Ramâwan: 2013

Ramâwan commonly describes the important yearly ceremonies for the Cham-Bani community of Vietnam (also known as the ‘Awal’) that occur during the ninth month of the Cham-Bani calendar (sakawi Awal). There is also a reputedly small Cham-Bani community in Cambodia, predominantly known in the press and academic circles as the *Kaum Imam San* (*kaum*: from Malay for ‘group’, of Imam San’s lineage). However, there are clear differences between this Bani community in Cambodia and the Awal of Vietnam, which will be the focus of future studies. In this essay the authors focus on the Awal of Vietnam as they represent an important example of localization of Islamic influence in contemporary Vietnam.

IN VIETNAM THE CHAM BANI number approximately 40,000 and live mostly in the dry coastal provinces of Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận, although a large number of Bani youth have migrated southward to Hô Chí Minh City to live and work. Every year, just before the month of Ramâwan begins, the Bani community in the Cham homeland of Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận swells in size as all family members return to their ancestral homes. The central ceremony during Ramâwan, called *ëw muk kei*, is in fact focused on, literally, calling the ancestors and is a ceremony that is shared with the Cham Ahier (‘Balamon’ or Shaivite influenced Cham) 1

In this way the central focus of the Ramâwan ceremony are less comparable to the practices of Ramadan, from which Ramâwan is derived, but more comparable to the common practices of ancestral worship shared amongst many Southeast Asian peoples. Amongst the Thai peoples these ceremonies are associated with *pu nyo* (ancestral spirit worship and amongst the Vietnamese these ceremonies are associated with *ông bà tổ tiên* (ancestral worship). With this regional context in mind it is helpful to remember that the specific context of Ramâwan is dictated by a priesthood – comprising the Po Gru, Imam, Katip, Mâdhir and Acar – which is unique to the contemporary Awal. 2

In villages and small towns in Ninh Thuận province, the Islamic Shia’s Sunnî community’s month of Ramadân began one day before the Awal month of Ramâwan this past year. However, before the month of Ramâwan begins, the Awal priests participate in a ritualistic cleansing ceremonies called Njop ndam pabak. The ceremony consists of offerings of soup, goat meat and rice – and is used to cleanse the essence of the priests before they lead Ramâwan ceremonies. As with all other elements of the month of Ramâwan, this ceremony takes places in accordance with the sakawi Awal. However, the location differs. A temporary prayer tent called a kaping is constructed for the njop ndam pabak ceremonies as follows:

– Acar ngap pang pokh hori angor (The lowest ranking priests: the Acar complete the ceremony on Wednesday)
– Mâdhir ngap hori but (The middle ranking Mâdhir priests complete the ceremony on Thursday)
– Imâm/Katip ngap hori jio (The Imam and the Katip priests complete the ceremony on Friday)

After the priests have taken part in this purification ritual they can then lead the rest of the Ramâwan rituals. These include the visitation of ancestral graves (nõg ghr) before the month of Ramâwan technically begins, the ceremony of calling the ancestors (*ëw muk kei*) and ceremonies of the month of Ramâwan (balâm mbeng oki – the month of fasting).

Nao ghr

The *nao ghr* ceremony is possibly the most important Awal ceremony associated with Ramâwan. Although the ceremony occurs before the month of Ramâwan technically begins, it is understood as the gateway to the month. Ghr are ancestral grave sites of the Awal community. Each individual grave is marked by a headstone and a footstone. These sites are associated with each household and determined through matrilineal bloodlines. Depending on the household, each family may visit between two and four individual ghr sites, although the standard is three over the course of three days. The older sites are generally visited first, while the newer sites are visited later.

During the *nao ghr* ceremony the Awal priests lay out mats and line up on one side of the ghr. Recently in the Awal community, due to the decreasing ratio of priests to lay people, lay male assistants who act as priests in training may also recite the prayers, provided that they are able to remember them. They recite Qur’anic prayers to invite the ancestor spirits to return to earth, using a mixture of tobacco and betel leaf offerings. While the priests recite the prayers, members of the kinship group, predominantly female, but also younger males, prostrate themselves before the ghr. This process draws the ancestors back to earth, where their spiritual essence is then contained in a basket. These baskets are gathered up and brought home to the household, where an ancestral altar is constructed and offerings made to the ancestor spirits (*ëw muk kei*). After approximately three days of the *nao ghr* and *ëw muk kei* ceremonies, further preparations are made and the individual family can enter the song *mögik* as the month of Ramâwan begins.

