

Pchum Ben in Cambodia

Each year in the fall, Cambodia celebrates one of its most cherished holidays called Pchum Ben. Pchum Ben combines traditional Cambodian beliefs with modern Buddhist traditions and honors ancestors reaching back as far as seven generations. Also known as “Ancestor’s Day”, the holiday celebrates the return of the spirit ancestors to the world of the living by providing them with offerings. The holiday is celebrated by everyone in Cambodia and serves as a yearly reminder of the importance of community and family.

Pchum Ben is the end of a period of lent which is observed for three months in the fall. The Buddhist monks sequester themselves inside of pagodas, which are religiously significant temples found throughout Asia, and meditate on particular mantras and sutras. They often chant in unison in order to create an atmosphere that is welcoming to the spirit ancestors. The first day of Pchum Ben marks the end of the monk’s lent.

Pchum Ben happens on the 15th day of the 10th month according to the Khmer calendar, which usually falls in October of the Gregorian calendar. Before the start of Pchum Ben, there is a fourteen day period called Dak Ben, which leads up to the main celebration. During Dak Ben, families take turns preparing meals which will be offered to the monks who dwell in the pagodas for lent. During this time, it is said that the spiritual ancestors linger outside the pagoda and await offerings to be provided by their descendants.

After two weeks of Dak Ben, Pchum Ben officially starts. The holiday lasts for three days and consists of various rituals and traditions across Cambodia. One of the most important aspects of the holiday is making offerings to the monks and spirit ancestors. Families rise at 3am or 4am to begin preparing food to drop off at the pagodas. Monks abstain from eating food after noon, so the families must begin cooking early to ensure that they will make it to all their stops before then.

In addition to feeding the monks, families also prepare food for their ancestors. While “pchum” translates to “gathering together”, “ben” translates to “little balls of rice”. With regard to the holiday name, families prepare little balls of rice that are tossed outside the pagoda to feed the spirit ancestors, as they are unable to enter the pagoda themselves. The balls of rice are called bay ben, and are a combination of sticky rice and sesame seeds. Cambodian beliefs dictate that the spirit ancestors can only consume food that has been prepared by their own family. If the

family fails to offer them food, they can become displeased and curse the family with bad luck. In addition to the rice balls, families typically offer incense, fruit, and flowers to the deceased.

Other rituals such as lighting candles, community dancing, donating money, cleaning the pagodas, and performing other acts of charity to accrue merit are popular during Pchum Ben. Often, musicians perform a traditional style of music near the pagodas as families come to make offerings. Other traditions include buffalo racing and ceremonies of wrestling.

After the holiday is over, the people of Cambodia are given a three day public holiday. The holiday offers a time for Cambodians to go visit their families and hometowns and to reconnect with one another. As respect for families and elders is of the utmost importance in Cambodia, this time is cherished by the entire nation. Pchum Ben is a holiday that connects the past with the present and reminds the people of Cambodia of those who came before them. It offers an intentional slowing down to give back to ancestors, family, and the spiritual community of Cambodia.

Citations

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