

KHMERO-THAI: THE GREAT CHANGE IN THE HISTORY OF THE THAI LANGUAGE OF THE CHAO PHRAYA BASIN

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1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that Ayutthaya, the old capital of Thailand from 1351 – 1767 A.D., was from the beginning a bilingual society, speaking Thai and Khmer. Bilingualism must have been strengthened and maintained for some time by the great number of Khmer-speaking captives the Thais took from Angkor Thom after their victories in 1369, 1388 and 1431 (Kasetsiri 1999: 25). Gradually toward the end of the period, a language shift took place. Khmer fell out of use. Both Thai and Khmer descendants whose great-grand parents or earlier ancestors were bilingual came to use only Thai. In the process of language shift, an abundance of Khmer elements were transferred into Thai and permeated all aspects of the language. Consequently, the Thai of the late Ayutthaya Period which later became Ratanakosin or Bangkok Thai, was a thorough mixture of Thai and Khmer. There were more Khmer words in use than Tai cognates. Khmer grammatical rules were used actively to coin new disyllabic and polysyllabic words and phrases. Khmer expressions, sayings, and proverbs were expressed in Thai through transference. This paper is organized under six topics in the following order: The background of Ayutthaya and her language; Code-switching and the Rajasap of Ayutthaya; More than just loanwords; The Khmer elements in Thai; The hybrid Thai?; and The conclusion.

2. The Background of Ayutthaya and her language

Ayutthaya was founded in 1351 A.D. by King U-thong, who administered her in accordance with the Khmer traditions and culture. He seemed to have wanted to make Ayutthaya the center of the empire, replacing Angkor Thom, the Khmer center. In 1369 he sent his son and his son's uncle to invade the Khmer and won the battle. He also invaded Sukhothai, then under the Khmer

control. By 1419/1420 Sukhothai had become Ayutthaya's vassal state. Ayutthaya started as an outpost of Lopburi. The Arabs referred to her as the "New Capital" and Lopburi the old. Later this capital emerged as a flourishing entrepot in Southeast Asia. She created a network of trading and diplomatic relations throughout maritime Asia unmatched by any other Asian ports. Ayutthaya was quite cosmopolitan. She was crowded with people from other lands. There were many international villages in Ayutthaya such as Vietnamese village (Baan Yuan), Portuguese village (Baan Portugate), Japanese village (Baan Yii-Pun) and Muslim village (Baan Khaek). Some of them, Muslim and Vietnamese villages, remain to this day. Foreigners must have been numerous such that they were mentioned both in the royal Thai chronicles and in many articles of the Three Seals Laws. Foreigners are mentioned in many aspects, such as marriage, arms, and taxes. Some times as many as fourteen different group names were mentioned. For example:

Article one:

Muslims (Khaek), Brahmins (Phraam), Vietnamese (Yuan), French? (Farang), English (Angrit), Chinese, Cham, Wilanda (Dutch), Javanese, Malayu, Kuey, Khmer (Khōm), Burmese, Mon (Raaman) who enter to stay in the royal territory or to trade either by land or by boat...(From the Three Seals Laws volume 4, page 38).

Ayutthaya was well known for her sophisticated administration called Wiang, Wang, Khlang, Na and her highly hierarchical social structure. The kingdom lasted over four hundred years before she was sacked and fell to the Burmese in 1767.

The Languages of Ayutthaya. As a former outpost of Lopburi, which was a study center for Khmer civilization (Kasetsiri 1976: 85), at the beginning, Ayutthaya must have used Khmer as the language of wider communication in the same manner as Lopburi. The Khmer language, especially the written one, was then regarded as being holy and had magical power. People paid special respect to written materials which happened to be mostly about religions and kings. The Thais of Ayutthaya, formerly under the Khmer control, could also speak Khmer besides their own language. Pali was used only in the religious circle. The people of Ayutthaya as well as the Thais of

Bangkok today enjoyed listening to monks chanting in Pali though they did not understand it. They believed they were making merit.

