KHMER OF SURIN : LEXICAL REMARKS

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This paper is limited to a few remarks concerning semantics of the Khmer language as spoken in Surin. In fact, this study is basically to discuss some methodological prospects and to make a few observations. There will be some references to the language itself, but they will only be examples to illustrate some point, without trying to exhaust the matter or to be very systematic

My first remark concerns the expression " Khmer of Surin " and the meaning given to it by Thai scholars, mainly in the very remarkable *Khmer (Surin), Thai, English Dictionary,* which was published at Chulalongkorn University in 1978 by Ajarn Dhanan CHANTRUPHANTH and Mr. Chartchai PHROMJAGKARIN The introduction of the authors contains a map representing the distribution of the Khmer speaking minority in the Thai provinces along the Cambodian border : from Trat province in the south - west, up to Ubol Rachatani province in the north - east, through Chanta Buri, Prachin Buri, Nakhon Rachassima, Buriram, Surin and Sri Sa Ket provinces, plus an islet in the south of Maha Sarakham.

If this were only a census of Khmer speaking groups of people, it should include a few references in the south of Roi Et province and in the east of Cha Choeng Saw. If their intention were to locate where the Khmer language of Surin is spoken, I mean a language actually proper to Surin and the neighbouring areas, this is a little more complicated.

Who are the Khmers of the North - East? They are most probably mainly members of autochthonous populations, residual from the populations of the ancient Khmer empire. When did the provinces where they live pass from Khmer sovereignity to Siamese domination? That might be as early as the beginning of the XVI th. century A.D., but it was definitely before the reign of King Naresuen the Great of Siam, for we know that, in 1570, King Barom Reachea the First of Cambodia undertook a last and unsuccessful campaign to reconquer these lost provinces, retaking Korat for a short while. These then isolated provinces were separated from the lowlands of Cambodia by the Dangrêk mountains, and nothing in their economic system would justify any special development or direct relationship with what was to become the Cambodian provinces, still now removed, of Oddor Meancheay and Preah Vihehar, all with central lowlands. So far, we can assume that they were politically and economically isolated from Cambodia early in the XVI th. century, and that this isolation was almost complete, the border being, however, never closed, up to around 1970, to pilgrimages and for the sojourn of young men in Cambodian monasteries.

As for the Khmer minorities in the east of Prachin Buri, especially in Aranya Prathet area, many of them, undoubtedly, belong to the same autochthonous stock, but their relationship with Cambodia is very different : they have been on the pathway of every army during the many conflicts between Siam and Cambodia. They even have been administratively connected with the parts of Batdambang and Siem Reap provinces repeatedly annexed to Siam from the XVII th. century to the XX th. century. The Bangkok - Phnom Penh railway line and all kind of commercial and social activities occurring on both sides of the border multiplied the opportunities for exchanges. Therefore, it is not surprising to note a greater conformity of the Khmer language spoken in this area with " standard " Khmer.

Here is one example : one of the most distinctive features of Surin, and generally of Northern Khmer, is the sexed aspect of the personal pronoun for the first person singular. It is undifferentiated in standard Khmer, the unique pronoun being ខ្ញុំ *(khñom)*, but it is differentiated in Surin, *khñom* being reserved for feminine subjects in both its autonomous and possessive forms. The masculine gender in Surin uses a distinct pronoun, for both autonomous and

possessive forms, clearly pronounced *kmat*, without aspiration, which is most probably the result of a contraction of the deferential pronoun ខ្ញុំ (khn̆om *pad*), which is naturally reserved for masculine employment. On the contrary, in the Aranya Prathet area, the pronoun is undifferentiated for both genders and if *kmat* seems to be known sometimes, it is never used as a possessive.

