

Appropriateness in Khmu Culture

SUWILAI Preamsirat

Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development
Mahidol University, THAILAND

1. Introduction

Effective communication in a community is determined by the ability of the speaker to use the community's accepted forms of speech. From my experience working in rural societies of ethnic minorities, especially with Mon-Khmer speaking people, I have observed that the first thing one must learn in order to live in the community is the appropriate use of the address terms for different people in the community. The inappropriate use of address terms is considered to be impolite or even rude. Appropriateness in this context is normally referred to as *politeness* in Western urban society, but for the rural society and most Southeast Asian societies, I prefer to use the term *appropriateness*. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the address system and its related components in order to identify how appropriateness or politeness is expressed in the culture of Khmu speakers.

2. Khmu language

Khmu is a Mon-Khmer language that is spoken widely in northern Southeast Asia (SEA). Khmu speakers live in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China, and they are also believed to live in Burma. The Khmu population totals more than 500,000 speakers. Although various aspects of the Khmu culture and language found in different areas are generally the same, nonetheless, we do observe some phonological, lexical, and cultural variations. The data presented here are based mainly on the Khmu dialect as it is spoken in Yunnan province of southwest China. I recently studied this variety of Khmu as part of the larger research project on the Thesaurus of Khmu dialects in SEA.

3. Khmu kinship system

The kinship system forms the basis of Khmu society. To understand the address system in Khmu culture, one must first investigate the kinship system because the social values reflected in the use of the Khmu address

terms are based on the kinship system. Figures showing kinship terms for kin in different generations are presented below. Both male and female ego are presented in the charts because some of the terms for male and female kin are different. Following the figures are the corresponding tables in which are listed the Khmu kinship terms and their corresponding English glosses.

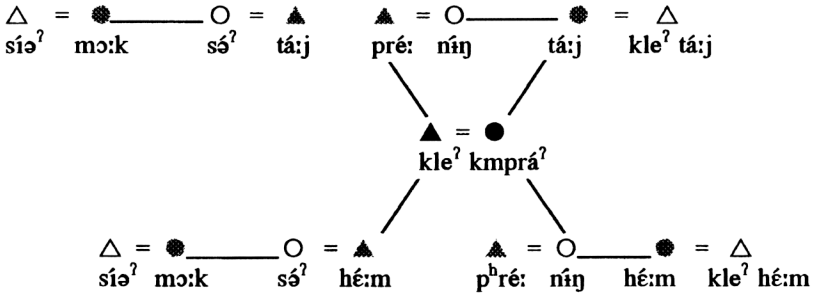


Figure 1. Representation of kin relations for the same generation as ego.

Table 1. Terms for kinship relations of the same generation as ego.

kle [?]	'husband'
kmpra [?]	'wife'
tá:j	'male ego's elder brother and female ego's elder sister'
sá [?]	'male ego's brother's wife'
hé:m	'male ego's younger brother and female ego's younger sister'
mɔ:k	'male ego's sister'
sía [?]	'male ego's sister's husband'
p ^h ré:	'female ego's brother'
nínj	'female ego's brother's wife'
hé:m	'female ego's younger sister; female ego's sister's husband'

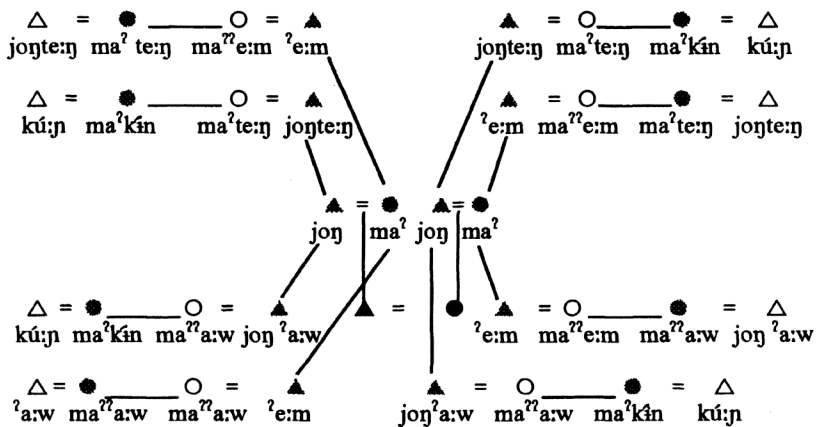


Figure 2. Representation of kin relations for the first ascending generation.

