

The Cham Muslims of Indo-China

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The Cham Muslims of Vietnam and Cambodia represent one of the most forgotten Muslim peoples of the Muslim ummah.

We hear of the Muslim minorities in the Soviet Union, China and India due to their large numbers and majority-minority tensions, and sometimes of the smaller Muslim communities in Burma, Thailand and the Philippines. But, it seems that we never hear of the Muslims of Indo-China, as their numbers have never been large and because they have never really had any political or economic influence or power in their native lands.

Even though we now have some of them living and working among us as refugees, we still know next to nothing about their history, culture or religious practices within their homelands. We are even more ignorant of the fate of those who for one reason or another remained behind after the communist victories throughout Indo-China in 1975.

Who are the Cham?

The Cham are relatively late converts to Islam, largely adopting Islam after the fall of their kingdom in the late 1400s, even though they had known Islam for the previous 700 years. There has been speculation that this was essentially the Cham way of trying to maintain contact with the Malays, with whom they share racial and linguistic affinities, after they lost control over their destiny. Most are now Muslim, the only exceptions being small groups in Vietnam who follow traditional ways and are known as Cham Kafir.

The strong presence of Indian Hindu culture upon the Cham civilization is a fact of history. This was due mainly to two factors: Buddhism's rejection of the caste system and its attendant concepts of ritual purity and pollution made it possible for Indian merchants to mix with the local populations and eventually to settle down and establish Indian communities, and India's desire for gold.

This hunger apparently became quite intense beginning of the Christian era, as it could no longer rely on its traditional source in Siberia due to loss of contact during the preceding upheavals in the region for roughly two hundred years. Rebuffed by the Roman emperor Vespasian (69-79 AC), who feared the consequences of meeting India's apparently insatiable demand for gold on the Roman economy, India began to look towards the East to see if the legends of an Asian Eldorado were true.

Fortunately for India, this period was also a time of great advancement in both ship building (the Chinese junk made its debut during this time) and in understanding the monsoon winds needed to propel boats between India and the Far East.

Trade relations gradually became more lucrative, and very soon Hinduized kingdoms began to spring up: Fou-nan (located in present-day Cambodia), Tien-sun or Tun-sun (on the Malay peninsula), Langya-hsiu or Langkasuka (on the Malay peninsula), Tambralinga (on the eastern side of the Malay peninsula), and Takkola (to the north

of these other kingdoms). Further to the east, located in the southern coastal parts of present-day Vietnam, lay Champa.

Much of what is known of the history of the Champa comes from contemporary Chinese sources. As all non-Chinese have historically been considered "barbarians" by the Chinese, they might not be entirely reliable.

They report that Champa was founded in 192 AC, when a native official managed to wrest control of some Chinese-administered land. As with many new countries, Champa's main activity seemed to be raiding neighboring lands. In this case, the lands to the north contained the large fertile plains with Champa, a small entity located along the sea-coast and with only limited control over the neighboring lands to the east at that time, coveted these plains so that it could support its increasing population.

Historically, Cham society was formed of two distinct parts: a strongly Hinduized absolute monarchy which ruled according to India's law of Manu and observed the caste system. Siva was the supreme god kings and scholars were expected to be conversant with Sanskrit, Buddhist texts, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the important works of Hinduism. The Cham masses, on the other hand, remained largely untouched by this high culture and continued to follow their traditional folkways and customs.

Much of Champa's contacts with its Vietnamese and Cambodian neighbors, as well as with the Chinese empire to the north, were military in nature. Unfortunately, it usually lost these campaigns, which would almost invariably cost it much natural treasure (Champa was quite rich), inhabitants taken away as slaves, and the loss of land (some would be recaptured, but much of it remained under Vietnamese domination). During the middle of the tenth century the Vietnamese finally were able to free themselves from Chinese rule, an event which held grave consequences for Champa.

Islam appears in Champa

The mid-tenth century is also when we find the first concrete historical evidence that Muslims were in Champa. Chinese texts speak of several men with Muslim names: Pu Ho San (a Chinese transliteration of Abu al Hasan), who served as the ambassador of the Cham king in 951 AC and again in 960 AC when he wanted to present tribute or conduct some diplomacy with the Chinese emperor, Pu Lo E (Chinese transliteration of Abu Ah), who is said to have led approximately 100 foreigners from Champa (it is not known if these were Muslims or not) at a time of internal trouble; and Hu Xuan (Chinese transliteration of Hussain), who led 300 more northwards the following year.

