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Cambodian Literature: An Introduction

When Cambodians speak of literature, they speak of *aksar-sel* (Sanskrit *aksharashilpa*), "the art of letters" and *aksar-sah* (*aksharashastra*), "the science of letters." Khmer writers who succeed are celebrated not only for the creative genius of their art but also for their technical mastery over the bewildering variety of forms and genres Cambodian authors have developed. In Khmer, authors are known as *neak nipun*, literally "those who bind together," from Sanskrit *nibandha*, "tying down." The work of composition demands virtuosity in fastening words to one another. In many Cambodian genres, this work of binding involves controlling impressive arrays of linking rhymes and layers of hidden meanings. Even prose authors are tasked with holding together long strings of serial verbs and adjectives, evoking the sonic qualities of assonance and balance so valued in Cambodian poetry.

I entered Cambodian literature through the door of sound. My first intensive encounters with its literary forms were as a student of Buddhist chant and poetry recitation in rural Kampong Speu province, Cambodia, for thirteen months from 2005 to 2006. My teachers, *lok kru* Prum Ut and *neak kru* Koet Ran, had exacting standards for diction, melody, and moral conduct, and knew that their role as masters of an exceptionally musical form of chant called *smot* meant instilling such standards in their students. I was only eighteen at the time, fresh out of high school in San Francisco, and was at first a failure in their eyes. I mispronounced the words, put trills and glissandi in the wrong places, and once ran away to a nearby mountain temple when I couldn't stand the pressure of complete immersion in Khmer village life. Despite my transgressions, they took me under their care. Under their tutelage, I repeated short phrases until I got it right or until my throat, irritated by the silty tea we drank out of dimpled beer mugs, simply gave out.

In studying with Prum Ut and Koet Ran, I had unwittingly been steeped in the way Cambodian literature had been transmitted for the past fifteen hundred years. Koet Ran, who became blind after the Khmer Rouge period, stressed the oral method alone: she would sing, I would repeat, then she would critique me and sing again. She had memorized well over a hundred chants and had high hopes I would have such a fine memory. But here again I failed,

fumbling for the words whenever I set down my notebook. Prum Ut offered a dual method, both oral and written. At night, he would sit me down on the creaky floors of his one-room home, light a slender candle, and take a thick *krang* off the altar. This paper manuscript, folded in the leporello or accordion style, guided my studies of *smot* and sparked a lifelong passion for traditional Southeast Asian books and manuscripts. Prum Ut chanted Khmer and Pali texts from the *krang* in ornate, flowing melodies as I did my best to keep up. By day, I returned to the manuscript, transcribing and translating the texts we had studied the night before.

My failures notwithstanding, these are the core methods that Cambodians have used in teaching literature and the performance of literature to new generations since at least the seventh century of the Common Era. For many Cambodian authors throughout history, their rigorous approach to language built the foundation for the expressive art of literature. Since this issue of *Mānoa* looks at literature as art rather than science, I offer my essay here as a kind of counterweight, carving out a peephole into the precise, intricate workings that make traditional Cambodian literature tick.

The borders of the modern nation-state of Cambodia are home to a plethora of languages. In addition to the ninety percent who primarily speak the national language of Khmer, there are also large communities of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cham speakers, the latter being an Austronesian language closely related to Malay (and very distantly to Hawaiian). On Cambodia's hilly borders with Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos, there is also an extremely diverse range of indigenous communities living in the forest, beyond the margins of wet-rice cultivation. Most of these groups speak related languages from the Austroasiatic family and have lived in Cambodia for several thousand years or more. This volume—like so many representations of Cambodia—focuses on voices from the numerically and politically dominant community of Khmer speakers. But language and ethnicity are never airtight categories. Many of the writers featured in this collection are of mixed heritage, including several with both Khmer and Chinese traditions in their families and one who was born in Vietnam. Sinn Sisamouth, far and away the most celebrated Khmer singer and songwriter of the twentieth century—a performer included here—had both Lao and Chinese grandparents.

