Katé is one of the largest festivals and religious gatherings of the Cham people of Southeast Asia.1 It is the largest Cham festival in Vietnam, where the Chams have their ancestral homeland.2 It is perhaps due to its popularity that there are two dominant misconceptions regarding Katé. The first is that Katé is the ‘Cham New Year’. The second is that the festival is limited to the Cham ‘ Brahmanist’ population, known as the Cam Ahier (or simply Cam).3

William Noseworthy

IN REALITY, the Katé festival occurs during the seventh month of the Cam Ahier calendar, usually in October, and the participants in the Katé festival are not limited to the Cam Ahier, but also include Cam Awal. The Cam Awal are a complex community that may consist of both Cam Islam (Sunni) and ‘polytheistic’ Bani elements, or may consist of Bani elements only, depending on the source. 1 Finally, the Cham community has recently adopted Katé to include ceremonial and festivals, such as Katé-Romdaw and Katé Côn Gô, each of which represents a shift toward a transnational frame to redefine communal and cultural identity.

Misconceptions about Katé are rooted in the history of the Southeast Asian Cham. Once a classical civilization that stretched along nearly half of the contemporary Vietnamese coastline and deep into the hinterlands of the Annamite Chan, the ‘archipelagic’ territories of the Cham people were slowly annexed by various Vietnamese lords through a process of demographic and administrative expansion that lasted from the eleventh to the nineteenth century.2 During this time Cham society changed greatly as the religious makeup of the population shifted from a Hindu-Buddhist society, to a society

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population. The Cham society changed greatly as the religious makeup of the population shifted from a Hindu-Buddhist society, to a society predominantly Muslim and living mostly outside of the Cham homeland.3 This brings us to the question of the Cham community today and the festival of Katé.

Today the largest Katé ceremonies and festival is held in Phan Rang (Ninh Thuân province, Vietnam), at the site of the Po Klaong Garai tower (VN: cháp: C. bimong/kalan). Scholars and travelers alike may encounter many names for Katé including: Mêng Katé, Lễ Hội Katé, Katé-Rombaw, and Katé Côn Gô. Each of these ceremonies and festivals is rooted in the history of the Cham people in the Vietnamese national context. A lack of widely accessible research on Cham history and culture reproduces this significant misrepresentation. Têt Katé conflates the notions of the Vietnamese lunar New Year, more appropriately called Tết Nguyên Dinh, with Katé. Transliterating Katé into the Vietnamese pronunciation Katê may seem very slight to non-tuned ears, but can be replicated to differences amongst native speakers of Cham and Vietnamese.

Cham communal leaders generally reject the term Têt Katé. Meanwhile Lễ Hội Katê demonstrates an additional form of Vietnameseization at, or only is Katé transliterated, but the additional Vietnamese terms Lễ Hội, apply an understanding of Vietnamese social patterns to the Cham festival of Katé. While Lễ has a religious connotation meaning ‘ceremony’, Hội is more social and means ‘gathering’. While Vietnamese social patterns are sometimes applied (inaccurately) to better understand Katé, it itself has also changed over time. Today the Cham community frequently uses the term ‘Bani’ means to ‘devour’, ‘to gnaw’, or ‘to destroy’, but can also mean ‘to make an offering to the gods’, or ‘even festival’, according to the classic dictionary of Amnon Amnon and Caban.4

Today Katé is a four day festival, with the last two days referred to as Mêng Katê (the festival of the ancestors), and which are centered on ancestral worship and the veneration of the oldest matriloc in each family. To the outsider, observe these two days may not appear so different from the first two days, but they most certainly are.

Katé, day by day

Each Cham family is associated with a hometown (C: chum Polo; VN: quê hòn), and each hometown is associated with one of the Cham Creation deities such as the various incarnations of Po Klaong Garai or Po Klaong Can; and other ancestral gods such as Po Sah Inâ and Po Klaong Can. On the first day of Katé each of these deities is worshipped at individual sites in the hometowns. For example, in Pêki Hamutaran (VN: Nhơn Đức) there is a parade that brings ceremonial gifts and clothing to a small figure of Po Inâ Nâm. Cham Abier priestesses offer gifts to this goddess of the soil, who according to Cham manuscripts written in the modern Cham script of Akhar Tinh was responsible for teaching the Cham community the art of weaving and the technology of lowland rice agriculture.5

The second day of the Katé is dedicated to the ‘towers’ (VN: nguyệt Binh; C: Kıtê dê bımong/kalan). The Cham towers are a universal cultural symbol, particularly since the largest tower group at MY Son was declared a UNESCO world heritage site in 1999. During the ceremonies and festivals of the Cham calendar (akhal Cam) the Cham towers become sites of active communal worship, gathering, and celebration. Thus, on the second day of Katé, members of the Cham community go up to the towers and perform a ceremony to ask permission to open the doors, which is followed by offerings to the ancestral gods.

