

# Khmer Cuisine Vocabulary

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## I. Scope

The word "cuisine" should not be given here the strict sense of "style of cooking", because a typical Khmer meal includes also uncooked dishes, and these are by no means side-dishes as they might appear. It could be better glossed by "food-preparing". Further, it should be recalled that a Khmer meal, like many Asian ones, wants all dishes to be served at the same time and disposed on a mat or a large tray within the circle of seated commensals. These are given each a plate in which they first take some rice, thereafter they help themselves to the food they fancy, of course within the limits of decorum. This leads us to consider also eating-manners as current in the Khmer community, and as required by the subject. In brief, this paper will include some remarks on the concept of a meal, on food-preparing and eating manners in connection, and around, the main theme of "style of cooking".

This being the enlarged scope of my paper, I want to insist on two cultural points. The first one was made earlier on the principle that a Khmer meal consists of hot cooked food and cool uncooked one. Secondly, it should contain liquid and non-liquid food at the same time and roughly on equal share. This preliminary observation immediately hints at a kind of dichotomy underlying the conception of food and meal. If we carry the analysis further afield, we shall see this classification running through the whole system of Khmer cuisine. It, thus, behoves me to analyse this dichotomy first, before examining the vocabulary proper, thereafter I shall make some comments on the data.

One last word should be said about the extent of the paper. It will be deliberately limited to the fundamentals of Khmer cuisine, because it is the first attempt ever made on the

score, and presented in the very short time allotted to a conference communication.

## II. Basic dichotomy in food vocabulary

Viewed semantically, the main constituents of Khmer cuisine vocabulary follow a binary classification. Words practically team up in pairs. In each pair, contrasted words are closely correlated, such as "uncooked - cooked", "non-liquid - liquid", etc., hence the primary pattern of:

A            and/versus            B

At first sight it is a case of semantic opposition, but behind that lay numerous und diverse connotations; still farther behind one would come across indications on Khmer eating habits which in turn entail modes of food-preparing. This, incidentally, confirms the semantico-cultural approach I alluded to earlier.

Let us examine the initial pair of "to eat - to drink", in Khmer (1) *ŝi-phik/sii phək*. Plain as it may appear, it has terrific connotations, hence cultural implications. Firstly, the pair could be used as compound verb: *ŝi-phik*, lit. "to eat und drink", meaning "to feast". Secondly, when used separately, the two verbs are respectively related to "non-liquid" and "liquid". We, thus, face two first correlations:

- |                 |       |                    |
|-----------------|-------|--------------------|
| 1) "to eat"     | a./v. | "to drink"         |
| <i>ŝi/sii</i>   |       | <i>phik/phək</i>   |
| 2) "non-liquid" | a./v. | "liquid"           |
| <i>gok/kəok</i> |       | <i>dik (2)/tək</i> |

This represents the basic pattern of a Khmer meal.

Regarding the food proper, a meal is conceived as a dichotomy, too. It is made of two undissociable elements: cooked rice und dishes, hence a 3rd correlation:

|                  |       |                         |
|------------------|-------|-------------------------|
| 3) "cooked rice" | a./v. | "dishes"                |
| <i>pāy/baay/</i> |       | <i>mhūp (3) /mhoop/</i> |

A meal without rice is unthinkable; the part of rice is somehow comparable with that of bread in some South-European countries. Moreover, rice represents the bland and dry constituent of the meal, therefore it requires, as a rule, moistening and much seasoning from dishes (cf. correlations 2 and 3, sup.).

Along with the need of moistening rice, we find a very ancient Khmer custom. A person may, and should, help himself to push down dry morsels of food in his throat in "sipping" (*hut/hot*) the thin gravy of any liquid dish (cf. correlation 2). This allowance is correlated with another eating-rule, negative, which excludes serving drinks - mainly water - during the main course of the meal.