Table 2. Terms for kinship relations of the first ascending generation.

jon̄	'father'
ma²	'mother'
jon̄ te:ŋ	'father's elder brother and mother's elder sister's husband'
ma² te:ŋ	'mother's elder sister and father's elder brother's wife'
ma² k̄n	'father's sister'
jon̄ kú:ŋ	'father's sister's husband'
jon̄ ²a:w	'father's younger brother and mother's younger sister's husband'
ma² ²a:w	'mother's younger sister and father's younger brother's wife'
jon̄ ²e:m	'mother's brother'
ma² ²e:m	'mother's brother's wife'

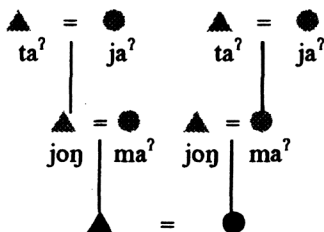


Figure 3. Representation of kin relations for the second ascending generation.

Table 3. Terms for kinship relations of the second ascending generation.

joŋ	‘father’
ma [?]	‘mother’
ta [?]	‘grandfather’
ja [?]	‘grandmother’

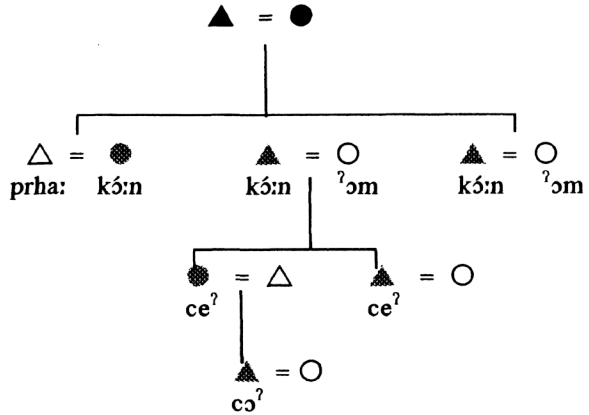


Figure 4. Representation of kinship relations for first, second, and third descending generations.

Table 4. Terms for kinship relations of first, second, and third descending generations.

kó:n	‘children’
prha:	‘son-in-law’
?om	‘daughter-in-law’
ce [?]	‘grandchild’
cɔ [?]	‘great grandchild’

The Khmu family is a nuclear one. After marriage, the man will normally stay with his wife’s parents for about one year before building a house for his own family. However, Khmu society is patrilineal. The children’s totem follows the father’s totem. Men are normally responsible for organizing and leading the major ceremonies in Khmu life, such as the healing ceremonies, spirit restoration, and rice planting or rice harvesting ceremonies. Both men and women look after the house, raise children, work in the field, and fish. Women take care of getting water, pounding paddy rice for cooking, and cutting firewood for household use. In addition, women exclusively make mats, pillows and some musical instruments from bamboo, such as the *thór* or *da:w da:w*. Men hunt, make traps and various kinds of baskets, such as the *jáy*, *sapuŋ*, and *kluáj*, and also musical instruments, such as the *pi:*, *sú:l*, *ró:ŋ*, etc.

The Khmu kinship system clearly differentiates sex. A sibling of the same sex as ego is referred to by words that distinguish age differences, such as *tá:j* ‘elder sibling’ and *hé:m* ‘younger sibling’, and the sibling whose sex is different from ego is addressed by special terms, viz., *p^hré:* ‘female ego’s brother’ and *mɔ:k* ‘male ego’s sister’. In Khmu culture the marriage of *p^hré:*’s daughter and *mɔ:k*’s son is permissible and is considered ideal. But parallel cousin marriage is not permitted, that is, a woman can not marry the son of her mother’s brother and the man cannot marry the daughter of his father’s sister. It is considered to be incest because ego has the same role and function as his own same-sex parent. Sex distinctions are also made in kinship terms for other generations; in the ascending generations, the distinction is made between *joy* ‘father’, *ma[?]* ‘mother’, *joy te:ŋ* ‘father’s brother’ and *ma[?] te:ŋ* ‘father’s brother’s wife’, *ta[?]* ‘grandfather’ and *ja[?]* ‘grandmother’, etc.

Age differences are also important in Khmu culture. Lineal kin of different generations normally have different terms as shown in some of the following examples:

Table 5. Age differences are coded in kin terms for differences generations.

1 st ascending generation	<i>joy, ma[?]</i>	‘parents’
2 nd ascending generation	<i>ta[?], ta[?]</i>	‘grandparents’
1 st descending generation	<i>kɔ:n</i>	‘child’
2 nd descending generation	<i>ce[?]</i>	‘grandchild’
3 rd descending generation	<i>cɔ[?]</i>	‘great grandchild’
	etc.	

