# THE WORD āc IN KHMER: A SEMANTIC OVERVIEW[1]

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1.1.  Modern Khmer (mod.K.) āc /ʔaac/ is not what would normally be
called a problem word.  It is a verb pure and simple, and as such is
likely to be modified by adverbs and, in particular, post-posed result-
ative verbs covering the ideas of *to be possible* and *to be not
possible*.  It belongs to the written language more because of its
refined associations than because of any obsolescence.

1.2.  Turning to our two Khmer dictionaries, we find āc defined as fol-
lows:
   *VK*, 1719b: Āc.  a) *to be brave, courageous, fearless*; b) *to be en-
titled to; to be possible, can.*
   *DCF*, 35b: Āj.[2]  *to dare; daring, bold.*
   Although there is no apparent semantic problem, in reality these
glosses and their illustrations in the two dictionaries are far from
adequate.
   The best-known derivative of āc is aṃṇāc /ʔəmnaac/, which is glossed
as follows:
   *VK*, 1848a: Aṃṇāc.  a) *courage, boldness*; b) *capacity, title*;
c) *strength, force, power.*
   *DCF*, 80b: Aṃṇāc.  a) *power, authority*; b) *right, title, liberty,
permission.*
   It is clear enough from the foregoing that aṃṇāc is a nominal
derivative of āc, but once again the glosses provided by our two dic-
tionaries are far from satisfactory and far from complete.
   Another derivative, formed with prefix /bən-/, is glossed as follows:
   *VK*, 533b: Pañ-āc.  a) *capacity, right*; b) *to encourage, make bold*
(causative derivative).

*DCF*, 915a: **Pañ-āc.** *daring, fearless.*

Here we note an obvious discrepancy between the two dictionaries; in my view, this points up the obsolescence of this derivative. The editors of the dictionaries have definitely failed to pinpoint the full sense of the item, and have therefore failed to assign it to the same wordclass.

1.3. Borrowed by Siamese, probably before the appearance of the earliest written document (end of thirteenth century), āc seems to have followed the same lines of development as in Khmer, as is suggested in

*TED*, 989b: **Āc.** *daring; bold; fearless; valiant; undaunted...;* *...capable; proficient; qualified; fitted.*

Siamese also has the same two derivatives of āc as does Khmer, and I am inclined to believe they were borrowed at approximately the same period as the wordbase.

*TED*, 996b: **Āṃnāc.** *power; authority; right; jurisdiction; ability;* *capability; ...licence.*

*TED*, 475a: **Pǎñ-āc.** *to be very bold, daring or fearless; to overstep* *the bounds of propriety.*

The striking similarity between the Khmer and Siamese glosses is significant insofar as it shows that their editors' investigations were limited to the modern languages.

1.4. This much leads us into problems raised by the interpretation of āc as it occurs in older documents, namely of the Old Khmer and Middle Khmer periods. It must be mentioned here and now that these problems are not recognisable as such in translations of the Old Khmer inscriptions edited successively by Aymonier, Finot and Cœdès (cf. 2.2.).

For example, I myself was quite satisfied with the definitions of āc given in various dictionaries until I began, some five years ago, to analyse the Middle Khmer texts. It was only then that it occurred to me that the semantic range of āc was markedly broader and richer than I had suspected, and that it required further consideration and a reworking of its definition. The next step was intensive analysis of the Old Khmer inscriptions independently of their translations. Here again all occurrences of āc pointed to a breadth of meaning previously unknown to myself and previously unrecorded in the dictionaries. But the problem is even larger: Professor Alexander B. Griswold, the well-known student of the Old Siamese inscriptions, has recently called my attention to the fact that the various dictionaries cited (cf. 1.2., 1.3.) likewise do not cover all the senses that āc has in Siamese texts.

1.5. Sensing a need for external evidence, I next turned to Mon[3] with a view to finding a cognate which would throw light on the problem. It was a disappointment at first to find that āc ~ āt in Old Mon and modern Mon alike is confined to the notions of *to ask, to request*, which seemed to rule out any possibility of comparison. However, it was not long before I was brought back to this question, for my most recent comparative studies[4] seem to show the importance of the pre-inscriptional stage of Khmer and Mon, when these languages probably had more in common than is visible through written documents. This supposition led me to ask myself, "Could Khmer āc ever have meant *to request*, as in Mon?"

2. The answer to this question calls for re-examination of representative texts of all three periods. In presenting the results of my analysis I choose, for the sake of clarity and the reader's convenience, to work forward from the earliest texts rather than in the contrary direction. At the same time, data from modern Khmer are adduced whenever they seem to throw light on data from earlier periods.

2.1. Āc is one of the most current lexical items in the Old Khmer inscriptions, being particularly common in the Angkorian inscriptions.

Analysis calls first of all for consideration of the kinds of speech involved. Briefly, occurrences of āc in a) "actual" speech (narrative, statement) must be distinguished from occurrences of āc in b) "virtual" speech (wish, injunction, potentiality). We turn first to consider virtual speech, the more complicated of the two types, since any light thrown on it will elucidate actual speech, whereas the contrary does not apply.

Occurrences of āc in virtual speech conform to the following pattern:

I. Actual speech        II. Virtual speech

A. _____  āc ti
                        vvaṃ āc ti  _____

This means that āc introduces a clause in virtual speech (II) connected with a clause in actual speech (I) that precedes it. To pinpoint its sense and function it may be helpful to consider similar patterns of virtual speech in Old Khmer and modern Khmer:

I. Actual speech        II. Virtual speech

B. (OK)_____    leṅ
                        kampi leṅ  _____

C. (OK)_____    jā
                        vvaṃ jā  _____

D.  (mod.K.)_____     sūm                _____
                              sūm kuṃ

(OK **vvaṃ** and **kaṃ** and mod.K. **kuṃ** are negative particles.)

Regarding A, B and C, our first readings of the texts do not make us
aware of any difference between āc, leṅ and jā.  All three appear in
similar constructions indicating that an actor, following the predication
in I, next gives a kind of "warning" or "injunction", which may be ex-
pressed as follows:

I.                    II.
_____, *'let (the object mentioned)* _____.'

_____, *'let (it) not* _____.'

*oʰ:*

_____, *'let (the recipient)* _____.'

_____, *'let (him, her, them) not* _____.'

2.2.  Moreover, one is made even less aware of differences between āc,
leṅ and jā by French translations.[5]  As it happens, French has only one
way of rendering all three, namely by the conjunctive particle **que** plus
a verb in the subjunctive, the effect of which is to conceal all the
nuances of the original.  Be this as it may, analysis of the French sub-
junctive itself shows that it includes a range of aspects such as the
optative, the potential, and an injunctive of various shades (which
permits the subjunctive sometimes to overlap with the imperative), all
of which offer clues to differentiating the senses intended in Khmer.

2.3.  With reference to French translations, leṅ (B) is shown by the
texts to mark the optative.  I shall not dwell on this case, as it has
little bearing on the question at hand; however, I should at least note
the fact that this use of leṅ disappeared during the Middle Khmer period.

    The case of jā (C) calls for a sharper focus.  In Old Khmer as well
as modern Khmer this lexical item means *'to be in such and such a condi-*
*tion; to be in good condition; to be good, proper; to be free (not a*
*slave), of good breed; to be in good health'.*[6]  Thus what the actor in I
means to say in II is:

I.                    II.
_____, *'it is good (it behooves)* _____.'

_____, *'it is not good (does not behoove)* _____.'