (sprinkled all over/dirty all over)
/bondaet-bondaoy/ to make (someone) (cause to float/cause to follow)
do as one wishes

Poetic language

Free and bound forms are not marked here since a considerable span of years is under review and it is not in all cases possible to know whether a component which is not now a free form was always a bound form.

i. Repetitive compound (with reduplication of the whole form)

/yɛək(s)-yɛək(s) sva:-sva:/ ogres and monkeys (plurality stressed)

ii. Rhyming compound (with reduplication of vowel nucleus and final consonant)

/cuːə-buːe/ row upon row < /cuːə/ row
/slaŋ-kaŋ/ faint and pale < /slaŋ/ pale
/tralaŋ-kaŋ/ having four sides

iii. Chiming compound (with reduplication of initial and final consonant)
iv. Alliterative compound (with reduplication of initial consonants; at least one component cannot be demonstrated to be free)

/yûŋ-yûǝl/ to catch sight of, to see < /yûǝl/ to see
/skvm-skay/ huge, vast
/rûm-rûmcê:ŋ/ to crash (of waves)

v. Alliterative compound (with reduplication of initial consonants; both components may be demonstrated to have occurred as free forms in poetry)

/miːl-miːh/ all gold (much/gold)
/phle:k-phǝh/ to dart here and there (to flash/to bound over)
/tratê:h-tratû:ay/ swaying gracefully (lithe, curving over)

The proportion of alliterative compounds formed of two free forms to those formed on any other pattern is very high in the plain language; in the poetic language it is overwhelmingly so. The most frequently recurring pattern of alliterative compounds in poetry seems to be $C_1C_2V(C)$-$C_1C_2V(C)$. These compounds may be regarded as catalysed as such, for the purpose of this paper, by the fact that they are cited as separate entries in the Vacananunkram Khmer. However, some compounds which are discussed in vi. and vii. below or in section 5 and which are not to be found in the dictionary are held to be compounds only because they are repeatedly used, perhaps only in one work, with a fixed, coordinated meaning which is clear from the context.

The examples given in the two sets of paragraphs i-v above show that approximately the same variety of patterns occurs among poetic reduplicative compounds as among those in the plain language. The following paragraphs introduce two further poetic patterns.

vi. Semi-repetitive compounds based on Indian loanwords

A Sanskrit (Skt.) or Pali (P.) loanword is repeated with a change of final consonant or final vowel nucleus and final consonant. The Sanskrit or Pali inflexions which are thus brought into play do not in all cases reflect correct Sanskrit or Pali forms. This kind of compound is virtually unknown in the plain language.

/baksǝ:-baksǝvǝ/ birds, male & female < Skt. /paksi/ bird
/mahǝ:-mahǝ:h/ great < Skt. P. /maha/ id.
/mulhǝo-mulhǝǝn/ erring < P. /mūlha/ gone astray
/yǝc-yǝp/ sacrifice < Skt. /yajña/ & P. /yañña/ id.