To complicate the picture further, Khmer speakers are not limited to Cambodia. They have lived in the southern provinces of modern-day Vietnam since at least the middle of the first millennium, if not considerably longer. Vietnamese toponyms such as Saigon have older Khmer names; *sài gòn* is probably derived from Khmer *prey kor* "Kapok Forest" or *prey nokor*, "City in the Forest." The whole Mekong Delta region is sometimes known as Kampuchea Krom, or Lower Cambodia, and the Khmer dialect spoken there is mutually intelligible with that in Cambodia proper. The political reach of past Khmer

kingdoms once extended far into what is now Laos and Thailand, particularly before Lao and Thai speakers arrived in mainland Southeast Asia in the early centuries of the second millennium. Even today, in the southern provinces of northeastern Thailand, especially Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket, there is a robust community speaking a dialect known as Northern Khmer, which in recent centuries has diverged significantly from Modern Khmer as spoken in Cambodia. One song in Northern Khmer appears in this volume, Songsaeng Rungrueangchai's "The Big Tusker."

The Cambodian diaspora has brought Khmer speakers to many corners of the globe. Large refugee communities formed in France, the U.S., Australia, Canada, and elsewhere after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. Many Cambodian authors abroad continue to read and write in Khmer, while others have made their literary mark in English, French, and other languages. Khmer literacy is still taught in diaspora communities, particularly in Buddhist temples. It is also fostered at university academic programs. Maintaining the Khmer language in aggressively monolingual environments such as the U.S., with its long history of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia, is an enduring challenge for members of the Cambodian diaspora. Limited resources are available for language programs, especially in comparison to programs in other Asian diaspora communities. My personal hope is that this volume may remind the Anglophone world of the depth, range, and beauty of Cambodian literature, and so foster support for more language programs, especially those serving diaspora communities.

Where does the national language of Cambodia come from? Khmer, along with Mon and Vietnamese, is one of the most prominent representatives of the Austroasiatic language family, as basic to human history as Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, or Dravidian. Austroasiatic languages are the primary indigenous languages of mainland Southeast Asia, and their distinct grammar, phonology, and vocabulary have shaped all subsequent languages that have entered the region. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when the Khmer language arose; it probably diverged from its closest Austroasiatic cousins between two and three thousand years ago. Like other languages in the same family, Khmer has several fascinating properties that have guided its development as a literary vehicle.

First, Khmer is distinguished by its mix of monosyllables and sesquisyllables. The latter refers to words composed of a weak syllable followed by a strong syllable. The rhythmic structure of Khmer verse thus tends to be iambic, with an alternating stress pattern. Second, these sesquisyllables are generally derived through prefixes and infixes that can easily change verbs into nouns, actions into agents, and ordinary verbs into causatives. In simple terms, this means that every verbal root in Khmer can be grammatically transformed by adding a weak syllable to either its front or middle. An old verbal root, *ser/sir*, meaning "to make a line" (now obsolete in Khmer), can be transformed into *sar-ser* ("to write"), *smer* ("a scribe, a writer"), and *samner* ("a piece of writing"). Third,

these verbs and their derived forms may be combined with other verbs to form complex strings of serial verbs. In poetry, key nouns such as the subject and object may be dropped or only implied, leaving behind a sequence of verbs for the reader or listener to weave together into a grammatical sentence. These features give Khmer authors great flexibility but pose particular challenges when translating into a radically different language such as English.

In addition to its distinctly Austroasiatic features, Khmer literature has been shaped by words borrowed from other languages. The vocabulary of Khmer received a massive influx of words from Pali and Sanskrit, a transformation already visible in the earliest dated Khmer-language inscription from 612 CE. Later cultural contacts brought a smaller number of words from Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, and French. By the mid-twentieth century, Khmer writers, concerned about the increasing share of foreign borrowings, either coined new words from Indic roots or adopted Khmer-derived terms for describing the new protocols and technologies of the modern world. The result of these centuries of borrowings and new coinages is an Austroasiatic language with a rich set of Indic-derived words, similar to the preponderance of Romance-language vocabulary in English.

Cambodia is home to one of the longest continuous literary traditions in Southeast Asia. The oldest writings in Sanskrit by Cambodian authors date to the fifth century, and hundreds of Khmer-language inscriptions survive from as early as the seventh and eighth centuries. To speak of the Sanskrit inscriptions first, these are almost entirely in verse and reflect the linguistic genius of their Cambodian authors. The dominant form of Sanskrit verse in Cambodia is known as *prashasti* ("praise"), the genre of ornate, eulogistic inscriptions that spread throughout South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium and early into the second. Surviving examples of this genre by Khmer authors number in the hundreds. A short except from one of them appears in this volume, under the title "In Praise of Sister Queens." This celebrated inscription, among the oldest known works by a female author in Southeast Asia, was etched in stone at the temple of Phimeanakas in the heart of the ancient royal palace.