Regarding the Khmer minorities in the Phanom Sarakam area, in Cha Choeng Saw province, Ajarn Naree SARIKABUTHI states that this community settled there only a century ago, which would explain why its language is different from that of Surin

As for the Khmer spoken by minorities in Chanta Buri province, its features must be even more different for there is a very ancient and live tradition of communication between both sides of the border, especially near the Pailin - Pong Nam Ron axis. In Trat province, and in the Hat Lek appendix, the features are again different, for two reasons : historically, exchanges have been so frequent that there is a considerable Thai speaking minority in the neighbouring Cambodian maritime province of Koh Kong ; linguistically, the Bo Rai valley is bordered on the east by the first spurs of the Cardamomes Mountains where the Khmer spoken language is very special and specific

To conclude the first part of this report, we can say that the concept of a Khmer speaking minority in Thailand must be used carefully : the words " Khmer of Surin " should be strictly reserved for the Khmer speaking minority settled in the *Isan*, between the River Mun and the Dangrêk mountains.

Having now precisely defined the term, one special feature of the Khmer language of Surin is that it is an oral language, almost without written form. This might have been an ordinary situation in pre - protectorate Cambodia, especially in the remote provinces. Dr. Christian BAUER first disabused me of the common stance that there is no written form in Surin, and I owe the complete copy of manuscripts recognizably written in Surin, of which I have since seen the original, to Pr. François BIZOT.

These manuscripts are all of religious matters, written in *moul* form, and only a few monks and a few men who have been monks can read or recopy them.

However, Khmer scriptures are far from unknown in this part of Isan. They are even rather frequent equally always in *moul*, since it is the writing used in all tattoos. It is noteworthy that these tattoos, oddly enough, even in Khmer alphabet, are more popular among the *Isan* Lao people than among the *Isan* Khmer, and anyway almost none of the latter can read them. During a lecture given to the Siam Society by Dr. Francois LAGIRARDE, it was said that one would look in vain for a meaning in these series of tattooed letters which give the false appearance of being texts. The *Krū* who made the tattoo had submerged the true message in a substratum deprived of meaning. But even if there were a message in it, there would be no message in it because it would remain esoteric, magic, and we would look in vain for a passage from a coherent semiology to a clearable semantics.

We may then assume that the Khmer language of Surin is an oral language, developed in almost total isolation from that of the Cambodian region for over three centuries.

(To be exact, it should also be interesting to study the possible influence of Cambodian Khmer broadcasts, during the past few decades ; but such an inquiry would necessitate more information about how and when electricity was brought into those provinces of *Isan*, the distribution of radio sets, the size of the audience, and so on).

Let us next consider the lexical features and some of the syntactic aspects of the Khmer language of Surin.

Philip JENNER, William SMALLEY and Ajarn Dhanan state that the differences between Surin Khmer and " standard " Khmer are such that natives, from opposites sides of the border could not understand each other. On the other hand, David THOMAS says that the dialect of Surin " is closely related to the central language of Kampuchea ", and I have myself been able to verify on many occasions that verbal exchanges between speakers from both sides of the border were quite easy. Dr. THOMAS adds that this dialect has " many loanwords from Thai ". He might have mentioned loanwords from Souey and possibly from other sources. As a matter of fact, almost 10% of the words in the two books published by Chulalongkorn and Mahidol Universities are strictly Thai words. For instance, not surprisingly, in the *Conversation Lessons*, the more dialogues concern some form of public administration, the more Thai words they contain ; whereas dialogues regarding agriculture, fishing or personal relationships consist

of pure Khmer vocabulary.

Trying to restore words of the *Khmer (Surin), Thai, English Dictionary* in their Khmer writing allows the following observations :

I) It pushes back elements of diachronic comparison over a hundred years, since some lexical elements are not found in modern dictionaries, but may be traced in the first dictionaries of JANNEAU (1870), AYMONIER (1878), GUESDON (1930) or TANDART (1935), that is to say, among data collected as early as the middle of the XIX th. century. (for instance, the word *blah* might be connected with GUESDON's ប្លាយ (plāy), both meaning " too ", " too much ").

II) At a semantic level, it is possible to note a few terms whose meanings have evolved in appreciably different ways from the same words in standard Khmer (for instance, the word *smim* which means " startled " or " scared " in Surin whereas in standard Khmer ស្រមឹម *(sramim)* means " in a partially appearing manner ", with no reference to fright).

