

Collaborative research in highland Southeast Asia:

The extraordinary work of
Damrong Tayanin and Kristina
Lindell on Khmu culture



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Kàm Ràw and Kristina Lindell in Northern Thailand at an (unrelated) local shrine. Photo probably taken in 1973 or 1974. Courtesy of Olivier Evrard and Ten Nyi (on left in the photo).

Kàm Ràw, also known by his Thai name Damrong Tayanin, was a Khmu (Kammu) scholar born in northern Laos, where he grew up in a highland village and gained wide-ranging knowledge of his own peoples' culture, including the treasures of Khmu oral literature and music. As a young man and itinerant laborer (including as a wartime army porter), he also learned several other languages spoken across the region of the Khmu who live mainly in northern Laos and Thailand but also in China and Vietnam.

In the early spring of 1973, Kàm Ràw (1938-2011) was invited to meet Kristina Lindell (1928-2005), a Swedish linguist, folklorist, and scholar of East and Southeast Asian cultures in northern Thailand, near Lampang. At the time, Kristina Lindell was conducting a year of research at the Lampang field station of the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen (today renamed the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, NIAS), where she initiated the Kammu Language and Folklore Project in 1972. Kàm Ràw was originally invited as one of several storytellers who were asked to share their stories for documentation in the alphabet that Kristina Lindell created. She quickly realized his extraordinary capabilities, and he was asked to join the project as an assistant and interpreter. Thus began a collaborative research project on Khmu language and culture extending over almost four decades—one of the most striking stories of productive and profoundly meaningful long-term collaborative research in Southeast Asia. It is remarkable not least because Kàm Ràw grew up without formal schooling and yet produced a body of scholarship and documentation which constitutes a dramatic testimony both to the formidable richness of Southeast Asia's historically non-literate cultural traditions, and to the intellectual capabilities of his people.

In 1974, she arranged grants for him to come and work at Lund University, a major research university in Southern Sweden. There she gathered a broad team of researchers in all these fields and more, who all collaborated with Kàm Ràw, coauthoring books and articles with him. Kàm Ràw and Kristina Lindell remained based at Lund University for the rest of their careers. They left only for research trips in Southeast Asia, or for brief *séjours* elsewhere, such as Kàm Ràw's academic year visit with his family at Cornell in 1989-90, on which more below. When she passed away, Kristina bequeathed her Lund house, where she lived for many years with her aging mother, to Kàm Ràw, who lived there with his own family until his death this April. The two are buried near each other in the Limhamn Cemetery, Sweden.

At the time when they first met, Kristina was in the process of founding the Department of East and Southeast Asian Languages at Lund University, where she organized the teach-

ing of Chinese, Thai, and other languages. I myself first signed up for her Fall 1978 intensive Chinese class and remained a disciple ever since, even though I came to Mon-Khmer studies much later through my research on the Wa, who are also speakers of a Northern Mon-Khmer language, like the Khmu and the Lamet (or Rmeet), and others. I learned to deeply value not just Kristina's tough-love mentorship as a formidable and demanding teacher, but, as I noted elsewhere (Fiskesjö 2005; see too Swahn 2006), above all her insistence on taking language and culture seriously. I am personally convinced that it was her fundamental regard for the irreducible complexity and richness of others' languages, folklore, and culture, that fueled her determination in her long years of research and writing.

She too came to academia through extraordinary hard work (having once been a primary school teacher, she persevered in studying foreign languages, overcoming gender bias, etc.). Ultimately, her ethos derived from her training both in languages and (later) in folklore, in which she had come to



Kàm Ràw visiting at Cornell University, 1990. Photo by Charles Harrington, courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. (The original appeared in a *The Cornell Chronicle* article by Kaff 1990).



Kristina Lindell at Lund University after receiving her honorary doctorate. *Courtesy of Kristina Lindell.*

grasp how linguistic and cultural difference really does make a difference that can be ignored only at the price of either misunderstanding or missing the point, or both. This was her starting point, in listening to Kàm Ràw—really listening; and collaborating with him in writing down, and in writing about, those vast riches to which he had access through his learning of what was essentially an oral tradition.