Kin of the same generation are also distinguished by age difference as in the examples give in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Age differences are coded in kin terms of same generation.

ego’s generation	<i>tá:j</i>	‘elder sibling’
	<i>hé:m</i>	‘younger sibling of the same sex of ego’
1 st ascending generation	<i>joy te:ŋ</i>	‘father’s elder brother or mother’s elder sister’s husband’
	<i>joy[?] a:w</i>	‘father’s younger brother or mother’s younger sister’s husband’

Consanguineal and affinal kin are also distinguished in kinship terms as shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Distinction between consanguineal and affinal kin.

ego's generation	<i>pré:</i>	'female ego's brother'	-	<i>níŋ</i>	'female ego's brother's wife'
	<i>mɔ:k</i>	'male ego's sister'	-	<i>síə[?]</i>	'male ego's sister's husband'
1 st ascending generation	<i>joŋ[?]a:rɯ</i>	'father's younger brother'	-	<i>ma[?]hɛ:m</i> or <i>ma[?]a:rɯ</i>	'father's younger brother's wife'
	<i>ma kîn</i>	'father's sister'	-	<i>joŋ kú:ŋ</i>	'father's sister's husband'
1 st descending generation	<i>kɔ:n</i>	'son or daughter'	-	<i>ʔom</i>	'daughter-in-law', and <i>prha:</i> 'son-in-law'

The paternal and maternal kin relations are also distinguished as indicated in the list of terms in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Distinction between paternal and maternal kin.

'father's elder brother'	<i>joŋ te:ŋ</i>
'father's younger brother'	<i>joŋ[?]a:rɯ</i>
'mother's brother (elder and younger)'	<i>joŋ[?]e:m</i>
'father's sister's husband'	<i>joŋ kú:ŋ</i>
'mother's elder sister'	<i>ma[?]te:ŋ</i>
'father's sister (elder and younger)'	<i>ma[?]kîn</i>

Khmu society places importance on sex, age, consanguineal/affinal and maternal/paternal differences. People who are related as kin are therefore distinguished by these kinship features. Furthermore, their social roles, functions and patterns of behaviour in interacting with one another are expected to be different.

4. Khmu address system

Address terms refer to the terms we use to address or call the attention of the person we want to talk to. They typically preface the sentence. The choice of address terms normally reflects the speaker's idea or feeling about the person to be addressed. Therefore, appropriateness is reflected clearly in

the use of address terms. The following example sentence represents the position of address terms in Khmu syntax. The word *ma*[?] is the address term for the speaker's mother, whereas the pronoun *pa:* is the subject of the sentence. However the subject in Khmu can sometime be deleted, so the address term looks very much like the subject of the sentence.

<i>ma</i> [?]	<i>pa:</i>	<i>ce</i>	<i>jəh</i>	<i>məh</i>
Mother	you (f.)	will	go	where
"Mother, where are you going?"				

4.1 Address terms for kin

4.1.1 Address terms based on kinship terms

In the rural society of the Khmu people kinship lies at the heart of the Khmu social system. The majority of the address terms are based on kinship terms. Table 9 below lists terms for lineal kin in the ascending generation which are normally used as address terms.

Table 9. Lineal kinship terms are used as address terms.

<i>jəŋ</i>	'father'
<i>ma</i> [?]	'mother'
<i>ta</i> [?]	'parent's father'
<i>ja</i> [?]	'parent's mother'
<i>kɔ:n</i>	'child'
<i>ce</i> [?]	'grandchild'
<i>cɔ</i> [?]	'great grandchild'

The terms designating collateral kin of parental siblings are also used as address terms as indicated in Table 10 below.

Table 10. Collateral kinship terms of parental sibling used as address terms.

<i>jəŋ te:ŋ</i>	'father's elder brother or mother's elder sister's husband'
<i>ma</i> [?] <i>te:ŋ</i>	'mother's elder sister or father's elder brother's wife'
<i>jəŋ</i> [?] <i>e:m</i>	'mother's brother'
<i>ma</i> [?] <i>kɪn</i>	'father's sister'
<i>jəŋ ku:ŋ</i>	'father's sister's husband'
<i>jəŋ</i> [?] <i>a:w</i>	'father's younger brother or mother's younger sister's husband'
<i>ma</i> [?] <i>a:w</i>	'mother's younger sister's or father's younger brother's wife'

There are also terms used for addressing affinal kin as indicated in Table 11 below.

Table 11. Address terms for affinal kin.

<i>nɨŋ</i>	'female ego's brother's wife'
<i>siəʔ</i>	'male ego's sister's husband or wife's brother'
<i>pə:j</i> or <i>səʔ</i>	'male ego's brother's wife or wife's sister'
	etc.

