

# 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.

William Noseworthy and Quảng Văn Sơn



Left: Ew Muk Kei at Ghur Ranaih, Mỹ Thường, Ninh Thuận (Photo by William Noseworthy)

IN VIETNAM THE CHAM BANI number approximately 40,000<sup>1</sup> 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 Hồ 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 *éw 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).<sup>2</sup> In this way the central focus of the Ramâwan ceremonies 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 nya* 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, Imâm, Katip, Mâdhir and Acar – which is unique to the contemporary Awal.<sup>3</sup>

In villages and small towns in Ninh Thuận province, the Islamic Shafi'i Sunni community's month of Ramadan 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 *Ngap ndam pabak*. The ceremony consists of offerings of soup, goat meat and rice – and is used to clean the essence of the priests before they lead Ramâwan ceremonies. As with all other elements of the month of Ramâwan, this ceremony takes place in accordance with the *sakawi Awal*. However, the location differs. A temporary prayer tent called a *kajang* is constructed for the *ngap ndam pabak* ceremonies as follows:

- *Acar ngap yang pabak harei angar* (The lowest ranking priests: the Acar complete the ceremony on Wednesday)
- *Mâdhir ngap harei but* (The middle ranking Mâdhir priests complete the ceremony on Thursday)
- *Imâm/Katip ngap harei jip* (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 (*nao ghur*) before the month of Ramâwan technically begins, the ceremony of calling the ancestors (*éw muk kei*) and ceremonies of the month of Ramâwan (*balan mbeng aek* – the month of fasting).

#### Nao ghur

The *nao ghur* 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. *Ghur* 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 *ghur* 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 ghur* ceremony the Awal priests lay out mats and line up on one side of the *ghur*. 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 *ghur*. 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 (*éw muk kei*). After approximately three days of the *nao ghur* and *éw muk kei* ceremonies, further preparations are made and the individual family can enter the *sang mâgik* as the month of Ramâwan begins.

#### The sang mâgik<sup>4</sup>

The majority of Bani ceremonies during the month of Ramâwan take place in the *sang mâgik*, or a Bani temple that serves as the center for village and small town life. In Ninh Thuận province, the local *sang mâgik* have formed a provincial board to redistribute donations from the wealthier small towns to the poorer villages and govern communal programs. *Mâgik* is a local pronunciation of *masjid*, the Arabic term for mosque, and *sang* is the Cham word for 'house'. However, the *sang mâgik* are different from what one might expect of either Sunni or Shi'a mosques. Most *sang mâgik* only open their

doors for life cycle rituals (weddings, funerals, etc.), Friday prayers and Ramāwan. While priests sit in the front of the *sang m̄gik* and live in them the entire month of Ramāwan, elder women sit in the back of the *sang m̄gik* each evening during prayers. Furthermore, during the prayer ceremonies a major focus is the prostration of older women, younger women and younger males inside the *sang m̄gik*.

During Ramāwan the doors open to the public in the evenings around 6 o'clock. Priests begin the prayers by filing out of the *sang m̄gik*, performing cleansing ceremonies and then re-entering with a chant of 'awluah' while tracing their fingertips around ceremonial headdresses, while the *Katip* beats a drum, before beginning prayers at 6.30pm. After approximately twenty minutes, lay people, predominantly women, filter in to the *sang m̄gik* in order to pray (*tagok*). 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 end around 8:30pm. During the rest of the day, Awal priests remain in the *sang m̄gik*, during which time they are obligated to recite Qur'anic prayers five times per day (*subahik*). Each prayer session begins with the lighting of a special candle (*badien*) and then the cleansing of the priests before they recite prayers for Awal deities such as Po Awluah (Allah), Po Mohammed, Po Ali and Po Phatimah (Fatimah). Although the complex relations of Awal and Ahier 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'.<sup>5</sup>

