



Pray, and then eat

Written by Elyse Lightman

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COMMENT

Despite visible differences in how Cham Muslims celebrate Ashura, Elyse Lightman detects common themes.

On the morning of January 8, the market in Sreybrey village, Kampong Chhnang province is virtually empty. In this Cham Muslim community along National Route 5, north of Phnom Penh, just a few women are frying bananas over hot coals and selling dewy piles of lettuce and purple flowering chives. The rest of the women are at their homes toasting nuts and seeds to add to the traditional black sticky rice, a delicacy that this group of Cham Muslims makes once a year on Ashura.

For the Cham, Ashura represents the New Year, and is a celebration of new life. In other parts of the world, Ashura has many other meanings.

It is the day Noah left the Ark, and it commemorates the death of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed, who was

slain in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. These events are those most frequently linked to Ashura by Muslims elsewhere in the world, but among the Cham in Cambodia there are many varying explanations for what the day means. This is especially true for the minority Imam San Cham sect - numbering about 30,000 - who practise traditional Cham customs rather than more widely practised forms of Islam.

One thing is common, though, among the many different kinds of Ashura ceremonies observed by the Cham: Prayer, as well as symbolic foods, are integral.

"Ashura represents the New Year and the creation of human life," says Kai Tam, the sect's leader, or ong khnuu. He is the seventh official leader of the Imam San. His commune, O'Russey, is the cultural and spiritual centre of the Imam San. He explains there are six parts of the prayer that the Cham practice on Ashura - three representing men and three representing women - together forming life.

The Imam San's most significant practice on Ashura is making black sticky rice.

"We make [it] because it continues from the ancestors," Mayum, 55, explains as she sits in her wooden and bamboo hut grinding a coconut against a metal tool.

At noon the women begin carrying trays of food on their heads from all corners of the village, heading towards the mosque.

In Sreybrey village, the pilal hits a giant drum that hangs from the ceiling of the mosque to call the men to prayer. The ongcha, or religious men, who wear all white with white scarves wrapped around their heads, enter the shaded, cool space. These men must commit themselves to joining in the prayers on Fridays, being part of ceremonies, and must give up earthly pleasures like alcohol and dancing. Most are elders, but a few are boys. "I feel happy when I see young ongcha," Lep Kai, 28, says, "because I think the Imam San will survive." There was not always such a split between the different kinds of Muslims in Cambodia.

All Cham originated in the Champa Kingdom, on the coast of central Vietnam, and migrated when their kingdom was taken over by the Vietnamese in the 15th century.

The Imam San have retained the traditions from the Champa Kingdom, praying once a week - on Fridays - reading their own version of the Koran in the Cham language and engaging in vibrant spirit possession ceremonies.

After the Untac era, when foreign aid began to come to Cambodia, Muslims from Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait began building mosques and religious schools for Cambodia's Muslim population. Some Muslims don't agree with the way the Imam San practise and consider their ways out of step with true Islam. A growing number of Cham have converted to Tabligh and Wahhabi Islam and left behind traditional Cham practices.

Some of these villages, like Prey Pis, a few kilometres up the road from Sreybrey, show vestiges of their past ways.

In Prey Pis, the village follows the Shafi'i school of Islam. There are two madrassas, built within the last 10 years. Both house and teach young people from around Cambodia and prepare them for continuing their studies in Malaysia and the Middle East. Young women wear black purdahs that cover their bodies from head to toe, exposing just their eyes, and hold giant Korans under their arms. They and the young men study Malay, Arabic and Thai at the madrassa, at alternating times. When I ask the students if they will celebrate Ashura, they say perhaps the villagers will celebrate it.

Eventually, I find people in Prey Pis who celebrate Ashura. At noon, about 30 men gather in the mosque. The mosque architecture reflects the history of change within modern Cham culture: The structure was originally built in 1988 in the Imam San style, with three doors in front and a hall of columns inside. In 2007, renovations were made to the roof to make it look like other Arab-style mosques.

The men sit in a circle around pots of porridge. While some of the stories among the two kinds of Cham are similar, the differences are also palpable - the absence of black sticky rice in Prey Pis is oddly conspicuous.

Alberto Perez, an anthropologist studying the Cham, hypothesises that modern Cham have replaced the black sticky rice with porridge because "the black sticky rice is specific to the Imam San, which is problematic". For certain people, he says, "vestiges of Chamness undermines the purity of Islam".

As the prayers finish at the Prey Pis Mosque and discussions have ended, everyone eats. In this multilayered mosque of varied religious observances, the traditions of the past are not erased, rather rewritten. For now, at least, one tradition remains the same: Pray, and then eat.

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