

Khmer of a female term in linked pairs signifying a sexually contrasted couple.³ This occurs above all in *me pa* or *mday aupuk* "mother-father", i.e. "parents", and in the apparently associated term *meba*, referring to a male intermediary in marriage negotiations, an elderly man who acts as the representative of the girl's family.⁴ The fact that the female component precedes the male in these terms is claimed to suggest the greater importance of women over men in traditional Cambodia and hence a matrilineal or "matriarchal" bias in social organization.

Such linked pairs have been a common feature of the Khmer language throughout its history,⁵ and of many Southeast Asian languages. An initial objection in respect of the present hypothesis is Jenner's observation that in Old Khmer especially – the period we are most concerned with – the elements of these linked pairs were not of equivalent status but differently valued, the initial element being subordinate, the succeeding element superordinate.⁶ This directly contradicts the argument that priority of position denotes a higher status.

Comparative ethnography also contradicts this hypothesis, since similar situations arise in societies without matrilineal descent. A recent book by Needham (1987) details something very similar in the domain of Mamboru, on the island of Sumba, Indonesia. Here, the following linked pairs are recorded: *ina ama* (lit. "mother-father", i.e. "parents"); *ina sanggula ama sanganji* (lit. "mother eminence-father ruler", i.e. "governor-king"); *layia yera* "wife takers-wife givers"; and Ina Kalada Ama Kalada (lit. "great mother-great father", or "paired aspects of the same spirit"). In all these cases the subordinate category precedes the superior, as in Khmer – yet in Mamboru there are patrilineal descent groups and patrilineal succession to office. This does not exhaust the instances of similarly arranged linked pairs in societies with patrilineal descent. For example, there are in Indo-Aryan and Dravidian pairs like *maa + baap* "mother and father" (in more formal speech *maataa + pitaa*) (Zide and Zide forthcoming); and Mundari, an Indian language distantly related to Khmer and other Mon-Khmer languages through Austroasiatic, has *enga-apu* with the same gloss (Munda 1976: 847, 865). Still more closely related to Khmer is the Mon language of Lower Burma and central Thailand. To quote Shorto, "Mon habitually names the female part before the male except in the marital relationship...", e.g. "sister-brother", "aunt-uncle" – and the Mon have patrilineal descent and bilateral inheritance.⁷

³ See, for example, Pannetier 1921: 125–6; Verneau and Pannetier 1921: 315; Malleret 1941: 175; Leroi-Gourhan and Poirier 1953: 600, 602.

⁴ See Martini 1951: 202; 1962: 165; Porée-Maspero *et al.* 1958: 49; Nou and Nou 1973: 263 n. 1.

⁵ E.g. *cweeng-sdam* 'left-right', *wiitel-pnum* 'lowlands-highlands', *sèeb-kuu* 'odd-even', *cii dōon-cii taa* 'grand-mother-grandfather' (Jenner 1976). The Chinese traveller Ma Tuan-lin referred to the first of these oppositions in the thirteenth century: 'They regard the right hand as pure and the left hand as impure' (quoted in Coedès 1948: 129).

⁶ Jenner *ibid.* His examination resembles the Hertzian studies of the collection Right & Left (Needham 1973), though he mentions neither it nor Hertz in his article.

⁷ Shorto 1956: 347–8; Foster 1972: 27; 1973: 208. Many similar examples could be cited from Indonesian ethnography in particular, regardless of descent mode.