

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN OLD KHMER AND OLD MON

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Old Khmer was the language of the Khmer or Cambodian people, while Old Mon was the language of the Mon. Before discussing some of the similarities between Old Khmer and Old Mon, I should remind the reader that the Khmer, the earliest inhabitants of the Indochina area, founded the empire of Fu-nan toward the 1st century A.D. The territory of Fu-nan was coterminous with what is now South Vietnam (formerly Cochinchina), Lower Laos, central and peninsular Thailand, and Lower Burma.¹ To the northwest of Fu-nan the Mon inhabited the valleys of the Irrawaddy, the Salween, and the Menam. Their language and other cultural features were closely similar to those of the Khmer.

It behooves us to remember that the term *language* may refer not only to systems of oral speech but also to such speech as reflected in writing. Spoken languages are "born" with the birth of a people; in this sense, Khmer came into being with the appearance of the Khmer people while Mon came into being with the appearance of the Mon. It follows that a written language can arise only after the spoken language which it purports to represent.

In the case of Old Khmer, all we can say for certain is that writing is first attested by the so-called Vo-canh inscription (in Sanskrit) of Śrītmāra, a Khmer king ruling in the 2nd or 3rd century A.D.²

are not yet able to date the adoption of writing
re precisely.

The "Liste générale des inscriptions du
mbodge"³ inventories 1,005 texts in Old Khmer,
nskrit, and Pāli. Of these 646 are in Old Khmer.⁴
e bulk of these was found scattered all over the
esent Khmer Republic. A number of Khmer inscrip-
ons have also been found in neighboring territories.
r example, from South Vietnam we have the Prasat
am Loven̄ inscription (K.8) from Phsa Dêk (Sadec)
ovince⁵ and the Vat Thlen̄ inscription (K.1) from
at Chrouk (Chaudoc) province.⁶ From Laos we have
e Sai Fong inscription (K.368) from the area west
Vientiane⁷ and the Vat Ph'u inscription (K.366)
om Bassac province.⁸ From Thailand, finally, we
ve the Sukhothay inscription (K.992) from P'isnulok
ovince,⁹ the Dong Méngang Muong inscription from
khon Sawan province,¹⁰ and the Hin K'on inscription
.388) from Khorat province.¹¹

While written Khmer dates back to the 2nd or
d century A.D., written Mon is attested from the
h or 6th century. The earliest monument of Mon
s found not in Burma, as might be expected, but
Phra Pathom in Thailand, about thirty miles west
Bangkok. Discovered here was a single early
scription in Pāli, incised on the column of a
itya and reading simply, "*Tesaṃ tathagato*."¹²
is has been attributed to the 7th, or possibly
the late 6th, century. Certain Thai archeologists
cribe the inscription to Indian settlers.¹³ The
nsensus is that it is to be imputed to the Mon
mmunity.

From Lopburi, eighty miles north of Bangkok,
have an inscription in Mon on the pedestal of an

image of the Buddha;¹⁴ this text is of particular interest by reason of its exaggerated downstrokes, which are identical with those of the earliest 6th-century inscriptions from Cambodia. As Cœdès says, "Ce court texte, dont les caractères à grands jambages rappellent l'écriture en usage au Cambodge au vi^e siècle, doit être lui aussi en mon."¹⁵

We have another Mon inscription from Lopburi, this one of an especially archaic type attributed to the 6th or 7th century. Of this text Halliday writes, "Sans aucun doute, cette inscription de Lopburi constitue le plus ancien texte môn qui ait été déchiffré et publié jusqu'ici."¹⁶ He goes on to mention that the character in which this text is written is "the same" as the character found in Khmer inscriptions of the 6th or 7th century.

Other Mon inscriptions have of course been discovered elsewhere in Thailand as well as in Burma. A detailed comparison of these Mon inscriptions with the Khmer inscriptions for successive centuries shows convincingly that in the early period the characters used in each were not greatly different. Subsequently, the Khmer and the Mon were cut off from communication with one another, and the shape of their characters began gradually to diverge.

The formal features of the Khmer character changed hand in hand with Khmer society and culture (most notably, art and literature), and hence passed through periods of progress and decadence which tend to mirror, respectively, the peaks and troughs of the frequency of the inscriptions. Students of Khmer paleography have divided the evolving writing system into varying numbers of main types. For example, Maspero recognized ten

pes, including the modern Khmer character.¹⁷ Louis-Charles Damais, limiting himself to the five consonant symbols p, m, t, r, s, recognized fourteen.¹⁸ Cœdès, for his part, accepted only seven types including the sole inventory.

