



## Krom Ngoy (ក្រុម ង៉ុយ) (1865-1936), *The Father of Khmer Poetry*

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**Krom Ngoy** was born Ouk Ou but is known as "Phirum Ngoy" or "Ngoy the language master". His poetry takes the form of rhyming "Chapei" songs which are recited to the accompaniment of the "**Ksedeav**", a **Cambodian** lute. The effect is mesmerising.

He usually performed "Chapei" at various religious ceremonies and festivals. Considered the unrivalled father of Khmer poetry, his poems are concerned with moral issues and teach people about life, culture, arts, literature and Cambodian nationalism. Themes and issues include: farming life, the ethics of Khmer traditional marriage life, poverty and its causes, the lack of education and the illiteracy of the Khmer people, divisions and conflicts in the Cambodian society, repression and oppression of the Khmer people by foreign powers, the lack of Khmer independence, and the survival of Khmer culture and Khmer literature as a whole.

Most, if not all, of his poems have been used as guides by many parents and school teachers to teach children about Khmer traditions and culture. Krom Ngoy's songs or religious chants always described about the current issues of his time.

## Publications

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Because most of his work was never written on paper, only a few of his masterpieces have been published, all by the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. These include:

1. *Chbab Laboek Thmey* (1922), *The Law of the New Prose*- a ballad of four rhyming words
2. *Chbab Kekal Thmey* (1922), *The Law of the New Inheritance*- a poem of four, five and six rhyming words
3. *The Advice on Life*, (1931) - a poem of seven rhyming words
4. *Chbab Bross Chbab Srey, The Law for Men and Women* (publication date unknown) - a poem of seven

rhyiming words 5. *Bandam Krom Ngoy*" (publication date unknown), "*Krom Ngoy's Will* - a poem of seven rhyiming words.

Only two other Khmer poets, Suttantaprija Ind[1] and Santhor Mok, come close to the calibre of Krom Ngoy. His many prose and poems include "The Law for Men and Women" and "Krom Ngoy's Will", iconic works that deserve to be remembered and studied for generations to come.

## Krom Ngoy (1865-1936), Family Lineage(1)

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Krom Ngoy was born in the Christian era of 1865, or the Buddhist era of 2408, in Andong Svay village, Kombol commune, Phnom Penh district, Kandal province. His father, Ouk, was the chief of Kombol commune who was given the royal title of Chao Ponhea Dharma Thearea ( a royal title for the commune chief during the 19th century). Chao Ponhea Ouk had a family lineage with the Lord Poc who was a descendant of Chaova (Lord) Baen, whose descendants ruled as the lord-governors of Batambang province from 1796 until 1907. His mother's name was leng who was a daughter of Chao Ponhea Poc, the chief of Spean Thmor commune of the same Phnom Penh district. Both his father and mother were the second children in their respective family.

Phirum Ngoy was married to Mrs. In and had six sons. They are 1. Dong, 2. Cheng, 3. Cha, 4. Chen, 5. Chong and, 6. Chev. Among his six sons there was one son who inherited his poetry skills. Chong, the sixth son, had a poetry skills that rivalled his father and was respectfully called Achar Chong by many who knew him (Achar meaning "a learned man"). Phirum Ngoy had one grandson who inherited his poetry skills and became the Ayai singer (Ayai is another form of a duet poetry song performance, often between a man and a woman throwing sarcastic comments at each other while they sing). It was said that this grandson had a very thin build so people who knew him well affectionately nicknamed him Neay Sloek (Mr. Leaf) because he was as thin as a leaf. And when he sang the Ayai song he always introduced himself in this eloquent fashion: "My birth village is located west of Pochentong and I am the son of Achar Chong and the grandson of Achar Ngoy".

Phirum Ngoy passed away on Friday, the sixth day of the Moonrise in the Lunar calendar, the 12th month of the Buddhist era of 2479, the Christian era of 1936, at the age of 71 years old, due to constipation.

