

History of Water Festival

The history of the Regatta Festival has been chronicled by the Cambodian people and also foreigners for a very long time. In fact, the festival is depicted in stones of the Angkorian period. There are three different histories to the festival, each quite distinctive.



1. According to the chronicle of King Jayavarman VII in the ancient Academic Buddhist Institute, it is claimed; in the 12th century of the Angkorian era, Cambodia had achieved peace and prosperity following Preah Bath Jayavarman VII's success in a naval war with the neighboring Chams. The war victory (1177-1181 AD) liberated Cambodia and is inscribed on the bas relief of the Bayon Temple and the Banteay Chhmar Temple. On the bas relief there are images of the navy with Preah Bath Jayavarman VII bravely wielding a fighting stick and bow on the royal barge.

2. According to documentation written by Mr. Trach Pen, the lay teacher of the Academic Buddhist College in Kampuchea Kraom Kleang Khet, it is mentioned that: In the Longvek era (2071 BE. 1528 AD). Preah Bath Ang Chann I appointed Ponhea Tat to the position of King Tranh (District King) of Kampuchea Kraom Bassak District.

Racing at the junction allowed easier access for many provinces. The event became an annual tradition providing the navy with the opportunity to show its military prowess.

3. It is said that the water festival is one of the most spectacular traditional events. It is described as being similar to some festivals held in the north of Europe today. Some traditionalists claim the history of the festival lies in close connection with the history of Buddha, however, others translate that the festival represents a thanksgiving to the Gods of Water and Earth for providing the livelihood and welfare for the Cambodian people. One final translation relates to the festival following the tradition of Brahmanism and reflecting the daily life of the farming community.

The District King assigned a royal administration to defend his district. He divided his navy into three different types of boats with his troops trained in specific fighting styles:

Group 1- The Vanguard: A boat that is similar in shape to today's racing boat.

Group 2- The Reserve Army: The rowing boats traveled two abreast.

Group 3- Bassak Army: A large boat with a roof structure, fixed oars and sail. This boat is similar in shape to the traditional used on the Bassak. The boat was used primarily to store the army's supplies.

The navy was headed by the King on Earth and King Tranh who directed four ministers (Four Columns). During the period of the full moon in November the four ministers mobilised their troops for a campaign for one day and one night. The navy was ordered to a boat race on the river Peam Kanthao in Khet Kleang at a junction of the river.

The water festival is held on the full moon in November coinciding with the rainy season. During this time the lakes flood creating great seas and in turn it is time to harvest the rice. When the Mekong River swells during the period August to November, the waters flow into the Tonle Sap Lake from the south to the north. Then in the low water season following November, the lake waters ebb and the flow reverses back from the Tonle Sap into the Mekong River from the north to the south. This annual flooding of the Mekong River, with its source in Tibet, provides the livelihood for many Cambodian farmers.

The silt that is carried by the flood waters is extremely fertile providing a rich resource for Cambodia. The crops produced in the low water season are essential to the welfare of the Cambodian people.

For this reason the Khmer people choose the full moon of Khe Kadek as the time to conduct the water festival, the procession of illuminated floats, the salutation to the moon, and the Auk Ambok as a means to express their profound thanks to the Mekong River and Tonle Sap River.

The festival is usually held for three days, i.e. the 14th and 15th of the waxing moon and the 1st of the waning moon. Festivities take place in front of the Royal Palace.

The Festival of Illuminated Floats (Bondet Protib)

This festival consecrates Preah Changkaum Keo (the main parts of Buddha) in the Naga World and the Buddha's footprints in the five directions detailed below. The Khmer people conduct this festival during the full moon of November. It is believed that great merit and prosperity will be provided to the country.



In Pali Teathavong scripture it is said that the four Preah Changkaum Keo are dedicated in four directions: Traitroeng Paradise, Naga World, Srok Kanthea and Toan Borakaling Roath

In Pali Pheana Veara it is said that the footprints of the Buddha are located in five directions: Sovann Mealika Barapoat, Sovann Barapoat, Sovann Koda Barapoat, Yoonka Borei and Stoeng Neamatea.

In the prose and Pali praise of Preah Bath "Yortha Bate" it is also said that Buddha's footprints are located in five directions as in Pheana Veara.

The Festival of the Sampeah Preah Khe and Auk Ambok

Sampeah Preah Khe means the salutation to the moon. **Auk Ambok** means the offering of bananas and Ambok. This tradition is based on ancient Khmer legends. In the first phrase of Pali scripture of Baromathatibani Atha Katha Chariya Bedak, it is said that the Great Buddha was born on the full moon as Sasa Bandit or "Wise man born in the form of the Rabbit".



Indra decided to test the faces by disguising himself as an old Brahman and begged for Sasa Bandit's flesh as food. Sasa Bandit told the old Brahman to light a fire and once the fire was burning strongly he shook himself three times to let the insects perched on him to escape and then leapt into the flames. Fortunately the flames did not touch Sasa Bandit and the old Brahman hurried to carry him to the moon in his arms. He drew an image of the rabbit on the moon in Maneang Sela "plaster" and wished the figure of the rabbit long life.

Under the power of the Buddha and the resolution of Indra, the shape of the rabbit has appeared in the moon ever since. To reflect this belief the Khmer people celebrate it annually during the full moon of the Khe Kadek. They prepare special cakes, Ambok and bananas to salute the moon.

(Source: Ministry of Tourism of the Kingdom of Cambodia)