4.1.2 Kinship-based and non-kinship-based address terms.

The Khmu language makes use of address terms that are not based on kinship terms, as well as some that are based partially on kinship terms. This is clearly seen when ego addresses kin of the same generation as ego. The address terms for the husband and wife before and after having a child are different. Before having a child the husband is addressed by his wife as *kə:kəniʔ* <he-this one>; and the wife is addressed by her husband as *na:kəniʔ* <she-this one>. However, when they have a child the husband is addressed as *joŋ Khan* <father + the first child's name> 'Khan's father' and the wife is addressed as *maʔ Khan* <mother + the first child's name> 'Khan's mother'. The address terms for ego's siblings who have been married and have a child are not the same as when they have not yet married or have not yet had a child. When they have married and have a child, the kinship terms for ego's siblings are changed to kinship terms for parental sibling, except that the word *maʔ* 'mother' or *joŋ* 'father' is added before the word, for example, *joŋ te:ŋ*, *maʔ te:ŋ*, *joŋ ʔa:w*, *maʔ ʔa:w*. The address terms for ego's siblings do not normally have these forms, that is, ego's siblings are addressed as *te:ŋ*, *ʔa:w*, *ʔe:m*. However, when sex has to be differentiated, *maʔ* and *joŋ* can also be added. This is to show respect and to teach their children how to address relatives who require their respect. The following charts present the address terms for kin of the same generation as ego before and after having a child.

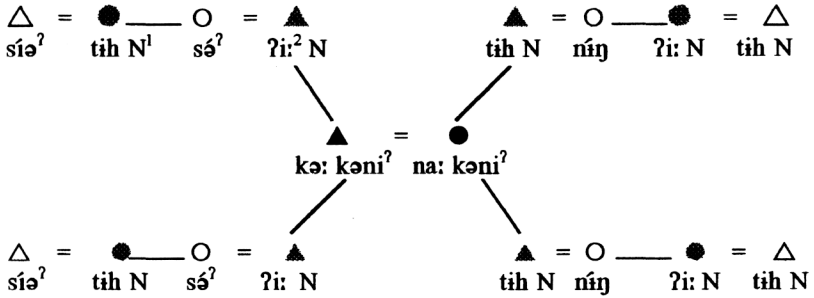


Figure 5. Representation of address terms for kin of same generation as ego before having a child.

Table 12. Address terms for kin of same generation as ego before having a child.

kə: kəniʔ	'husband'
na: kəniʔ	'wife'
ʔi: N	'ego's sister'
tih N	'ego's brother'
síaʔ	'male ego's sister's husband'
sáʔ, pə:j	'male ego's brother's wife'
níŋ	'female ego's brother wife'
ʔi: N =	female marker + name
tih N =	male marker + name

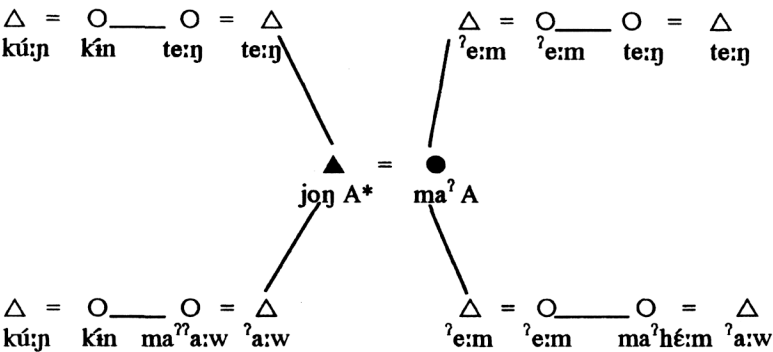


Figure 6. Representation of address terms for kin of same generation as ego after having a child.

¹N = a person marker
 ²ʔi: = female marker
 ³tih = male marker

Table 13. Address terms for kin of same generation as ego after having a child.

joŋ A*	‘husband (father + the first child’s name)
ma [?] A	‘wife (mother + the first child’s name)
te:ŋ	‘ego male’s elder brother and his wife’
	‘ego female’s elder sister and her husband’
kin	‘ego male’s sister’
kú:n	‘ego male’s sister’s husband’
?a:w	‘male ego’s younger brother or mother’s sister’s husband’
?e:m	‘female ego’s brother and his wife’
ma [?] hé:m	‘female ego’s sister’
	([?] A = first child’s name)

The following examples are terms used for addressing kin of the same generation that are not directly based on the proper kin relation but use the higher level of kin relation. The address terms for ego’s siblings are the same as those for the parental sibling. This is one of the reasons why the Khmu address system looks so complicated.

