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Ritual Works and Practices

A Case Study from a Muslim Community in Cambodia

Cathrine Bell's observation that Ritual Studies are emerging as a new academic field indicates that the study of ritual remains a challenge even long after the pioneering works by scholars such as Arnold van Gennep, Edmund Leach, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and others (Bell 1992: viii).

Until recently, the idea that rituals usually involve certain kinds of social action which serve to distinguish ritual events from the ordinary everyday life has been emphasised in most theories of ritual. So, for instance, Maurice Bloch (1992) finds that ritual action provides an alternative to everyday social action. The function of the ritual is to assert a transcendental power over everyday experience and rituals therefore tend to be formalized, repetitive and conservative events. Against such a conservative background of "mystifications", possible contestations of power tend to be restricted and to limit the possible alternative outcomes of the ritual. But, as Stanley J. Tambiah (1985) has pointed out, a given outcome of the ritual cannot be taken for granted. Following Tambiah's point that ritual always carries the potential for change, recent contributions to ritual studies argue that "ritual plays a crucial role in practice" (Kelly and Kaplan 1990: 141). Practice-oriented approaches in recent contributions to ritual studies (see Mitchell 1996 and Stausberg 2002 for general discussions) suggest a focus on the participants and their different understandings and interpretations of the ritual according to their own points of view. Such a perspective tends to reveal more pragmatic concerns, as well as the inter-contextual relations and complexities in ritual action (cf. Steedly 1993: 201). Understanding ritual as social practice and pragmatics is crucial to the analysis of all kinds of ritually displayed authority, including secular power of, for instance, the state and statecraft related practices. In such rituals, not only may the participants have varying interpretations, but, as noted by Jon Mitchell (1996: 492), it cannot be assumed that the "audience" for such rituals is inevitably convinced.

The same can be said of rituals of exorcism. Bruce Kapferer has suggested that instead of seeing such rituals "as produced by and expressive of conflicts and tensions, it might be closer to reality as experienced to

view the events leading to rituals and the rituals themselves as being both expressive of conflict and tension and productive of them as a dialectical process" (Kapferer 1979: 122).

In this paper, I want to show the importance for ritual studies of ritualised strategies for the negotiation of power and influence. My research on a spirit possession cult among the Muslim Cham in Cambodia* will serve as an empirical basis for a discussion of the open-ended and unbounded features of ritual in contemporary society, since the performances of this cult may be seen both as a kind of "state ritual" and as exorcism.

The Cham in contemporary Cambodia

In Cambodian society today the Cham find themselves exposed to the weakened state as well to the international structures of domination, including not only externally controlled market forces and a large number of international aid organisations and NGOs, but also the representatives of International Muslim associations by whom they are being targeted.

In contrast to the unbelievable wealth demonstrated by these agencies, the Cham find themselves not only impoverished but, maybe more importantly, also bereft of any fair chance of gaining recognition for their needs by those agencies and structures that control access to all of these modern arenas through which hopes of a better life can be materialised, such as development agency programmes for rural development, including the cleaning up of unexploded mines and other harmful material left from the war, as well as formal education or substantial health care.

Working in a Cham roadside community I was able to watch the floats of the white UN Landcruisers and similar cars with all their incredible high tech equipment passing our villages *en route* upcountry. As the cars passed by, leaving us with nothing but dust, I was occasionally asked by villagers whether "I knew anything about what plans the International Community had for them", which was to say that somehow they had expected to be on the agenda. Beginning with the sudden and massive foreign presence in the country during the UN intervention in 1991–93 (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, UNTAC), international aid organisations are still very visible. Although I got the impression that the young UNTAC staff had been much liked, not least for their youth and good humour and the promises for the future that marked their appear-

* Fieldwork in a Cham community in Kampong Chhnang province has been carried out, together with Jan Ovesen, intermittently between 1996 and 2002. It has been financed by grants from Sida/SAREC and the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

ance, at the same time as their wealth, means of transportation and general life-style gave the Cham a sense of otherness, of being aloof and invulnerable to the various contingencies and hazards of life. At the same time, families were found discussing where to send their children in order for them to find paid employment. Marriage deals with those lucky enough to have relatives in Malaysia were considered fortunate because such arrangements were believed to make dealings with the much feared immigration authorities easier. Finding themselves placed between two stools, confronted at best by the indifference of state bureaucracies and their representatives on the one hand, and the pressure to conform to (Arab) Muslims standards of religious life on the other, it is not clear to them who is to blame for their poor conditions, or how they might be improved. Rather than blaming the war, the Khmer Rouge, or any other external agency, they tend to take the blame on themselves. "I need to pray more, to be careful and to improve my *karma*. In the past the Cham have done sinful things and this is the result. Now, look at the fate that has come over us", one of the Imams lamented.

