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THE 'KHMER ISLAM' COMMUNITY IN CAMBODIA AND ITS FOREIGN PATRONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Apart from brief references to the arrest in May 2003 of suspected members of Jemaah Islamiyah *in Phnom Penh and the later revelation that Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin) had spent six months in Cambodia before being captured in Thailand, the international media have paid little attention to Cambodia's 'indigenous' Islamic community, the Khmer Islam (Islamic Cambodians), numbering around 500,000 in a total population of 12-13 million. Generally described as 'Chams', the majority are the descendants of immigrants from the once-powerful kingdom of Champa located on the central coast of modern Vietnam. But Cambodia's Islamic community also includes the descendants of Malay settlers, perhaps 15% of the total. Members of this latter group are known as* Chvea. *For the most part living apart from the ethnic Cambodian population both during colonial times (1863-1953) and following independence, the Khmer Islam community played little part in politics. During the Pol Pot regime (1975-79) members of the community suffered grievously, with an estimated 90,000 dying from executions, overwork and hunger and disease out of a total of 250,000. Following the fall of Pol Pot the position of the Cambodian Islamic community has attracted the interest of co-religionists in the Middle East and Southeast Asia who have contributed substantial funds for the construction of mosques, the support of Koranic schools and financing of participation in the* haj. *At the same time there has been a substantial growth in the interchange between members of the Khmer Islam community and fellow Muslims in southern Thailand and Malaysia. Overall, the community remains generally poor and disadvantaged and so potentially vulnerable to external influences.*

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Introduction

Two recent developments in Cambodia have briefly focussed international attention on that country's little-known 'indigenous' Islamic community.T[1] The first of these developments was the arrest in Phnom Penh, in May 2003, of three foreigners (two Thais and one Egyptian) alleged to have links with *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI). These arrests were followed by the expulsion of twenty-eight Islamic teachers, and their families, associated with an Islamic school in the capital, again for alleged association with extremist Islamic teachings. Subsequently, and following his arrest in Thailand, it was revealed that Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin), the claimed Indonesian-born mastermind behind the October 2002 Bali bombings, had lived secretly in Phnom Penh for six months, from September 2002 until February 2003. He had passed his time in an obscure guest house located next to the Boeng Kak mosque. Following his arrest, Hambali is reported to have stated that it had been JI's intention to bomb the United States embassy in Phnom Penh.[2]

The nature of Cambodia's Islamic community

In the limited contemporary media discussion devoted to Cambodia's Islamic community, numbering perhaps 500,000 in a total population of 12-13 million, little effort has been made to analyse its quite complex composition. Reports have generally referred to the community as 'Cham' (with individuals referred to as 'Chams'). This fact alone disregards the important division that exists between Muslim Chams and Muslim Malays (known as *Chvea*) who are citizens of Cambodia--both of these groups being the descendants of families who settled in Cambodia many generations ago. The fact that such a division does exist has been recognised in Cambodian official usage, current since the 1960s, which has referred to the Islamic community as 'Khmer Islam' to take account of this division.[3]
Cambodia's indigenous Islamic community has been the subject of relatively limited scholarly study. Much of the research carried out during the period of French colonial control (1863-1953) was preoccupied with distant history or with linguistic issues and some more recent research dealing with political questions awaits general publication.[4]

In very broad terms the following background is essential to understanding contemporary developments. There are two main elements to Cambodia's Islamic community. The larger of these, the Chams, is composed of descendants of an ethnic group that originally inhabited coastal areas of central Vietnam and formed the population of the once important state of Champa. In the face of Vietnamese southern expansion, and over a period of some hundreds of years, Champa was eventually wiped out as a state and many of its inhabitants fled westwards to Cambodia. These Chams are classified by ethnographers as forming part of the broad Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) ethnic group and their language has close affinities with Bahasa Malay/Indonesian. Yet even in the case of those grouped under the general term 'Cham' there are further divisions in identity in terms of the manner of their religious observance.[5]

Separately, Malays coming from modern Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra also established settlements in Cambodia over many hundreds of years. Both the Cham and Malay settlers brought Islam with them as their religion, a fact setting them apart from the majority Buddhist Cambodians.[6]

In the case of both Chams and Malays resident in Cambodia, members of these communities maintained links with Islamic communities in

southern Thailand, in Malaysia and to a lesser extent in Indonesia. These links existed over long historical periods and involved people leaving Cambodia to study in the religious schools that existed and were more developed away from Cambodia. In seeking more advanced Islamic education away from Cambodia, members of the Khmer Islam community were acting in a very similar fashion to Cambodia's majority Buddhist community whose monks frequently travelled to Thailand for study. In both cases the fact that education was sought away from Cambodia was, and is, a reflection, of Cambodia's underdevelopment at all levels of society. Reliable statistics for the number of Chams and Malays who studied away from Cambodia in the past are not available.