Sanskrit *prashasti* by Khmer authors are just as magnificent as those produced in India. Indeed, the Sanskrit inscriptions of Cambodia are only matched by the magnificence of the stone monuments on which they are carved. Dense with royal and religious imagery, many such inscriptions overflow with an ingenious literary technique called *shlesha* ("embrace"), in which whole stanzas are intended to be read in two completely divergent ways based on small ambiguities in the Sanskrit. By breaking up Sanskrit words in different ways, Khmer poets embraced two possible meanings for their verses, with the hidden reading often revealing a sophisticated interpretation of Hindu or Buddhist philosophy. In many ways, Cambodia's Sanskrit literature is better known outside Cambodia than its Khmer literature, having been assiduously studied and translated by generations of Cambodian, Thai, Indian, and European scholars from the late nineteenth century onward.

Very little classical literature written in Khmer has been available to Anglophone readers. Khmer falls into three linguistic stages: Old (seventh to fourteenth centuries), Middle (fourteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries), and Modern (mid-eighteenth century to the present). The distinctive metrical structures of Cambodian poetry have their roots in Old Khmer, but many of the key forms and meters were only developed during the Middle and early Modern phases of the language. Khmer poets refer to this versified poetry as *kaby* (pronounced "kap"), derived from Sanskrit *kavya,* meaning the style of complex literary verse used in *prashasti.* Though Khmer poets borrowed aesthetic concepts from Sanskrit genres, the meters they created are completely Southeast Asian in character, and best suited to the linguistic structures of Austroasiatic languages. Khmer meters are distinguished by the following features: fixed patterns of syllable counts per line, usually between four and nine; stanzas of three to seven lines each, with four being the most common; complex rhyme patterns that link together lines both within and between stanzas; and an emphasis on alliteration and other forms of assonance. These features, coupled with diverse traditions of melodic recitation, have favored the aural dimensions of Khmer poetry throughout its history.

Meters (known as *pad,* pronounced "bot") featured in this collection include the Narration (*bamnol,* "pumnol"), Brahma's Song (*brahmagiti,* "prumakit"), Crow's Gait (*kakagati,* "kakkate"), Serpent's Lilt (*bhujang lila,* "phuchung lilea"), Four-Syllable (*baky puon,* "peak buon"), Seven-Syllable (*baky prambir,* "peak prampir"), and Eight-Syllable (*baky prampi,* "peak prambei") varieties. Each meter is associated with up to a dozen or more styles of a cappella recitation. Cambodian folk and popular songs are based on the same set of meters, particularly the Four- and Seven-Syllable meters, allowing for an ever-expanding horizon of melodies to be applied to Khmer poetry.

The metrical forms and musical dimensions of Khmer poetry pose a range of conundrums to the translator. How can we hope to capture in English the beauty generated through subtle arrangements of Khmer sounds and musical tones? Several approaches for literary translation are possible, each with their own merits and limitations. One, we can focus on the meaning alone and ignore the rhyme patterns and syllable counts of the Khmer. If the goal is a fluid, readable text in English, this is the most direct method, and most of the translations in this book adopt such an approach. In all but a few cases, the original stanza divisions have been respected, and in my own translations I try to maintain a regular line length and syllable count to more faithfully convey the rhythmic qualities of the original.

Another approach is to ignore rhyme but still preserve the exact syllabic structure of the Khmer poem. For poems in the Crow's Gait meter, for instance, this entails creating an unrhymed English translation of four syllables per line and seven lines per stanza. I frequently follow this method in my translations, as it makes the structural qualities of the Khmer visible to the reader without compromising too much on meaning. A third approach, represented only by

"This Life Is Short" in this collection, is to reproduce both the syllable counts and rhyme scheme in the English. The risks of this mode of translation usually outweigh the gains. But such examples do allow readers unfamiliar with Khmer to appreciate the kinds of intricate rhyme patterns that structure most of the poems composed in Cambodia up to the present.

