



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Local Culture as an Obstacle to Foreign Missionary Penetration in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

Following the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1992, several Muslim non-governmental organisations, including Gulf-based ones, began aid projects that sought to return Cambodia's Muslims to the fold of orthodox Islam after years of religious suppression. These have included efforts to promote Salafism, the view that the most authentic form of Islam involves rigidly adhering to the lived example of the first three generations of Muslims. This article shows why Gulf donors failed to convert to Salafism one Cambodian Muslim community, the Imam San, who constitute some 10 percent of Cambodia's Muslims.

Cambodia is the most ethnically homogeneous country in mainland Southeast Asia, with 90% identified in the most recent national census as Khmer. Over 96% of Cambodians practised Buddhism, according to the census, while Muslims made up 2.5% of the population.¹ Despite its minority status, Islam is treated very much like a native religion by the government: the Ministry of Cults and Religions has a separate department for Islamic affairs. This ministry and the Mufti of Cambodia are responsible for the maintenance of social harmony within the Muslim community and ensuring that the Muslim community prospers in a way that adds to the overall levels of social solidarity in the country. The emphasis on development of the Muslim community is pronounced because the Muslim (and Buddhist) leadership of the country was exterminated by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. This left the country without the religious scholars and leaders necessary to put the Islamic community back together when peace returned.

¹ Ministry of Planning. *Statistical Yearbook of Cambodia 2008*. Phnom Penh: National Institute of Statistics, 2008.

MUSLIM MISSIONARY ACTIVITY IN CAMBODIA

The departure of the UN Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993 was accompanied by a wave of Muslim missionaries arriving from the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and Malaysia, committed to helping Cambodian Muslims return to the practice of orthodox Islam. After a long period of living on the edge of the Muslim world, the rehabilitation of the Cambodian Islam became an important cause among Muslims across the globe.² The two main groups of missionaries were the Salafis, whose sources of funding were primarily in the Middle East, and the Tablighis, who came from Malaysia and Southern Thailand — areas with which Cambodian Muslims have long had close relations.³ For a period, there was a great deal of conflict in the community, with the various forms of Islam on offer pulling its members in diverse directions. Although confessional lines are now mostly decided, during the first years of missionary work, there were fears that the community would be torn apart.⁴

Islamic NGOs, government agencies and private donors from abroad have changed the face of the Cambodian Muslim community. Today, even fairly remote Muslim villages are likely to have a mosque or madrasah donated by a foreign charity or benefactor. Muslim villages throughout the countryside are dotted with wells proudly displaying the name of the agency or person who had contributed to their construction. These improvements in infrastructure paved the way for what would be the most powerful bond between Cambodian Muslims and the rest of the ummah (or Islamic community), namely, the institutions of Islamic education.⁵

CAMBODIA AND THE NGO SECTOR

Before delving further into the question of Islamic development aid in Cambodia, it is absolutely crucial to see this in the broader Cambodian context. The early 1990s did not just mark the entry of Islamic missionaries, but of a whole host of international NGOs working in sectors such as food aid, disease control, education and other civil society matters. This then led to the registration of local NGOs to serve as local partners for foreign NGOs or to tap into the veins of development funding themselves. By 2013, there were 3,500 NGOs registered in the country. Even considering

²Bruckmayer, Philipp, "The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 23(3), 2006: 1-23.

³ Guérin, Matthieu, "Les Cam et leur «véranda sur la Mecque », l'influence des Malais de Patani et du Kelantan sur l'islam des Cam du Cambodge." *Aséanie* 14, 2004: 29-68.

⁴ Blengsli, Bjørn, "The Cham: Religious Diversity and Change among Cambodia's Muslims," Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2003.

⁵ Blengsli, Bjørn, "Muslim Metamorphosis: Islamic Education and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia," in *Making Modern Muslims: the Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*, ed. R. W. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 2009).

that some of these organisations are insignificant in size or many may have become inactive, they still represent one of the highest concentrations of NGO's anywhere in the world.⁶

The presence of so many NGOs in the country has been criticised by many observers who see these organisations as not operating in the best interests of the country or its citizenry.⁷ Nevertheless, the Cambodian government continues to regard NGOs as an essential component of its development strategy — bringing in not only funding, but also expertise that can then be passed on to local Cambodians. With the majority of the country's educated people either killed or forced to emigrate during the Khmer Rouge period, it is not surprising that Cambodia should be so dependent not just for financing its development, but even for the development of its most basic human resources.