The Islamic community before the Pol Pot period

In the post-independence period of Cambodian history the Islamic community played only a minor part in political affairs, with both Chams and Malays living largely apart from the rest of the community, often in isolated villages, and separated as they were by both religious identification and personal practices, particularly in relation to dietary observances. The number of those making up the community has been a matter for heated dispute, but a figure of around 250,000 for the total Islamic community in the early 1970s seems appropriate.[7] I have found no fully satisfactory basis for estimating what proportions of that number were Chams as opposed to Malays. It is nevertheless certain that by far the largest proportion of the followers of Islam were Chams, perhaps to a percentage figure of eighty-five per cent. As a rough rule of thumb, it seems proper to note that the bulk of the Malay followers of Islam were and are located in villages on Cambodia's southern coastline, near the provincial town of Kampot. While some individual members of the Islamic community enjoyed political preferment, most of their co-religionists were poor and disadvantaged, engaged for the most part in subsistence agriculture and fishing. As at 1970, it is estimated that the Islamic community worshipped in 122 mosques and that there were 300 Koranic schools throughout the country.[8]

Regarded as a community apart by the bulk of the population, not least because most Chams, as opposed to Malays, mostly did not speak Khmer, there is great difficulty in providing an accurate account of the extent to which these followers of Islam were orthodox in their observances. Although it is clear that some members of the community were rigorous in their observances, including by making the *haj*, others were clearly less so and practised a religion that was much affected by syncretic influences from Hindu, Buddhist and local traditions. (Perhaps reflecting the existence of these syncretic influences, peasant Cambodians have often regarded Chams as a group that practised sorcery.)

While women in the community covered their heads for attendance at mosques, many did not do so at other times. On the basis of personal observation throughout the 1960s, the only occasions when I saw members of the Islamic community wearing clothing that was Middle Eastern in style was among a limited number of the pilgrims returning from having made the *haj*. It appears that the one clear point of identification that was universal throughout the Cham Islamic community was the acceptance of a prohibition on eating pork. (Once again, there are suggestions that some Malays in Cambodia's Islamic community were less rigorous in refusing to eat pork, particularly in social intercourse in the company of Buddhist Cambodians.)[9]

While it is possible, even likely, that there was some foreign assistance given to members of Cambodia's

Islamic community in the years between independence in 1953 and the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975, I have found no means of quantifying the amount that might have been involved or the nature of its sources. My presumption is that some assistance was provided to assist a limited number of the Islamic community to make the *haj* or to assist in the provision of religious texts. On the basis of personal observation, these were certainly not matters that received attention in elite Cambodian society.

What is certain is that the Islamic community suffered grievously under the Pol Pot regime. Although a limited number of Khmer Islam joined the forces opposing Phnom Penh between 1970 and 1975, this did not prevent the Pol Pot regime from regarding them as a danger to the authority of the state after 1975, essentially because their religion was a barrier to state control. The best estimates suggest that no fewer than 90,000 followers of Islam died during the Pol Pot tyranny, with a substantial proportion executed. If this number is accepted, it represents 36% of the Cham-Malay community, a proportion sharply higher than the losses sustained by the rest of the population.[10] Most, if not all mosques were destroyed or desecrated, some being used, with the deliberate intention of giving the greatest possible offence, as pigsties, while individuals were forced to eat pork.

By the time Pol Pot and his associates were ousted from power in early 1979 the Cambodian Islamic community was in a shattered state. Those who had survived in Cambodia faced the terrible problems of food supply and the continuing fact of guerrilla warfare that meant large areas of the country were insecure. At the same time, the community was further divided by the fact that a substantial number of the followers of Islam had either managed to escape Khmer Rouge rule and were living as refugees in both Malaysia and southern Thailand, or had gone to those countries as refugees in the immediate post-Pol Pot period.