#### 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: *illa-illwa-illallah*), the Awal priesthood also shows markers of Buddhist influence, particularly as monks shave their heads, their clothes are embellished with embroidery 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 Mahayana Buddhists or have appeared through contact induced change with Vietnamese and Khmer populations.<sup>6</sup> This milieu of cultural influence also explains why the senior (Po Gru) and junior (Po Acar) Awal priests have names that have Sanskrit roots. Further Indic influence is also thought to be found in the method of lay person prayer amongst the Awal population. For the older men, they sit cross legged and at two points during the ceremony turn toward the center of the *sang m̄gik*, 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 *sang m̄gik* lift their hands and touch them together in front of their forehead before they bow down, lying almost completely 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 touch forming a triangle, and the entire motion is repeated three times. They bow down three times, before making room for others to enter. Normally, during the first days of Ramāwan, when the *sang m̄gik* 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 Ahier 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 pescatarian 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 majority of the younger population is generally less strict with these practices. The villagers and townspeople are

Right: Gahlau (Aloeswood incense) and Hala (betel leaves) are critical offerings (Photo by Quang Văn Sơn)



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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 reappears during the ceremonies of *Muk Trun* (the arrival of the deity Po Phatimah) on the fifteenth day of the month, and *Ong Trun* (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 *tuh brah*, which are offerings that parallel the Islamic traditions of *zakat*, and the *talaih kalam* ceremonies (*kalam* from Arabic *Qu'lam* meaning 'pen', or 'writing instrument'). *Talaih kalam* is particularly important, as it is during this ceremony that young males are symbolically (NB: not literally) circumcised (*katat*) and that they begin the study of Awal prayers written in the localized script of *Akhar Bani*.

Based on our current understandings, *Akhar 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-'arabiya* or *arabi*) languages, retaining approximately 80% orthographic similarity with standard Arabic. However, there are no institutions for the study of *Akhar Bani* other than the Awal priesthood. As such, study groups are held on weekends at the household of an Awal priest who takes the role of a teacher (*gru*, from Sanskrit *guru*) for the purposes of language study. The association with *gru* can be quite strong in the Awal community, with students holding almost kinship like loyalties to *gru*. 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 *talaih Ramāwan*, which includes the return of ancestral spirits to their *ghur* with rituals that assist their return to the spirit realm.

The emphasis on ancestral worship as part of the Ramāwan ceremony highlights the importance of the protection of Cham grave sites. Many of these locations are old Cham villages that the Cham people were forced to abandon during the relocation of the Cham people under the Nguyen Vietnamese Emperor Minh M̄nh 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. Consequentially, 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 *ghur* 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 *ghur* sites, before Awal ancestral worship ceremonies can be performed. However, these are not the only issues surrounding *ghur* sites. At some sites villagers have noted a potential for increased desertification as a result of unchecked water usage; and at others the apparent lack of ability to create a communal garbage collection system has led to high piles of trash near ancestral graves.

Through a combination of history and contemporary concerns, the protection of *ghur* sites, along with increased recognition of the Ramāwan 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 *ghur* 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 recently delayed as a result of safety concerns regarding the proposed sites). Finally, a comparative analysis of the Cham Awal of Vietnam and the 'Bani of Cambodia' or 'Imam San' group is certainly worthy of future research.

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#### Notes

- 1 Yasuko Yoshimoto. 2012 (December). 'A Study of the Hoi Giao Religion in Vietnam: With a Reference to Islamic Religious Practices of Cham Bani', *Southeast Asian Studies* 1(3):487-505
- 2 Noseworthy, W. 2013. 'Reviving traditions and creating futures', *The Newsletter* issue #64, pp.12-13
- 3 By contrast the Bani of Cambodia, or the Kaum Imam San, have been influenced by more contact with Malay and Khmer culture. All priests are called Acar and there is no 'Po Gru'.
- 4 *Sang* is the Cham word for house. In the Phan Rang area, a consonant shift has led the initial 's' to be pronounced as a hard /th/ as in 'Thomas.' *M̄gik* comes from a Cham adaptation of the pronunciation of the Arabic word masjid, although, as in many places in Southeast Asia, the Cham developed their own form of construction for the *sang m̄gik*. The question of whether or not it may be better to understand the 'sang m̄gik' as an Awal temple is one for further research.
- 5 The most clear example of this can be found in the field notes of Dorris Blood dated to 1968.
- 6 This information, as with 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. 'Palei- Một hình thái cư trú của cộng đồng Chăm ở Việt Nam', in *Tapuk Bhap Ilimo Cam (Tập chí Văn hóa Chăm – The Journal of Cham Culture)*, No. 1, pp.4-12

Below: Closing Evening Prayer during Ramāwan (Photo by Quang Văn Sơn)

