

A Short Description of the Khmer Orthography

The Khmer orthography has been in use since the A.D. 600s (“Khmer” 268). Khmer writing is a branch of the southern Brāhmī writing system, which developed from a form of Semitic in the Indian sub-continent. The Khmer language is a member of the Austro-Asiatic Mon-Khmer (Eastern) family.

The Khmer writing system has been described by linguist J.D. Crowley (with, perhaps, very little hyperbole), as “the most complicated alphabet system in the world” (Interview [3]). Perhaps the main reason for this perception is that almost every consonant sound in Khmer can be represented by two different graphemes. Franklin Huffman divided the two sets of consonants into a Series 1 and a Series 2. The Khmer themselves refer to the series as *a'kosa* and *'kosa*. The first series has an inherent [ɑ], and the second an inherent [o]. Hence, the first four consonants of the alphabet are pronounced [kɑ], [k^hɑ], [ko], [k^ho] – but there are really only two consonant sounds here: [k] and [k^h]. This inherent

vowel shapes the sound of the vowel attached (graphemically) to the consonant. The vowels themselves come in two varieties: dependent (attached in some way to a consonant) and independent (free standing). A dependent vowel is written beside (either side), above, or below the consonant that it phonetically follows. (Some vowels surround their consonant in some way.) The independent vowels follow (phonetically) a glottal stop, which is an inherent part of the independent vowel grapheme.

To further complicate matters, Khmer is written with no spaces between the words in a sentence; consequently, confusion would arise if a stressed syllable – the main syllable of a word – were interpreted as the presyllable of the next word. To avoid this confusion, the potentially ambiguous consonant, which happens to be the “most important consonant of the word,” is converted into a subscript, which is placed under the second symbol of the presyllable (Letter, 11 June [1]). Some of the consonant feet bear little resemblance to the fully written consonant (“Khmer Writing” 269).

On top of all these difficulties, Khmer is an ancient writing system, and it has not kept pace with the phonological changes that have taken place in Khmer over the last one-and-a-half millennia. Crowley compares the Khmer alphabet with the English in this respect. He points out that the simple “sound [kia] can be written three different ways” in Khmer (“Explanations” [1]). Another (minor) difficulty is that Khmer has two scripts: the normal letters used for most printed texts and a stylized script used for signs and document titles (Interview [3]).¹

(Postscript: this article is excerpted from a paper written on the Tampuan orthography for the class Phonetics and Phonology, taught by Dr. Bruce Byers. At the time I wrote the paper, I did not have access to Huffman’s indispensable *Cambodian System of Writing and Beginning Reader*.)

¹ When I visited Cambodia in 2002, I was surprised that 12-year-old Anna Crowley, who is fluent in Khmer, had trouble reading the signs posted at a tourist stop. I now understand the complexity of Khmer and am amazed by her ability to work through words in the unusual script at all.

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