However, it is believed that contact between the Cham and the Muslim world began at an earlier date. According to Simkin, a student of early trade relations, after the Arab Muslims conquered the Byzantine and Persian empires in the mid-seventh century AD, they became active participants in the international Asian trade networks. In 671, a Chinese text states that the Chinese pilgrim I-Ching went to Sumatra on a Persian ship. By 727, large Muslim ships were a common sight in the Chinese port city of Kwangchou (Canton). When this city was sacked and burned by

the Arabs and Persians in 748, the center of this trade moved to Haiphong, now located in northern Vietnam.

Muslim Chinese trade had become so large scale by the ninth century, and so many ships were making frequent voyages between the two nations, that the Persian Gulf, according to Simkin, began to be referred as the "Sea of China". Large Muslim colonies were flourishing in Southern China, and small Muslim settlements were springing up along the route, just as those of the Indians had done earlier.

As ties between the countries involved in this trade network increased, so did the number of Muslims in the port cities and as the years passed, Islam began to spread inland. And Champa had one product which these merchants wanted: aloewood, considered by many Muslim geographers of the time to be the best in the world.

There are other artifacts which prove that Muslims were in Champa during these years. One of these consist of rubbings taken by a French naval officer of two Arabic engravings in the Kufic script (unfortunately, he could not find them again after he left the area).

The first one is a tombstone of one Abu Kamil which has the date of 29 Safar 431 / 20-21 November 1039 inscribed upon it, while the second one is an announcement to the local Muslim community on the need to pay taxes (done in a hybrid Kufic-Nashi script). It is unknown what percentage of the Cham had become Muslim by this time, but it is probably quite small.

Scholars who have dealt with the introduction of Islam into Champa are of the opinion that the Muslims which initially brought Islam to Champa were mainly Persian Shi'is, citing such events as the above mentioned Persian ship, the persecution of Shi'i Muslims, the existence of a large Persian community on an island near the Chinese capital (in 748), salutations upon the Prophet and his house (as opposed to his companions, who are not mentioned) on the above-mentioned tombstone, and a remark by al Dimashqi (1325) that "the country of Champa...is inhabited by Muslims, Christians and idolaters. The Muslim religion came there during the time of Uthman...and the Alids, expelled by the Umayyads and by Hajiaj, fled there.

There is also some evidence from the Cham rituals themselves, which place special emphasis upon the names of Ali and Fatimah in wedding ceremonies and cosmology, and on Hassan and Hussein (in cosmology).

Regardless of who first introduced Islam into Champa, most scholars believe that Islam never made any significant progress until after the disastrous defeat of Champa by the Vietnamese in 1471. This was the time of the Islamization of the Malay world, when vast areas stretching from modern-day Malaysia to the Philippines were coming into the fold of Islam, and when their Muslim rulers were leading large and profitable trading kingdoms whose ships regularly plied the waters to China and the Middle East.

Muslim traders, scholars, mystics and others traveled far and wide from the last years of the thirteenth century until the establishment of European domination over

the area in the seventeenth century. The Cham, an acknowledged racial, cultural and linguistic part of the Malay world, were not left out.

Over the years, more and more Cham became Muslim, and it appears that during the late sixteenth century and all during the seventh century the upper classes, including the royalty, eventually converted to Islam. But, they now had no country to rule over. Many chose to move to Cambodia, while others stayed behind.

It should be noted that of those who went to Cambodia, eventually a full one hundred percent of them became orthodox Sunni Muslims under the supervision of Malay communities in Cambodia. Those who remained behind in Vietnam, however were not so fortunate. They were intentionally isolated from the larger world by the Vietnamese authorities and, cut off from the Islamic ummah, their religion gradually deteriorated. As only half of them converted, the influence of the traditional religion and customs remained strong and were gradually reincorporated into Muslim rituals and beliefs. What resulted would not be considered Islamic by many orthodox Muslims, and when the Cham of Cambodia tried to bring them to a more orthodox version of Islam, they ran up against stiff resistance.

