

# Language, Culture and History: Towards Building a Khmer Narrative

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## Abstract

Genetic and geological studies reveal that following the melting of snows 22,000 years ago, the post Ice-age Sundaland peoples' migrations as well as other peoples' migrations spread the ancestors of the two distinct ethnic groups Austronesian and Austroasiatic to various East and South-East Asian countries. Some of the Austroasiatic groups must have migrated to Northeast India at a later date, and whose descendants are today's Munda-speaking people of Northeast, East and Southcentral India.

Language is the store-house of one's ancestral knowledge, the community's history, its skills, customs, rituals and rites, attire and cuisine, sports and games, pleasantries and sorrows, terrain and geography, climate and seasons, family and neighbourhoods, greetings and address-forms and so on. Language loss leads to loss of social identity and cultural knowledge, loss of ecological knowledge, and much more. Linguistic hegemony marginalizes and subdues the mother-tongues of the peripheral groups of a society, thereby the community's narratives, histories, skills etc. are erased from their memories, and fabricated narratives are created to replace them. Each social-group has its own norms of extending respect to a hearer, and a stranger. Similarly there are social rules of expressing grief, condoling, consoling, mourning and so on. The emergence of nation-states after the 2nd World War has made it imperative for every social group to build an authentic, indigenous narrative with intellectual rigour to sustain itself politically and ideologically and progress forward peacefully. The present essay will attempt to introduce variants of linguistic-anthropology practiced in the West, and their genesis and importance for the Asian speech communities. An attempt shall be made to outline a Khmer narrative with inputs from Khmer History, Art and Architecture, Agriculture and

Language, for the scholars to take into account, for putting Cambodia on the path to peace, progress and development.

**Keywords:** *Austroasiatic, Sundaland, Cambodia*

## Preface

The Dalai Lama's statement of April 23, 2018 is noteworthy and timely. He said: "Serious discussions on how to include the ancient Indian traditions in educational system should begin. India has the capability to combine modern education with its ancient traditions to help solve problems in the world". The British, after taking control of India, imported their own system into the sub-continent with the intent to create sepoys and coolies for the empire: The class of people, which as desired by McCauley 'would be Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, and intellect.'

The curricula documented by Dharamapala, a Buddhist scholar of the past, included grammar (vyakarana), rhetoric and logic (tarka), mathematics/astronomy (ganita), aesthetics (rasa), ethics (darshana), political science (arthashastra), and epistemology (pramana). These subjects will produce well-informed, creative individuals, who can learn new things. The Dalai Lama was right, after all. A fresh look at the education-system will enable us to make use of the best of both the traditional and the new systems -- to adopt the positives from tradition and to ignore or disown the negatives from both.

Today Artificial Intelligence (AI) is acting much like the guru in a 'gurukula' of old India. In the gurukula-s, the guru could and did understand exactly what the pupils' capabilities were because they lived with him, and could instruct them to bring out the best in their talents. The May 9, 2018 account from The Southern Indian state of Kerala is indeed heart-warming: Sreenath, a coolie at the railway station in Ernakulam, Kerala, qualified for the Kerala Public Service Commission [State Administrative Service]. He used the free Railway Wi-Fi at the station, downloaded question papers and examination forms, and so forth. Using his smart- phone, he managed to study to clear the written examination. If a hard-up Sreenath could do this, an affluent middle-class adult can do still better by diligently learning new materials from the Online open courses [MOOC] available today. In effect, life-long learning is now available, and the key for us is to learn about how to learn and not to learn facts that will soon become obsolete. There are several more instances of such determined persons who have exhibited their talent.

## Language Society and Culture

Language is not simply a vehicle of communication. It marks one's identity; it is the store- house of community's history, ancestral knowledge, skills, customs, rituals and rites, attire and cuisine, vegetables and crops, sports and games, joys and sorrows, terrain and geography, climate and seasons, family and neighbourhood, greetings and address-forms, art and literature and so on.

Language loss leads to loss of social identity and cultural knowledge, loss of ecological knowledge, and much more. Causes of language loss include natural disasters, war and violence, cultural repressions, and socio-cultural marginalization. Sociolinguists study dialects across a given region,

and examine words that are unique to a region. They take into consideration factors such as socio-economic status, social class affiliation, gender etc. that play a role in language use. Such investigations reveal the close linkage between language and social-class. Sociolinguists study the processes that monitor language use.