Islam and the local cult

The spirit cult is found among the group of Cham who identify themselves as the *Jahed*. Their version of Islam is superimposed on a basically Hindu worldview which is being recognised as "custom". The Muslim congregation gather in their small prayerhouses and modest mosques on Fridays for communal prayers and for the sharing of a communal meal offered to them by the married women on behalf of each household. This, along with other practices, tends to set them somewhat apart from other Muslims and they are therefore intensively targeted by missionary groups from International Muslim associations. The input of print capitalism in the form of standard Arabic prayer books, handed out free in the villages in order to replace their own handwritten ones, painstakingly copied by generation after generation, makes them extremely vulnerable to this kind of mission.

I have elsewhere offered a detailed discussion of the cult (Trankell 2003; Ovesen and Trankell 2003), and therefore only briefly outline its main features for the sake of argument here. The spirit cult centres on the *cay* spirits who are the royal spirits from the ancient kingdom of Champa. The cult is a celebration of Cham mythical history retold in the *pi cay*, the songs of the spirits chanted by the predominantly female mediums while possessed. On one level, the cult of the *cay* spirits can be read as a "state ritual" celebrating the glorious past of the Cham nation. On another level, it can be seen as a healing cult, to which people turn in cases of illnesses for which

medical treatment has proved insufficient. At the same time, the cult stages the conflicts and sufferings of today in a setting reconstructing and invoking the past, and thus serves to articulate recent as well as contemporary social conflicts between individuals and families, as well as the situation of the Cham ethnic group in Cambodian society at large. The cult appears to have been in decline during the 1960s (Baccot 1968), and it became all but extinct during the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975–79. Since the 1980s, however, it has been increasing in popularity, and nowadays ceremonies are held almost every week. A founding myth relates the fate of the Cham King and is accompanied by a complex set of rites and ceremonies. In spite of a common recognition of the cult and of its importance as a foundation for Cham identity, members of the Cham community hold disjunctive views with regard to its “truth”, its effectiveness and constitutive elements. Therefore the ritual has opened up an arena where the power and hegemony of the politico-religious leaders is being contested and coming under pressure from external social forces that advocate modernisation and an increased influence of commercial powers in society at large. Strangely, these processes seem to take place in combination with a re-enactment of the ritual among the Cham.

To the Muslim leaders religion is defined by the corpus of sacred texts, handed down by their literate and learned elite of scribes, the Imams, in the Cham’s own language and ancient script. But religion is also manifested socially in the gathering of the community for the Friday prayers. The services and work carried out in the community by the Imams themselves is likewise considered important to the local understanding of religion and the local version of Islam, according to which communal prayers are carried out once a week, while delegating to the Imams the duty to carry out daily prayers on behalf of the congregation. Unsurprisingly, Muslim leaders and teachers insist that the beliefs and the rituals associated with the cult of the royal spirits have nothing to do with Cham religion. However, with one important exception, the On g’nur, the Imams all testified to the authenticity of the ritual, justifying it as part of Cham society and custom, and often referred to it by the term *prapeni*, tradition, in Khmer. The ritual was considered as “truth”, and the mediums initiated in the cult considered “true mediums”.

An exception to this view was expressed by the On g’nur, the main religious-political leader. Disappointed by the recent changes in the cult and the rituals, the On g’nur regretted, that at least in his opinion, the “true” ritual was lost in the *mahandori*, the big destruction, i.e. the Khmer Rouge period, along with much of what before that time still remained of “Cham civilisation and high culture”. He therefore tended to dismiss the re-installment of the cult as “pretending” and mainly “theatre” – “what else can you expect with such extremely unintelligent mediums serving the King of Champa?”

The Imams are expected to participate in the rituals to a limited extent only, to offer their blessings and prayers and partake of a meal of rice and cooked food offered to them in the late afternoon. This meal only serves to mark the start of the ceremonies. Having finished the meal, the Imams take their leave, before the mediums carry out the procession to greet the spirits and to pay respect to the "teacher", i.e. the spirit of the King of Champa representing the original sacrifice.

This limited official participation on behalf of the Imams, represent a change in relation to pre-revolutionary society, and it seems that the cult of the royal spirits has grown apart from the Muslim religion as practised in the local communities. In the 1950s and 60s, as described by the French ethnologist Juliette Baccot (1968), the participation of the Imam was considered important for the sacrifice of the buffalo and the distribution of the meat among high-ranking village and community leaders. According to Baccot, the right part of the sacrificed animal was for the Imam and the Muslim religion, while the rest was intended for the mediums and for important family members.