The song *mögik* 3

The majority of Bani ceremonies during the month of Ramâwan take place in the song *mögik*, or a Bani temple that serves as a center for village and small town life. In Ninh Thuận province, the local song *mögik* have formed a provincial board to redistribute donations from the wealthier small towns to the poorer villages and govern communal programs. *Mögik* is a local pronunciation of mawzid, the Arabic term for mosque, and song is the Cham word for ‘house’. However, the song *mögik* are different from what one might expect of either Sunnî or Shi’a mosques. Most song *mögik* only open their
ds for life cycle rituals (weddings, funerals, etc.). Friday prayers and Ramāwan. While priests sit in the front of the song mūḍī and line in them the entire month of Ramāwan, elderly women sit in the back of the song mūḍī each evening during prayers. Furthermore, during the prayer ceremonies a major focus is the protonization of older women, younger women, and younger men inside the song mūḍī. During Ramāwan the doors open to the public in the evenings around 6 o’clock. Priests begin the prayers by filing out of the song mūḍī, performing cleansing ceremonies and then re-entering with a chant of ‘ JWalt’ while tracing their fingertips around ceremonial headrests, while the Watpak beats a drum, before beginning prayers at 6:30 pm. Approximately twenty minutes later, lay people, predominantly women, file in to be sung mūḍī in order to pray (ihagul). At approximately 7:05 and 7:10, men shift their position for prayer. Then at approximately 8:15 the prayer begins to cease, as the nightly ceremonies and around 8:30 pm. During the rest of the day, Awal prayers remain in the song mūḍī, during which time they are obligated to recite Qur’anic prayers five times per day (Jumah). Each prayer session begins with the lighting of a special candle (bâdien) and then the cleaning of the priests before they recite prayers for Awal deities such as Po Awaluh (Allâh), Po Muhammet, Po Ali, and Po Phatimah (Fatimah). Although the complex relations of Awal and Aher deities (Balamon – Brahmanist influenced) cannot be fully explained in this short space, the Awal community has been known to map the deities on the human image in pictorial representations that resemble the Sufi concept of the ‘perfect man’.7

The many facets of syncretic Awal traditions

The question of Sufi influence remains open historically, as in addition to certain Sufi markers (such as the concept of the ‘perfect man’) and the recitation of the phrase, Ilaha illâ-Ilaah, the Awal priesthood also shows markers of Buddhist influence, particularly as monks shave their heads, their clothes are embroidered with embryos that repeats certain Buddhist motifs, and they chant using rhythms that have been clearly influenced by either deeper origins of the Bani community as Cham Mahayan Buddhists or have appeared through contact induced change with Vietnamese and Khmer populations.8 This milieu of cultural influence also explains why the senior (Po) and junior (Po-Ahier) Awal priests have names that have Sanskrit roots. Further Islamic influence is also thought to be found in the method of lay person prayer among the Awal population. For theAwal, they sit cross legged and at two points during the ceremony turn toward the center of the song mūḍī, remaining cross legged, with hands clasped together at the center of the forehead. For women and younger males, during the middle of the prayer recitations, they enter the doorway of the song mūḍī, lift their hands and touch them together in front of their forehead before they bow down. Upon completion the palms are placed flat on the floor, with the palms of the hands poised upwards near the head; the palms are then turned slightly inward so that the thumbs and index fingers of each hand then form a triangle, and the entire motion is repeated three times. They bow down three times, before making room for others to enter. Normally, for the first days of Ramāwan, when the song mūḍī is more crowded, an individual may only do this offering one time. However, as the population of the small towns and villages wanes during the middle of the month, a given individual may bow down in prayer three or four times, perhaps more, during the nightly ceremonies. Notably, this method is shared amongst both Awal and Aher Cham populations, and is noted as a lay, rather than priestly, method of supplication. While older and priestly members of the lay community may take on certain practices like eating a vegetarian diet (no meat except seafood); not cutting facial hair, hair or fingernails; refraining from drinking; and refraining from killing any live being, for a total of the first fifteen days, the second fifteen days, the majority of the younger population is generally less strict with these practices. The villagers and townpeople are responsible for providing meals for the Awal priests during Ramāwan. Although the entirety of the month is focused on ceremonies and may appear to have an ornamental layering of Islamic practice, as previously suggested, the central importance of Ramāwan for the Bani community is ancestral worship, which revolved around the ceremonies of Mah Sun (the arrival of the deity Po Phatimah) on the fifteenth day of the month, and Org Fun (the arrival of the male deity Po Ali) on the twentieth day of the month. After these deities arrive, a number of other ceremonies can take place. This includes the ceremonies of ruh bât, which are offerings that parallel the Islamic traditions of adhikat, and the tahol kalam ceremonies (kalam from Arabic Qur’ân meaning ‘pen’, or ‘writing instrument’). Tahol kalam is particularly important, as it is during this ceremony that young males are symbolically (NB: not literally) circumcised (kâtal) and that they begin the study of Awal prayers written in the localized script of Abkâr Bani. Based on our current understandings, Abkâr Bani is a localized version of Arabic with slight orthographic modifications and the absence of a certain number of letters to account for the differences in pronunciation between the Austronesian Cham and Semitic Arabic (al-‘arabîya or ‘arabî) languages, retaining approximately 80% orthographic similarity with standard Arabic. However, there are no institutions for the study of Abkâr Bani other than the Awal priesthood. As such, study groups are held on weekends at the household of a Awal priest who takes the role of a teacher (gu, from Sanskrit guru) for the purposes of language study. The association with gu can be quite strong in the Awal community, with students holding almost kinship like loyalties to gu. However, the teacher-student relationship never trumps the relationship with ancestral spirits and this is evident throughout the month of Ramāwan. The month closes with tahol Ramâwan, which includes the return of ancestral spirits to their gur with rituals that assist their return to the spirit realm.