The Islamic community in the post-Pol Pot period

It was at this point that the plight of the Islamic community was recognised by both foreign governments and private individuals. Since the early 1980s, but more particularly since the Cambodia peace settlement of the early 1990s, culminating in the UN-supervised elections of 1993, foreign funds have poured into Cambodia to support the local Islamic community. The activities of a long-time Cham revolutionary, Mat Ly, who was initially a Khmer Rouge and after defection a supporter of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and finally of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), are of interest in this regard. In 1979 he inaugurated the *Samakum Islam Kampuchea* (Cambodian Islamic Association), but it was not until the mid-1980s that he was able to gain assistance from the Middle East. Donors to his organisation included the Islamic Development Bank in Jeddah and funds provided by Dubai businessmen to assist those of his co-religionists seeking to make the *haj*.[11] In addition to Mat Ly's *Samakum*, there are at least two other active organisations of the same kind receiving funds from external sources.[12]

A very apparent index of this flow of funding is provided by the dramatic increase in the number of mosques that have been constructed since the fall of the Pol Pot regime. In the early 1990s there were no more than 20 functioning mosques in Cambodia. Even accepting that some of the currently functioning mosques are buildings that existed before 1975 and have since been rehabilitated, the estimated 268 mosques that are now operating is double the number that existed before the Khmer

Rouge came to power. Interestingly, the number of Koranic school appears to be about the same as was the case before 1975.[13] The range of donors is wide. From the Middle East it is certain that funds have been given to the Cambodia Islamic community by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Dubai and Iran. Nearer to home, donations have come from Malaysia and Brunei.

While it is possible in some cases to identify the sources and amounts of funds provided--for example the cost of the International mosque built in Phnom Penh in 1994 was US$350,000, with the funds provided by Saudi Arabia, and a newly opened mosque at Phum Trea in Kompong Cham Province has been built with donations of US$500,000 from Muslims in the United States--donors are frequently unready to state the size of their donations. The Malaysian Embassy in Phnom Penh when questioned about the size of its government's donations stated that 'We never give out the figures.'[14] Diplomatic sources in Phnom Penh with whom I discussed this issue in both 2003 and 2004 gave widely varying estimates of the funds coming into Cambodia for the Islamic community from Saudi Arabia, with one estimate being that the Saudi government contributes no less than US$100,000 each month. Funding of Koranic schools, increasingly referred to as *madaris* is also supported by foreign donations. Among the most prominent of the range of other NGOs supporting the Islamic community are the Cambodian Islamic Development Foundation and the Cambodian Islamic Youth Association. These two organisations are funded by the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries already mentioned.

It is not just in terms of funding that links with foreign followers of Islam have become of greater importance than was the case before 1975. Most reporting of travel abroad by Cambodian followers of Islam for religious training is anecdotal in nature, but there is a clear impression that many more individuals are undertaking such training than once was the case, just as it is clear that many more Khmer Islam are now making the *haj*.

Much interest attaches to those, mostly young, individuals who have been travelling to Malaysia and southern Thailand to undertake religious instruction in *madaris*. According to recent reporting, Cambodian students have travelled to both Malaysia and Thailand in considerable numbers ('Lots of Chams are going every day.'), some on legal visas, others without formal authorisation. At the same time, Cham leaders deny that Cambodians who have travelled to Thailand have been involved in the attacks mounted against the Bangkok government by Islamic groups.[15] According to a Cham member of the Cambodian National Assembly, Ahmad Yahya, Thai Islamic militants have visited Cambodia seeking assistance for their campaigns against the Thai government, but their approaches have been rejected.[16]

That Thai Muslims have travelled to Cambodia is confirmed by William Collins who, writing of an event he observed in the late 1990s, reports that five Thai Muslims from Narathiwat, dressed in Middle Eastern style robes, and one from Patani in 'street clothes,' visited Trea in Kompong Cham province to preach in favour of the Dakwah Tabligh movement. There is no suggestion in Collins's account that these missionaries were advocating violence in Thailand.[17] Of considerable interest is the fact that in none of the sources I have consulted is there any suggestion of links between the Cambodian Islamic community and the Muslims of the southern Philippines.

