

SOME FEATURES OF KHMER VERSIFICATION

Two transcriptions are used below. The one in heavy type, representing the spelling of Khmer words, is based on the transcription usually used for Sanskrit with four main differences:

1. that the inherent vowel is represented by **̄** when there is no short mark over the final consonant and by **̆** when there is a short mark over the final consonant, while the vowel written *añ* (Sanskrit *ā*) is represented by **ā** when there is no short mark over the final consonant and by **a** when there is a short mark over the final consonant.

2. that the following vowel-signs are used to represent the symbols added by the Khmers: **u** (*u*), **uo** (*uo*), **y** (*y*), **uo** (*uo*), **io** (*io*), **e** (*e*).

3. that although no virama is normally used to mark final consonants in the modern Khmer orthography the final consonants of words are transcribed without the following symbol **̄** (which would represent the implied inherent vowel).

4. that where a character has the virama, e.g. *ṅ̄*, brackets enclose the corresponding letter in the transcription: **bhūm(i)**.

The transcription in italics is that used by E.J.A.Henderson¹ to represent the modern pronunciation.

The metres which have been used in Khmer poetry have been described elsewhere.² The purpose of this article is to discuss in further detail two of the basic features of Khmer versification, the rhymes and the syllables. A description of the recitation of five of the metres, as taught in Cambodia now, is appended.

The rhymes used by Khmer poets are based on both the vowel and final of the metric syllables involved. Nevertheless they do not always seem satisfactory. The 'imperfect' rhymes may be described as follows:

1. those which are orthographically appropriate but which are discrepant in the modern pronunciation. These may indicate that a change in pronunciation has taken place since they were first used.

2. those of which the vowels or finals are orthographically different but are pronounced alike in the modern language. Some rhymes of this category have been noted only in the poetry of the nineteenth century onwards and may therefore reflect modern developments of pronunciation, e.g. **es** with **eh**, both now realized as *eh*.

3. those of which the vowels are equivalents neither in the orthography nor in the modern pronunciation. Many of these date back to what is assumed to be the earliest extant poetry and will be discussed in detail in the following pages.

It is the tradition of Khmer poetry that the vowels of one register³ may rhyme with the corresponding vowels of the same length on the other register. Thus **kɔ̃n**, *kɔ̃:ŋ* is as good a rhyme for **bɔ̃n** *pɔ̃ŋ*, as is **lɔ̃n**, *lɔ̃:ŋ*, and **gap**, *kɔ̃ap*, rhymes with **kāp**, *kap*, just as well as with **rap**, *rɔ̃ap*. Rhymes occur, therefore, in these cases, between vowels which are written with the same symbol. It is possible that at the time when these spelling conventions were established, the corresponding vowels on the two registers were similarly articulated.⁴ It seems reasonable to suppose that it was at this same stage in the development of the vowel-system that poetic conventions were being established and perhaps some of the extant Khmer poetry being composed. Thus **lāy** and **rāy** (modern pronunciation *la:y* and *ri:əy*), which rhyme together in the 'Chbap Kram', were possibly as perfect rhymes for each other, as far as articulation is concerned, at the time when the poem was composed as the spelling would still indicate them to be. However this may be, and it must of course be largely a matter of conjecture, Khmer rhymes have always been made between corresponding vowels on the two registers as well as between 'identical' vowels. Rhymes across register continue to be tolerated in modern poetry. I know of only one long poem, 'Teav Ek', in which they do not occur at all. Cross-register rhymes are the only examples noted of the first type of 'imperfect' rhymes mentioned above, those which the orthography supports but which modern pronunciation denies.

The second and third types of 'imperfect' rhymes will be dealt with together. Here we are first concerned with rhyming vowels of the same length but orthographically different; some are pronounced alike today while others are not. All common cases of this type of rhyme are mentioned below:

1. Short inherent vowel of either register rhymes with

- (a) **u**. Has been noted before final *k, ŋ, t, n, p, m, r, l, s, h*. e.g. **yɔl**, *ywəl* with **sompur**, *sɔmbol*. Before final *p* and *m* only, and on the second register, the symbols are pronounced alike today, i.e. both symbols are realized as *ũ*.
- (b) **a**. Has been noted before *k, t, p, m, l, s, h*, e.g. **khɔp**, *khɔp* with **slap**, *slap*. These symbols are never pronounced alike in modern Khmer.
- (c) **o**. Only before final spirant, e.g. **bos**, *pwəs* with **smoh**, *smɔh*. These symbols are always pronounced alike in the modern language, when on the same register.

2. **a** rhymes with

- (a) **ɛ**. Has been noted before the palatals, *c, ɲ, y*, and dentals, *t, n*, e.g.

cañ, *cap* with **muñ**, *mùṇ*. These symbols are never pronounced alike in modern Khmer.

- (b) **e** before palatals, e.g. **cañ**, *cap* with **ceñ**, *cep*. Before a final palatal plosive the vowels are pronounced alike today, both symbols being realized as **a** (*êac-ḍac* do not occur).

