

NOTES

On the proposed system for the Transliteration of Siamese
words into Roman Characters

BY

HIS MAJESTY THE KING.

1. I am sorry to have to differ with the committee so early in the day as this, but I really cannot see what good it would do to attempt to transliterate say the word “*ภริยา*” phonetically, because I really cannot believe that one *could* do so. According to the committee’s system, (which see), the word “*ภริยา*” would very likely be written “p’anrayā.” This, I submit, would be doubly wrong: in the first place, etymologically: in the second place, *phonetically*. For, in the first place, supposing we came across the word “p’anrayā,” and wanted to transliterate it *back* into Siamese, the way I should do it would be “*ป๋หริยา*”; or, if I knew the meaning of the little twiddly sign denoting the aspirate, “*พ๋หริยา*,” both of which would be simply nonsense; whereas, if the word were written “bharyā” according to the Hunterian system, I should not—and could not—transliterate it any other way but “*ภริยา*,” and I should moreover understand its meaning at once. In the second place, with all respect to the learned members of the committee, I cannot agree with their phonetic transliteration of my language, for no really educated Siamese would pronounce the word “*ภริยา*” as though it were written “*พ๋หริยา*.” The educated ear would detect the difference between the “*หริ*” and the “*ป๋หริ*,” for the “*หริ*” should be pronounced in a slightly slurred manner, wherein the presence of the “*หริ*” would be detected, though to foreign ears, it may sound so slight as to be practically unnoticeable. However, the common people, especially the *women* (and Bangkok women in particular), are notoriously bad pronouncers as a whole, and frequently mispronounce words and “murder the King’s Siamese” in a most cruel manner. Therefore, if such people are to be taken as criterion for the pronunciation of my language, then I pity the poor language most profoundly! It would be just as bad to write English as she is pronounced by the Cockney of the

East End of London, but it would be just as consistent. It would not only be murdering the language, but it would also be like the massacre of a whole race root and branch, so that no one in later days would be able to trace its origin! However, more of this later on.

2. As to the question of local geographical names. I partly agree with the committee, *i. e.*, I agree that the names of places already well-known, or which have acquired international sanction, should be retained to avoid confusion; but of the two names cited, "*Bangkok*" is in my opinion already as correctly transliterated as any name could be, whilst "*Ayuthia*" would be absolutely correct with but the trifling alteration of two letters, *viz.*, "t" into "d" and "i" into "y," thus transforming the name into "*Ayudhya*," which does not look so strange as to be impossible of adoption. Indeed, seeing that the English have already had the courage to change the spelling of several well-known names in India, such for example as "The Punjab" into "*Punjab*," "Cawnpore" into "*Kanpur*," "The Deccan" into "*Dakhan*," I really do not see why we should not have the courage to do the same wherever the change would not prove too confusing.

3. I agree with the committee in deploring the variety of methods adopted for transliterating words of Pali and Sanskrit origin; but frankly, I do not think it any improvement to transliterate "𑖀𑖩𑖪" as "*tep*" instead of "*dhev*," for both are wrong, and two wrongs do not make a right. The committee has ignored the fact that the word "𑖀𑖩𑖪" did not come into Siamese direct from the Pali or Sanskrit, but rather reached us through some already corrupt channel; that is to say, it did not come as "*deva*," but as "*deb*," which is actually the current pronunciation of the word by the modern Indian, who speak what is now comprehensively termed Hindi, or any of the other dialects of modern India. We Siamese were certainly not guilty of changing the original "𑖀𑖩𑖪" into "𑖀𑖩𑖪." This being the case, I for one would never have transliterated "𑖀𑖩𑖪" as "*deva*," but I would certainly write "*deb*" as being the correct transliteration of the word as used in Siamese.