Foreign Islamic influences have also brought change to the sectarian orientation of the Khmer Islam community with divisions now having been established between the community at large with its

'relaxed' version of Islam and an estimated 20% who have embraced Dakwah Tabligh (an orthodox form of Islam that has many followers in Malaysia), and a further 20% who have accepted the tenets of Wahhabi Islam with its even stricter practices.[18] There are reports of these various approaches to Islam dividing communities who refuse to worship together, while the limited adoption of Middle Eastern clothing, including full veiling of women, is now observable in some communities.

The present and the future

What has happened in Cambodia, so far as the country's Islamic community is concerned, appears a classic case of a clearly identifiable and underprivileged section of society responding to the external stimulus of wealthier co-religionists. It is too early to say whether this stimulus will have long-term consequences in further separating the Islamic minority from Cambodia's Buddhist majority, but to the extent that both Dakwah Tabligh and Wahhabi influences continue to gain ground such separation does not seem impossible. For the moment it appears that the government is alert to the dangers involved in foreign influences having a political in addition to a religious effect, with Prime Minister Hun Sen having Cham advisers and the support of the community's mufti.

This said, it would be unwise not to take note of the fact that the increase in foreign patronage of the Khmer Islam could pose problems in the future, particularly if it were the case that Cambodian followers of Islam came to identify with extremist Islamists in other countries. Moreover, it is well to remember that the overwhelming majority of Cambodia's Muslims are among the poorest members of the country's population. To emphasise this fundamental fact is not to lapse into 'root cause' argumentation as an explanation for the growth of extremist Islam in parts of Southeast Asia. Rather it is to make the point that Cambodia, along with other countries, cannot afford to allow a contributory cause to radicalisation to persist without efforts to ameliorate the great divide between 'haves' and have nots' in the country, when so many of its domestic Islamic community are numbered among the disadvantaged of the population.

APPENDIX: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CHAMS AND MALAYS OF CAMBODIA

Now only an historical memory, Champa was once a powerful 'Indianised' state located on the coast of central Vietnam. It rose to prominence at the same time as the great Cambodian empire at Angkor, and like Angkor its rulers practised the Hindu religion, with some Mahayana Buddhist admixture. Champa's capital, Vijaya, was located at the modern Vietnamese city of Qui Nhon. Records from its period of greatness exist in the form of Sanskrit inscriptions, while there is abundant evidence of its highly developed artistic capabilities in its distinctive architecture and sculpture. Major architectural remains may still be viewed in central Vietnam, and there is an important museum of Cham art in the Vietnamese port city of Danang.

Champa under pressure from Vietnam: conversion to Islam and successive migrations

By the eleventh century the Cham state was already coming under pressure from the expanding Vietnamese state, which had thrown off Chinese control in 939 CE. Nevertheless, as late as the second half of the thirteenth century Champa was powerful enough to mount a successful expedition against Angkor, when that city was at the height of its power. From that time on, Champa entered a period of secular decline as successive Vietnamese dynasties undertook their *nam tien*, the march to the south.

In 1471 the advancing Vietnamese captured Vijaya. Subsequently, a Cham state, or probably more correctly a collection of Cham statelets, continued to exist in regions south of Vijaya and centred around modern Phan Rang. By the time Vijaya was captured by the Vietnamese some of the Cham population had converted to Islam. The details of this conversion are a matter for continuing scholarly controversy, with some scholars insisting on a much later date for Cham conversion. In any case, it is clear that Muslim merchants had been visiting Champa for centuries before general conversion was widespread so that individual conversions could well have taken place over a long period of time.

Of great interest for any discussion of Chams in the Cambodian context is the fact that the fall of Vijaya to the Vietnamese was followed by a westward migration of Chams from the Cham heartland to Cambodia. Additionally, records from the great port city of Malacca, dealing with the history of the city before the Portuguese captured it in 1511 make clear that some Chams went to Malacca at the same time as a much larger group went to Cambodia.

It seems certain that at the time of this first migration of Chams to Cambodia there were already communities of Malays, immigrants from sections of modern Malaysia and Indonesia, living in Cambodia. Once again quantification is not possible, but a range of historical records make clear the presence of substantial numbers of Malays in fifteenth and sixteenth century Cambodia.