3. As might be expected because of 2, **u** rhymes with **e** before palatals, e.g. **muñ**, *mùṇ* with **ceñ**, *cep*. This coincides with modern pronunciation in which *ɿṇ* and *ep*, *ùṇ* and *ēṇ* are indistinguishable. The vowels have been transcribed differently in order to maintain the link between spelling and pronunciation.

u, **ū** and **i**, **ī** occasionally rhyme with **e**, e.g. **cer**, *ce*: with **prambir**, *prampūl*. Although these vowels are of different lengths it is convenient to mention them here.

4. **ī** rhymes with **ay**, e.g. **tay**, *day* with **stī**, *sdvy*. These symbols are never pronounced alike in modern Khmer.

5. **ε**, written with a first register-initial, rhymes with **e**:

- (a) before final **h** and in words of Sanskrit and Pali origin, e.g. **prāhes**, *prāhes* with **veh**, *vèh*; **tet**, *daet* with **hetu**, *haet*. The modern language supports these pronunciations.
- (b) in native Khmer words before final *k*, *ṇ*, *t*, *n*, *l* and in open syllables, e.g. **εñ**, *aen* with **leñ**, *lê:ṇ*. These symbols are never pronounced alike in modern Khmer.

6. **o** rhymes with:

- (a) **u** before *h*, e.g. **soh**, *soh* with **kuh**, *koh*. Modern pronunciation does not support this rhyme. (The word **noh**, *nùh*, 'that', is a modern exception as the vowel, **o**, is there pronounced as if it were **u**.)
- (b) the long inherent vowel of either register before *k*, *ṇ*, e.g. **rōk**, *rô:k* with **pok**, *baok*. These symbols do not give a rhyme in the modern pronunciation.

It may be that at some time in the past each of the sets of vowels listed above did actually rhyme and that the convention of using the rhymes lingered on after the pronunciation changed (as we have guessed to be the case with rhymes across register). Certainly these rhymes between vowels written with different symbols are still used today, when many of them are not perfect rhymes.

An examination of the poetry of different periods has shown that there has apparently been a fashion in the use of certain of such rhymes. Thus the rhyme, **ī** with **ay**, which does not occur in what are generally taken to be the oldest poems, is used in the poems attributed to the time of King Sri Dhammaraja (reigned intermittently, 1702-1747). The rhyme is not steadily used from then onwards, however. In the poems of King Ang Duong and his contemporaries it rarely occurs. Whether this was mere fashion or a question of dialect cannot perhaps now be known. Again, the rhymes, **u** with **a** and short inherent vowel with **a** were used by King Sri Dhammaraja and the poets of the next generation and by King Ang Duong but not very much by the poets of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries; the former seems to be obsolete while the latter is now used again.

The rhyme between **o** and **u** before *h* seems on the other hand to reflect a genuine development. It does not occur in what are taken to be the oldest group of poems; in the next group it occurs only with the word, **no_h**; finally all the syllables ending with **o_h** rhyme with **u_h**.

With reference to 6(b) above, there is evidence from the inscriptions that modern long inherent vowel and *ao/ô*: in many words derive from a vowel written **o**. Thus **mōk**, *mô:k*, **rōk**, *rô:k* were written **mok**, **rok** from the seventh century until the early eighteenth. They were probably therefore at some time pronounced the same, with regard to the vowel as other words then and still written with **o**, and now pronounced with *ao/ô*:. This may account for the rhyme.

So far, in discussing the 'imperfect' rhymes which are orthographically discrepant, we have been concerned with vowels which are written with different symbols but are of the same length. Two more rhymes must now be added to the 'imperfect' rhymes of the third type, those, that is, which are different both orthographically and in the modern pronunciation. The two additions are short and long vowels rhyming together. Thus the short inherent vowel rhymes with the long inherent vowel and **a** rhymes with **ā**. This feature persists throughout Khmer poetry. It is possible that the length opposition in the inherent vowel and in **a** in native Khmer words was a comparatively recent development. The short mark, which allows the short and long inherent vowel and **a/ā** to be distinguished in writing, was an eighteenth-century invention. Occasionally **ū** and **u** rhyme together.

It seems then that some of the large variety of 'imperfect' rhymes may have been perfect as regards articulation when they were first used. Once a rhyme was established it set a precedent for later poets; thus any of the above-mentioned rhymes may be used by a modern poet. Nevertheless, it appears that a wide choice of rhyming vowels was required by the poet if he was to fulfil the demands of the metres; for, quite apart from all the rhymes mentioned above, there are occasional instances of completely different vowels being rhymed together (**uo** with **o** and **y** with **ū** for example), and of final **k** being unpronounced as in the colloquial language in words such as *mô:k*, *rô:k* so as to rhyme with an open *ô*:. It might be suggested on the other hand that a near-rhyme appeals to the Cambodian aesthetic sense.

The final consonants which give 'imperfect' rhymes are few; all are orthographically different, as follows:

Final r with open syllable	Since final r is no longer pronounced the modern language supports this rhyme.
Final s and h	In colloquial speech both are usually realized as aspirates. In reading style they are distinguished.
Final r and l	Not now pronounced alike.
Final ūv and ū	Not now pronounced alike.