The third day of Katé is usually referred to as Mêng Katê Polo and is the beginning of the ‘Mêng’ gatherings, ceremonies, and celebrations. On this day, Cham families return to their hometown temple (Déng tuy for or ‘history’ of the local deities. For example, on this day Cham families in Pêki Côn Lo (Ninh Thuan province), gather at the local temple (donoe) of the deity Po Klao Can who is said to have taught the Cham people pottery, and the one responsible for granting Po Klaong Garai his royal ‘proves’ (genrel). The ceremony starts by asking permission to open the doors of the donoe. Next, worshippers (most women) gather along the inside of the hall, while the priests (mostly men) sit off to the right hand side. As the ceremony reaches its peak, the On Kalafer (specially priest who is a master in the history of the Cham people, has a deep knowledge of Akhar Thrah, and plays the kanyi) sings the Donoe or ‘history’ of Po Klaong Can. Meanwhile, priestesses assist in the ritual washing of the figures of Po Klaong Can and his wife. To those familiar with Indic tradition these figures may appear as ‘lingas’ that have had faces painted on them. Finally there is a priestess, known as a Mêng Poipu, who is responsible for channeling the Po Yông, or divine essence of the ancestral deities, in a ritualistic act of spirit possession. As the Mêng Poipu is possessed by the Po Yông, she smokes two cigarettes, performs traditional Cham dances, thrusts her arms

Reexamining human rights discourse after the Jewish and the Chinese Holocausts

After World War II, considerable efforts were made in the discipline of philosophy to question the validity of Western metaphysics. Surprisingly, human rights discourse has not been the subject of similarly rigorous interrogation. Sinkwan Cheng

ON THE PRESSING ISSUE of crimes against humanity, no serious efforts have been made in the liberal West to seek alternative precautions or cures outside human rights discourse, which had long existed before Auschwitz, but nonetheless failed to avert it; nor have thinkers and policy makers seriously examined whether the abstract subject-centered reason grounding human rights discourse has not unwittingly contributed to the problem it seeks to address. As Levinas turns to the Jewish tradition in the aftermath of the Holocaust in order to reprimand the suffering face of the Other before the philosophizing subject, I turn to the Confucian tradition for an alternative ethics and politics that would foreground the destitution of the Other before abstract legal, political, and philosophical discourse about ‘rights.

The above is what I undertake in one of my two BAS book projects, entitled ‘Reexamining Human Rights Discourse after the Jewish and the Chinese Holocausts’. In keeping with the Institute’s spirit of bringing Europe to Asia, and Asia to Europe, both books in progress are devoted to translation, comparative philosophy, and comparative politics. That Levinas and Confucius are brought together in my first project is no coincidence: the Jews and the Chinese sustained the greatest crimes against humanity were committed not because of the absence of the concept of ‘rights’ in the world, but because people had lost their humanity and humaneness, as well as their ability to recognize the victims of such crimes as human beings. Chang’s pleading fell on deaf ears.

World history since the adoption of the UDHR by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 has called it time to reconsider Chang’s proposal. Rights discourse has become ever more elaborate and sophisticated over the past 65 years. Yet this growth has been simultaneous, simultaneous with the burgeoning of rights discourse, should command us to reexamine whether ‘rights’ were not yet another abstract notion hypostatized into a monotheistic God, and whether it would not be more to the point to focus on the ‘human’ in ‘human rights’, and to reprimand the flesh-and-blood human being before the intangible idea called ‘rights’.

Humanization of man

My project originated as a response to an important proposal made by the Chinese representative P.C. Chang (张国枢) at the drafting stage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Chang recommended that the foremost mission of the Declaration should be the humanization of man.7 For good reason: for the Chinese who had suffered an estimated loss of 10-20 million lives in World War II, crimes against humanity were committed not because of the absence of the concept of ‘rights’ in the world, but because people had lost their humanity and humaneness, as well as their ability to recognize the victims of such crimes as human beings. Chang’s pleading fell on deaf ears.

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Notes
1 Note that the atrocities against the Chinese was committed by the Japanese after the latter’s aggressive adoptions of ideas and institutions from the modern West. Those adoptions were by no means free from reinterpretations and misinterpretations. The Jewish proverb articulates well this Confucian sentiment: “The other’s material sufferings are my own – not because the Other’s material needs are endless, but because my spiritual need is my spiritual need.” The other’s material need concerns my spirituality, as in the case of the liberal politics of tolerance, would not qualify as equality. The ability to feel for each other as enjoined by Confucian ethics can help us return from abstractions to the concrete human in human rights. This has tremendous significance for rethinking human rights. Crimes against humanity are invariably committed when the victims are not recognized as human beings – when they are objectified into numbers or other kinds of abstractions such as targets in a system to be ridden, and when the perpetrators also abstract themselves into killing machines devoid of the human capacity to feel for the sufferings of the Other.

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