If it is indecorous to drink water during meals, nothing prevents commensals to help themselves to any dish at any time. Thus, a good meal is made of a number of dishes of a different nature, i.e. varying not only in taste and nourishing value but also in consistence. And the main characteristics of food could be again teamed up in correlations:

|   |       |                                       |
|---|-------|---------------------------------------|
| 4) "raw, uncooked"                            | a./v. | "cooked"                              |
| <i>chau/chaw</i>                              |       | <i>ch-in/c?n</i>                      |
| 5) "animal products"                          | a./v. | "vegetables"                          |
| (fish, meat,<br>poultry, game,<br>eggs, etc.) |       |                                       |
| <i>tri-sāc/trey sac</i>                       |       | <i>panlae pañkā/bonlae<br/>bōjkaa</i> |

This pair calls for a few extra comments which are not unrelated with our subject. The Khmer are first and foremost fish-eaters. Everywhere, fish represents the main daily supplier of proteines. In the country, peasants occasionally cure buffalo-meat for local consumption. But beef and pork, in daily diet, are supplied by non Mon-Khmer people, mainly Chinese. Secondly, the compound word for "vegetables", is significantly made up

from two derivatives, to wit: *panlae* < *phlae* "fruit", and *pañkã* < *phkã* "flower". This means that the vegetal part of diet consists mainly of fruits and flowers, besides the plan-leaves and stalks. This lexical derivation clearly alludes to pregardening times when men relied on "gathering" forest products for their daily diet.

Finally, another crucial concept should be examined in relation with animal products. A word *ch-ãp/c?aap/* means "to taste or smell of any such product" - actually very difficult to render in European languages! Its derivative *camãp/cam?aap/* has a very broad meaning, covering all the dishes which make up the main course of the meal (cf. *sup.*, correlation 5). After partaking of these, commensals must literally get rid of this taste in the mouth, not only by means of water but also in taking "dessert", made of fruit or sweet meat, and called *pañ-aem/ bəŋ?aem/* "which is sweet". Incidentally, the taking of dessert is rendered by a very expressive verb, to wit *lãñ māt'/liəŋ mat*, lit. "to wash up or cleanse the mouth". Hence a last pair of correlated words in Khmer:

|                                   |       |                         |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------------------------|
| 6) "main course"                  | a./v. | "dessert"               |
| (=tasting or<br>smelling of meat) |       | (= which is sweet)      |
| <i>cam-ãp/cam?aap</i>             |       | <i>pañ-aem/bəŋ?aem/</i> |

### III. Basic verbs for food-preparing

The following charts list the basic culinary verbs as current in Khmer community. Most of them refer to cooking proper; they are followed in Chart 3 by a few verbs referring to preparing fresh food. Regarding the style of cooking, verbs are contrastively analysed according to these criteria: consistency of dishes, food materials, heat used, and mode of cooking.

CHART 1  
COOKED FOOD : LIQUID

| Words                   | Heat                               | Mode  | Materials                                       | Engl. Transl.                  |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| <i>tām</i> /dam/ (K.)   | Any cooker (stove, hot plate, ...) | Plain water                                     | Water, rice, medicinal stuffs                   | To boil, cook, make porridge   |
| <i>sno</i> /snoo/ (K.)  | Any cooker                         | Water, slightly seasoned                        | Fish, meat, egg, sea-food + a little vegetables | To boil, make broth            |
| <i>sła</i> /slod/ (K.)  | Any cooker                         | Water + many condiments, boiled into thick soup | Fish, meat, + lots of vegetables                | To stew, concoct, make a curry |
| <i>chun</i> /choŋ/ (C.) | Boiling water                      | Poured on ingredients                           | Tea-leaves and the like                         | To brew                        |