Linguistic anthropologists believe that the human language faculty is a cognitive and a social achievement that provides the intellectual tools for thinking and acting in the world. Therefore, documentation of what speakers say in their daily social activities takes a central place in such studies. Linguistic anthropology seeks answers to the issues like: why do individuals (or groups) switch over to a foreign language in place of their own? Why are there gender differences, if any, in speech? Speakers' attitudes and differences need to be identified and their causes unearthed. A linguistic anthropologist is expected to unravel the subtleties of life as the community members live it from birth to death. Some of the major issues that specialists record and analyse are as follows: The domains of the use of a language in family/social gatherings, in group conversations, in discourses on belief systems, political discourses, scientific discussions/ descriptions, discourses on art and literature.

Language contact, an essential life situation in a globalised world, provides a concrete setting to the members of a social group to immerse themselves in the code of the 'other' language. Does such an immersion reflect one's social status? The contact between faiths might impress upon one the desire to embrace a foreign faith. Will such a shift bring about any lingu-cultural change in the 'individual's' speech etc.? Such issues also constitute a part of the linguistic anthropologist's concerns. Linguistic anthropologists place language-speakers in the class of that of cultural-beings who possess a unique cultural identity.

Linguistic hegemony marginalizes and subdues the mother-tongues of the peripheral groups of a society, and thereby the community's narratives, histories, skills etc. are erased from their memories and fabricated narratives are created to replace them. Colonial Histories present several such instances!

Franz Boas (1858–1942) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) were pioneers who described the importance of linguistic research for an anthropological understanding of human societies. Boas studied the grammatical structures of the indigenous languages of the American northwest coast—he was against any correlation between language and 'race'. He believed that language was an important tool for the study of culture. Significant damage had been done to the indigenous cultures of the Americas by European colonizers--Boas and later Sapir documented the languages and cultural traditions that were on the verge of disappearing. Boas's studies produced valuable information on Native American traditions. He brought scientific rigour to linguistic descriptions, and demolished a number of unfounded stereotypes about the languages that were then called 'primitive.' Boas argued that the opinion that the speakers of American Indian languages were less accurate in their pronunciation was false. Boas believed that each language should be studied on its own terms rather than according to some preset categories based on the study of other languages. To an Asian linguist, this observation of Boas may effectively form the starting point of investigation.

Edward Sapir's students who did courses in linguistics called themselves 'Anthropological linguists.' Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897– 1941), a chemical engineer, taught himself linguistics, and after 1931 joined E. Sapir and his students at Yale. Whorf believed that ways of thinking may develop by analogy with 'fashions of speaking.'

Dell Hymes stressed the need to see linguistics as part of anthropology. Hymes revised the Whorfian concept ‘fashions of speaking’ and termed it as the ‘ways of speaking.’ John Gumperz and Dell Hymes considered ‘language as a social activity’. They chose to study language-use in concrete situations. Such studies of ‘Linguistic performance’--contrary to Chomsky’s focus on ‘Linguistic Competence’-- became an enabling cause for the field-workers to identify the creative dimensions of an act of speaking, the role of individuals and groups in the reproduction and transformation of linguistic codes, etc. The study of ‘linguistic performance’ enabled them to put forward the concept of ‘Communicative Competence’—in place of Chomsky’s ‘Linguistic Competence’.

Hymes (1967) proposed the ‘SPEAKING Model’---Situation, Participants, Ends, Act Sequences, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre---for specialists in Communication studies [Ethnography of Speech] to investigate. Gumperz (1982) preferred the analysis of face-to-face interaction. He included within the concept of ‘linguistic repertoire’ the range of resources that speaker-hearers use to make inferences about the ongoing context. This resulted in the emergence of the notion of ‘contextualization cues’ (intonation, paralinguistic features, choice of code, use of key words, and formulaic expressions), the linguistic features through which ‘speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows. The study of ‘contextualization cues’ provide the key to both successful and unsuccessful [cross-talk] communication.