4. I am sorry I cannot bring myself to agree with the idea of phonetic spelling. Even granting that the word "𑖀𑖩" would be better represented by "*Kon*" than "*Kol*"—which I do not agree—I still prefer "*Kol*" as being more in accord with the Siamese spel-

ling of the word. If the word “ กอ ” were pronounced as asserted by the committee, we should have written it “ กอน ” in Siamese ; but that is not the case. The word is written “ กอ ” because *it is so pronounced*, e g., “ กออุบาย, กอศึก, กอไก,” which are actually pronounced “ *Kola-ubái,*” “ *Kolasük,*” and “ *Kolakai*” respectively. It is a mistake to assume that the Siamese cannot pronounce the final “ l ”, because they can and do pronounce it, even in the wrong place sometimes ! The reason why the word “ กอ ” sounds like “ กอน ” to the ear is to be explained by the fact that the Siamese have a careless habit of slurring words and thus clipping the ends, very much in the same manner as the Danes, who for example pronounce the word “ *roed* ” (red) as though it were written “ *roe* ”, the final “ d ” being practically indistinguishable to the ear of foreigners. The Siamese are not so bad pronouncers as that even, and to write “ กอ ” as “ *kon* ” is absolutely misleading, and would lead to regrettable confusion, for the word “ *kon* ” would rather connote “ กอน ” than “ กอ ”, which might have ludicrous and unlooked for results. As to the other example in this paragraph, *i.e.*, the word “ เรว ”, I quite agree with the committee that it would be absurd to write it “ *rew*,” because the “ ว ” in this case is not there as a consonant at all but rather as a *semivowel*, being in this case comparable to the final “ ย ” in “ ไกย ” for example. I am surprised that the learned committee has not noted this here.

5. I still maintain that the phonetic writing of *any* language is impossible, and merely leads to confusion. Mr. Roosevelt’s attempt at simplified spelling created nothing but laughter, and in my opinion *deserved it!* I think, on the whole, that the Chinese are really more sensible in this respect than we are, for they simply employ a certain sign or combination of signs to represent an idea, and each reader pronounces it in his own language. For example, when coming across the ideograph representing flower, the mandarin would read it as “ *wah*,” whilst the Cantonese would read it as “ *hua*,” and each would be right, for each would understand the ideograph to mean exactly the same thing. In the same manner, to write “ *about* ” does not in any way represent the word as pronounced by a Cockney, nor by a Scotsman, and it would be absurd to write it as “ *abakt* ” in London and

“*aboot*” in Scotland! “*About*” is therefore only a *conventional* way of writing the word, not a phonetic one, as far as the Cockney and the Scotsman are concerned. Besides this, to still confine myself to the English language, even the English themselves show a tendency to be careless in pronouncing their own language, so that one often notices them pronouncing “shooting” as “*shootin*,” and so on; worse still, “er” is often substituted for the sound “u,” especially when appearing in everyday phrases, such for example as “don’t you know,” which is often pronounced “*doncherno*,” even by people whom one would call “educated.” To represent “don’t you know” by “*doncherno*” would be more phonetic, but also very awful to contemplate! What has happened to the English has also happened to the Siamese; that is to say, they have become careless about the pronunciation of their own language, which explains the reason why words are not always pronounced as they are written. In my opinion, it constitutes one of the best reasons why an attempt at phonetic representation of Siamese by foreigners would be impossible, for there is really no knowing how certain words might become altered later on. Pronunciation is never stationary; it gets altered gradually and imperceptibly, and to attempt to follow it by way of phonetic spelling appears to me a hopeless task.

6. The paragraph concerning aspirated consonants is very well presented; but I should like to state a personal opinion on the subject. It is true that “ph” may be easily mistaken for “f,” but in my humble opinion p^h means absolutely nothing to the lay reader. If the best argument in its favour is that it is known to scholars, then I do not see why the scholar could not get equally used to “h” as an aspirate sign, and “h” has in my opinion the advantage of the sign ‘ in that it is more generally understood as such already and is moreover less liable to be accidentally omitted. If simplified spelling is aimed at, then surely the less signs we employ the simpler it will be. Surely to write “*Khwam*” is much easier than “*K^hwam*”! The sign ‘ may seem the most satisfactory way of getting out of a difficulty, but to a layman, it probably means less than nothing; on the contrary it looks both useless and superfluous, and therefore the layman’s tendency would most probably be to ignore it altogether. For this reason I still prefer the “h,” which no one would dream of omitting without making due inquiries as to the effect likely to be produced by its omission.

