

# Mamun and the 'Kaum Imam San' of Cambodia

Discourse on syncretic Islam could, according to recent scholarship, explain the practices of a Cham community known as the 'Kaum Imam San' by some and the 'Bani of Cambodia' by others. This community, numbering about 50,000 today, has gained great attention; perhaps due to the following reasons. First, the community has attracted scholarly interest through the newfound efforts backed by the American embassy to increase basic literacy in the endangered Cham script. Second, the community has attracted the attentions of the purification efforts of Salafi- or Tablighi-influenced elements of Cambodia's Islamic community. Finally, it is likely that the Kaum Imam San have also attracted a potentially disproportionate amount of scholarly attention (per population) as a result of their vibrant religious traditions, which mix elements of Islamic, Khmer and ancestral worshipping practices with the unique historical memory of the saint named Kaum Imam San, in order to produce a truly lively experience.

William Noseworthy

A NUMBER OF SCHOLARS have written about elements of the 'Mawlut' and 'Chai' ceremonies of the Kaum Imam San, while only few have selected to study the 'Mamun' ceremony. *Mawlut* from Arabic *Mawlid* refers either to *Mawlidu N-Nabiyyi* – 'the birthday of the prophet' – or *Mawlid Imam San*, a potentially Sufi influenced ceremony celebrating the nineteenth century Imam who secured the recognition of the Kaum Imam San in Cambodia through his partnership with the Khmer king, Ang Duong. These ceremonies are calendar events and occur once a year. Meanwhile, *Chai* ceremonies have an added flare of Southeast Asian ancestor worship and spirit possession rituals. They can take place at any time and are more a matter of a family securing enough funds to put them on, in order to purify the spiritual and physical essence of a sick, terminally ill, or otherwise afflicted member of the family or village group. Although *Mamun* also features this distinct flare, it, like *Mawlut*, only occurs once a year: at the end of the rainy season, after the Khmer water festival, usually in conjunction with the boat race on the Mekong, just as the moon becomes full. As tradition has it, when the moon is right, the ancestors are ready.

## Mamun

Mamun is intended to be a celebration of the specifically Cham royal ancestry of the Kaum Imam San group. During Mamun the great ancestors of the Kaum Imam San come alive through spirit mediums. Meanwhile, during the days, Islamic rites are held to bless the Kaum Imam San villagers and lineage. It is traditionally a three day ceremony, continuing into the early hours of each morning. However, in recent years it seems that the ceremony has become shorter. This past year Mamun lasted only one full afternoon, evening and morning. Additionally, although reported that traditionally the Khmer Royal family also used to visit Mamun, this has not once occurred in recent memory. This year, Mamun happened to take place just after the Islamic ceremonies of 'Asura', which are celebrated by the Kaum Imam San, the Shafi'i Sunni mainstream Muslims, as well as the Tablighi- and Salafi-influenced elements of the community. Just two days after Asura, the ceremony began when the Kaum Imam San priests [*acar*] gathered under a small tent [*gaom Mamun*].

As with other ancestral worship ceremonies and religious occasions in Southeast Asia, food plays a central role in Mamun. It is the women (and predominantly elderly women [*muk*]) who busy themselves with the food preparation. In particular, the Cham concept of ancestor worship called *mbeng muk kei* includes the Cham word *mbeng*, which connotes consumption as well as celebration. The food being offered is for the ancestors to imbibe. Notably, unlike certain other Cham ceremonies in Vietnam where rice porridge [*abuh*] or cooked rice [*lisei*] is offered, during Mamun the central offering is rice noodles [*pachuk*]. The rice noodles are placed on a platter [*dalam lisei*] along with curry [*kari*] and a special green sauce [*aia danyrao*]. Chilies adorn the center of the platter for extra flavor.



## The opening

As the offering platters are slowly moved into the *gaom Mamun*, the *acar* gather. They are led in prayer by a head Imam from the community, which begins with the *Al-Fatihah* verse of the Qur'an (the opening). However, the tonal quality of what follows is of greatest interest. In Vietnam, the *Awal* (the 'Bani of Vietnam') have recently been noted to have a tonal quality to their chants that demonstrates a distinct Buddhist influence. The *Al-Fatiha* is recited in a lower register. Meanwhile, throughout Shafi'i Sunni Southeast Asia, the *Al-Fatiha* is generally recited in a comparatively higher register. The register of the Kaum Imam San prayers appears to be in the middle, occasionally leading observers to a state of surprise and wonder when they hear prayers being recited in a relatively high-pitch, forte, but with also a rhythm still showing some traces of potential influence from Buddhist chants. To learn more about the prayers that follow the *Al-Fatiha* during Mamun one should study *git* literature – a form of text that explains when to use certain verses [*surah*]. However, the *git* will only get one so far, as what follows the few *surah* that are recited during Mamun appears to have no written regulation, although it is guided by oral conceptions of Cham traditional practices [*adat*].