In addition to their metrical form and musical performance, the materiality of Khmer poems has also shaped their transmission and reception, particularly in the Middle and early Modern phases of the language. As I learned from Prum Ut, the key material object for the transmission of Cambodian literature has long been the manuscript, including handwritten documents in a variety of formats. We know that manuscripts were used extensively between the seventh and fifteenth centuries, but none of that age have survived Cambodia's hot and humid climate. From the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, however, we have direct knowledge of Middle and early Modern Khmer literature from manuscript copies made in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the translations of pre-twentieth-century literature in this book were made either directly from manuscripts or from academic editions based on such manuscripts.

Carved on the long, pliant leaves of the talipot palm or inked on the folded pages of bark-paper manuscripts, these texts hail from a period when handwriting was king and print not yet born. Buddhist monasteries were traditionally the primary places for the creation, curation, reading, and safeguarding of both secular and religious manuscripts. These documents are thus imbued with a sacred aura. In the weeks leading up to my temporary ordination as a novice monk, Prum Ut guided me through the specific bows and gestures involved. Careless and clumsy in my practice robes, after completing one bow I lost balance and fell back on his leporello manuscript. He rebuked me, stating it was a grave misdeed to disrespect a book in this way. This reverence for manuscripts was a key factor in the preservation of old literary works well into the twentieth century.

Print technology arrived late in Cambodia. The first European-style printed books appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, but print technology only fully supplanted the use of traditional manuscripts in the 1960s. Verse novels from the early twentieth century were still composed and transmitted on palm leaves or recited by itinerant bards from memory. When the modern prose novel emerged in the 1940s, it coincided with a wider availability of printed material and a burgeoning book culture in Cambodia. The Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh played a key role in this process, publishing early-twentieth-century works by Suttantaprija Ind *(Journey to Angkor Wat),* Padumatther Som *(Tum Teav),* and Krom Ngoy ("A Garland of New Advice"). These authors, all featured in this volume, had previously only been accessible in handwritten or oral form.

In contemporary Cambodia, though traditional manuscript materials have fallen out of use except in rare circumstances, the practice of hand-copying

continues. Koet Ran's sighted husband copies down all the texts she has memorized in paper notebooks. On the rare occasions when her memory falters, he is there by her side to cue the next verse. In the 1980s, a vibrant literary world emerged from the circulation of novellas hand-copied on notebook paper, which were rented out to an eager circle of readers. As Rinith Taing's essay in this volume describes, the practice of renting printed books continues to the present. The material basis may have shifted, but little has changed about Cambodians' reverence and passion for literature.

As documented in Phina So's essay in this collection, spaces for the literary arts continue to flourish in Cambodia, despite the plethora of challenges. That such a thriving culture of writing exists today can hardly be taken for granted. It took a tremendous amount of effort on the part of Cambodian writers in their homeland and beyond. The tumult and tragedy of the twentieth century visited unimaginable horrors on Cambodians everywhere. Throughout these trials, writers have been punished, banished, and executed. But they have persisted in bringing pen to page and letters into song.

Each year, more and more Cambodians study Old Khmer inscriptions at the Royal University of Fine Arts and other institutions. Classes and research on Khmer literature from the Middle and Modern periods are burgeoning at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and manuscript digitization initiatives are promising unprecedented access for Cambodians hoping to read traditional forms of Khmer literature. Senior bards such as Kong Nay, master of the *chapei dang veng,* represented in this volume, are celebrated anew as younger songwriters find ways to incorporate traditional forms. Contemporary poets continue to push the boundaries of their craft, even as they compose in meters now hundreds of years old. Collaborations between writers in Cambodia and those in diaspora are beginning to emerge, paving new paths. Cambodian literature rests on a much deeper history than the Khmer Rouge dared to imagine, and the future looks bright. This collection is an invitation to explore, celebrate, and be moved by what Khmer writers have offered the world through the ages.

NOTE ON SOURCES, TRANSLITERATION, AND NAMES

We have presented the essays, contributions, and notes in the main portion of this collection entirely in Roman script and without diacritics. For students and researchers looking for more precise information, we have included two additional resources in the back matter. For complete citations of all of the pieces gathered in this volume, with Khmer and Roman script as appropriate, including diacritics, please consult the Sources in the back. For more on the authors and translators, including Khmer-script names of the relevant authors, consult About the Contributors.

In presenting Khmer words in Roman script, we have followed three basic conventions: (1) respecting precedent and the choices of individual authors, (2) transcribing terms in contemporary contexts phonetically, and (3) trans-