



Heritage or Commodity? The Katé Festival, Cham Identity, and Tourism in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on the marginalised Cham communities in Vietnam. Historically, the Cham people have inhabited central Vietnam for over six centuries, yet their population has witnessed a continuous decline, with current estimates suggesting a population of no more than 178,948 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2023). Once engaged in prolonged conflict with the Viet majority, the Cham are now receiving unprecedented attention from Vietnamese authorities and society.

A notable aspect of this shift is the strategic promotion of Cham cultural heritage as both a tangible and intangible asset. With Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand and Indonesia experiencing significant economic growth through tourism, Vietnam appears to be capitalising on the rural character of Cham settlements to foster eco-tourism. The Cham's rich cultural traditions—rooted in a Hindu heritage—are being emphasised through the revival of pottery-making, weaving, folk dances, and lunar calendar-based festivals.

This article examines the motivations behind this abrupt shift in state policy and public perception, exploring how the Cham are being repositioned within Vietnam's broader cultural and economic framework. The analysis highlights the ways in which Cham heritage is being leveraged to contribute to Vietnam's tourism sector while also interrogating the potential implications of such representation for the Cham community itself.

Keywords: Katé festival, Cham, Cham Balamon, Cham Bani, Champa, Vietnam,



The Katé Festival is a vital cultural event celebrated by the Cham people, an ethnic minority group primarily residing in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces of Vietnam. The festival takes place in the seventh month of the Cham calendar, typically in late September or early October. It is a time of reverence, reflection, and festivity, bringing together families and communities to pay homage to their spiritual and ancestral roots. This paper provides a detailed exploration of the festival's historical background, its various rituals, and its evolving significance in a rapidly modernizing world.

The Champa empire, once a dominant force in Southeast Asia, flourished between the 2nd and 19th centuries. The earliest dynasties of Chams adopted the Hindu religion as seen clearly in the Võ Cạnh inscription. “The Vo-Chanh Rock Inscription (No. 1) refers to the royal family of Śri Māra, and its royal author is styled as the “delight of the family of Śri Māra”. The inscription is not dated, but may be referred, on palaeographic grounds, to the second or third century A. D. Thus a Hindu or Hinduised dynasty was founded by Śri Māra in the second century A. D., and it was ruling over the region, later known as Kauthara, about the second or third century A. D.” (Majumdar, 1927). Chinese texts that record the founding of the Kingdom of Champa (which the Chinese called Lin-yi) around the year 192 C.E. This further attests the date as mentioned in the inscription. (Maspero, 2002).

The Katé Festival has its roots in the worship of Hindu deities, particularly the goddess Po Nagar and the king-poet Po Klaung Garai. Over centuries, the festival has adapted to various religious influences while maintaining its essential spirit of reverence and community cohesion.

When the Viet established a kingdom at the beginning of the 10th century, Champa, a southern neighbor of Đại Việt, had already become a well-established entity. As an independent kingdom, Champa was compelled to defend its territory against the threat of the Khmer Empire to the west, while also seeking to expand northward with the aim of conquering the Vietnamese state. Amidst internal turmoil in Đại Việt following the assassination of Emperor Đinh Tiên Hoàng, Champa attempted an invasion of Đại Việt in 979, in support of China, but was repelled due to the strong defensive efforts of the Vietnamese forces under the command of Lê Hoàn. This event marked a



pivotal moment in history, sparking a prolonged and intense rivalry between the Cham and Vietnamese kingdoms (Taylor, Hall, & Whitmore, 1976).

Many Chams, especially those in the south, sought refuge in Cambodia, where they gradually converted to Islam, influenced by the already established Malay and Khmer Muslim communities. This conversion allowed them to integrate more easily into Cambodian society while preserving a distinct ethnic identity separate from both the Viets and the Khmer majority. Today, the Cham Muslim population in Cambodia traces its roots to this historical exodus, maintaining linguistic and cultural elements of their Champa heritage while embracing an Islamic identity that sets them apart from their ancestors' predominantly Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Starting in the 2nd century AD, the Cham people began settling along the coasts of Vietnam, gradually overtaking political control from the indigenous population. Over time, they lost connections with their ancestral homeland in the Indonesian archipelago, with Hinduism being the primary cultural link they retained. During this period, Buddhism also spread into Vietnam, and together, these two religions gradually supplanted the animistic belief systems that had long dominated Southeast Asia. With a formidable naval force, the Cham established the Kingdom of Champa in central Vietnam, later expanding their territory into parts of present-day Laos and Cambodia. At their peak, they even captured the palace complexes of Angkor Wat from the Khmer Empire. Champa remained a dominant regional power for over a millennium, flourishing between 500 and 1500 AD.