Cambodian Muslims are no different from other Cambodians when they hold the belief that knowledge and expertise comes from outside. The lack of local knowledge or an indigenous intellectual class leaves Cambodians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, with few tools to challenge the ideological presuppositions of the aid programmes they receive. Instead, the tendency in many sectors has been for the international actors to import their templates of development along with their funding in a way that does not always interface effectively with local institutions, both formal and informal. Among Cambodia's Muslims, something very similar has happened, with Islamic schools opening and teaching curricula according to the preferences of their donors. These curricula are often imported directly from Malaysia or Kuwait and do not represent a continuity of the previous tradition of Islamic education that existed in the country. At present, the most active NGO in the field of Islamic education is the Kuwait-based Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage (RIHS), now known in Cambodia as the “Good Source Foundation”.

MISSION FAILURE: ATTEMPTS AT CULTURAL REPLACEMENT

The cultural terrain of Cambodian Muslims is highly uneven. The first distinction to recognise is an ethnic one. Roughly three-quarters of Cambodian Muslims are ethnic Cham, meaning that they trace their ancestry to migrants who entered Cambodia from Champa — a civilisation that once dominated what is now the central coast of Vietnam — and for the most part speak Cham at home rather than Khmer. The other quarter of the Muslim population is usually referred to as the Chvea. These are the descendants of Malay peoples who settled in Cambodia and although they maintained their religion, they eventually assimilated linguistically.⁸ Although the Cham and the Chvea may live in the same areas in urban environments, particularly in Phnom Penh and Battambang, in the countryside, they always tend to live in separate villages.

⁶ Domashneva, Helena, “NGOs in Cambodia: It's Complicated,” *The Diplomat*, December 3, 2013.

⁷ Trannin, Sabine, “Les ONG occidentales au Cambodge: La réalité derrière le mythe,” Coll. Points sur l'Asie, L'Harmattan, 2005.

⁸ Collins, William, “The Chams of Cambodia,” Phnom Penh: National Symposium on Ethnic Groups in Cambodia, 1996.

18 December 2018

For the Chvea, the relative paucity of cultural memories or linguistic markers to separate them from the dominant Khmer Buddhist population means that religion is the main defining characteristic of the community. For this reason, the Chvea acceptance of Islamic practices brought from abroad and considered more authentic than their local practices has been relatively unproblematic. Tabligh missionaries have been particularly successful among the Chvea in the south of the country, where Muslims are increasingly overtly pious, maintaining distinctions from Khmer by wearing Islamic garb and the veil in the case of women.

Among the Cham, however, the situation is more complicated. With their own language, which is unrelated to Khmer, and a multiplicity of narratives about their origins in Champa and the meaning of the loss of their country and their exile in Cambodia, the Cham have other markers of difference not just between themselves and the Khmers, but also between themselves and the Chvea. Indeed, there are even differences among the Cham themselves. The result of this is that some Cham have been resistant to the teachings of foreign Muslims, who insist that the correct practice of Islam necessitates the abandonment of aspects of local culture that are still dear to the Cham people. In addition, missionary work is often hampered by the fact that direct communication between donors and recipients is frequently impossible.

Individual donors and foreign Islamic NGOs depend on local organisers to make contacts with communities in need. Foreign Muslim benefactors and Islamic NGOs typically have little knowledge of the country and therefore local contacts are necessary even to locate villages and then to communicate with them about the donor's plans. This means that donors and Islamic agencies have little understanding of the community, its particular view of itself, its religio-cultural practices, and the local politics, unless this is made clear by their local contacts. Such explanations by local contacts rarely occur because the "local" contact is often a resident of Phnom Penh or some other urban centre, rather than the rural community being assisted.

