

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE SURIN DIALECT OF KHMER

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### 0. INTRODUCTION

It is sometimes forgotten that the southern third of Northeast Thailand, a generally arid and economically depressed territory, falls within the zone of distribution of Khmer speech.<sup>1</sup> One of the more fertile parts of this region, otherwise known as the Khorat Plateau, is the basin of the Mae Nam Mun, which rises in the Dong Phraya Yen chain west of Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) and flows east past Ubon to join the Mekong some 40 kilometres above Paksé. In its progress the river crosses Buriram, Surin, Sisaket and Ubon provinces, all bounded on the south by the Dangrek escarpment and northern Cambodia. Most of the inhabitants of the relatively densely populated lands watered by the Mun speak Khmer as their mother-tongue. Official figures are wanting for the total number of Khmer-speakers in the four provinces, and estimates range from an ultra-conservative 200,000 to a probably excessive 500,000.

Of movemenets and intercommunications between the Mun valley and the Cambodian hearland to the south we have little except inferential knowledge. It is tempting to conjecture that they could never have been important. During much of the Angkorian period the whole Khorat Plateau along with much of Central Thailand was under Khmer suzerainty. This circumstance cannot be used to prove that Khmer speech had a similar extension, for in reality the settlement of the Khorat Plateau is not known in any detail. There are nevertheless good archeological grounds for taking the confluence of the Mae Nam Mun with the Mekong as the earliest identifiable centre of Khmer power - providing Khmer was not also the common language of Fu-nan.<sup>2</sup> However this may be, it is reasonable to suppose that Khmer-speaking rice-growers have been in occupation

of the lower Mun valley for a millennium or more. Control over most of the Khorat Plateau was wrested from Angkor by Rāmādhīpati of Sukhotai by the year 1350. In the wars culminating in the abandonment of Angkor (1431-3) the territories on both sides of the Dangrek were repeatedly ravaged and depopulated. Although it is not known how they were affected, it is unlikely that the humble Khmer-speakers of the Mun came through these events unscathed. At least it can be pointed out that the usual direction of the mass deportations practised at the time was into rather than away from the sparsely settled Northeast. It may even be supposed that from the 15th century on the earlier Khmer population was increased by important accessions of transportees from the Tonlé Sap basin. In 1794 Thailand formally annexed the old Cambodian provinces of Battambang, Angkor, Mongkolborey, Sisophon and Khorat. While this whole territory was under Thai administration there were presumably ample opportunities for contacts and migrations between the Mun valley and central Cambodia, notwithstanding the difficulty of communications across the Dangrek chain. Since the mid-15th century, however, there has been no sustained motive for major contacts or movements, and the historical connection of the Khmer dialects of the Mun basin with modern standard Khmer has yet to be determined.

The town (/myəŋ/) of Surin,<sup>3</sup> seat of the province of the same name, lies 54 kilometers south of the Mun, the same distance due north of the Cambodian frontier, 42 kilometers by rail east of Buriram, and about 95 kilometers by rail west of Sisaket. During the spring of 1967 it was my good fortune to meet on the University of Hawaii campus a young Thai student, Miss Aree Somthawin, who had been born and raised in Surin, who spoke Khmer as her first language, and who accepted with much good grace my request for her services as an informant. In the following paragraphs I sketch out the results of our collaboration over a period of some four months, believing that the peripheral position of the Surin dialect may justify the presentation of such tentative findings to others in the field of Khmer or Mon-Khmer studies.

The Surin dialect is an unwritten vernacular which has for long, apparently, followed a line of development independent of the Cambodian mainstream.<sup>4</sup> The mutual intelligibility of Surin Khmer and the standard of Cambodia, which I had the opportunity to test, is limited. Its main areas of divergence from standard Khmer are intonation, the vowel system, and lexicon. Register<sup>5</sup> appears to be entirely absent; whereas standard Khmer has a maximum of 31 contrasting syllable nuclei, Surin Khmer has only 23. The circumflex clause terminal seems to be characteristic. The vocabulary contains a good many archaisms (/biət/ 'near'), regionalisms (/kmaat/ 'first person singular pronoun, masculine'), and loans

from Thai (/talaat/ 'market').

## 1. SEGMENTAL PHONEMES

### 1.1. VOWELS

There are 9 simple (long) vowel phonemes, namely /ii, ee, ɛɛ; yy, əə, aa; uu, oo, ɔɔ/. These combine with shortness to yield 8 (or 9) shortened counterparts, namely /i, (e), ɛ; y, ə, a; u, o, ɔ/; functional contrast between /ee/ and /e/ cannot be demonstrated by my data, and is only tentatively assumed for the sake of symmetry. The 3 simple (/ii, yy, uu/) and 3 shortened (/i, y, u/) high vowels combine with /ə/ to form 6 falling diphthongs. The total vowel inventory is shown in Table I. Note the absence of /aa, a/, of /ee, oe, oee/, and of /aaɛ, aae, aao/.

The phonetic quality of these syllable nuclei is not essentially different from that of standard Khmer and will not be detailed here. It may be worth mentioning, however, that as in the standard the phonetic length of the long nuclei is perceptibly decreased by voiceless finals while that of the shortened nuclei is increased by voiced finals. Again as in the standard, the shortened vowels tend to be lower than their long counterparts.

### 1.2. CONSONANTS

There are 17 consonant phonemes, /p, b, m; t, d, n; c, ɲ; k, ŋ; q; w, j; r, l; s, h/, all of which occur initially. /b, d/ are preglottalised (implosive); /q/ represents [ʔ], often theoretical in word-initial position; /w, j/ are the labial and palatal semivowels respectively; /r/ is a voiced lingual flap (occasionally a trill) with alveolar contact in syllable-initial position.

Front Unrounded		Central Unrounded		Back Rounded	
i	ii	y	yy	u	uu
iə	iiə	yə	yyə	uə	uuə
(e)	ee	ə	əə	o	oo
ɛ	ɛɛ	a	aa	ɔ	ɔɔ

Table 1: The Syllable Nuclei

Table 2, which probably falls short of representing all possible combinations, shows the initial consonant clusters occurring in my data.

<i>initials</i> →	p	b	m	t	n	c	k	w	r	l	s
p	x			x			x				x
b		x		x			x				x
m				x		x	x		x		x
t							x		x		x
d	x						x		x		x
n	x		x	x	x	x	x				x
c			x								
ɲ	x										
k	x			x		x					x
ŋ				x						x	x
q	x					x				x	x
w						x			x		x
j							x				
r	x		x	x		x	x				x
l	x		x	x		x	x	x		x	x
s	x						x		x		
h	x		x	x		x	x				

Table 2: Complex Initials