Kàm Ràw was warm, friendly, and caring, and was endowed with remarkable talents as a singer, storyteller, and scholar. At Lund, he soon became fluent in both Swedish and English—this was a man who once taught himself Lao writing by peeking through a schoolhouse window. In the research, Kàm Ràw originally was a linguistic and cultural informant, and continued as such throughout. He was also one of several storytellers whose retellings of Khmu oral literature provided the material for six volumes of tales published 1977-1998, under the general heading *Folk Tales from Kammu* (see below for details). Volume III presented a wealth

of stories told by Kàm Ràw himself. (It is prefaced by a marvelous account of his invoking of a Khmu story to rebuke what he saw as the misbehavior of Kristina Lindell.) The other volumes, produced with his editorial aid, rendered stories told by Khmu storytellers, both masters and novices, engaged by the project team through Kàm Ràw's aid. Kàm Ràw himself also became involved as an author and scholar in research on a wide range of other topics such as ethnobotany and music. In 1986, in recognition of his scholarship, Kàm Ràw was given an honorary doctorate at Lund University (Kristina Lindell received hers in 1994).

Their collaboration was primarily focused on the recording and analysis of Kammu folktales, music, and language, and were increasingly based in the Linguistics department at Lund University, where Kàm Ràw's own rich webpages are still hosted (see below). The work also involved the linguist Jan-Olof Svantesson and the ethnomusicologist Håkan Lundström, among others. The folklorist Jan-Öyvind Swahn, together with Kristina Lindell, explored the motifs deployed in Kammu oral literature, and sought to link them with other Asian and world traditions (on the methodology, see Lindell et al, *Working on the Motifs in a Folk Tale*; Lindell & Swahn 1997).

Kàm Ràw was a visiting scholar at Cornell University in 1989-90, as a Rockefeller Resident Fellow in the Humanities, and the university newspaper ran an article on him (Kaff 1990). The power of his Khmu singing is still recalled by those who attended his presentation. Another of the outcomes of this stay was the autobiographical book published in English in Cornell's Southeast Asia Program's book series, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life* (it has also been published separately in Thai, in 2005). It is a fascinating account, but in a review, the US social anthropologist Durrenberger (1997) painted Kàm Ràw as a passive captive of "the Scandinavian tradition of folk studies," a straw-man construction denounced by the reviewer as divorced from history, and also mistakenly conflated with Karl Gustav Izikowitz, 1903-84, cf. Izikowitz 1985, the anthropolo-

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gist famous for his work on the Lamet of northern Laos, neighbors of the Khmu, who also welcomed Kàm Ràw in Sweden and encouraged his scholarship). This aside, in his eagerness to reject "folk studies," Durrenberger seems to have missed the key point about taking seriously what people say (at length, in detail, in many volumes!), which is the core and enduring

value of “humanistic” folklore studies—sadly ignored in some forms of social science. Durrenberger made a better point when he expressed his hope that Kàm Ràw would also write more about the modern-day history of the Khmu (not least their war-time experiences)—only Kàm Ràw was already doing this, in his own way (e.g. Damrong Tayanin and Lue Vang 1992), and about his life in the West (cf. Damrong Tayanin 2005). But much more importantly, what is dismissed by some as so-called “folk” materials may remain crucial materials for Kàm Ràw and other Khmu, not idle “stories,” but vehicles for both the embodiment and transmission of treasured knowledge of key importance for their people, including for their identity as a living people. For this reason it is also important to point out that his work to record and transmit Khmu folklore and culture was very highly regarded across the global communities of fellow Khmu, whom Kàm Ràw’s visited during his travels to France, to the US, and elsewhere. As Charles “Biff” Keyes noted on the ThailandLaosCambodia online network, April 21, 2011, Kàm Ràw “was received in Seattle as among other Kammu communities both abroad and in Laos as their chief advocate for their cultural heritage.”

Among Kàm Ràw’s last work was his participation in the twin books recording and discussing his Khmu songs, produced in collaboration with Håkan Lundström within the framework of linguistic recording first built by Kristina Lindell in the early 1970s. Together, Kristina Lindell and Kàm Ràw, and their several collaborators, have created an example of dedi-

Together, Kristina Lindell and Kàm Ràw, and their several collaborators, have created an example of dedicated collaborative work producing a lasting inheritance—not only for the Khmu people as they go into the future as a global presence in their own right, but also for all of us, as a treasure-house of human ingenuity, and wisdom.

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

For more on Kàm Ràw’s and his collaborators’ research (and for more pictures of Kàm Ràw), see the rich pages still hosted at Lund University under the title of the “Kammu Home Page,” <http://person2.sol.lu.se/DamrongTayanin/kammu.html>. In addition, there are lists of Kàm Ràw’s publications at this page: <http://www.sol.lu.se/en/sol/staff/DamrongTayanin/>. For more on Khmu culture, also see Evrard (2006), Proschan (1997, 1999, etc.).

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