7. The reason which moved me to suggest the employment of X to represent ᨗ , and Q for ᨑ was exactly what the committee said in one paragraph on page 6, *i.e.*, "whenever feasible, a single Siamese sound should be represented by a single Roman equivalent, and a given symbol should represent invariably the same sound." I agree that "other Roman letters exist which convey more or less approximately the sound of the characters ᨗ and ᨑ ." But what about the desire that "a given symbol should represent invariably the same sound"? For example, does the "ch" invariably represent the same sound? In the word "chin" it represents ᨗ , whereas in the word "character" it is " ᨑ ". You cannot say that of the X as I should use it, for it would *always* be ᨗ , and never anything else. The Spanish already pronounce it somewhat like the guttural "ch" of the Gaelic, and sometimes J is substituted for X, *e.g.*, the town of Xeres, which is also written "*Jerez*", and which in English became corrupted to "*Sherry*," and the sound represented by sh in English would ordinarily be represented by ᨗ in Siamese; but all this is purely by the way, and I only mention it here to show that the X is not dragged in without any rhyme or reason, though its right to represent the sound ᨗ may at present be unestablished in usage as yet. As to the Q for ᨑ , I suggested it so as to give the overworked K a little rest; I also like it because it is, of all Roman letters, the most invariable, for all nations agree in pronouncing it the same, and I venture to think that to write the word " ᨑᨗ " as "*gon*" may look strange at first, but would be preferable to "*k'on*" which, besides being equally uncouth to look at, is also more liable to confusion, for should one by any chance forget the aspirate sign after the k and write it "*kon*," the result might be regrettably ludicrous. This also reminds me, that the omission of the aspirate sign might produce an even more ludicrous result in the case of ᨗ . For instance, if we wanted to write ᨗᨗ (thick) in Roman letters, we should, according to the committee's proposed system, write it "*k'ōn*" (with the sign for the ◌ over the vowel); supposing one were careless enough to omit the ◌ , the result would become "*kōn*", and the meaning changed from something perfectly ordinary into something rather ludicrous to say the least. On the other hand, if we use the h to aspirate the k, and represent ᨗ by kh, such a mistake would be practically impossible, for one does not drop a whole letter by inadvertence, which might easily be the case with signs and accents.

8. I do not agree, that for the sake of consistency, the characters ๒ and ๓ should be denoted by X in the same way as ๑, because the characters are *not* pronounced the same. There is indeed, to us Siamese at any rate, more difference between ๒ and ๑ than we could see between the Roman hard C and the K. The ๒, besides being a "high-toned" letter, is pronounced with more emphasis than ๑; it is in fact the ʔ aspirated. As to the character ๓, not a single word in Siamese commences with it except those derived from Pali or Sanskrit; and its pronunciation is very much more aspirated than the ๑, or should be but for the bad habit of the average Siamese in mispronouncing. But it would be manifestly unfair to condemn ๓ to suffer loss of identity through the fault of the decadent pronouncer. But, whether X be accepted for ๑ or not, I beg to record my protest here against the representation of ๒, ๑ and ๓ by the same Roman letter or combination of letters, for to do so would make them each lose their individual character, and I cannot be an accessory before or after the fact in the case of "murdering the King's Siamese," which I should be doing were I to raise no protest against the aid given to people to mispronounce my language. For similar reasons, I must also protest against the proposal to represent ๔, ๕, and ๖ by the same symbol. I may point out that the ๔ and the ๕ are quite useless, and are in the process of being altogether dropped.