The fact that Muslim leaders were not expected to deal with the spirits does not mean that they were not involved in the rituals; they were often husbands of mediums of the same family as victims attacked by sorcery or suffering from being possessed by the spirits. The Imams had the right to divorce a wife who became a spirit medium, but I know of no case where this was practised.

The case

Through the cult, the Cham tend to take refuge in their memories of the distant past rather than in their more immediate memories of terror and political violence, during the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime. Re-phrased as songs of the spirits, the present and the past intermingle in narrating the difficulties, the conflicts and the struggle in the world of the spirits who live next to, and mingle in, the world of ordinary human beings.

Late in 2001, Om Riess was taken ill. As one of the main figures in the Muslim politico-religious establishment, he had spared no efforts to raise money for a new mosque placed in the very centre of his own village, an accomplishment which was no doubt expected to considerably enhance his reputation and general standing in the community. When we met him, he told us that he had become ill with high blood pressure sometime before the Khmer New Year in March 2001. Doctor Eng and another local "doctor" gave him pills that helped momentarily, but the condition soon returned and was worsened by insomnia and difficulties in breathing. Af-

ter fifteen days of ineffectual treatment, he consulted a few Cham mediums. They suggested a ceremony for either one day–one night or three days–three nights. To begin with he held a short ceremony, offering only white cloth and with the minimum of three mediums present at his house at late evening time to invoke the spirits and ask them for advice. This small ceremony was repeated five times, but the spirits were not happy, or the ceremonies seemed to lack something and he was not cured. During the process, however, mediums diagnosed influence from evil spirits. The case was discussed with people in the village and it was decided that in order to counter the evil spirits' influence, he should seek help from a *kru khmer* in Battambang who was an expert in treating spirit afflictions. He went to Battambang. The *kru khmer* collected herbs in the forest, boiled them and prescribed drinking the medicine for seven days. This helped momentarily, but after a week he grew worse again and did not sleep for two days and nights. He asked his relatives to take him home, as he was afraid he would die and wanted to be with his family. He went to the Calmette hospital in Phnom Penh, where the doctors diagnosed a heart condition. He got a prescription and took the medicine for five days, spending 90,000 Riels on the medicine. But there was still no improvement and therefore he did not trust the medical doctor, but went home and consulted the mediums again. They prescribed the sacrifice of a buffalo to the ancestors. It had been suggested that his problems were related to his project of building the new mosque in the village, next to his own house. It had been revealed that the site for the new mosque was a former Chinese cemetery, and therefore the *neak ta*, i.e. the Chinese ancestor spirits, were angry and had punished him by causing his illness. He had acquired the buffalo for the sacrifice, but since he had not become any better, he had sold the buffalo. Instead it was decided, after consultations with the mediums, that he should have a ceremony on 27 January 2002, with 35 mediums. Since November 2001 there had been some improvement, he could eat and sleep but dared not go far from his house. The mediums had said that he might not be cured by the ceremony, but that he would not die. The cost of the ceremony would be more than one million Riel, even without the buffalo sacrifice and with only two chickens.

Apart from the expenses for the ceremony, he still owes 600 U.S. Dollars to the constructors for building the mosque, but that should be paid next month. His friend, *hatep* El, helps him by selling chickens. He had already received some financial support (apart from our "seed-money") from Kong Som Ol, who on behalf of the Ministry of Cults and Religion, has contributed the tiles for the floor and five tons of cement. He also indicated that people from the neighbouring villages were after him, out of envy because of the fact that he had successfully managed to construct the mosque and that he had been attacked by their bad spirits and sorcery. He

complained that the attacks were not fair, since he had long since quit community and congregational politics, realising that his moral standards and physical condition were not what they used to be when he was younger.

We should note that the Cham view their universe as one where spiritual beings intervene in the world of humans. Those individuals who suffer from illnesses are seen as victims of evil and as being controlled by the evil forces that have somehow broken away from the accepted social order. Illness, Bell notes, "takes root when key social relations – among the living or the living and dead – are disturbed" (Bell 1997: 116). Suffering is therefore not related just to the individual and his or her own body, but to key social relations in the community. The *cai* rituals address moral and social dimensions of life not dealt with by biomedicine, including sorcery and bad luck (cf. Kapferer 1979: 111). Although Om Riess as Imam and village leader is really not supposed to have anything to do with the *cai* rituals, yet – being a Cham – he cannot avoid it as he finds himself diagnosed as a case of possession illness, supposed to have been possessed by the *cai* spirits.

