កាព្យសាស្ត្រ or Khmer Versification: Poetic Meters

1. The "Brahma's Song" Meter and the ឆ្បាប់

Rather than present you with an exhaustive listing and explanation of the many

types of poetic meters in Khmer, we're going to only concentrate on three of them.

These just happen to be the meters used in the three classical literature excerpts

provided in this chapter. To make a complex subject a little less intimidating, in

this book we'll discuss most of this topic in English, reserving Khmer for just the

important terms you'll need to discuss poetry in Khmer at a basic level. In the

classroom at SEASSI, you can practice this vocabulary of course…please don't use

English to ask any questions about poetry! That's what the textbook is for.

First of all, you should know that the meters of Khmer poetry are called បទ , a

word you already know as the classifier for songs. By the way, you can listen to

all of the new vocabulary used to talk about poetry on Audio Track 39, Disk # 2.

See page 351 for a list. Every បទ (and there are a great many varieties) has a name, usually a quite descriptive and colorful name like "The Leaping Frog Choking on Jewels" (បទកង្កែបលោតស្លាក់ពេជ្រ) or "The Lion Playing With His Tail" (បទសីង្ហគោលេងកន្ទុយ). Sometimes you can see from the structure of a particular meter—the pattern of its rhyming scheme when we diagram it out—how it got its descriptive name. More often, however, the intention of whoever origi–nally named the meter is lost to us in our modern world view and language. The first បទ we'll analyze is the បទព្រហ្មគីតិ or "Brahma's Song Meter".

You need to know the basic units by which Khmer verse works are constructed. First, just as we have the "stanza" in English, in Khmer we have the វគ្គ . Each វគ្គ is broken down into lines or ឃ្លា (which is of course the same word we use to mean "sentence"). Note that each meter specifies the number of ឃ្លា that can ex–ist within one វគ្គ . Now you might think that the next smallest unit we'd come to would be the individual word or ពាក្យ , but that's not the case with Khmer verse. Instead, the next unit, which is in fact the smallest unit we'll need to consider in our study, is the syllable or ព្យាង្គ . And yes, the rules for each specific type of meter dictate how many of these will be found in a line. The ព្យាង្គ are the things we'll talk about as either rhyming or not rhyming with each other. Incidentally, the word "rhyme" in Khmer is ចួន or ចុងចួន . "To rhyme" is to ចាប់ចុងចួន .

Just *how* ព្យាង្គ rhyme in Khmer verse is a whole topic unto itself. Not only can Khmer syllables rhyme in the popular way we usually think of things rhyming (that is, when two syllables have the same vowel sound and final consonant sound,

such as "bird" and "word", "pop" and "top", "gong" and "wrong", etc.). They rhyme

in several other ways, some of which may seem a little strange to you. First of

all, Khmer syllables can rhyme in the same way that we just described for English:

ខ្លា rhymes with ផ្កា , ខ្លួន rhymes with ប្លួន , បាង rhymes with ចាង . But in

Khmer poetics, two syllables can also be considered ឬន if they simply share the

same consonant cluster: thus ខ្លា rhymes with ខ្លួន , and ស្លាប់ rhymes with ស្លឹ .

And that's not all. Syllables can be considered ឬន if they share only the same

written vowel symbol , even if (due to differerences between first and second

series) the vowels in each syllable *sound* different! Examples are ថៃ rhyming

with ថៃ , and ត្រិ rhyming with ពីរ . Crazy, huh? We're still not done. Yet an–

other type of Khmer rhyme are the "near rhymes," which I like to call "cheater

rhymes." These are considered to rhyme in Khmer, though the syllables have ab–

solutely nothing in common. Just pick any two syllables, any at all, and "poof!"

You've got a rhyme. However, hold your horses here, you can't go using cheater

rhymes indiscriminately. They're basically only a last–ditch option when you can't

come up with any other kind of rhyme. Nobody's ever going to write a verse

made up entirely of "near" or "cheater" rhymes, so just get that thought out of your

head now. Finally, in Khmer rhyming we're also allowed to repeat the exact same

syllable for two points designated as rhyming points. This is not only allowed, but