With the rise of the Vietnamese communist regime, efforts were made to obscure and suppress Cham history, mirroring similar patterns seen in other communist states. At the time, approximately two-thirds of the Cham population adhered to Hinduism, while the remaining third practiced Islam—both of which stood in contrast to the communist government's atheistic ideology. Additionally, the ruling authorities sought to prevent potential territorial claims by the Cham over their ancestral lands, further contributing to their marginalization. As a result, the Cham people faced systemic exclusion, and tensions between them and other ethnic groups were often exacerbated by state policies. Their history was largely omitted from school curricula, and Cham



Hindu temples were left unacknowledged in official tourist guides. Tragically, many of these temples suffered extensive destruction in the 20th century. The border region between Northern and Southern Vietnam—home to some of the oldest Champa structures—became a major battleground during the Vietnam War. Intense fighting between North Vietnamese communist forces and the pro-American South Vietnamese army led to the devastation of numerous Cham temples, with only a handful surviving the conflict.

The Katé festival takes place in a vast space and lasts for a long period with the main ritual ceremony falling on the first day of the seventh month of the *Cham* calendar, late September or early October of the calendar year. The festival is held at the same time in three different temples in Ninh Thuan province, including the towers of Po Klong Garai (Cham King Jaya Simhavarman III is traditionally credited with constructing the tower dedicated to Po Klaung Garai in the late 13th century. However, the discovery of several earlier steles suggests that his role may have been one of restoration and expansion rather than original construction (Ngô, 2006) in Phan Rang-Thap Cham city and Po Rome and Po Nagar in Ninh Phuoc district. Nowadays, the festival is also revived at Po Sah Inu tower in Phan Thiet city of Binh Thuan province (Nguyễn, 2018).

The *Cham* gather at a temple where the festival will be organized to attend a ritual held to welcome costumes of the gods and goddesses who are worshipped at the temple, including Goddess Ponagar, the mythological mother of the Vietnam's ancient Champa kingdom, and King Po Klaong Garai and King Po Rome. In the past, costumes of gods and goddesses used to be kept by the *Raglai*, who had a kinship relationship with the *Cham*. Therefore, the *Cham* people had to organize a costume-receiving ritual one day before the official opening of the festival to receive the costumes from the *Raglai*. But nowadays, such a ritual is held only at the Ponagar tower to receive the Goddess Po Nagar's costumes as the *Raglai* has handed over the costumes of King Po Klaong Garai and King Po Rome to the *Cham*.

The atmosphere of the festival continues to flood *Cham* villages. To prepare for the village ritual and activities, villagers assign each other to sweep the temple which is considered the common house of the village and prepare offerings and the stage for art performances.



Each *Cham* village, called *Paley*, worships its own deity, called *Pokal*, and chooses either Wednesday or Saturday to organise the festival. The village head who conducts the ritual is not necessarily a *Cham Boloman*¹ dignitary but a prestigious person conversant with the village traditional customs. He will represent villagers to bring offerings to the village deity and pray for peace and blessings for villagers.

Built in the 13th century, the tower complex was constructed to honor the Cham King Po Klong Garai (1151-1205), who ruled Panduranga (modern-day Ninh Thuan). The site comprises three towers: the main tower, where a statue of King Po Klong Garai is worshiped, the Gate Tower in the east, and the Fire God Tower in the south, known for its boat-shaped roof.

These towers are enclosed by a perpendicular wall and showcase remarkable artistic value in terms of architecture, construction, and relief sculpture, featuring images like God Shiva and the sacred cow Nandin. In 2016, the Prime Minister designated Po Klong Garai as a special national relic.

The Cham people celebrate their most significant annual ritual, the Katé Festival, at Po Klong Garai and two other towers, Po Rome and Po Inu Nugar, all located in Ninh Thuan Province. The festival is held on the last day of the sixth month and the first day of the seventh month of the Cham calendar, typically falling in September or October.

The festival spans three days, with each day dedicated to different religious and communal activities (Ta, 2019):

- **Day 1: The Opening Ceremony (Lễ Mở Cửa Tháp)** The festival commences with a sacred ceremony at the Po Nagar or Po Klaung Garai towers, where Cham priests, known as Acar, perform traditional rituals to invite deities into their shrines. This ritual, called "Mở Cửa Tháp," symbolizes the opening of communication between the spiritual and earthly realms.
- **Day 2: Worship of the Deities and Ancestors** The second day is dedicated to prayers, offerings, and performances that honor the deities and ancestors. Families clean and

¹ *Balamon* in Cham signifies the term *Brāhmaṇa* as a social class.



decorate their altars, offering food, incense, and symbolic items. Traditional music and dances, such as the Saranai and Ginang drum performances, play an essential role in this day's observances.

- **Day 3: Community Celebrations and Festivities** The final day is marked by vibrant community gatherings, including traditional Cham sports, weaving exhibitions, and folk singing. This is a time of joyful reunions and storytelling, reinforcing cultural identity and solidarity among the Cham people.