During the divination and the diagnosis of sorcery and illness, the victim's social relations are carefully examined during nightly ceremonies, when his or her relations to kin and ancestors of the *chour-sambour*, "the family lines on both the father's and the mother's sides" are scrutinised. After Om Riess had approached the spirits through the mediums and gradually recovered, he promised the spirits to stage a ritual for them lasting "one night and one day", as well as sacrifice a pair of chickens.

Restaging the theatre state

The ritual is staged in a shelter which is raised specifically for the purpose in front of the patient's house. The shelter is said to represent both the Champa Royal Palace and the barge on which the King of Champa went to war against the Vietnamese, according to the myth (cf. Trankell 2003). The ritual is supposed to exorcise the spirit, heal the victim and purify the immediate family and kin of the suffering person.

The ritual constitutes an important element in the community's repertoire for cultural production and the rather elaborate ritual is carried out as a public event, which involves the major part of the community and also has a certain entertainment value. Women use the opportunity to earn some welcomed extra money by offering snacks and drinks for sale. Children are included in the ritual by being instructed how to support the musicians of the "royal orchestra" and to beat the rhythm of the music on bamboo stems, placed on the ground.

At the beginning of the ritual the "signs of power" are displayed, including banners and weapons (cf. Anderson 1990: 32–33; Geertz 1980). The

mediums usually perform dressed up in their traditional finery, which is supposed to be traditional Cham dress. In reality, the dressing up is in the out-of-the-ordinary and quite anachronistic combination of garments, jewellery and weapons that Morris has termed items of transmission (Morris 2000). Much to my surprise, Om Riess performed in the ritual dressed up in modern-style jacket and steel-rimmed reading glasses identical to those usually worn by his friend, anthropologist Jan Ovesen, combined with a black Muslim head dress Malay style and ordinary Cham check-patterned sarong.

For the successful completion of the ritual and the exorcism of the evil it is important that the spirits involved identify themselves by giving their names. Since Om Riess, supported by the mediums, performed in the dance, he was, in the opinion of the mediums, also possessed. But in the negotiations, the spirit possessing Om Riess refused to reveal his or her name. The mediums were not happy about this, and some of them were crying. Other signs of disagreement between the mediums also started to appear as they formed different interpretations of the situation. The younger mediums claimed that the spirits were unhappy with the situation and requested that the ceremonies be carried on until the name of the spirit had been revealed and its demands met. In reply to this, more moderate voices suggested that the ceremony be completed with the sacrifice of the chicken as agreed beforehand.

In escalating their demands, the younger mediums on behalf of their spirits voiced the demand that Om Riess quit his position as Imam to become a spirit medium, to prevent bad luck from striking the community. To this the voice of *Po T' Gon* strongly requested that demands be moderated in consideration of the situation and the fact that sacrifices had already been made by the victim and his family. Was it not true that he had already performed a number of sacrifices to honour the spirits? Was it not true that his wife had given herself up, and was now a medium? Was it not true that, apart from this sacrifice, the spirits had also already claimed his son as a medium? Justice and fair treatment was demanded on Om Riess's behalf. And so it went on, the songs and the sounds of strong voices raised and fell. The old and experienced mediums refused to give up their authority and did not give in. The reason that the spirit who was possessing Om Riess did not reveal his name, they claimed, was due to the "fact" that he was an ordinary ancestor spirit and not one of the *cai* spirits. The solution would be to invite the spirit to enjoy the ceremony and kindly accept the sacrifice. This was finally agreed upon. As the ceremony was closing, and the sacrifice had been carried away to the bush outside of the village, commotion was noticed in the neighbourhood and a message was sent to the mediums that someone else needed their support.

Cosmology, ritual politics and changing sociopolitical relations

Where rituals have political dimensions, as in the case related here, they indicate that the ritual as medium of communication "does not simply express or transmit values and messages but also actually creates situations" (Bell 1997: 136). Therefore the subordinations to power, the watching and participating in processions and the like are not only "reflections of the relationships of authority" – "they create these relations; they create power in the very tangible exercise of it" (Bell 1997: 136; cf. Kapferer 1979).

The imams and the village leaders act as mediators in the settling of social conflicts in the village, especially those relating to marriage and divorce, or between neighbours over land, or trespassing of cattle into the fields. But there are still conflicts over wealth and resources, name and reputation, sometimes suspicion and jealousy, unsubstantiated rumours and the like caused by the difficult conditions under which the people live. Such quarrels and uncertainties are brought to the mediums for divination.

