

Prachum Benda "Ancestors' Day"

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Cambodians believe that although most living creatures are reincarnated at death, due to bad karma, some souls are not reincarnated but rather remain trapped in the spirit world. Each year, for fifteen days, these souls are released from the spirit world to search for their living relatives, meditate and repent. The fifteen-day observance of *Prachum Benda*, or Ancestors' Day, is a time for living relatives to remember their ancestors and offer food to those unfortunate enough to have become trapped in the spirit world. Furthermore, it is an important opportunity for living relatives to meditate and pray to help reduce the bad karma of their ancestors, thus enabling the ancestors to become reincarnated and leave the torment and misery of the spirit world.

Prachum Benda, better known colloquially as *Pchum Ben*, may be translated as "gathering together to make offerings" (*prachum* meaning "gathering together" and *benda* meaning "offering"). The observance usually begins in mid-September and lasts an entire lunar cycle, constituting the fifteen days that ancestral spirits are given to visit their living relatives. In the year 2003, the specific dates for its commencement and conclusion are September 11th and September 25th, respectively.

Pchum Ben is the fifteenth and final day of the observance and consists of a large gathering of laity for festivities at the local Buddhist temple. Each day leading up to the fifteenth, however, is also important and special. Different families host services at the temple on each of the fourteen days prior to the final celebration. The days leading up to *Pchum Ben* are known as *Kann Ben* (*kann* meaning "hosting or holding") and are numbered one through fourteen accordingly.

Prior to the day a family or families are scheduled to host a *Kann Ben*, relatives and close family friends will go to the temple to make preparations. During the preparations, urns of ancestors, traditionally kept on temple grounds, are polished and brought to the *viheara* (the main chanting room). Also, the names of ancestors are recorded onto an invitation list. This is important because spirits cannot receive offerings unless they are first invited to do so by living relatives. In the evening, the host family and other participants will join the monks in the *viheara* for meditation and chanting. The monks will then pass on the Buddha's teachings, as well as offer blessings and guidance to those present.

Before sunrise on the morning of the *Kann Ben*, special food is prepared for the ancestral spirits to enjoy. Favorite dishes of various flavors and colors are offered. They range from the simple and traditional *nom ansom* (sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves with assorted fillings) to the more elaborate and rich *amok* (steamed fish fillet marinated in a complex mix of spices and herbs). As a gesture of kindness, the hosts also prepare *bai ben* (steamed sticky rice mixed with sesame seeds and then formed into balls) to be thrown into shaded areas about the temple grounds. This mixture is an offering to the hungry souls who have been forgotten or no longer have living relatives to make them offerings.

Before noon on *Kann Ben*, candles and incense are lit and the various dishes are offered to the monks. The prepared list of names is then recited and burned. The reading and burning of the list is a ritual performed to alert and direct the wandering souls to the location of their families. It is an invitation for the ancestral spirits to join their living relatives as they commemorate life. After consuming the proffered meal, the monks continue to chant blessings, sprinkling (or showering)

holy water onto the families and their visiting ancestral spirits. The *Kann Ben* is a time of remembrance and an opportunity to accumulate good karma on behalf of one's ancestors.

The rituals of *Kann Ben* continue for fourteen days. On the fifteenth day, the traditionally observed *Pchum Ben*, families in the local area gather to perform the same ritual of ancestral remembrance and offer an immense communal feast. This day is especially important because if any ancestors are unfortunate enough to have become *Priad* spirits, it is the only day that they may receive offerings of food and benefit from the good karma earned by their relatives. *Priads* are the most miserable of all souls due to their exceptional bad karma. Unlike other spirits, *Priads* fear light and can only receive prayers, food and be reunited with their living relatives during the darkest day of this lunar cycle, the day of *Pchum Ben*.

Participating in the *Pchum Ben*, whether as a host or participant, is a very important aspect of Cambodian culture. It is a time of reunion and commemoration. It is a time to express love and appreciation for one's ancestors. By offering food and good karma to those possibly trapped in the spirit world, living relatives help assuage their misery and guide them back into the cycle of reincarnation. After the ancestors are reincarnated, they have the opportunity to accumulate good karma on their own and look forward to attaining a peaceful inner spirit, which is the best blessing a living relative can wish for their ancestors.