The First Cham Diaspora

While the fortunes of the Cham in Vietnam continued to decline, in neighboring Cambodia the Cham were able to actually improve their lot. In this they were helped by local Malay communities, with whom they gradually joined forces. They were allowed to hold governmental posts and to serve in the armed forces (earning a reputation for audacity and cruelty), and even established a short-lived independent state in Thbong Khmum province, where they and the Malays formed a majority. By 1642, they were strong enough to force one of their own on the Cambodian throne, after which he married a Malay princess, became a Muslim, and changed his name to Ibrahim.

Cambodian society was scandalized, and by 1659 Ibrahim was dead (exact cause unknown) and large numbers of Cham and Malays were slaughtered and forced to flee to Thailand. However, the Cham of Vietnam still continued to come to Cambodia to escape the Vietnamese, and so they always maintained a presence there. This continued until the imposition of French rule on Indo-China. While the Cham in Cambodia did not benefit from the French rule (established in 1859) - in fact they actually saw a decrease in their influence - those in Vietnam did find their conditions somewhat eased, as the French became their guardians.

While the Cham communities in Vietnam remained isolated villages mired in poverty and ignorance, the Cham in Cambodia succeeded in establishing an interlinked village system to avoid the breakup of their community. Each unit was led by a local Muslim who had obtained a high level (according to local standards) of Islamic knowledge. Either he or his assistants made the necessary arrangements for the Friday congregational prayers and other affairs associated with the religious life of any Muslim official.

Such people volunteered their services, and all officials and their villages were under

the High Council for Muslim Affairs, which was in turn under the direct supervision of Cambodia's Ministry for the Buddhist Religion.

Cham villages were self-sufficient and, by choice, usually separated from those of other ethnic groups. The government's schools were not patronized, for the French teachers insulted Islam by saying that it was incompatible with progress and that the young Muslim students should abandon it. Parents instead sent their children to the mosque or other suitable places in order to obtain an Islamic education.

Much of their education consisted of learning the Islamic fundamentals for their spiritual and daily life and how to read the Qur'an. The Cambodian language, due to its identification in the minds of the Muslims with the Buddhism of the Cambodians, was not used as the medium of instruction. Instead, classes and studies were pursued in Jawi (classical Malay written in an Arabic-derived script), a language with which the Cham language shared many linguistic and vocabulary affinities. The Cham have continued to use this even today in their diaspora.

The Twentieth Century

The Cham have been devastated by the events of the twentieth century. In Vietnam, they suffered along with everybody else as Vietnam fought for 50 years to free itself from French colonialism and American intervention in its civil war. Throughout this period, they were also targets of intense assimilation drives by the American-backed rulers in Saigon.

Vietnamese were moved into their lands, their language was prohibited, their culture ridiculed, and they were regarded as savages to be treated as Saigon saw fit. Hanoi, on the other hand, officially supported policies of respect for the minorities and encouraged its cadres to win them over by persuasion and example instead of force.

The Viet Cong, as well as the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, claimed to respect minority rights, encouraged them to use and develop their native languages (Ho Chi Minh asked his cadres who worked in minority areas to learn the local areas, something that those in Saigon would never think of doing), respected local customs, paid for what they took, and would some times (in Cambodia) even build Qur'anic schools which they would then encourage local young Muslims to attend. They would even call the faithful to prayers.

During the war years, the Cham participated in several minority movements, such as The Front for the Liberation of Northern Cambodia. The Front for the Liberation of Champa (these two merged in 1962 to become the United Front for the Struggle of the Cham, and was also known as the Front for the Liberation of the Champa Highlands), the Can Sen So (White Scarves) movement (supported by Cambodia) and its successor, The Struggle Front of the Khmer Krom of Kampuchea Krom, and Bajaraka. Some also joined the local communist movements, more out of a sense of being on the side of right and justice than for any attraction to communist doctrine.

After the American bombing of Cambodia started in March 1969, followed by Lon Nol's seizure of power from Prince Sihanouk the following year, two local Islamic organizations were established to watch over the Muslims: the Central Islamic

Association of Cambodia (concentrated on giving the Cham Muslims a correct understanding of Islam) and the Association of Muslim Youth of Cambodia (undertook the task of grouping and then unifying the Muslim youth of various areas in order to deal with their educational, social, religious and other problems). Both were also active in providing services to Muslim refugees in the overcrowded cities. Until the Khmer Rouge came to power, this was the prevailing condition to be found among the Cham of Cambodia.

By mid-1975, both Vietnam and Cambodia were under communist rule, and the Cham had to deal with a new set of rulers.