The emphasis on ancestral worship as part of the Ramâwan ceremony highlights the importance of the protection of Cham grave sites. Many of these locations are old Cham villages that the young Awal and Aher peoples were forced to abandon during the relocation of the Cham people under the Nguyen Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mônh in the 1830s. Others are linked to Cham villages that were forcibly abandoned during the series of conflicts that devastated mainland Southeast Asia throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, because the land of these grave sites has not yet been protected in any fashion, new construction in the 1980s and 1990s onward has threatened the heritage of the Cham community. While some grave sites have been well protected, such as those in the village of Palei Pamblap Biruw, negotiations must be made at other sites between the Cham priesthood and local Vietnamese who have constructed, or farmed, upon gur sites, before Awal ancestral worship ceremonies can be performed. However, these are not the only issues surrounding gur sites. At the village level there is potential for increased desertification as a result of unchecked water usage; and at others the apparent lack of ability to create a communal garbage system has led to high piles of trash near ancestral graves.

Through a combination of history and contemporary concerns, the protection of gur sites, along with increased recognition of the Ramâwan ceremonies as part of the cultural heritage of the Cham community and the contemporary Vietnamese state, has become one of the most important contemporary issues in the discussion between the local Vietnamese officials and intellectuals in the Cham community. Meanwhile, with the construction of a new provincial museum, local Vietnamese officials hope not only to promote tourism within the province, but also to improve public education; they continue the overall good relations that have existed between Cham and Vietnamese in the province over the past decades. Nevertheless, the protection of gur sites is but one amongst a host of issues that local officials must negotiate, as planning moves forward for the controversial construction of Vietnam’s first two nuclear power plants which (was then recently delayed as a result of safety concerns regarding the prospects for a long chain of events) a comparative analysis of the Cham Awal of Vietnam and the ‘Ban of Cambodia’ or ‘Imam San’ group is certainly worthy of future research.

This research was made possible through funding by the Center of Khmer Studies. The authors are incredibly grateful for their gracious support.

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Notes
3 By contrast the Ban of Cambodia, or the Kaum Imam San, have been influenced by more contact with Malay and Khmer culture. All priests are called Aca and there is no ‘Gru’.
4 Sing is the Cham word for house. In the Phan Rang area, a common shift has led the initial ‘S’ to be pronounced as a hard (th) as in “Thomas”. Môhk comes from a Cham adaptation of the pronunciation of the Arabic word masjîd, although, as in many places in Southeast Asia, the Cham developed their own form of construction for the song mūḍī. The question of whether or not it may be better to understand the ‘song mūḍī’ as an Awal temple is one for further research. At the village level examples can be found in the field notes of Dorris Blood dated to 1968.
5 This information, as well as much of the information on the Bani community comes with great thanks to a long series of studies with ‘Gru Hajan’ (Dr. Thành Phần) over the past several years. The authors are always grateful for his instruction. He mentioned the suggestion of possible Sufi influence on Bani traditions in a recent publication: Thành Phần. 2013. ‘Pêc’m mới hiến thô tru các cita, cong dieng Chăm ở Việt Nam’, inTapâh Bôp Kaum Cam (Thapâh Chăm ở Việt Nam – The Journal of Cham Culture). No. 1, pp.4-12