

## The Cham Boat Habitat

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### ABSTRACT

The Cham people now living in Cambodia are descendants of the once famous kingdom of Champa (192-1835). Champa is part of the present day Vietnam. In Cambodia the Cham dwell in many types of houses which are called the "One, two or three ... roof houses". The largest is the "Seven roof houses" usually built by and for the well to do families. Other types of the Cham houses are known as *Sang Pet*, *Sang Ketang* and *Gaiy Sang*. The objective of this paper, which is a series of my research writing on the Cham houses in Cambodia, is to give a brief description of the types of the houses mentioned above and the description of the Habitat of the so called "boat people", people living in "*gaiy sang*, house boat" which differs from the "boat house" meant for housing racing boats. The focus will be on the living habitat of the families living all their lives on *gaiy sang* raising up their children and what will hold for the future of their offspring.

**Key words:** Cham, Cambodia, Cham House, Cham family

### INTRODUCTION

The Malay-Cham of Cambodia is the combination of two people from the same linguistic origin, the Austronesian, earlier on known as the Malayo-Polynesian. The Malay are the descendants of the people from Malay Kingdoms of the Malay Archipelago, whereas the Cham are descendants of the Champa people who as earlier as the 15th century migrated to the welcoming land of Cambodia; a few more migrations in big number of them continued to come and made Cambodia their home since.

Due to their Austronesian linguistic family they could easily get together and form a community known as Cham-Chvea and later Khmer Islam. As we all know the Cham were one of the earliest people who had built their dwellings. The first dwellings were probably for protection against the weather and animals in a generally hostile environment. These can be said to be natural shelters, and later they were more developed and sophisticated. To build them, the Malay-Cham of the present day Cambodia had know-how which is passed on to the younger

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generations. Looking into these traditional houses some of the techniques is rudimentary. To many of them, these houses, no matter how modern or sophisticated, are considered “pabung”, that is “roof above their head”, meaning in another word, “shelter or protection” to the family.

### Statement of Purpose

In view of reducing number of wooden traditional houses, as the country is becoming more developed and scarcity of wood for construction, these old traditional wooden houses rediscovered have become not only heritage for the Malay-Cham people but more importantly for Cambodian national architectural heritage, which need to be conserved and preserved, as many of them are facing with wear and tear, old age and in some places, demolition and redevelopment.

### Scope of the Project/Presentation

It is our aim to record and document the historically and architecturally important Malay-Cham houses in Cambodia. The methodology is collecting imagery of those historical buildings, no matter how small or big in size. This heritage registry it is necessary to develop a methodology for undertaking of the recording and documentation, to categorize their types, ages to see if we can study and group them depending on the periods and styles. This study is conceived as a product that will be expanded upon as more information is collected.

### Types of Houses

There are mainly three types houses namely *Sang Gungdol* (Kh. Rong daul), *Sang Pett* (Kh. pett) and *Sang Tanglab*, *Sang Kontang* (Kh. kantang), *Gaiy Sang* and *Sang Rakik*. The following are brief descriptions of these houses.

#### **Sang Gongdol** (Kh. rongdaul):

The many types of houses built and owned by the Malay-Cham of Cambodia differ only with the shapes of their roofs. The Sang Gongdol has only one roof compared with other like the *Sang Pett* or *Sang Ketang* (see infra). Mr. Sulaiman who has built many *Sang Gongdol* (*Gongdol* house) in his career said it is the easiest house to build. Though in terms of size, they usually measure between 6m to 8m large and up to 15m long. They consist of four rows of hard wood columns. Those *Gongdol* houses found are mostly some 100 years old. The respondent, Mr. Sulaiman and his family stay in his *Sang Gondol* built by his grandparents. The house said to more than 100 years old, and it measures 6m x 15m. We have found two *Sang Gongdol* houses, one is in Svay Khleang, Krauch Chmar and the other one is in Angkor Ban, both in the province of Kompong Cham.



Oknha Baurtes Osman's house.