## Krom Ngoy's Education

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When Krom Ngoy was a young boy he studied arithmetic and literature at Boeng Chork Temple in Baek Skor village, Baek Chan commune, in his native district. He excelled in literature and poetry. Krom Ngoy was a very studious child. During his childhood he had been ordained as a Buddhist novice in the village temple. After a few years spent as a novice he left a monastic life in order to help his parents in the farm. He also served as a secretary to his father and as a tax collector for the royal treasury. At 21 years of age he was once again ordained, this time as a senior monk, in his old temple under the guidance of Mr. Sass, Venerable Chrouk and Venerable Oung as his religious teachers. Venerable Krom Ngoy learned about the Buddhist teachings, the Pali language and learned how to translate the Buddhist Scripture, The Tripitaka, first under the guidance of Venerable Tith, a high priest of Ang Boeng Chork Temple. After he gained enough knowledge he changed course and went to practise Vipassana (meditation) with many religious teachers in various places. This time he remained in the monkhood for 5 years. After obtaining enough religious knowledge he decided to leave the monkhood and become a lay-person. He then returned to work for his father as both his legal advisor and as his secretary. When Cambodia was facing economic strife and political turmoil he quit his government job and returned to the life of an ordinary farmer.

Krom Ngoy was a talented poet who has the ability to remember many ancient stories, both religious and non-religious. The villagers, who were hypnotised by his poetic Chapei songs, considered him as a scholar. They often called him “Phirum Ngoy”, Ngoy the language master. Krom Ngoy, was a big man with firm build and bulging belly who liked to have his hair cut short and growing his moustache. He often wore a Chorng Kben skirt (a kind of Cambodian traditional skirt), wore a round-necked shirt with big buttons, wore thongs and wore a bird’s nest-like hat. Like many of his contemporaries of that time, he often bring his walking stick with him and carrying his bag hanging from his shoulder wherever he went. When he sang his Chapei songs he always play the Ksedev (guitar-like instrument) along as well. His Ksedev was unique. It can be disassemble at any time and re-assemble as quickly as possible when he needed to play it. It was made from a gourd shell and his walking stick. It was said that when he needed to sing his Chapei songs he will take out a gourd shell from his bag, joined it with his walking stick, attached the strings from the gourd shell to one end of his walking stick to build an instant guitar that will produce a very nice sound.

It was said that, in Winter, after he finished with his farm works, he was always invited by villagers from near and afar to sing or chant for their festivals or ceremonial events. There were claims that he never charged the people for his performances. And because they loved him and his performances they always collected the money and the rice from the villagers to give to him. Whenever he travelled somewhere through Phnom Penh he

always stayed at the Ounnalom Temple, which was the headquarter of the Cambodian Buddhist Patriarch, in order to use the opportunity to discuss about various religious issues with the senior Buddhist monks there.

## Becoming a Royal Singer

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Krom Ngoy's reputation as a talented poet has spread to the king of Cambodia. His Majesty King Sisowath instructed his court officials to invite Krom Ngoy to come to sing for him in the Royal Palace. Krom Ngoy had performed numerous times for ordinary folks. But this is the first time in his life that he comes to perform for the Khmer king. He was not sure how his performances will impress the king or will they bore the king. However, during his Chapei performances at the royal palace he impressed the king with his eloquent and poetic Chapei songs. Impressed by Krom Ngoy's Chapei performances, King Sisowath invited Ngoy to join the Royal Band and presented him with the royal title of "Phirum Ou (Ou, the language master)", Ou being his birth name. But because there was someone in the Royal Band who was named Ou already His Majesty instructed everyone to call him "Ngoy" instead, so as not to be confused with the other Ou. Since then he was called Ngoy or Krom Ngoy (Ngoy, the expert).

## Performing for the Thai King

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Ngoy's reputation as a skilful poetry singer was not confined in within Cambodia alone. His reputation has rapidly spread to the Kingdom of Thailand as well. By chance or by pre-arrangement, one day the Siamese prince named Dhamrong Rajanubharp and a French man named (Georges?) Coedes had an audience with King Sisowath. During the musical performances for the two foreign guests in the royal palace Krom Ngoy had outperformed the other musicians with his Chapei songs by playing the Ksedeav along. He had captivated the Thai prince's imaginations with his poetry skills. The Siamese prince, upon his return to Thailand informed the Thai king of Krom Ngoy's hypnotising Chapei performances. The Thai King then sent a royal letter to the Khmer King asking for a royal permission to invite Krom Ngoy to sing for him in Bangkok. Krom Ngoy went to perform in Thailand for three months and received a cordial royal reception from the Thai King and his officials. Krom Ngoy again impressed the Thai king with his poetic Chapei songs. After many performances in the Thai royal palace, the Thai King then presented him with a title as a master of the "phai roh leou kern" (the master of the melodious voice). The Thai king's gesture was unprecedented as no other Khmer had ever received such title before. The Thai King also presented him with silver buttons, money and other paraphernalia for his brilliant poetry singings.

