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Proto-Mon-Khmer Vocalism: moving forward from Shorto's 'alternances'

While we have had a century of more-or-less consensus views on the nature of the Proto-Mon-Khmer (PMK) consonant inventory, cries of exasperation have accompanied consideration of PMK vocalism. Writing in the first issue of MKS David Thomas reminded us that "... comparativists have stated flatly that regular sound-laws simply do not exist in Mon-Khmer vowels".

Harry Shorto developed a reconstruction of PMK vocalism which he defended at the 1973 Hawaii Austroasiatic conference, and elaborated in his posthumously published *A Mon-Khmer Comparative Dictionary* (2006). Shorto based his analysis on a binary comparison of Old Mon and Written Khmer, and believed that in the correspondences he could discern a pattern of variation which may have reflected ancient system of vowel gradation. The principal types of variation he postulated were (i) between short and long vowel: *i/ii*, etc.; (ii) between simple vowel and diphthong: *ii/iə*, *uu/uə*; and (iii) between diphthong and *ə* : *iə/ə*, *uə/ə*. In the application of his reconstruction Shorto effectively set up a hierarchy in which, if the correspondences did not unambiguously point to a single proto-value, the presence of a diphthong reflex presumed a long-high proto-vowel (e.g. *iə < *ii*), and the presence of a long-low vowel presumed a proto-diphthong (e.g. *εε < *iə*). This approach greatly skews the reconstruction, making it particularly 'top heavy' (lacking low vowels).

Considering a wider range of cognates from MK languages it is evident that long-low monophthongs actually have a strong tendency to diphthongise within the family, and thus various of the sound-changes reconstructed by Shorto may be reversed in my reanalysis. With illustrative comparisons I will present a revision to the proto-vocalism which reduces the number of hypothetical 'alternances' and offers a more typologically balanced ('natural' ?) vowel distribution.