### **Sang Pett (Kh. bett)**

The *Sang Pett* is sturdier than Sang Gongdol because more wooden beams, intersecting one another, are used. Besides *khneap* (from Khmer) which are meant to firmly hold the whole structure. For comparison purposes, a *Sang Gongdol* does not need so many beams, especially the *khneap* to hold the structure. Thus in terms of cost, one needs to spend more to build a *Sang Pett*. The picture shows a Sang Pett with two pabung (Kh. khnaung) or roofs. It is rather small and measures around 5-6m large by 6-8m long.



### Sang Tang and Tang Laap (Kh. kontang slaab)



A *Sang Kontang* or *Kontang Laap* is similar to a *Sang Pett* in terms of number of roofs, which can be two or as many as seven *pabung* (Kh. khnaung) roofs. But the design of the roofs is slightly different as we can see in the two photos. A seven *pabung* Malay-Cham house is rarely seen now. A seven *pabung* house is huge and needed for a big family. It is usually built and owned by well to do people. Usually a seven *pabung* house was built in stages; the additional *pabung* were built when the need arises. This need arises when the number of children becomes bigger or the owner needs a bigger space when the daughters get married. According to their normal practices, the parents would look after their daughter families until they have their own house, which normally take three to five years. Thus the house space is extended. During our research, we came across, though rare, *sang Kontang* of only five *pabung* houses. Three *pabung* houses are of common sight.

Mr. Sulaiman who is a carpenter in his 60s has said that the techniques of construction of the old house as compared with the new one are the same, including the design of the interior partitions. If an old house used wooden nails, the new one uses iron nails and *blong* (terms borrowed from the French *boulons*, bolts, and nuts)

### Pillar Liners

As all the types of houses described above are on stilt, the pillars liners are of another important part of the construction. If the pillar liners are not solid enough, the pillars will sink into the ground. In old houses wooden pillars liners are made of stones chiseled from rock; the fairly new liners are made of concrete molded and decorated with beautiful design. The latest pillar liners are simpler and usually taller than the other two types and rest on another liner made of a stack of bricks. These taller liners are now needed as the long tree trunks for the columns has become rare, and when one need a “under the house” (see infra) spacious and higher, one need to extend the length of the column by building taller concrete liners.



### Gaiy Sang

Another type of Malay-Cham dweller is a *Gaiy Sang*. The term is a combination of two words, *gaiy* (boat) and *sang* (house). The *Gaiy Sang* is a house on a boat, a dwelling for a fisherman and his family. The reverse of the position of the two-words, that is *sang gaiy*, is another type of construction, which is a house (hut) where a *gaiy* (boat) is kept, especially a pricey racing boat. Many of those families, who live on *Gaiy Sang* own no piece of land or any other landed dwelling. Many are found in the village of Svay Roloum, near Takhmao. This picture of a *Gaiy Sang* tells it all. The front portion under the roof is the sleeping space followed by a small space for cooking. When the couple has small children, they share the same space. But when the children grow bigger, and if they can afford, they usually dispose of their small *gaiy sang* to buy a fairly bigger *gaiy* and build a new *sang*.



### Sang Rakik (Mal. Rakit)

This is another type of dwelling owned by fish farmers. A Sang Rakik are built on the fish cages. The fish farmer, owner of this house live there and at the same time they can keep an eye on their farms round the clock. Unlike the owners of a

*gaiy sang*, most of the owners of the *rakik* own other properties including landed properties.



To those who own only *Gaiy Sang* or *Sang Rakik*, the whole of their family members are born and grow up there till they get married. One respondent has told us that some parents save some money to buy another *gaiy sang* and offer it to their son when he gets married in order for him to be able to take care of his new family. As for a daughter, she will be taken care of by her husband, when she gets married.



Multipurpose use of a *Gaiy Sang*, Home and Fishing



Gaiy Sang are parked in a community



Old unused boats served as dwellings



Fish farming in Mekong River



Fish Farmers on *Rakik* dwellings



Fish Farmers on *Rakik* dwellings