After the performances for the Thai king, Krom Ngoy returned to Cambodia through Battambang and he met another skilful poetry singer named Phirum Yu, Yu the language master. Phirum Yu had heard that Phirum Ngoy was a skilful poetry singer so he asked Phirum Ngoy for a duet. During the duet Phirum Ngoy outperformed and outsmarted Phirum Yu with his poetry skills. In the song Phirum Yu asked Phirum Ngoy many questions about Meru Mountain. Not to be outsmarted by Phirum Yu, Phirum Ngoy replied “if you are so curious like this, do you want me to tell you the truth or do you want me to lie?” Phirum Yu retorted that “I asked in a bona fide therefore you, Phirum Ngoy, must answer in bona fide“. Phirum Ngoy answered Phirum Yu’s questions by describing about Mount Meru in his masterly poetry form and sarcastically retorted that if Phirun Yu did not believe him he must go and see it for himself.

Phirum Yu accepted Phirum Ngoy’s answers. Now, it’s Phirum Ngoy’s turn to ask Phirum Yu. Phirum Ngoy asked Phirum Yu “ how far is Battambang Market from Phnom Penh if one travels by road? And how many kilometres if one travels by way of Tonle Sap river?” Phirum Yu cannot answer Phirum Ngoy’s questions. Phirum Ngoy then sang by throwing critical sarcastic comments at Phirum Yu that “a place and a country where you used to live, you cannot answer me. And you asked me a place where I had never been to. Even if I lied to you, you wouldn’t know if I lied or not.” Phirum Ngoy continued to throw critical sarcastic comments at Phirum Yu until he felt so embarrassed and walked off the stage. The audience enjoyed the poetic exchanges and cheered for Phirum Ngoy when Phirum Yu walked off the stage. After the poetic exchanges, the governor of Battambang presented Phirum Ngoy with winning trophies of one white horse and 400 riels in cash (a huge sum at that time). Since then many prose singers were afraid to sing in a competition with him. Only a village chief named Sann of Pleung Chhess Rotess commune, Phnom Penh district, who was his very good friend and his usual duet, who can face up to his poetic skills. He and his friend always went to sing in a duet together. Wherever these two went to sing people, old and young, from near and afar came in their big crowd to listen to them sing.

For a while, after his return from Thailand, Mr. (Georges?) Coedes introduced Phirum Ngoy to Miss Suzanne Karpeles, who was the director of the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. In 1930 Miss Suzanne Karpeles invited Phirum Ngoy to sing all his poetry songs again so that the scholars at the Buddhist Institute can record and publish his works in books. As a reward Miss Karpeles gave Phirum Ngoy 1 riels in cash as a token and symbol of his love for, and service to, the Khmer culture and literature. His poetry masterpieces were then published into four books and later combined them into only one book by the Buddhist Institute.

Phirm Ngoy had written many poems, far more than were published by the Buddhist Institute because all of his poems and poetry songs were verbally authored and memorised and were never written on papers.

## Krom Ngoy's Legacy

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Krom Ngoy had authored many unpublished literary works. Up until these days many of his literary works were still not been properly documented and archived yet. As a result, many of his works were lost. For example, many of past literary works were hand-copied from one person to another and the authors' names were omitted. As a result, there were many other literary works by unnamed Cambodian past writers, which were discovered by later day scholars, were not attributed to any writers . The titles such as The Gratitude, The Three Attributes, The Law for Men and Women were published anonymously. Later days scholars were unable to determine who the authors were. But after some research and comparisons, they considered those literary works to be the works of Phirum Ngoy. Krom Ngoy had left many great literary legacy that rivalled the works of many great Western writers. His literary works, which often described, and aimed at educating people, about ethics and moral issues, were used as manuals to guide many Khmer families and parents in teaching their children about life and moral issues. Many of his literary works were used as texts in many Cambodian schools. His literary works were masterpieces and will be irreplaceable. It is therefore imperative that the next generations do everything possible to preserve his priceless works.

### Source:

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krom\\_Ngoy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krom_Ngoy)