III) The meaning of some words is expanded in comparison with their standard counterpart (for instance, *rətçəətç-rtçəətç* just means " noisy ", whereas its standard counterpart រេចរាចរ (recec - racāc) is restricted for noisy chickens or birds) ; on the other hand, words which have very restricted meaning in Surin use in standard are very much broadened (for instance, *salaa* or *slaa* designates only open pavillions in wats, whereas the standard Khmer counterpart សាលា (sālā) is used for a large range of buildings).

IV) There are a few interesting words whose meanings, although they conform to their standard counterparts, are given an original semantic treatment in Surin (for instance, the word ភ្លើង bloeṅ); that means " fire ", exists in Surin as such, but it appears in the expression *nəu phlœŋ*, with the same meaning as its Laotian or Thai counterpart, in an expression meaning " to be at the fire ", which means for a woman " to be delivering a baby. "

V) Some words rarely used in standard Khmer are in common use in Surin, whereas others, very common in standard Khmer are rarely used in Surin dialect, (for instance, the word *sʌ̀* means any kind of bottle in Surin, while its standard counterpart សិក្ក (sik) refers to a special bottle made of clay which holds alcohol ; on the other hand, the standard Khmer ល្មម *(lmam)* which means " enough " is limited to mean " fitting " for a piece of cloth, and Surin people use the Thai word พอ *(phō)* to say " enough ").

VI) There are some Khmer words that, even in Cambodian Khmer, are used only in speaking and have no written counterpart ; some of them are used on both sides of the Dangrêk (for instance, the word *kanti - kanta,* which means " jolting " for a carriage or " bumping " for a road).

The question remains whether the language of Surin has words in proper, lexical radicals which belong to no other language, that it alone has kept or derived in an original way. It seems very much to be the case (for instance, the standard Khmer រ៉ាប៉ិច *(rapic)*, meaning " small ", " minor ", derivated in Surin in a phonetic doublet *rpeiç-rpaiç,* meaning " fussy " or " complex - minded ").

A few observations have been made regarding Surin Khmer syntax. The study by Mr. Somkiet POOPATWIBOON shows the overrunning ambiguity in a discourse where pronouns are never distinguished in the functions account. It is not actually a special feature in Surin Khmer, but is found in all rural Khmer idioms. It may also be observed that plural forms almost always are used without a classifier, except for human beings, and this only increases ambiguity.

Quite interesting is the distinctive passive form constructed with ប៉ះ *(pah)* in a large range of structures.

The last remark on this far from exhausted concern regards the syntactic structures borrowed entirely from Thai syntax : for instance, the expression *təu nəa mɔ̀ʔ* , very often subsituted for the more standard Khmer មកពីណា? *(mak bī nā)*, is nothing but the word for word transposition of that semipaternal Thai question : ไปไหนมา ? (py ny mah?) " where have you been? "

The semantic and linguistic approach to the Khmer of Surin provides a very valuable set of information about the Khmer language in general. It provides clues to identify some of the words now rejected by lexicographers from modern dictionaries on the ground that they cannot be located in written sources. In fact, we have to admit that Khmer has always been ill - written and that historic phonetic and phonological information are to be found as well in dialectal forms.

Of course, there are in Surin some additional

difficulties. First are the words borrowed from Khmer by the Siamese language and loaned back, but most of this problem has been solved by Ajarn Uraisi VARASARIN. Secondly, there is a strong influence from Thai phonetics, the main feature of which results from the absence of initial consonant clusters in Thai and the impossibility of referring to a " subscript " in the oral Khmer of Surin. An artificial inherent vowel appears, changing the number of syllables in words (for instance, ផ្ទះ *(phdāḥ)* " house ", being pronounced *" phetiia ". This feature alters even the final syllable of a word when the initial consonant of the next word acts as would have a " subscript " (for instance,* រកប៉ាក្កា *(rak pākkā)*, " to look for a pen " is pronounced " rokepakka ").

On the other hand, a phonetic study of the system of vowels in Surin Khmer shows many features common to a state of language previous to a shift that, some time during the period of the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, produced the two series of vowels - commonly refered as " A " and " O " - in Cambodian Khmer, from what was supposed to be derived low and high registers. There, insistance on the ancient linguistic isolation of Surin and the demands of a precise definition might prove to be meaningful.

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