My own work in Khmer paleography suggests that the writing system can be divided into three main types corresponding to the historical periods of the language itself: (a) a pre-Angkorian type, encompassing the 7th and 8th centuries, (b) an Angkorian type, extending from the 9th to the 13th century, and (c) a post-Angkorian type, from the 14th to the 18th century.¹⁹

The pre-Angkorian character, in use while Khmer civilization was beginning to make some progress, is typified by a slender form, by an embryonic *sok* or 'air' (the curved horizontal stroke over the body of certain symbols), and by underdeveloped lower extremities, suggestive of immaturity.²⁰

The Angkorian character, contemporary with the full flowering of Khmer civilization, shows an ample form and well-developed, decorative *sok* and lower extremities indicative of full growth and strength.²¹





The post-Angkorian character, which appears at a time when Khmer civilization was declining, is typified by emaciation of form and by lengthened *sok* and lower extremities, reminiscent of a gaunt and feeble old man.²²

If we examine it closely we can recognize successive changes in the Khmer character due to personal idiosyncrasies on the part of individual calligraphers and engravers, to artists aspiring to make writing an adjunct of sculpture, and to calligraphers who had

achieved a facile style. In the same texts, moreover we can observe minor variations in the shape of consonant or vowel symbols, most of which were probably unconscious departures from the engraver's solemn efforts to conserve the character of his day.

The Mon character can similarly be divided into three types. Damais recognized a Phra Pathom type, a Lopburi type, and a Lumphun type.²³ My own researches show simply an Old Mon type, a Middle Mon type, and a modern Mon type.

The Old Mon character is typified by the Phra Pathom inscription,²⁴ the Lopburi inscription,²⁵ and the Vieng Sa inscription.²⁶ The Mon character of this period is essentially the same as the pre-Angkorian Khmer character.²⁷

The Middle Mon character is typified by the various inscriptions recovered from Lumphun province, notably the Vat Don, the Vat Kukut, the Vat Sen Khao Ho, the Vat Mahavan, and the Vat Ban Hlui inscriptions.²⁸ The Mon character of this period resembled the Khmer character of the Angkorian period, though there were minor differences. For example, the Mon character had begun to lose the *spk* as well as its lower extremities; thus the Khmer consonant symbols  (k) and  (t) of the Banteay Chma inscription²⁹ are nearly identical with the Mon consonants  (k) and  (t) of the Vat Sen Khao Ho inscription.

The modern Mon character is typified by the copperplate inscription kept in the National Library in Bangkok,³⁰ dating from 1504 A.D. Generally, the character of this period was somewhat rounded, though not so much as in modern times. The form of certain symbols still resembled the corresponding Khmer

symbols, e.g., the symbols now read as me and mo:, je and jo:, and ha and ho:.

From this much it seems reasonable to say that the Khmer character and the Mon character were essentially the same, and that they evolved in parallel during the three periods specified above.

What is more, close study of the Old Khmer and Old Mon inscriptions shows close correspondences in vocabulary. For instance, the form 𑀇𑀢𑀺 (mo:j) found in the pre-Angkorian inscriptions of Vat Tnot and among Spui:, ³¹ and developed into the mvo:j of the Prey Chhma inscription and the mveaj of the Tuol Sasat inscription, both of the Angkorian period, and into the 16th-century mu:j and the 18th-century mu:əj. Old Mon used the same form 𑀇𑀢𑀺 (mo:j) in the 7th-century Paburi inscription, after which it appeared as mo:jj in the Vat Sen Khao Ho inscription (12th century) and as mu:jj in a 16th-century copperplate inscription; in modern Mon it becomes mvu:ə.

In the same way the word for 'child' appears in the pre-Angkorian Khmer inscriptions as 𑀇𑀢𑀺 kao:n. This corresponds to Angkorian 𑀇𑀢𑀺 kvə:n, which developed into post-Angkorian and modern 𑀇𑀢𑀺 ko:n. In the Old Mon inscriptions the cognate appears as 𑀇𑀢𑀺 (ku:n), which developed into Middle Mon 𑀇𑀢𑀺 (kvə:n) and into modern Mon 𑀇𑀢𑀺 (ku:n).

There are many such close cognates which underwent parallel evolution in the two languages.

Both languages, moreover, employ the same means of generating new words, namely prefixation, infixation, and composition. Here we shall consider only prefixation in Old Khmer and Old Mon as the most distinctive process.

An infix is a consonant inserted into a verbal root to yield a derivative noun. In Old Khmer and Old Mon only two infixes are found: -m- and -n-.

In Old Khmer infix -m- yielded agentival derivatives. For example, from the verbal base co:n 'to give' we have the derivative ឆ្មើ (cmo:n) 'giver', while from the verbal base tər 'to sew' we derive ត្រើ (tmər) 'one who sews'.

In Old Mon infix -m- likewise yielded agentival derivatives. For example, from the verbal base kləc 'to steal' we have the derivative កယ្លေ (kamləc) 'thief, burglar', which develops into modern Mon kamlɔ:t.