9. The whole of this paragraph demonstrates my contention as to the hopelessness of phonetic representation of Siamese words. With all respect to the learned members of the Committee, I submit that they have not hit off the proper pronunciation of the very words they have quoted as examples. The word "ปราชญ์" is *not* pronounced "ปราช, ส, ญ์," but more or less as written, though the tendency might possibly be to emphasize the ส after the ญ more than is necessary, thus making it sound like "ปราชะญ์" but if you ask a Siamese who is just able to spell English to read "prātsachāk," he would read it ปราช, ส, ญ์ with a distinct hesitation after the "prāt," out of respect for the presence of the letter "T" which he sees there, whereas if one wrote "prāsachāk" the chances are that he would pronounce it correctly. Nor is ๑๒ pronounced "๑๒ ๑๓" by the best educated Siamese; "Chōlaburi" would be nearer the mark, if ch be pronounced as in English. As for

work out for his own satisfaction that "Sachawāchā" was a compound word, composed of "Sach." (Truth) and "wāchā" (Speech); whereas if he attempted to do the same with "Satchawāchā," he would be very liable to find himself very hard put to it to account for the "cha" in the middle. Supposing him to possess a vocabulary, he would get "Sat"=Truth, "cha" =shall or will, "wāchā=speech, and might then proceed to translate it as "*Truth will speak,*" which would be distinctly amusing for any educated Siamese who heard him! Such examples might be multiplied, but would serve no useful purpose. But granting that it would be simpler for foreigners to adopt one letter only to represent each of the groups, known in Siamese grammar as ๒๒ ๒๓ and ๒๒ ๒๔ respectively, it appears to me somewhat strange that the committee should have hit upon the letters that the Siamese use very little in what might be termed purely Siamese words. Thus, no Siamese would ever think of writing of a monastery as a ๒๓ , nor of a frog as ๒๔ . When in doubt as to the spelling, the Siamese would invariably employ ๒๓ for ๒๒ ๒๓ and ๒๔ for ๒๒ ๒๔ , and in fact all semi-illiterate Siamese do so. I cannot therefore understand why the committee prefer t to d, and p to b; unless it be explained by the fact that European ears hear differently to ours, which, if it were so, would then probably also explain the reason why I cannot always agree with the committee in their attempts at representing Siamese words phonetically in accordance with their ingenious system of transliteration.

10. I think I have already remarked that I should like to see as few signs and accents as possible, and I still adhere to my opinion. Not only do they tend to make words unsightly, but I fail to see what useful purpose they would serve; for the man who does not know Siamese, signs would tell him nothing, for the man who does, they would not be necessary, for the context would be enough to let him know what words are meant. The committee is, however, of opinion that "*under exceptional circumstances, as, for instance, where some work of scholarship is being undertaken, it may be expedient, or even necessary, to indicate the intonation of Siamese words.*" If such is the case, then I agree; but I should like also to ask a question. In cases, "where some work of scholarship is being undertaken." would it not help the scholar to find the word ๒๓๒๔ written

“rājakār” rather than “rāch‘akān”? With “rājakār” before him, the scholar would be much more likely to trace the origin of the word to its true Sanskrit source than if he had “rāch‘akān”, which, to employ an expressive English slang, is “neither flesh, fish, nor good red-herring”! If, however, we are to consider the tourist rather than the scholar, then the marking of tones is not only unnecessary, but absolutely superfluous; so is the aspirate sign ‘; and, to a very large measure, so is transliteration itself, for the tourist would no more be able to pronounce Siamese correctly in a few hours than he could fly!

In conclusion, I should like to ask a question. Is the proposed system meant for scholars or for tourists and globe-trotters, or is it meant for European residents? If it is meant for scholars, then the system should in my opinion be as much founded on the Hunterian system as possible, so as to facilitate them in their work in the way of etymology and derivations. If it is meant for European residents, then it would have to have at least three distinct tables of phonetic spelling; one for Bangkok residents, one for the north country (*i. e.*, Bāyab), and one for the Malay Peninsula, unless they should prefer to adopt the scholar’s table, which would do for the *whole* of Siam. If, however, the tourists and globe-trotters are the people to cater for, then I should be strongly inclined to offer Mr. Punch’s famous advice to those about to get married—“*Don’t!*”

V. R.



NOTE.

—:0:—

In view of His Majesty's expression of opinion the Council of the Siam Society have resolved to make no recommendation in the matter of Transliteration.