To take one example, Om Riess's eldest son came and asked me for medicine since he was feeling weak. The reason for his uneasiness and physical feeling of weakness was that somebody had stabbed one of his cows in the back with a knife, so that it was bleeding. The Cham are personally attached to their cattle, so it was not difficult to understand his sadness. He did not know of the reason for stabbing the cow and nobody had told him. The family felt threatened and suspected that somebody was using sorcery against them, and subsequently asked the mediums to divine the case.

Although most of the mediums are women, quite a few are also men. Even some children have been initiated as mediums in the cult. The mediums themselves often bear witness to the fact that their social standing is somewhat ambiguous. This is perhaps not surprising given the fact that the communities are confessional Muslims. Nevertheless, the mediums, too, consider themselves faithful members of the Muslim congregation. Like most women, it is true that female mediums do not have their own direct access to Islam as a religio-political arena, but this is equally true of other women in the community. Female mediums, like other women, carry out the practices of Islam, such as for instance cooking for the congregational gathering on Fridays and carrying the food in proud procession to present the meal to their male relatives and receive public recognition for their contribution. The male mediums also consider themselves faithful to the religion and participate in the congregation in the same way as other members of the community. It is therefore not fair to say that the mediums are deprived of religion, i.e. of the Muslim congregational life.

The cult is transgendered in the sense discussed by Rosalind Morris (1995) as "gender twice over", which in this context is to say that gender is "good to think", and therefore used as a statement about something else found to carry priority over gender. I would like to suggest that one important aspect of the cult is one of continuity, in the sense that it connects people to their past.

The mediums therefore represent other social distinctions and differences in their society than that of a Hindu cosmology *versus* the Muslim religion. The pre-revolutionary society was still a stratified society with two caste-like formations, those considered to be descendants of the aristocratic warriors, and the peasants and commoners. Older mediums have their own quite specific experiences from pre-revolutionary society. During this period the rites were in decline, possibly due to the modernisation campaigns promoting rural development along with literacy and biomedicine. In general, the older mediums were recruited from the upper strata of former aristocrats and warriors, who in pre-revolutionary society served Khmer royalty as soldiers, bodyguards and policemen. It seems that in general the high-caste women, at least in the nostalgic retrospect, were held in great esteem for their education and knowledge of both culture and religion and represented a certain refined cultural genre and style. Today a few of them still remain with the core of the *cai* cult. The levelling of the community due to the war and the Khmer Rouge revolution has brought into the cult many young mediums from the lower strata of commoners and peasants, named *riess*, which means "citizen". Nevertheless, endless divinations are spent in search for the *cai* spirits in the family line until found. While mediums tell stories of how UNTAC revived all the spirits that had disappeared during the Khmer Rouge period, younger mediums still find it hard to gain access to the stories of their spirits, symbolic assets which are jealously guarded in the cult.

The link between poverty and sorcery/witchcraft has long been established in anthropology (e.g. Ardener 1970; Kapferer 1997). In Khmer society the Cham are known to practice magic and they are sometimes visited by Khmer people wanting to buy their knowledge (Vickery 1984: 181). The Cham communities are, however, also well known for their solidarity and kindness to each other when in difficulty, a kindness at times extended to Khmer (Vickery 1984: 181). Being unable to return to their own area at the time of the Vietnamese liberation in early 1979, the Cham received permission to settle in a few abandoned former Khmer villages. Chams identify themselves as *neak sre neak prey*, i.e. people making a living from fields and forest, and they proudly regard the white and sandy soil from which they produce their rice as their own second nature. In the early years of our fieldwork, however, some people were also able to make substantial income by crossing the railway to the west of the village in order to take on

logging work. In doing so, they had to face the financial and political demands of the remaining Khmer Rouge cadres. The area was, and still is, infested with mines and malaria, which were and are real threats to the people who go there. After the coup in 1997, many women in the Cham community found themselves deprived of their small earnings from selling drinks and snacks to travellers along the road, since travelling came to an almost complete halt as westerners fled the country. In addition, the military made new claims on as much as one third of the rice-fields, further diminishing their means of subsistence.

It is in this social, economic and political context that we must see the current flourishing of the Cham spirit possession rituals in general, and the actions of the mediums in particular. As I understand it, all the mediums aspire not only to social recognition for themselves but also to recognition and respect for their community. The discrepancies with regard to means and ends which I have described in this chapter make these aspirations difficult to achieve.

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