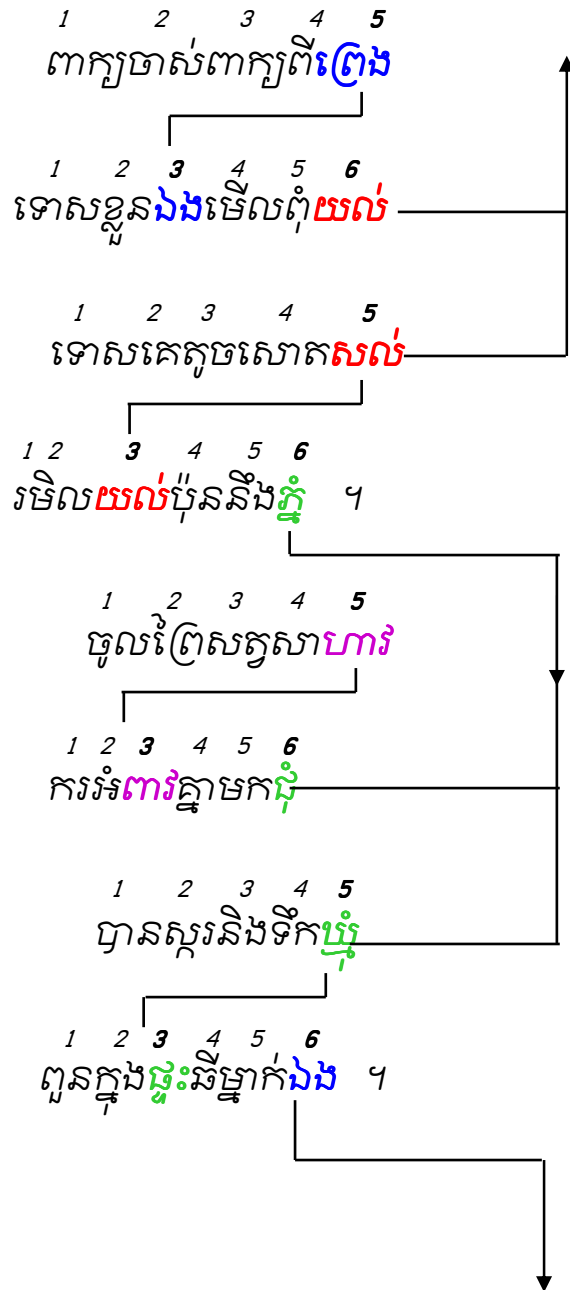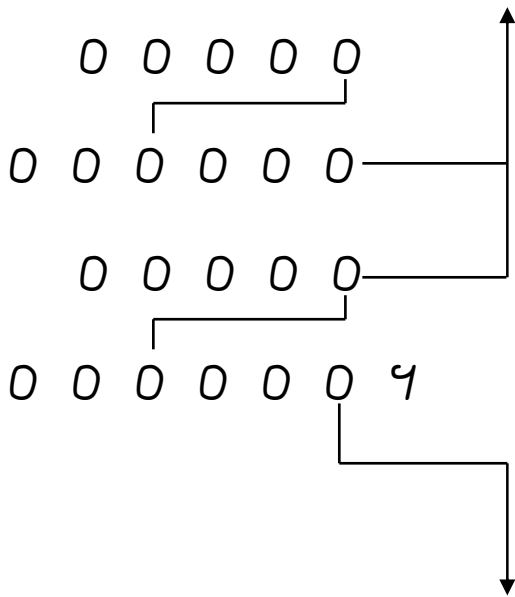in some types of meter, it's required at certain places.

Lest you start to think from the above discussion of rhyming that Khmer verse is

"easy" or "lazy," here's where it really gets tough. Now we're going to talk about

just *where* the different ព្យាង្គ which are considered to rhyme with each other might be located in a given ឃ្លា or វគ្គ . Any of the types of ចួងចួន mentioned earlier can occur either within the same ឃ្លា or across ឃ្លា in the same វគ្គ. However—here's where things really get complex—ព្យាង្គ can also be ចួន with ព្យាង្គ in an adjoining វគ្គ ! What makes the various បទ different from each other—what gives them their unique character and flavor—is the specific rules which state exactly where (within the ឃ្លា , on which numbered ព្យាង្គ , and/or between which ឃ្លា , either within the same វគ្គ or across វគ្គ) rhymes must occur. I know this sounds confusing. Hopefully it will get a lot clearer when we take an actual example—and we will, in just a second. First, however, we need to agree on some symbols with which to diagram Khmer poetic meters:

O   stands for one ព្យាង្គ

———   stands for a ចួងចួន of some kind between one ព្យាង្គ and another

Also, each horizontal line of   *O O O O O* represents one ឃ្លា , and each stack of ឃ្លា which ends with a ។ represents one full វគ្គ

Finally, an arrow on the end of a "rhyme line" means that the rhyme is with a ព្យាង្គ which is part of another វគ្គ . Got all that? Good. On the next page you'll find a diagram of the rhyming structure of the បទព្រហ្មគីតិ :

O O O O O

O O O O O O

O O O O O

O O O O O ។

So what's going on here? Well, first of all, in this type of បទ , every វគ្គ is composed of exactly four ឃ្លា , and every ឃ្លា is composed of either five or six ព្យាង្គ , depending on whether we're talking about the first and third ឃ្លា or the second and fourth ឃ្លា . The fifth ព្យាង្គ of ឃ្លា number one must rhyme with the third ព្យាង្គ of ឃ្លា number two, and so on, down the line. Note also that the final ព្យាង្គ of the fourth ឃ្លា in each វគ្គ must be ឈួន with the sixth ព្យាង្គ of the second ឃ្លា of the next វគ្គ .