Between the fall of Vijaya and the ultimate destruction of the last remnant Cham principality in what is today Vietnam in 1835, relations between Chams and the advancing Vietnamese fluctuated between periods of relative peace and open war. Major clashes between the Vietnamese and the Chams were followed by further migrations to Cambodia, or to modern Malaysia, particularly to the northern state of Kelantan. Various sources agree on there having been further major migrations out of Cham lands in 1692, in 1795-96, and in 1835.

The colonial period in Cambodia

As noted in the preceding paper, research into the Cambodian Islamic community during colonial times was relatively limited, with much of that research concentrating on linguistic matters. Colonial officials such as Moura, Leclère and Aymonier were aware of the distinctive character of Cambodia's Islamic community, but their writings about them were not a result of deep research. A reflection of the extent to which knowledge about the Islamic community was far from detailed may be found in the considerable differences between two ethnolinguistic maps prepared during the colonial years. In the *Atlas de l'Indochine* published in Hanoi 1928, Map 18, *Carte Ethnolinguistique*, shows no indication of Islamic settlements near Phnom Penh, nor along the southern coastline near Kampot — both have been centres of Islamic settlement for centuries. By contrast, a Carte *Ethnoliguistique* prepared under the direction of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, in 1949, shows Islamic settlements in the area around Phnom Penh and on the southern coast, but makes no attempt to differentiate between Chams and Malays.

Contemporary divisions

By far the greatest readily available detail on contemporary divisions within Cambodia's Islamic community is provided by William Collins in his paper 'The Chams of Cambodia' to which reference has been made several times in the preceding paper. The following is a brief summary only of his findings, the detail of which will be of great interest to students of religion and ethnology. Collins makes clear the distinct identity of Cambodian Malays, the *Chvea*, as a category within the Islamic community. The *Chvea*, mostly located on the Cambodian coast, do not speak the Cham language but rather Cambodian, while still possessing knowledge of Malay.

Within the Cham community itself, Collins identifies two broad divisions. The first of these is the *Jahed*, whose distinctive character is that they only pray once a week, on Friday, and are regarded as preservers of traditional Cham culture. They are literate in the traditional Indic Cham script. The second, and much larger group, Collins simply categorises as *Cham*. Both *Cham* and *Chvea* follow standard Islamic practice in praying five times each day (though, as noted in the main paper, there are suggestions that the Chvea are, on occasion, lax in their observance of dietary restrictions). The larger Cham group use the Cham language, which they write in both Arabic and Khmer script, but also speak Khmer.

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[1] The reasons for placing the word 'indigenous in quotation marks stems from the fact that the Islamic community in Cambodia is comprised of incomers who are the descendants of peoples migrating to the country over many centuries.

[2] Noy Thrupkaew, Follow the (Saudi) Money. *The American Prospect*, August 2004, available at www.prospect.org

[3] This usage was well established when I first arrived in Phonm Penh in 1959.

[4] In particular, the extended study by William Collins, The Chams of Cambodia, available at www.cascacambodia.org/chams.htm, undated. I am very much indebted to this source for much of the information contained in this paper.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See the Appendix to this paper that provides a brief summary of the background history of the Cambodian Islamic community.

[7] The issue of the size of the Islamic community in the early 1970s is discussed in detail in Ben Kiernan, The demography of genocide in Southeast Asia: the death tolls in Cambodia, 1975-79, and East Timor, 1975-1980. *Critical Asian Studies* 35 (4), 2003.

[8] *Phnom Penh Post*, 24October-6 November 2003. Luke Hunt, Cambodia: Cham offensive. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29 July 2004.

[9] Collins, The Chams of Cambodia

[10] The maximum percentage of Cambodian deaths from all causes during the Pol Pot period, excluding Chams and Malays, would be 25%, though a figure of 20% is more likely.

[11] Collins, The Chams of Cambodia

[12] Ibid.

[13] *Phnom Penh Post,* 24 October – 6 November 2003, quoting figures from the Norwegian anthropologist, Bjorn Blengsli, who is currently carrying out research among Cambodian Muslims.

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Phnom Penh Post,* 7-20 May 2004, quoting Cambodian member of parliament, Ahmad Yahya

[16] Ibid.

[17] Collins, The Chams of Cambodia.

[18] *Phnom Penh Post,* 7-20 May 2004, quoting Bjorn Blengsli.

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