Charles Peirce’s notion of indexicality influenced Michael Silverstein (1976) and Hanks (1990), and this offered a space to explore the role of the human body in the establishment of the referential grounding of most communicative acts. Therefore, the importance of the study of pronominals and place and time adverbials gained greater significance. Elinor Ochs’s (1996) model for the construction of social identities based on situational dimensions is established through language use.

The theorists from other disciplines (viz., Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur, Valentin Voloshinov) and the use of ideologies and technology has influenced understanding speakers’ processes of conceptualizing appropriate and interpretable language.

The studies of the languages of ethnic and marginalized communities emboldened scholars to disagree with Western narratives. Elinor Ochs and Bambi B. Schieffelin (1984) disagree with Western scholars with regard to language acquisition theory. Language acquisition, they opine, is a culturally specific activity which cannot be theorized uniformly with Western middle-class families as the model. Their experiences in Papua New Guinea and in Samoa demonstrate that the western concepts such as ‘baby talk’ or ‘motherese’ have no place in these societies. Ochs and Schieffelin demonstrate that language socialization is a never ending process because speakers never stop learning new ways of using language. Their studies examine the cultural implications of what is being done with language.

The studies of literacy practices reveal that multiple voices and coexisting language varieties present instances of grammar-mixing. However ‘politics of language’ pursued by the state administration determines community’s choice of language and its [community’s] alternative ways of speaking. Slogans like linguistic purism, national identity, and the political creation of ethnic boundaries between or within communities play an important role in the types of language varieties that are supported or oppressed (Shirley Brice Heath, 1983).

Language plays a critical role in determining differences in power between speakers. This has been amply demonstrated by the studies conducted by Goffman [face work], and Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson [Theory of politeness].

Language and gender studies isolate linguistic codes that define female speakers as weak, unassertive, and submissive. Contrary to such observations, Marjorie H. Goodwin (1990) in her study found that girls were as assertive and confrontational as boys.

## Cambodia Today

By the mid-1800s, the Cambodian King signed a Protectorate Treaty with France. In 1945, the Japanese briefly ousted the French. King Sihanouk, in 1953, succeeded in winning independence for Cambodia and took the reins of government himself as head of state.

Since 1993 C.E., Cambodia has been a constitutional monarchy. It is a member of the Southeast Asian community since 1999 C.E. Today the textile industry in Cambodia is booming, as is tourism. With a population of 16 million, the peace-loving Khmer shall grow quickly in all spheres of development--linguistic, scientific, technological, spiritual and intellectual. A constitution was adopted in 1993, when King Norodom Sihanouk returned to the throne. In 2004, his son, Norodom Sihamoni, became King in his place.

## Building a Khmer Narrative

Archaeological data reveal that Cambodia was inhabited by human beings at least 40,000 years ago. Indian and Chinese traders used to pass through the Cambodian 'cities'. By the 5th and 6th centuries several Indianized kingdoms were established in southern Cambodia. There are a few remains of small religious monuments of that period in brick and massive stone sculptures, and inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer. The earliest dated inscription comes from the 4th century CE. Cambodia's culture has its roots in Funan, known as the oldest Indianised state in Southeast Asia. Cambodia's language, Khmer, with elements of Sanskrit and Pali, India's faith-systems--Hinduism and Buddhism--can be traced from this period.

Recent genetic studies reveal that 4000 or more years ago, an adventurous band of Indians seems to have voyaged and turned up in Australia and contributed their DNA to the aborigines. The Indian 'stray dog' pet Dingo in Australia today, seems to have reached Australia along with that band of adventurers.

Following the melting of snows 22000 years ago, the post Ice-age Sundaland peoples' migrations as well as other peoples' migrations spread the ancestors of two distinct ethnic groups, the Austronesian [Malays, Indonesians, Filipinos, Brunenians, Tomorese, Taiwanese aborigines, Polynesians] and Austroasiatic [Vietnamese, Khmer, Mon in Thailand and Myanmar] to various East and Southeast Asian countries. Some of the latter [Austroasiatic] groups must have migrated to Northeast India at a later date, and whose descendants are today's Munda-speaking people of Northeast, East and Southcentral India (Sarkar, 60-61). Today these people speak languages related to Vietnamese as well as Khmer. The Post ice-age deluge is part of the folklore of the peoples across the Indian-Ocean Rim. The Laotian folk-story is different from the 'Katha' of Manu or Noah, so is the

oral tradition of the Australian aborigines (ibid). The Austroasiatic communities such as ‘Khasi-s’ in Meghalaya, ‘Santhal’-s in Jharkhand, and Khmer in Cambodia continue to be matrilineal for socio-cultural as well as genetic reasons (ibid).