1   2   3   4   **5**
ពាក្យចាស់ពាក្យពីរ**ព្រង**

1   2   **3**   4   5   **6**
ទាសខ្លួន**ងង**មើលពុំ**យល់**

1   2   3   4   **5**
ទាសគេតួចសោត**សល់**

1 2   **3**   4   5   **6**
រមិល**យល់**ប៉ុននឹង**ភ្នំ**   ។

1   2   3   4   **5**
ចូលព្រៃស្តូចសា**ហារ**

1 2   **3**   4   5   **6**
ករវំ**ពារ**គ្មាមក**ដុំ**

1   2   3   4   **5**
បានស្ករនិងទឹក**ប្រុំ**

1   2   **3**   4   5   **6**
ពូនក្នុង**ផ្ទះ**ធ្វើម្នាក់**ឯង**   ។

I'll bet you're thinking, "who came *up* with this stuff?!" I told you this was complex. Once you've sort of got your mind around how it works in the diagram, look at how it plays out with real live words (right side of the previous page).

What you're seeing there are the first two វគ្គ of the ឆ្បាប់ពាក្យចាស់ . We'll look at a few more stanzas on the next page. For now, don't worry about the meaning of the two stanzas on the previous page (although you should be able to figure out most of it with no problem). Just be concerned with understanding how the words fit into the rhyming structure that's outlined in the diagram. That is, find all those rhymes! Since each syllable is numbered, the arrows are in place and the rhyming syllables are color–coded, that shouldn't be too difficult.

Notice that in these two stanzas we have examples of several kinds of ចុងច្បូន . There are a couple "cheater rhymes" there. There are several rhymes where the written vowel symbol of each ព្យាង្គ is the same but the two don't *sound* alike, due to first vs. second series differences. And some of the ចុងច្បូន is of the "normal" type of rhyming that we're used to. Now, here's your assignment. Read the two stanzas on the previous page out loud to yourself, and make sure you can locate each instance of ព្យាង្គចុងច្បូន , and that you can justify (given the rules of Khmer rhyming explained earlier) *why* they're ចុងច្បូន . This is important, so spend some time on this. When you're done, turn to the next page, where you'll find not only our first two "sample វគ្គ " from the previous page but several more វគ្គ from this work. Listen to your Course Audio CD, Track 39, Disk # 2 as you read, so you can get a feel for how the ឆ្បាប់ are traditionally performed.

ច្បាប់ពាក្យចាស់

ពាក្យចាស់ពាក្យពីព្រេង	ទោសខ្លួនឯងមើលពុំយល់
ទោសគេតូចសោតសល់	រមិលយល់ប៉ុននឹងភ្នំ ។ ១
ចូលព្រៃគូសាហារវ	ករអំពាវគ្នាមកជុំ
បានសូរនឹងទឹកឃ្មុំ	ពូនក្នុងផ្ទះនឹម្ដាក់ឯង ។ ២
បានហើយចង់បានទៀត	ឆ្លៀតហើយឆ្លៀតពុំគិតឈ្មេង
មើលយល់តែមុខឯង	មិនមើលគេងទៀតផង ។ ៣
នឹងនីចងពិសា	ខ្លិលទំពាឱ្យរម្ងដ្បហ្ងង
យល់នាមថាជាមង	យល់ឯជងថាជាគួយ ។ ៤
យល់គាថាជាដូន	យល់ឯកូនថាជាក្អួយ
យល់ពីរថាជាមួយ	យល់ឯញ្ជួយថាជាសុខ ។ ៥
យល់ទោសថាជាគុណ	យល់ឯបុណ្យថាជាបាប
យល់ល្អថាអាក្រក់	យល់លាមកថាជាផ្កា ។ ៦
ស្ងៀកស្ងៀងមិនការសក់	ឆ្លុះកញ្ចក់ធ្មេចនេត្រា
យើញសេះថាជាលា	យើញគជាថាកណ្ដុរ ។ ៧