

Notes on Pchum Ben

A working paper of Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

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Every year in Cambodia, during the month of Potrbotr (late September – early October), a ceremony takes place called *Pchum Ben*. It begins with *Kan Ben*² on the first day of the month, and ends with Pchum Ben³ on the 15th of the month. During this two-week period, Cambodian Buddhists go to pagodas to give offerings (especially food and rice) to those who have passed away.

During Pchum Ben, very early in the mornings, people cook rice and, in the palm of their hands, form rice balls called *bay ben* (see figure 1). Before dawn, they bring these bay ben, along with other offerings, to the pagoda. There, they take part in a ceremony performed by the monks at the pagoda's main building (the vihira) to convene the souls of the deceased (figure 2). At a certain point in the ceremony, the participants circle the Vihira three times (see figure 3 and 4), scattering the bay ben onto the ground. After the procession, some of the people return inside and join the monks' chanting. Others remain outdoors in the temple compound, lighting incense and placing rice balls and other offerings to the *prett* (the damned); the deceased who have no neighbors, friends, or families to commemorate them; and to those whose families cannot attend (see figures 5 and 6).

As part of the Pchum Ben, people participate in different services and ceremonies. For instance, grains of rice or sand are constructed into five mounds, which represent Mount Meru where Brahminist gods reside⁴ (see figure 7). On the last day, Pchum Ben culminates with the bay ben being gathered together to form a collective offering. A religious ritual of great significance, *bang skoll*, contributes a spirit of solemnity at the close of this yearly process of mourning.

Held throughout the country, the Pchum Ben is one of the major annual religious-social-cultural ceremonies in which almost every Cambodian takes part. It is believed that this ceremony allows the souls of all those who have passed away to enter into a peaceful journey in the cycle of life and death, including reincarnation. (see figure 8)

¹ I do not intend to present a detailed historical, anthropological, or religious study of the Pchum Ben ceremony. Nor is my intention to say that Pchum Ben was or is a ceremony of reconciliation per se. Rather, these notes consist of reflections on a cultural expressive form that can offer some insights into and resources for conversations about collective processes of memorializing, mourning, and, perhaps, reconciliation.

² *Kan* in modern Khmer means to hold, to start, to begin, but it can also mean to “commit to something,” like those who commit to the Dharma (Buddhist law), in this case it is said of that person: *Neak Kan Sil*.

³ *Pchum* in modern Khmer means gathering or getting together, and *ben* refers to a rice ball that is formed in the palm of the hand. These individual rice balls are put together to obtain an ensemble, a mound. So Pchum Ben is the day when all the rice balls contributed by everyone during those 15 days are gathered together.

⁴ These mounds are also built during the Cambodian New Year festival. The act of rebuilding Mount Meru symbolically recycles the previous year and reenergizes the coming one.

I was drawn to present these notes on Pchum Ben because of the multiple layers of meaning embedded within this popular practice. In exploring those meanings, I thought that there could be inspiration for thinking about issues and questions of reconciliation, memory, and mourning.

For instance, formal elements of this ceremony suggest the interaction between the one and the multiple, the individual and the collective. The grains of sand or rice gathered together form an ensemble in the shape of a mound; the individual rice balls (each of which is formed by many grains of cooked rice) are gathered to form a collective ben; individual candles gathered together form an image of collective light. The notion of private and public is also articulated through the combination of paying respect to the deceased of one's own family as well as to the deceased of the community as a whole. The Pchum Ben is the result of a collective effort in which the expressions of individuals find their meanings as part of the whole, and in return the whole collective ceremony is dependent upon the contributions of each individual. The shaping of the rice ball directly in the hand of each participant suggests a sort of embodied contribution. The rice balls can almost be seen as a piece of people's bodies. The gathering (pchum) of all the bay ben on the last day is a symbolic act of reassembling all that has been scattered – bodies and souls, family members and community – in order to reshape and reenergize the collective. From an aesthetic point of view, it is also interesting to observe a cultural form constructed by a collective energy, as opposed to an artwork produced by the will of a single artist. None of the participants can claim authorship. The delicate interdependence of the individual and the collective in this ceremony relies on the common belief in the necessity of fulfilling a sacred act.

Pchum Ben also inspires a nuanced view of memorials as sites of remembrance and commemoration. If there were a shape or form to Pchum Ben as a memorial, it is certainly not the physical space of the vihira, nor the object, such as the rice ball or sand mound, though they are important elements. It would be a sort of non-form, generated by the energy of the recycling of the ritual. Its sustainability relies on its annual reenactment. It is dependent upon people, not objects or structures. Thus, the very essence of this ceremony is held in the collective consciousness, which confers organic and vital qualities to it.

In Pchum Ben, the act of remembering those who have passed away is inclusive. It does not segregate, categorize, or divide the deceased or the mourners. There is no hierarchy based on mine and yours, or even between damned and non-damned. For these reasons, it provides an open space for all those who wish to take part. It is the idea of death itself that is acknowledged, rather than the memory of any particular deceased person. Although people perform the Pchum Ben each year as a way to pay respect to the deceased, it is also a way for them to reaffirm the ethical relationships among the living. The act of gathering together (the act of pchum ben) helps to weave the threads of the social and cultural fabric.

Recent Cambodian history is shadowed by the legacy of the Khmer Rouge period. It is an inheritance that will require generations to “deal with.” Many questions and issues remain to be explored, including the question of how to mourn those who died in that era. The prevailing assumption today, is that the quest for responses from a legal perspective should take priority, through, for instance, the international tribunal that is taking shape. Without assuming the outcome of this tribunal, it is likely that the aim is to ascertain which crimes were committed by which of the few remaining Khmer Rouge leaders and eventually to punish them. This retributive method can set in motion dynamics of guilt, separation, and blame; it can provide the illusion that justice has been done. It could be very instructive to look at the real motivations underlying the establishment of this tribunal. What is it really for? Who does it really serve? Whose agenda is driving it?

This is a different set of complex questions, beyond the scope of these brief notes. By mentioning this upcoming tribunal, I do not mean to deny the necessity for legal action. However, we must always remind ourselves that, from the human side, what happened during the Khmer Rouge era was a tragedy for those who passed away, but also, and especially, for those who remain. The quest for responses cannot be simple or simplified, reduced only to legal action. It requires a complex and subtle approach, integrating religious, ethical, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions to address questions such as individual and collective needs for mourning.

This is a question that can be considered in light of the Pchum Ben. From a religious perspective, those who died during the Khmer Rouge era, whether perpetrators or victims, have their souls condemned to wander, damned to never reincarnate, unless acknowledged in a proper ceremony. That ceremony could be a sort of “special Pchum Ben.” In fact, for the living, this religious act of acknowledgment is fundamental, and prior to any process of mourning. Those who lost families and relatives can only start down the path toward healing, accepting, forgiving, and reconciling only after this “initial duty” has been fulfilled. As of today, this ceremony has still not been accomplished. The impulse of the Pchum Ben is one of rebuilding and regathering, rather than dividing, separating, and scattering. Living and deeply rooted in Cambodian society, it draws its strength from the religious and spiritual strata. It can constitute a resource, a reservoir of possibilities, for investigating creative approaches that can reach of the depths of human needs in the face of such tragedy.