One particular group of Cham Muslims, known as the Imam San, have been resistant to the influence of orthodox Islam of any type. This group, which is considered to account for approximately 10% of Cambodia's Muslims, is known for a number of practices widely considered to be un-Islamic. Such practices include the holding of prayers once a week on Fridays rather than five times daily and engaging in spirit possession ceremonies.⁹

These traditions are meaningful to the Imam San because they connect them to their history and to the land they lost in Champa. Their prayer practices were a special dispensation given to their people when they adopted Islam, and the spirits that are said to possess them in their ceremonies are none

⁹ See Baccot, Juliette, "On g'nur et Cay à O Reussey: Syncretisme religieux dans un village cham de Cambodge," *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. 1968; and Trankell, Ing-Britt, "Songs of Our Spirits: Possession and Historical Imagination among the Cham in Cambodia" *Asian Ethnicity* 4(1), 2003.

18 December 2018

other than the spirits of the kings, queens, princes, generals and even elephants and horses of the court of Champa, who are believed to return to this world, embodied in their willing hosts, in order to enjoy singing, dancing and feasting with their beloved Cham people. While this group of Cham do not perform the Hajj, they do travel to Oudong Mountain in Cambodia, where the founder of the community for whom they are named, Imam San (Hassan), is supposedly buried. This is deeply significant to the Imam San because Oudong Mountain is the site of a number of stupas dedicated to Cambodia's kings. In granting permission for Imam San to be buried on this sacred mountain of Cambodian royalty, the Buddhist king of Cambodia symbolically bound the Imam San to himself and by extension the rest of the country, thereby legitimising their continued presence in their adopted land.

Failure to understand how these Cham relate to their history, and the way that history legitimates their Cambodian citizenship has made the work of Salafi and Tabligh missionaries an uphill struggle. In a recent case, one of these Imam San villages was connected to a Salafi benefactor, by a Khmer convert to Islam from a nearby village. The benefactor's funding was said to come from Kuwait (although not directly from RIHS). Being Khmer, the middle man did not speak the Cham language and showed no awareness of the internal politics of the Imam San community. He therefore did not explain the community's traditions to the donors, nor did he explain that the community itself was riven with internal strife as the leader of the Imam San had undertaken a number of unpopular policies, and that any interest displayed in the donor's generosity might be a function of this political instability, a need to secure patronage, rather than a sincere desire to change their religion.

What followed was a series of gift-giving events, the most important of which was the construction of a new madrasah. But *qurban*, the animal sacrifice that is done during the Eid al Adha festival, also featured as an important event, since as non-orthodox Muslims, they had not been eligible in previous years. These donations were understood to be given without strings attached. As a result, the community did not alter its religious practices. By not imposing conditions on these donations, the foreign benefactor failed to create a patron client relationship with the community. What is striking is that the patron-client system among the Cham is essentially the same as that among the Khmer, yet the local Khmer convert did not advise the donors to explicitly forge this type of bond with the village.

Exactly why he failed to do this is unknown. What did become clear, however, was that most members of the community remained committed to the existing ethnic form of Islam. When eventually, the donor did place conditions on the construction of a new mosque, namely, the adoption of five daily prayers and the circumcision of all the men, the community came to a crisis point. Still, without clear instructions from the leader of the Imam San, the *bakim* (leader) of the village in question decided to begin encouraging the village to pray five times a day in Arabic. However, the *bakim* temporised on the issue of circumcision until at last, under pressure especially from women and religious students, the he broke with the donor.

18 December 2018

The inability to use cultural knowledge to present a vision of Salafism that would be palatable to the Imam San, and the unskillful deployment of gifts in a way that did not give rise to a relationship of reciprocal moral obligation meant that the opportunity to bring this community into the Salafi fold has been effectively squandered.

About the author

Alberto Perez Pereiro is a lecturer at the National University of Singapore University Scholars Programme. He has been conducting research on the Cham ethnic group and the development of Islam in Cambodia since 2004. In addition to studying the intersection of religion and cultural life, Alberto is currently working on the classification of the Cham language dialects spoken in Cambodia.