THE FORM SYAÑ IN ANGKORIAN KHMER

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In at least one respect the study of ancient languages known only from written monuments is like the study of contemporary languages which have never been reduced to writing: in both cases the investigator encounters as a matter of course lexical items which are not readily amenable to analysis. What is sometimes forgotten is that the linguist working on a living language normally has recourse to informants, whereas the linguist working on a dead language can have no such guidance. Hence, if most of the ancient lexicon is known or knowable, certain forms prove resistant to identification, and alternative means must be brought into play in attempting to account for them.

It is not my intention to claim that the difficulties confronting us in Old Khmer are as numerous or as perplexing as they seem to be, or to have been, in many another ancient language. Since the first inscriptions were published by Aymonier a century ago we have, thanks to the painstaking work of a few dedicated French scholars, seen the gradual elaboration of a tolerably good understanding of Old Khmer. By 1966, when the eighth and last volume of Cœdès's monumental *Inscriptions du Cambodge* [= C] made its appearance, most of the texts in the growing corpus of Khmer epigraphy had been analysed and explicated with an acceptable degree of reliability. By that year the bulk of the lexicon was fairly well understood, but a good many specialised terms had not been worked out to our satisfaction. This is still the case today, when a good many lexical and other problems continue to elude us. Among these is a small class of forms which appear to perform grammatical functions.¹ Typical of this class is syañ, which I propose to discuss here.

Not found in the pre-Angkorian inscriptions recovered so far,² this orthographic form is attested in Angkorian Khmer well over a hundred and fifty times. In addition, its life is extended through the Middle Khmer period, where it appears variously as syañ (A.D. 1560-77), syiñ (1560-1701), and siñ (1587-1706), with the apparent nonce-forms siñ (1620), siñy (1696) and siñ (1701). As to the meaning of the Angkorian form, Aymonier (1883: 494, n. 1) took it as synonymous with Sanskrit *kevalam* 'solely, entirely' and as the source of modern Khmer 'siñ' — by which he

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¹. There were no published studies of Old Khmer grammar until the valuable sketch by Saveros Pou (1979). The enquiry presented here goes hand in hand with my earlier *Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien* studies (1981, 1982).

². The language of the pre-Angkorian period, conventionally ending with the founding of Angkor in A.D. 802, is manifested in the form of two dialects. The principal or A dialect, among other criteria, lacks the high falling diphthongs [iːə], [uːə], [uːə] and their short counterparts. The lesser or B dialect, conforming with the phonology of the Angkorian period, has these diphthongs. The orthographic form syañ is ambiguous but must have been realized with a high falling diphthong: [siaŋ], [siaŋ], [suəŋ], [suəŋ]. It could, therefore, have occurred in pre-Angkorian as a dialect B form, but would take some other form in dialect A.
evidently meant siha /sɔŋ/ [svŋ] ‘nearly all, almost’. In 1913 Cœdès (Parmentier 1913: 14) understood it in the same sense as Aymonier and rendered it ‘sans exception’. In 1915, however, Finot (1915: 106) re-defined it as a pronoun, glossing syah ta as ‘qui’. For most of the half-century down to 1966, Cœdès and his contemporaries treated the form in various ways which are impossible to reconcile. Thus in the largest number of cases, representing about 35% of the total, we find it expressed by appropriate forms of tout. Yet in roughly 29% of its occurrences it does not seem to be rendered at all, at least overtly, even in those fairly numerous cases where the idea of tout would not appear out of place. Several times it is expressed by the related notion of ensemble. In other passages, representing a little over 15% of the total, we find it rendered by ‘comme’, ‘tel’, ‘réellement’ and, in one instance, ‘voilà’. It must be said, however, that in none of these latter cases is it absolutely certain that syah is being expressly rendered at all. Indeed, one has the impression that Cœdès and his contemporaries allowed themselves in some instances to be led into the translation they give under pressure from the supposed contexts. This uncertainty is greatest in passages in which figure appropriate forms of être: one simply does not know whether syah is being so rendered or is being passed over in silence.