The Mekong Delta (the Mekong river flows from China into Laos, Cambodia and southern Vietnam) was been the first major course of trade and commerce in antiquity. The first Indianized kingdom in South-East Asia was established in the Mekong delta; the Chinese called it the kingdom of Funan. The history of its establishment is interesting: An Indian merchant-ship, headed by young Kaundinya, was attacked by pirates who were led by Soma, the daughter of the Chief of Naga Clan. The Indians fended off the attack. Soma was impressed with Kaundinya’s bravery. She proposed to him and he accepted the offer of marriage. Their lineage ruled Funan for several generations. The inscriptions of the Chams of Vietnam and the Khmers of Cambodia both claim descent from this union. The Matrilineal genealogies continue to be given importance among these communities. Angkor is a living testimony to the fact that ‘Naga’ [Serpent] occupies a pride of place in Khmer iconography.

Oc Eo in Vietnam’s Mekong delta was a major centre of trade and through which, ships would sail to China. History reveals that Indian sea-farers from the coastal Odisha-Bengal had been settling in Sri Lanka from the 6th century BCE. They traded with South-East Asia through the Isthmus of Kra, now part of Thailand. This enabled them to be closer to the coast as the benefits of following the Monsoon winds had not been understood then. They would ship goods to the ports in Cambodia and southern Vietnam (Sarkar, 2016).

The Angkor Empire rose to power with the return of King Jayavarman II in 802 C.E. Jayavarman II, a Khmer prince who returned to Cambodia from Java. He was crowned as the Monarch in a ceremony near Angkor, at the Tonle Sap, the Great Lake. The following 600 years saw powerful Khmer kings dominate much of present-day Southeast Asia, from the borders of Myanmar east to the South China Sea and north to Laos. It was during this period that the Khmer kings built the most extensive concentration of religious temples in the world

- the Angkor temple complex. Yashodharapura, the Angkor capital, was perhaps one of the most populous cities at that time in history. The Angkor temples, dedicated to either Buddha or to Hindu gods, are among the artistic wonders of the world. The most famous of these, Angkor Wat, has been declared as a World Heritage Site. Angkor complex covers an area of 400 square kilometers in the province of Siem Reap, Cambodia, with 100 temples, and thus more than 1080 temples across the country. The most successful of Angkor’s kings, Jayavarman II, Suryavarman II and Jayavarman VII, built monumental man-made lakes and canals-- as master-pieces of ancient engineering. This refined system of irrigation enabled the Cambodian to grow as many as three rice crops per year.

Linguistic acts like greeting, condoling, inquiring etc. have a direct bearing upon one’s culture. Similarly, there are social norms that guide us in dressing ourselves for different occasions such as in the party, wedding, the market place, the funeral, and so forth. Food-habits are usually dependent upon the availability of grains and vegetables in the region. The patterns of cooking differ from one society to another. Kinship and address-terms mirror a society’s culture. Colour-names echo the ranges, shades and hues that the members of a society prefer to wear. In Japan, for instance, respect for elders is expressed by bowing to them when saying hello or goodbye. The Philippines place their hand on their forehead as a sign of respect for an elderly person. In the USA and the UK, it is frequently

considered rude to ask personal questions (marital status, income, etc.) unless one is familiar with the person. In South Africa one should not refer to Afrikaners as Dutch. South Africa is a very diverse place with many different belief systems. People in the Philippines refer to people by their honorific titles until they tell you not to do so. In America, it is frequently considered homosexual when two persons of the same sex hold hands in public. In South America it is frequently risky to hold hands with the same gender because homosexuality is extremely looked down upon. In Asia, it is acceptable for two persons of the same sex to hold hands in public without people coming to the conclusion that they are homosexual.