Language usage in Ayuthaya was very complicated in accordance with her elaborate social relations. Communication was status-based. Kings were regarded as gods and on the same scale as the Buddha in the hierarchy. Since kings were regarded as gods the language used to talk to and about them needed to be different from that of commoners. “Raja-sap” or royal vocabulary was created in the Ayuthaya period to be used with kings. At first, the royal vocabulary was meant for the aristocrats and commoners to use to talk with or about kings only. Later when King Baromtrailokanat promulgated the Law of Civil Hierarchy, he also amended the Law of the Palace, Kot Monthien Ban, in 1461. The use of “Raja-sap” or the royal vocabulary then was extended to other royal family members and the aristocrats.

Ayutthaya was also very sophisticated literally. She had a large number of “educated” aristocrats and elites who could read and write both Thai and Khmer. Many classical works, religious and folk literature, all in poems, were written in this period. . Many works were written entirely in Khmer; for example, “Dutsadi-Sangwuei-Klom Chang”, the old version (Ruangraklikhit 1999) and Pra-Tamra Borom Rachuthit. Those composed in Thai were full of Khmer words such as “Lilit Ongkan Chaeng Nam,” “Yuan Phay” and “Mahachat Kham Luang.”

How did the Thai in Ayutthaya manage to be so sophisticated administratively and literally as early as the fourteenth century while a large number of other Tai groups were still illiterate rice farmers and minorities? Who was King U-Thong? Where did he come from? What was he doing before he founded the Ayutthaya kingdom? Answers to these questions are still debatable. Thai historians do not agree on all points. Some say he was the son of a wealthy Chinese merchant, Shodu’k Sretthi (Kasetsiri 1976). Patronage. Others say King U-thong was a Lavo prince who married more than once for political reasons. One of his wives was a princess from Sukhothai and another from Suphanburi. These two marriages related him to at least two powerful political groups at the time. Later he became the Prince of Phetburi, a city for a future king to rule. When he founded Ayutthaya and became king he inherited control over a large area from Lavo or Lopburi and Suphanburi to Nakhon Srithammarat.

Though Thai historians do not agree on where King U-Thong came from, they all agree that he married a Khmer Princess and that Ayutthaya inherited all the Khmer administrative system and culture.

Whether or not King U-Thong was a Chinese or Khmer descendant, he was definitely a Thai speaker. It was he and his Thai-speaking fellows that brought the Thai language to Ayutthaya and later made it the language of the region. "U-Thong" is a Thai word meaning figuratively "the cradle or the land of gold" and literally "gold cradle." ("U" means "cradle" and "thong" means "gold" for the Thais in the Chao Phraya basin and "metal" to other Tais.) If his name derived from a place name, as suggested by Prince Damrong, it is then significantly different from all other contemporary important city names, i.e., Suphanburi Lavo and Phetburi, in that it is a Thai name, not Indic and not Khmer. According to some legends, the king derived his name from the gifts people gave to his parents when he was born. Many of the gifts were gold or metal cradles. King U-Thong was born in 1314 A.D. (Kasetsiri 1976: 52). Then the Thai were not the foremost influential people. At least they could not have been influential enough for the Chinese or Khmer people to adopt Thai names for their people. Then most cities or states were not fully independent. The Thai were just one of many minority groups under the Khmer. As with all other minorities, the Thai must have acquired the Khmer language so they could communicate with other people around them. Acquiring Khmer must have been "a must" for all minority leaders and elites at the time. There was evidence that three princes from the north who later became kings - Ramkhamhaeng, Mengrai, and Ngam-muang - went for their education at Lavo or Lopburi at the same time. This city was earlier an outpost of the Khmer capital and a study center for Khmer civilization such as Buddhism and Hinduism (Kasetsiri 1976: 85).

When King U-Thong founded Ayutthaya in 1351 A.D., he was actually a Khmero-Thai or Khmer-speaking Thai. At least he must have been educated as a Khmer leader because he became king in the Khmer tradition - a god-king. He sent for eight Brahmins in Banares to perform his accession ceremony. After the ceremony he was given the name Ramathibodi and ruled as a god-king (Testimony of the people from the old capital 1973: 59). He sent Ramesuan, his son born from his Khmer wife, to rule Lopburi,