To this diversity of interpretations may be added the treatment of syah and its variants in Middle Khmer texts. During the 1970s my learned teacher Saveros Pou redefined syah as an anaphoric ‘pronoun or particle’ (sic), holding at the same time that the Middle Khmer form or forms were the source of modern Khmer siha /sɔŋ/ ‘nearly’. As far as I am aware, however, it is nowhere rendered as an anaphoric pronoun in any of her superb translations. Of the fifty-seven Middle Khmer occurrences of syah and its variants collected for the present study, twenty-seven (48%) are not overtly rendered at all. Twelve, or 21%, mostly in combination with what we are no doubt justified in now calling the equational copula jī /jaa → cīa/, are conceivably assigned a copular function or, if this is not so, are also unrendered. In only three cases is syah represented by ‘comme’. On the other hand, in eight cases (14.5%), French and my own English translations read as if syah marked the apodosis of an ‘if’ or ‘when’ clause, or as an unexpressed ‘then’ introducing the consequence of a prior clause. We also have a small number of instances in which syah is, as I might say, plainly none of the foregoing but seems to express a contrastive (nevertheless) or instrumental (thereby) idea. In only two cases, both suspicious, does it appear to be taken as a pronoun. I may as well mention

3. As will be seen, he may have had in mind modern siha /sɔŋ/ [svŋ] ‘to rest’.
4. In addition to the occurrences tallied here, in over 9% of its instances the passages in which syah occurs are left untranslated for one reason or another. The Angkorian corpus also includes twelve passages with syah which are too garbled to be used in the present discussion.
5. I might mention in this connection that I have considered the possibility of a loan relationship, in one direction or the other, between Middle Khmer syah – sih and Thai /sɔŋ/ (for the corresponding Lao form see Kerr 1972: 493b), usually treated as a relative pronoun ‘used in reference to a person, an animal, or an inanimate object... in the nominative, objective, or possessive case’ (Sethaputra 1965: I, 349ab, who adds that it is also ‘used in a literary context to introduce a noun in the objective case after a transitive verb, where in ordinary language no preposition (sic) is required’; cf. Haas 1964: 157b; McFarland 1944: 309b). Since it seems to yield no useful results, my consideration of this possibility is not included in the present discussion.
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here that none of the Old Khmer or Middle Khmer occurrences of syañ allows interpretations suggestive of modern sīna /sɨν/ 'nearly'; as far as I am able to determine, this sense is unattested in the older language.

In view of such radically different interpretations of the meaning and function of syañ, we have no choice except to re-examine the data. It will be appreciated that the task of doing so has something of the character of a trial at law in which the evidence, abundant though it may be, is entirely circumstantial. This, taken with the diversity of views expressed by a number of eminent scholars, demands that all of the usable evidence be adduced and weighed. With this in mind I have screened all of the Old Khmer inscriptions available to me and collected every occurrence of syañ with a view to ensuring that no usage escaped notice. For Middle Khmer I have gone through all of the so-called 'modern' inscriptions of Angkor (Lewitz 1970-72), some seventeen cpā'pa /cbap/ or ethical texts;7 the Lpaka 'aṅgaravatta /lbaaṅ qaṅkōorwoat/; the undated metrical Supina /sobān/; and nine other inscriptions, namely* K.39 (A.D. 1574), K.177 (1478-1577), K.285 and K.465 (both 1583), K.715 (1586), K.27 (1587), K.261/I (1611), K.261/III (1639), and K.261/II, IV and V (1578-1677). Data in this quantity create a problem of presentation. On the one hand, the reader is entitled to examine the full array of the available evidence; but to provide the latter would occupy from sixty to seventy-five pages of space which could no doubt be put to better use. On the other hand, any significance to be found in the present study lies in whatever conclusions one may draw from the evidence, and such conclusions can be given in a few short paragraphs. One of these extremes being as unsatisfactory as the other, I have attempted to strike middle ground, first, by confining my citations to those from the Angkorian inscriptions and, secondly, by reducing the number of my citations to the absolute minimum consistent with the reader's ability to grasp the problem and its solution. It should be explained at the same time that, if it is true that a strictly objective examination of the evidence would furnish only the Old Khmer passages in question, this would be tantamount to dismissing the work and judgements of my predecessors and to depriving the reader of the

