





## Construction of Cham Identity in Cambodia



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[ *Abstract* ]

Cham identities which are socially constructed and multilayered, display their markers in a variety of elements, including homeland attachment to the former Kingdom of Champa, religion, language and cultural traditions, to mention a few. However, unlike other contemporary diasporic experience which binds the homeland and the host country, the Cham diaspora in Cambodia has a unique pattern as it seems to have no voice in the political and economic spheres in Vietnam, its homeland. The relations between the Cham in Cambodia and Vietnam seem to be limited to cultural heritages such as Cham musical traditions, traditional clothing, and the architectural heritage. Many Cham people have established networks outside Cambodia with areas of the Muslim world, like Malaysia, Indonesia, southern Thailand and the Middle Eastern countries. Pursuing education or training in Islam as well as working in those countries,

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especially Malaysia has become a way for the Cham to widen their networks and increase their knowledge of particularly, Islam. Returning to Cambodia, these people become religious teachers or *ustadz* (Islamic teachers in the *pondok* [Islamic boarding school]). This has developed slowly, side by side with the formation of their identity as Cham Muslims. Among certain Cham, the absence of an ancient cultural heritage as an identity marker has been replaced by the Islamic culture as the important element of identity. However, being Cham is not a single identity, it is fluid and contested. Many scholars argue that the Cham in Cambodia constitute three groups: the Cham Chvea, Cham, and Cham Bani (Cham Jahed). The so-called Cham Jahed has a unique practice of Islam. Unlike other Cham who pray five times a day, Cham Jahed people pray, once a week, on Fridays. They also have a different ritual for the wedding ceremony which they regard as the authentic tradition of the Cham. Indeed, they consider themselves pure descendants of the Cham in Vietnam; retaining Cham traditions and tending to maintain their relationship with their fellow Cham in Central Vietnam. In terms of language, another marker of identity, the Cham and the Cham Jahed share the same language, but Cham Jahed preserve the written Cham script more often than the Cham. Besides, the Cham Jahed teaches the language to the young generation intensively. This paper, based on fieldwork in Cambodia in 2010 and 2011 will focus on the process of the formation of the Cham identity, especially of those called Cham and Cham Jahed.

**Keywords:** Cham identity, homeland, cultural tradition, religion, language, Diaspora, Cambodia

## I. Introduction.

Cham people have been residing in Cambodia for a long time. Originally from the Kingdom of Champa in Central Vietnam, they migrated to Cambodia in several stages. When the Kingdom of

Champa was defeated by Vietnam in 1693, Cham people moved to countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Early migrations to Cambodia took place from the end of the 16th to the early 17th centuries. Cham people have close connections with people in other countries of Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia. Transnational networks have been established and these seem to follow old patterns of relationships. The Islamic world, an important channel for transnational networking, has equally influenced the contemporary construction of Cham identity in Cambodia, especially of those who are known to be Cham.

This paper utilized the anthropological, economic, and historical approaches in order to understand the Cham identity in Cambodia. For data collection and analysis, we employed the qualitative data analysis method, such as the semi-structured in-depth interviews with Islamic leaders; mufti; ustadz in *pondok* (Islamic boarding school) or mosques; and Cham communities in Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, and Kampong Chhnang. Moreover, we also carried out observations of on-going activities of the Cham in Kampong Cham and the Cham Jahed groups in Kampong Chhnang, especially during the carrying out of the ritual of Cham Jahed marriage in order to understand each step of the ritual. Field works in Cambodia were conducted twice in June 2010 and June 2011.

We will discuss several issues: the influences of Islam and Cham networking on the Cham identity and the cultural traditions of the Cham people. If we touch upon the formation of identity in general, it has been widely argued that cultural identity is not fixed, but is socially constructed (for example, Kipp 1993; Eriksen 1993; Kahn 1995; Wang 2007; Maunati 2011b; Maunati 2012a, etc). Concepts of identity and identity itself are often argued as the result of a dynamic interplay between context and construct. For example, Eriksen (1993) has pinpointed some of the processes involved in the historical construction of Indian identities who migrated to Mauritius and Trinidad. In each case, the subsequent identity was different and thus works against the notion of an "essential" form of Indian ness. Besides, the construction of identity has often involved multi-representations. Barth, for

example, has highlighted the complex array of ‘authorities’, including religious leaders, government officials, Balinese politicians, and anthropologists involved in representation of ‘the Balinese’ (Vickers 1989: 127-8). In a similar vein, part of the historical and dynamic quality of culture is that people reflect upon formal representations—especially those that derive from powerful parties—and incorporate them into their own image of themselves: for example, the Minangkabau villager known as Joel Kahn to de Jong, a Dutch authority on Minangkabau culture (Kahn 1980). Both Kahn (1995) and Saunders (1993) also emphasize that scholars have influenced the construction of identity. Here, Saunders (1993) notes that the image of Borneo has partly been taken from the image of Borneo depicted by travelers and scholars. Indeed, the degree of negotiation among different representations in the processes of cultural construction may be more complicated and far greater than first thought since identity itself is fluid depending on certain situations and contexts.

Moreover, discussing the Hakka Diaspora in Taiwan, Wang (2007: 875) argues that the integration of the Hakka in the process of the formation of a new "Multicultural Taiwan" identity as the Taiwanese national identity has been somewhat dynamic and complicated. The Hakka have also been in a situation of having a contested identity. Wang states:

Taiwanese Hakka identity is fluid and complex, reflecting an amalgam of different issues including national identity conflicts, the blurring of ethnic boundaries, and changing political conditions. Their identity remains diverse and multiple (Wang 2007: 886).