Table 14. Address terms for kin of same generation based on higher level of kin relation.

Kinship relation	Address term
ph [?] e: ‘female’s brother’	?e:m ‘mother’s brother’
níŋ ‘female’s brother’s wife’	?e:m ‘mother’s brother’s wife’
mə:k ‘male ego’s sister’	kin ‘father’s sister’
tá:j ‘male ego’s elder brother’	te:ŋ ‘father’s elder brother’
hé:m ‘male ego’s younger brother’	?a:w ‘father’s younger brother’

etc.

It is obvious that in addressing younger kin the person’s name is normally used. For those who are not so young the word *ma[?]* ‘mother’ or *joŋ* ‘father’ is used with the name, e.g., *ma[?] Se:ŋ* (mother + Name), *joŋ Lue* (father + Name). The most popular and appropriate address terms for a married kin is *ma[?]* or *joŋ* plus the name of the first child, e.g., *ma[?] ?i: Ke:ŋ* (mother + the first child’s name [daughter]), *joŋ Haŋ* (father + the first child’s name [son]). For older kin use of the name is not permitted in the address term.

4.2 Address terms for non-kin

The address terms used for kin are also extensively used with non-kin in the village and also with outsiders or visitors. Not only are kin expected to use the appropriately address terms for kin, but non-kin and outsiders are also expected to address the people in the village in the appropriate way.

We can state five general rules for addressing people who are not kin and are outsiders to the Khmu culture as follows:

1. People with administrative position are addressed by the name of his position:

joŋ kúŋ or *chun ca:ŋ* 'village headman'

2. People with special occupations are addressed by the occupation title:

khu: 'teacher'

mɔ: 'doctor'

3. Elderly people are addressed with kin terms:

táʔ 'grandfather'

jaʔ 'grandmother'

4. Older people are also addressed with kin terms:

maʔ te:ŋ 'aunt'

joŋ te:ŋ 'uncle (older)'

joŋ ʔ a:rw 'uncle (younger)'

5. Younger people are addressed with sex markers and their names:

Thaw/ ʔi: Thaw (female marker + Name)

maʔ ʔi: Ke:ŋ (mother + the first child's Name)

joŋ Haŋ (father + the first child's Name)

hé:m or *maʔ hé:m* (younger sibling)

pə:j (a female relative)

siəʔ (a male relative)

ʔi: Khan (female marker + Name)

kɔ:n jɛʔ (children)

kɔ:n (child)

The Khmu people address the writer as *maʔ te:ŋ* and address my assistant who is in her late thirties as *maʔ* or *maʔ hé:m*.

The soft intonation is considered to be the polite way of speaking. The use of final particle *o:* also shows politeness in Khmu culture as in the examples shown below:

A: *pa: kɔ: cuʔ teʔ kmú:l* 'Do you want to take some money?'

B: *cuʔ teʔ o:* 'Yes, very much'

A:	<i>pa: kɔ: ʔah kɔ:n</i>	‘Do you have children?’
B:	<i>ʔah o:</i>	‘Yes, I have children’

The use of expressions in greetings and leave-taking are considered to be appropriate communication in the Khmu community. The following are representative examples:

Greeting:	<i>yat ləʔ / sam ʔba:j ləʔ</i>	‘How are you?’
	<i>jɔh máh</i>	‘Where are you going?’
	<i>ʔəh máh</i>	‘What are you doing?’
Leave-taking:	<i>jat ləʔləʔ ʔoʔ ce jɔh ʔám</i>	‘Have a good life, I am leaving now’
	<i>jat ləʔ mah lam</i>	‘Have a good life’

5. Conclusion

The use of appropriate address terms, the soft intonation, final particle *o:*, and appropriate expressions for greeting and leave-taking are very basic ways for expressing politeness in the Khmu culture. From my fieldwork experiences among peoples speaking Mon-Khmer languages, for example, the Nyah Kur, the Chong and the Khmer, I have observed that most of them value the same features of appropriateness in their cultures. This system of appropriateness is typical for rural societies speaking Southeast Asian languages. This paper has demonstrated that the study of the kinship address system for one such language group can tell us a great deal about the organization of the social system and the society’s norms of politeness.

Key to Symbols:

△	male
○	female
=	to marry
_____	and
	children
black color ▲ or ●	male or female ego
▲ or ●	ego’s male or female sibling

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Institute of Language and Culture
for Rural Development, Mahidol University,
Salaya, Nakhon pathom 73170
Thailand
<lcspm@mahidol.ac.th>