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6. For a full list of her 'Inscriptions modernes d'Angkor' [IMA], see references below, Lewitz (1970-75).
* K = the inventory number in 'Liste générale des inscriptions du Cambodge', Cœdès (1966: 8, 73-225 and Supplements). (Ed.)
opportunity of weighing their judgements and mine for himself. I therefore give the published translations of each passage cited; my own alternatives to those translations are given later.

The simplest structural contexts we are concerned with are those in which syān follows a demonstrative pronoun (Dem.) and is itself followed by a noun (N) designating a metal—though there seems to be no good reason to take the metallic nature of the noun as in any way obligatory. In each case the Dem. + syān + N sequence is preceded by a more or less lengthy list, which I abbreviate, of objects forming part of an endowment:

(1) vaudi mvāy svok mvāy... 'arghya pādyā mvāy tampar neḥ syān prāk (K.171: 7-8), ‘Un vaudi, un plateau,... quatre vases pour le lavage des pieds (ārghya pādyā). Tout6 cela en argent’ (C VI: 166).

(2) ... cancyān 1 ratna ta gt 1 naupura 2 khse chdvāl 1 neḥ syān mās (K.669C: 10), ‘... 1 bague avec 1 joyau, 2 anneaux de cheville, 2 (sic) chaînes; tout cela en or’ (C I: 182).

Only slightly less simple are structures such as the following in which syān, still following a demonstrative pronoun, is itself followed by a noun phrase (NP). The sequences Dem. + syān + N and Dem. + syān + NP may of course be considered equivalent.

(3) ... me 'yak me ṇaṃ me des me sān me dvat neḥ syān sruk 'amarālaya (K.598B: 29), ‘Les me Tak, ṇaṃ, Des, Sān, Dvat, tous (sic)7 du sruk Amarālaya’ (Finot 1928: 77).

(4) ... ta duk praṣaṣṭa neḥ mratāṇ śri satayudha nu mratāṇ śri ripumatha neḥ syāṅ kvan mratāṇ śri prathivinarendra... (K.956: 58-9), ‘... Ceux qui conservent cet acte inscrit sont Mratāṇ Čṛi Satyayudha et Mratāṇ Čṛi Ripumatha(na), enfants de Mratāṇ Čṛi Prathivinarendra’ (C VII: 135).

(5) kamaratēn 'aṇ yogī ta vās ta neḥh phye phlu pūrvvottara tirthodyānapuspārāma neḥ syāṅ dharmma kamaratēn 'aṇ didai ra... (K.139B: 7-10), ‘Les seigneurs Yogin qui sont entrés en religion ici confessent le chemin du nord-est, le bain, le parc, le jardin fleuri: ce sont les œuvres mies de chacun des seigneurs’ (C III: 179).

In such passages as the following we see that the place occupied by Dem. in the preceding sequences may be filled by an NP:

(6) ... patigraha raupya 2 khlās 2 vodi prāk 2 bhājana dramvān 1 bhājana khpac 1 syāṅ hanīra bhājana pralvān 3 bhājana ta madhyama 6... (K.669C: 15-6), ‘... 2 crachoirs d’argent, 2 agrafes, 2 vodi d’argent, 1 récipient dramvān, 1 récipient décoré tout en hanīra, 3 grands récipients, 6 récipients moyens,...’ (C I: 183).

(7) ... dep reḥ ta dai ti syāṅ dakṣinā (K.263D: 44), ‘... ensuite on en choisit d’autres comme offrande (dakṣinā)’ (C IV: 138).

(8) kāṃsteṇ śāntilakṣmī paṅket chloṇi hariḍāṭta chloṇi somaśarmma syāṅ

8. Here and hereafter, those forms which I take to be intended to express syāṅ are italicized.
9. One would expect toutes.