COOKED FOOD : NON-LIQUID

| Words                       | Heat                       | Mode                               | Materials                      | Engl. Transl.                                  |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>tut</i> /dot/ (K.)       | Glowing embers             | Directly on                        | Fish, meat                     | To burn, broil                                 |
| <i>kap'</i> /kɔp/ (K.)      | Embers or cinders          | Directly in                        | Fish                           | To broil                                       |
| <i>āp̄n̄</i> /aŋ/ (K.)      | Any hot fire (open or not) | Contiguously: grill or wood-skewer | Fish, meat, ...                | To grill, roast, toast, cure, scorch, barbecue |
| <i>līn̄</i> /liŋ/ (K.)      | Any fire                   | In pan                             | Grains and nuts                | To roast                                       |
| <i>khvai</i> /kway/ (K.)    | Open fire                  | Roasting skewer                    | Meat, fowl (all well-seasoned) | To roast                                       |
| <i>n̄tet</i> /ŋiat/ (K.)    | Sun heat                   | Open exposure                      | Salted fish or meat            | To scorch, dry                                 |
| <i>cha-oer</i> /cʔaə/ (K.)  | Smoking fire               | Contiguously: on lattice-work      | Fish, meat                     | To smoke, cure, dry up                         |
| <i>cānhuy</i> /cənhoy/ (K.) | Hot steam                  | Contiguously: in pot or oven       | Any food                       | To steam                                       |

CHART Z (ctd.)

COOKED FOOD : NOT-LIQUID

| Words                                 | Heat          | Mode   | Materials  | Engl. Transl.      |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|--|--|--------------------|
| <i>srus</i> /sroh/ (K.)               | Boiling water | Directly in and quickly                            | Vegetables   | To blanch          |
| <i>pop</i> /baop/ <sup>4</sup> (K.)   | Any hot fire  | Directly   | Stuffed hare or frog                                       | To roast, grill    |
| <i>cāmhīev</i> /cāmhiəw/<br>(K.)      | Kitchen stove | Frying-pan   | Pork fat, lard   | To render, clarify |
| <i>chā</i> /chaa/ (C.)                | Kitchen stove | Hot fat in frying-pan                              | Meat + vegetables  | To sauté, stir-fry |
| <i>cīen</i> /ciən/ (C.)               | Kitchen stove | Hot fat in frying-pan                              | Fish, meat   | To fry             |
| <i>pañ' khlāñ'</i> /bɔŋ<br>klap/ (K.) | Kitchen stove | Quick cook in hot fat                              | Meat, ..., vegetables,<br>fruits, ... (battered or<br>not) | To deep fry        |
| <i>kha</i> /khəp/ (V.?)               | Kitchen stove | A little water + sweet soy-<br>sauce or fish-sauce | Fish, meat   | To (k.o.) stew     |
| <i>dīm</i> /təm/ (C.)                 | Kitchen stove | Steam cook   | Stuffed fowl   | To steam           |

CHART 3  
UNCOOKED FOOD

| Words                              | Materials   | Mode   | Engl. Transl.          |
|------------------------------------|---|--|------------------------|
| <i>hām</i> /pɔəm/ (K.)             | All k.o. vegetables, cold meat, poultry, ... + lots of aromatic leaves and other condiments | All mixed, well seasoned   | To mix, make a salad   |
| <i>puk</i> /bɔk/ (K.)              | Hard-fleshy vegetables, dried or smoked fish, aromatic stuffs                               | All mixed and pound in mortar  | To pound, make a salad |
| <i>bhā</i> /pliə/ (K.)             | Raw meat or fish  | Marinated in various acid fruit juices, mixed with vegetables, aromatic leaves | To make a k.o. salad   |
| <i>jrak'</i> /crɔk/ (K. or J. ?) 5 | All k.o. vegetables   | Steep in vinegar and the like  | To pickle              |

#### IV. Comments

1) A linguistic observation is immediately called for. By Khmer standards one would expect many nouns derived from these basic action verbs, designating the results of the actions, i.e. the food prepared. This is not the case, except for two verbs. On the whole, the semantic derivation, i.e. "action > results" has worked out all right, but without any morphological change. E.g.:

*n̄ām* "to mix ingredients" > *n̄ām* "a salad dish"  
*s̄n̄o* "to boil ..." > *s̄n̄o* "a k.o. broth"

As just stated, morphological derivation took place in two cases, to wit:

*līñ* "to <sup>^</sup>roast grains" > *ralīñ/r̄oliñ* "roasted grains  
or nuts"  
*sla* "to stew..." > *samla/samlab* "a stew, mess,  
curry"

It must be emphasized that the derivative *samla* has always been a landmark in Khmer language and culture. Culturally, there is no proper meal without a *samla*, hence a kind of nationally sounding implication of the word. In vocabulary, *samla* has been used by Khmer speakers to form many compounds of the type "*samla* - X", referring to all sorts of "stews", natives or of foreign import. For instance, it aptly applies to a French "ragoût", as well as an "Irish stew", or an "Indian curry". The varied typology of *samla* is large and open-ended so that it requires a proper paper to cover it.

2) Among the above listed verbs, only a few turn out to be loanwords. *kha* "to stew in soy- or fish-sauce" could be ascribed to *Vt. kho. Chā, cīen, dim* and *chuñ* were borrowed from Chinese (6). The lexical Sino-Khmer connection reflects the import of foreign semantic notions, and practically that of foreign techniques of cooking. Pork fat and tea-leaves are nothing but Khmer or Mon-Khmer, hence the introduction of action verbs from

Chinese along with the new techniques of frying in hot fat, steam-cooking of stuffed fowl, and brewing tea or coffee.

3) What is strikingly missing in this vocabulary is Indic. By Khmer standards again, this is very strange, or amazing to say the least, because any lexical theme in Khmer contains a good amount of Sanskrit. Now, in Old Khmer texts, one comes across some Sanskrit words all right connected with food, but a) they are nouns, and b) they referred to sacred food among offerings to the gods. In other words, their adoption answered a specific purpose, and in all likelihood they were not used by Khmer speakers at large. It is more worthy to note that, even in that context, not a single Indian verb (Sanskrit, Prakrit or Dravidian) occurred in epigraphic texts, and predictably none of the nominal loanwords has survived.

In later times, one word became current in Khmer culture, with both name and referent, i.e. *kārī* designating the Indian type of curry. It was very likely borrowed from Tamil (7), and has been used ever since as a noun exclusively. In brief, during twenty centuries of association with the Indian culture, Khmer has borrowed only one word from Tamil along with one type of food, i.e. "the Indian curry".

4) After sifting out all the loanwords, we are left with a large majority of Khmer verbs which form a compact nucleus remarkably preserved through time and space. They are found in literature, past and present; they are nowadays well distributed in space, largely used by Khmer people of all classes and in different environments. As regards food-preparing, the basic techniques laid out in the charts are still in practice among the Khmer, those lost in forest hamlets as well as urban housewives. An outsider who is entertained in a true Khmer home will soon find this out. And his keen mind will comprehend that the rest is nothing but "variations on" the above mentioned themes.

## NOTES

- (1) Khmer words are given in roman transliteration based on Indian system, occasionally with IPA phonetic transcription
- (2) Cf. M.K. for "water".
- (3) A derivative of verb *hūp/hoop/*, a regional synonym of */sii/* (sup.).
- (4) Sometimes pronounced */baok/*.
- (5) Old Khmer *caruk*, cf. Old Javanese *jruk* "pickled meat"
- (6) See an article by S. Pou & P.N. Jenner, "Some Chinese Loanwords in Khmer", in: *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Hong Kong, XI/1/1973, S. 1-90
- (7) See S. Pou, "Dravidian Loanwords in Khmer", in the press, Kuala Lumpur.

### Abbreviations:

|          |                    |
|----------|--------------------|
| C.       | Chinese            |
| J.       | Javanese           |
| Khm., K. | Khmer              |
| Lit.     | literal, literally |
| M.K.     | Mon-Khmer          |
| Skt.     | Sanskrit           |
| Vt., V.  | Vietnamese         |