The official ceremony of the festival will undergo four steps: processioning costumes of gods and goddesses, opening the temples' gates, bathing genie statues, and changing the costumes of genie statues. The Katé Festival is not merely a religious event but a broader cultural phenomenon that helps sustain Cham heritage. It serves multiple purposes:

- **Religious Function:** Strengthens devotion to Hindu and indigenous Cham deities.
- **Social Cohesion:** Provides an opportunity for family reunions and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Reinforces traditional Cham music, dance, and crafts. Ninh Thuan Province (VietnamPlus, n.d, 2024), where the festival is prominently celebrated, has invested in infrastructure and facilities to accommodate tourists. This includes improving transportation, accommodation, and visitor services. The festival is now part of cultural tourism packages, offering visitors a chance to experience Cham rituals, traditional music, dance, and crafts.

The Binh Thuan Provincial People's Committee approved a project to preserve and promote the Katé Festival of the Cham people, recognizing its cultural significance and potential for tourism development (Vietnam Tourism, n.d, 2023). Katé is the most important festival of the Cham Balamon community, traditionally held at the beginning of July in the Cham calendar (corresponding to October in the solar calendar). In 2022, the festival took place at the Po Sah Inu tower relic in Phu Hai Ward, Phan Thiet, drawing a large gathering of Cham people from Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan provinces, along with visitors from across the country.



As one of the most significant spiritual, religious, and cultural celebrations of the Cham Balamon, the Katé Festival plays a vital role in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of the Cham people. It serves as a living tradition that reflects Cham customs, arts, and beliefs, deeply intertwined with their economic, social, and spiritual life. More than just a religious event, the festival fosters community solidarity, mutual respect, and a sense of national identity, reinforcing traditional moral values and strengthening social bonds. Beyond meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of the Cham people, Katé also serves as a cultural bridge, promoting the rich heritage of Binh Thuan and the Cham community to domestic and international tourists.

However, globalization and urbanization pose challenges to the festival's authenticity. Younger generations may struggle to fully engage with traditional rituals due to shifting societal values and modern influences. Despite these challenges, local authorities, Cham cultural preservationists, and tourism agencies have undertaken efforts to sustain the festival through digital documentation, educational programs, and tourism promotion initiatives. Recognizing its cultural importance, the Vietnamese government has actively supported its revival and promotion, with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism listing the Katé Festival as one of Vietnam's 15 largest festivals. In 2022, the Binh Thuan Provincial Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism announced Decision No. 776/QĐ-BVHTTDL, officially designating the Cham Katé Festival in Binh Thuan as a national intangible cultural heritage (Nguyen, Son, 2023).

Historically, Cham temples and towers were considered sacred spaces, accessible only during special religious occasions like Katé. Worshippers observed strict rituals, and temple caretakers were restricted from opening sacred doors except on designated worship days. However, in modern times, Cham towers have come under the management of the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Ninh Thuan Province. As a result, these historical and spiritual sites are now regularly open to the public, integrating tourism and commercial activities with traditional religious practices. While this shift has increased public awareness of Cham heritage, it also raises questions about balancing cultural preservation with commercial interests (Nguyễn, 2018).



CONCLUSION

Since their subjugation by the Viets, the policies regarding the community have rarely been in their favour. Even during the French colonial rule communities like Cham were forced to work on various plantations and mining farms. The philosophy of “*mission civilisatrice*” only added to the woes of Chams as their land ownership was also snatched away (Scupin, 1995). Altogether, the French period might have collected the data on Cham to rebuild their history but on the other hand their policies did nothing but to destroy their traditional socio-cultural and economic systems and contributed to their further marginalisation. Post-colonial period brought in little to no relief, Chams participated in the freedom struggle against French rule but at the same time also realized that they deserved an ethnic autonomy from French later on Americans and Viets alike (Scupin, 1995). The division of Vietnam into North and South Vietnam under both Comrade Ho Chi Minh and President Ngo Dinh Diem emphasised on a need to assimilate Chams into Vietnamese society and drafted policies to further this cause (Gerald, 1993). However, once again the policies, where the leaders relocated large numbers of Vietnamese into the Cham areas, contributed to making Chams an alien entity in their own home. Relocation of Vietnamese who already didn’t share a very friendly history with the Chams, resulted in the introduction of Vietnamese lifestyle and culture replacing the Cham way of life. Later on a ban was imposed on Cham language and materials produced in that were also burnt. Overall, all the attempts in history have only furthered the erasure of this community little by little.

In such a scenario, it is tricky and hard to believe that opening up the Cham areas and promoting the Katé festival to boost tourism in Vietnam would bring in a lot of positives for the Chams themselves. It can surely add to the income of the local vendors and shops, but are there any measures taken to safeguard the authenticity of the festival. An example can be learned from the Odalan festival that is celebrated in Bali. Measures were taken to ensure that the Balinese culture was protected against the corrupting contact with the modern world brought in by the foreign tourists (Picard, 1990).



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