After the opening prayers of Mamun have been recited the offering platters are placed in front of the priests of the community, who eat first, followed by elder males, elder women and then younger members of the community. As the evening begins, the eldest females of the community take center stage, as it is only these priestesses that have the power to call upon the ancestor spirits ('Chai' and 'Po'). These aspects of the evening may also be compared to elements of the popular Chai ceremonies covered by other scholars – including the emphasis on the historical memory of the 'Kingdom of Champa', and how 5,000 members of the upper echelon and royal family moved to form the Cham community in Cambodia in 1692. Although they were joined by later migrations and more heavily influenced by Islam in Khmer territory, this memory of the Kingdom of Champa is critical.

## Origins and visitation of Po and Chai spirits

The oldest 'Po' and 'Chai' are said to have come from the Kingdom of Champa. Certain Po and Chai names – 'Po Lihan', 'Po Traong' and 'Muk Thang Ahaok', for example – can also be found in Cham ceremonies in Vietnam, although their forms, understandably, take on different apparitions during the Mamun ceremonies. First, almost all of the Po and Chai

spirits visit the ceremonies through the bodies of women. Second, as with Chai ceremonies, during Mamun there are a wealth of spirits. This can be explained in two ways. The first is through a sort of psychologizing of the post-Khmer Rouge experience of the Cham community. The second is through an oral narrative that states that the Kaum Imam San had an original flag from the Cham royal family in their possession. The flag was traditionally folded and held many Po and Chai spirits inside. Within recent memory (after 1993 – or on the verge of 'post-conflict Cambodia') this flag was opened and a whole new series of Po and Chai appeared.

The diversity of Po and Chai spirits present during the Mamun ceremonies certainly warrants further research, as does their potential connection to ceremonies in the Cham community of Vietnam that also include similar figures. Another aspect of the ceremonies that warrants further research is the collection of 'royal objects' that are brought out, ceremoniously blessed with aloes wood incense [*gahlau*], presented and paraded at different points of Mamun. It is possible to note that there are also two bunches of coconut [*baoh la-u*] and bananas [*baoh patei*] that are present in the Mamun ceremonies. Once the royal objects are brought back into the tent they are presented before the Po Traong and Muk Thang Ahaok several times to be blessed with aloes wood smoke and water. At this point lighted candles [*badien*] surround the platform where the Muk Thang Ahaok priestess sits and small platters of hard boiled eggs [*baoh manuk*] are present as well. As with other ancestor worship ceremonies, the presence of tobacco [*pakao*] and betel leaves [*la*] are also important. Once all these elements have been combined the ancestor spirits are invited to return to the community. There are three sessions of Cham music held, before a fourth session of Khmer folk music stretches into the early hours of the morning.

During the Cham folk music sessions there are a few instruments that are considered to be characteristically Cham rather than Khmer, or Muslim, etc. These are the *nang* drum and the *saranai* trumpet as well as a particular style of gong. The *nang* drum is played while sitting and typically two *nang* are played at the same time. The *saranai* trumpet of the Kaum Imam San is quite similar to the *saranai* of the Cham of Vietnam, with the major differences being that the pitch is lower and, in Cambodia, the *saranai* appears to be played with a less shrill tune. By the time that the Khmer folk music is played, the *saranai* is replaced by a traditional two-stringed instrument played with a bow [Khmer: *troh*, Cham: *rabaub*, Arabic: *rabab*], and a guitar.

## In closing

The final moments of Mamun occur the next morning. The royal objects are brought out again one last time and blessed, while the *muk* priestesses assist the *acar* priests in what appears to be an 'offering', or perhaps better said, an 'initiation' of three un-wed young men. During this point in the ceremony a traditional Cham manuscript, written in the Western Cham variant of the Cham script, is recited. It is a *saovada* text: a kind of lineage or history of the Cham ancestor royal ancestors, imbued with ethical guidance. Sections are read by the Imam and then repeated by the three boys as they symbolically offer rice noodles, packed cooked rice, vegetables and turtle meat to the ancestors, along with rice-wine [*alak*]. Each food element is treated with aloeswood smoke, and after the ceremonies are completed, the crowd breaks to eat the last *mbeng muk kei*.

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