In Old Khmer infix -n- yielded derivative nouns denoting actions or things. For example, from the verbal base ceav 'to buy' we have the derivative ឆ្មើ (cneav) 'purchase, thing bought', while from the base tuk 'to keep' we derive ត្រុក (tnuk) 'thing kept'.

In Old Mon infix -n- likewise yielded derivative nouns denoting actions or things. For example, from the verbal base pos 'to become a monk' we have the derivative បុណ្ណស (puṃnos) 'the act of becoming a monk'. This form, incidentally, was used only in Old Mon; it corresponds to Old Khmer bōmnao:s, which in turn corresponds to modern Khmer phnu:əs. In this connection it is worthy of note that Khmer manifests a tendency to contract polysyllabic forms into monosyllables. Hence infixes -m- and -n- are liable to be represented as conjunct symbols written in ligature with the wordbase initial, as in the case of ឆ្មើ (chmam) 'guardian', from the verbal root cam 'to watch, wait'.

These few examples will serve to show the close relationship between Khmer and Mon. Many lexical items in the two languages had similar forms and underwent similar evolutions. In the creation of new vocabulary they used the same means, one of which was fixation. The written form of these languages dates from the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. in the case of Khmer, from the 5th or 6th century in the case of Mon.

¹G. Cœdès, *Histoire ancienne des Etats hindouisés* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1944), 44.

²*Vid.* Jean Filliozat, "L'inscription dite 'de -cānh'," in *BEFEO*, LV (1969): 107-16; also G. Cœdès, *Les Etats hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*. 2^e édition (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1964), 81.

³In G. Cœdès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, éditées et traduites par... Volume VIII (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1966), 73-225.

⁴The writer has recently completed a chronological classification of these Old Khmer inscriptions in the form of an outsized table too costly for reproduction here. Interested readers may obtain copies by application to the writer or to the editors.

⁵*Vid.* Cœdès, *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (hereafter *IC*), II: 79; *BEFEO*, II (1902): 224; XII (1912).3: 6; XXVIII (1928): 611; XXV (1925): 5.

⁶*IC*, VI: 28; *BEFEO*, XXXV (1935): 3; XXXVI (1936): 38.

⁷*BEFEO*, III (1903), 1, 18, 460; XIII (1913).1: 1; XV (1915).2: 108, 185; XL (1940): 344; and R.C. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Kambuja*. Asiatic Society Monograph Series, VIII (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1953), No. 179.

⁸*IC*, V: 288; *BEFEO*, XIV (1914).2: 25b; XXIX (1929): 300, 303; XXX (1930): 199.

⁹*IC*, VII: 194.

¹⁰*JA*, CCXLV (1955): 132; *Varasara Vadhanadharma*, (1958).3:12; *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam (Angkok)*, III, No. 35, 12.

¹¹IC, VI: 74; BEFEO, XXX (1930): 56.

¹²Recueil des inscriptions du Siam, III, plates IIIA and IIIB.

¹³Ibid., 6.

¹⁴BEFEO, XXV (1925), Planche XVII.

¹⁵BEFEO, XXV (1925): 186; *Inscriptions du Cambodge* publiées sous les auspices de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, tome I, planches XIII and XV.

¹⁶BEFEO, XXX (1930): 82.

¹⁷Georges Maspero, *Grammaire de la langue khmère (cambodgien)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1915), taken between pages 48 and 49.

¹⁸Louis-Charles Damais, "Les écritures d'origine indienne en Indonésie et dans le Sud-Est asiatique continental," in *BSEI*, XXX (1955).4: 365-81, figure

¹⁹This threefold division, corroborated by the graph mentioned in note 3, is based on the syllabic form of the consonant and vowel symbols.

²⁰*Inscriptions du Cambodge*, publiées sous les auspices de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, tome I, planches XXXIII, XXV, XXVII, XXVIII, XXII, IV; tome II, planches LVIII, LVIIIb.

²¹*Ibid.*, tome I, planches XXVI, XXVIII, XXIX; tome II, planches LXXIV, LX, XCIII.

²²*Ibid.*, tome I, planches XII and XIV.

²³Damais, *op. cit.*, figure 15, page 365.

²⁴Recueil des inscriptions du Siam, III, plates IIIA and IIIB.

²⁵BEFEO, XXX (1930): planche VIII.

²⁶BEFEO, XIII (1913).6: 29, planche I.

²⁷*Inscriptions du Cambodge*, publiées sous les auspices de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, tome I, planches XXXIII, XXV, XXVII, XXII; tome II, planches LVIII, LVIII bis.

²⁸BEFEO, XXX (1930): 86-105, planches IX-XIII.

²⁹Recueil des inscriptions du Siam, III, No. 58 (K.227), plate 25,

³⁰*Ibid.*, III, No. 53, plates 20A and 20B.

³¹*Inscriptions du Cambodge*, publiées sous les auspices de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, tome I, planche XXIV (1.13), XXV (1.2) (K.41