Cambodia is generally matrilineal, such as with the Khasis of Northeast India. The Khmer kinship-system and address-terms are distinct and culture specific. Cambodia is primarily a rice-eating society where cultivation of the paddy is the major profession; fishing does not fall under the category of a 'major profession' in Cambodia. The irrigation-system has been a major concern of the Khmer people; for centuries 'water-consuming' rice has been cultivated in the region. Cambodia grows three crops of rice in a Calendar year due to the watchful use of waters of the Mekong River and the Great Lake Tonle Sap. Cambodian headgear is different from the headgear of Vietnamese.

It is imperative, therefore, to investigate Khmer social norms of extending respect, greeting, congratulating, condoling, consoling, cooking, feasting, and celebrating and so on. Such investigations will unfold the subtle dimensions of the socially acceptable norms of social communication in Khmer society. An anthropological narrative must be built by scholars who are deeply immersed in the Khmer socio-cultural ethos.

Khmer language has a rich lexicon. Khmer has the word-order SVO, akin to Khasi in Northeast India; English has an identical word-order. Khmer aspirates voiceless stops, so does Khasi; English does not. The consonant sounds in Khmer are: stops--bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal--[p, ph, b, m; k, kh, g, ng etc.]; sibilants: Voiceless alveolar and glottal; and voiced liquids--y, r, l. v. The functional consonant and vowel sounds in Khmer are as follows:

### Consonants:

ka, kha, ga, nga, ca, cha, ja, ɲa, ta, tha, da, na, pa, pha, ba, ma, ʔ, s, h,  
ya, ra, la, va.

Vowels and diphthongs:

e, e:, o:, u:, i,  
ei, ai, ao, au, oe.

The Khmer script has its genesis in the Ashokan 'brahmi' script, as in all the extant South and Southeast Asian scripts. Each 'letter' in these scripts is a 'syllable'.

An African saying is fitting in the context: The Story of the 'hunted' has to be said by the 'victim' [hunted] not by the hunter [victor]. Large parts of Asia have suffered 'Colonial' suppression; free Asia has to shun the 'colonial hang-over' and build narratives based upon the achievements, victories, failures, folk-wisdom, knowledge-systems, literature, art and architecture. Such acts will embolden

and energize the young who will thus be proud Asians.

## After-word

A researcher has to be careful and aware of the delicate relationship between the researcher and the subject(s). Fieldworkers must prepare field notes and must transcribe recordings of social encounters, activities, and events. The one interested in grammatical analysis must provide word-by-word glosses; for the one interested in the relation between speech and the spatial organization of the event, visual representations of the settings become crucial. Of late, the new tools have brought considerable improvement in the documentation processes and procedures. The description of verbal activities such as greetings, proverbs, insults, and speech-making is recorded with audio-visual gadgets to notice speech, intonation as well as bodily gestures and facial expressions of the participants in a discourse. Michel Foucault's analysis of the development of the institutions that dealt with health in France marks the beginning of the investigations with regard to the power of new technologies in the definition of persons and their rights.

The following Western scholars deserve to be emulated to investigate socio-cultural and linguistic realities of Asian communities.

M. A. K. Halliday's functional approach to language encourages comparative studies of communication and discourse without an in-depth study of grammatical theories.

Philip Parker (1997) in his statistical analysis involving 460 languages in 243 countries considered economic resources, transportation, population-density, and means of communication to demonstrate the relationship between language, social mobility and culture.

In his search for 'Linguistic Universals', Greenberg, a linguistic anthropologist in the Boasian tradition, has provided a thorough classification of the African languages.

Dell Hymes, the father of the ethnography of communication, believed that linguistic tools and anthropological methodologies must go hand in hand with each other to bring to the surface a fuller picture of the processes of speech.

The study of mixed languages [pidgins and Creoles] provides valuable information about the historical events of the past two-three centuries under the Colonial regimes. This understanding is of vital importance to historians, demographers, geographers, anthropologists and sociologists [even colonial apologists] alike. Similarly, the issues of language death, language loss and endangered languages have caught the attention of the linguistic anthropologist worldwide.

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