Indeed, many scholars have argued that diasporic people are often in circumstances of keeping multi and contested identities (Kivisto 2001; Wang 2007; So 2013). So (2013: 1) emphasises on the identity construction and intergenerational relations of the Cham diaspora in Malaysia and Thailand. She

finds that the Cham people are not only able to preserve their cultural identity, but also to adjust with mainstream society and continue to establish network with their predecessor country and other countries (So 2013: 11).

The markers of cultural identity may originate in a presumed distinctiveness of religion, language, and tradition. Overlapping may occur among different ethnic groups. Indeed, the construction of cultural identity is complex partly because it is a product of history. Cultural identity itself is changeable depending on the context and on the power and vested interests at play. Bayer (2009), who illustrates by way of two approaches—constructivism and primordialism the formation of identity, and questions the end of construction in situations where certain groups use primordial elements for their markers of identity for certain periods. Indeed, one must be aware of such debates when we talk about the process of the construction of identity, especially in understanding the process of transforming certain existing markers of identity which are believed to be the markers of identity of an ethnic group. Indeed, the elements of markers of identity could change though the group remains the same. The processes of identity construction have involved many representations and are complicated. Clearly, the Cham identity of Cambodia is constructed and contested through a long historical context as well as contemporary representations.

## **II. Cultural Identity of the Cham in Cambodia**

Like other ethnic group identities, such as that of the Dayak (Maunati 2000) or of the Hakka (Wong 2007), Cham identity is both fluid and a product of historical and contemporary construction. Historically, Cham people have transformed themselves through their conversion from animism to Hinduism to Buddhism to Islam.

Cham religion has gone through several shifts over the centuries. Their most ancient beliefs were in a "Mother Goddess". The "Earth Mother" image is an ancient one that

ties the people to the soil, and is an agriculturally oriented icon in an agriculturally based society. During the late third century and fourth century, through relationship with Indian traders, there was a conversion to Hinduism, most notably, the Hindu gods Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu. Gradually there was also a rise of Mahayana Buddhism. Finally there was a gradual conversion to Islam over a period of several centuries. This likely began at about the time the first Cham immigrated to Cambodia to take sanctuary in the 15th century. The Cham of Vietnam, who are mainly Hindu, practice a form of Shaivite Brahmanism. Despite the strong, early influence of Hinduism, the lives of the common people of Champa centered around ancestor worship, fertility cults and hero worship. Islam arrived in Cambodia via India and Malaysia. Those living in the rural areas mixed Islam with their indigenous culture and animistic elements, resulting in folk Islam. The spiritual centre for the Cham Muslims of Cambodia is Chur-Changvra near Phnom Penh. In Cambodia, there are a few Islamic groups such as Chang Veng, *Imam San*, Da'wa and Wahhabiyya. The Chang Veng group of villages tends to mix more Malay words with their vocabulary than those from the Imam San group of villages. This is because of their strong connections with, and support received from, Muslims in Malaysia. The Imam San group has fewer connections with the outside Muslim world because of their stance on animistic traditions that are unacceptable to fundamental Muslims. The Da'wa is a missionary movement from a variety of Islamic countries outside Cambodia. Visiting groups of Da'wa missionaries can be seen in Cham villages of Cambodia today. They travel from village to villages preaching their beliefs and normally preach in village mosques where they also live during their stay. The Wahhabiyya is also a missionary movement similar to the Da'wa in that they also preach a more fundamentalist type of Islam (Available in [http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples\\_and\\_places/people\\_groups/cham\\_of\\_cambodia](http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/people_groups/cham_of_cambodia)).

Even though, the Cham people in Cambodia are associated with Islam, they do not have a single identity because in terms of religious practices, the Cham people are divided into at least two groups: the Cham who pray five times each day and the Cham Jahed who pray on Fridays only. In the past, they could have been the same group who practiced a similar religious ritual.

It is in relation to such issues that the construction of Cham identity is important to be explored. As has been reported in the first year of fieldwork (Maunati 2011a), interviews with several informants in Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham Province show that Cham people have been divided into two groups according to their praying practices—those that pray five times daily and those that only pray on Fridays. During our second fieldwork in July 2011, we found this to be true: the Cham Jahed people who reside in Kampong Chhnang pray only on Fridays. Both groups speak Cham, but they have different practices in praying and other rituals. If we look at the language element, both groups can be categorized as the Cham of Cambodia, but if we look at the other aspects, there clearly are differences.

The Cham in Cambodia are today are often associated with Islam but differentiating the Muslim Cham from other Muslims in Cambodia seems to be a challenging work since Cham identification may not just be determined through religion. Malays have also identified themselves as Muslims, thus there must be something else that may identify Cham people. Muslims do not necessarily practice the same rituals, thus, Islam may not be a sufficient identity marker.

Collins (2009) reports the history of Cham and their identities in his *History of Cham*:

The Cham were originally a people of an ancient kingdom located along the central coast of Vietnam called Champa. Champa was a wealthy maritime nation in frequent contact with China. The ancient Cham civilization was divided geographically into four regions, one being Quang-nam,



where Dong-doung is located was considered the Champa holy land. Other regions were Amaravati to the North, Vijaya (present day Bihn-dinh), and Panduranga in the South (Collins 2009).

Indeed, the homeland Kingdom of Champa has been a case in point for both the Cham and Cham Jahed. Even though they claim being descendants of the Kingdom of Champa, Cham Jahed often insist that they practice a "pure" or more "authentic" tradition. Authenticity is also a product of construction.

Any discussion of the constructed nature of culture and cultural identity must squarely address the issue of authenticity and the status of tradition. As Hoben and Hefner (1991) observe, tradition is often quite untraditional (Wood 1993: 58).

The concept of tradition itself is subject to change. Handler and Linnekin outline a shift from "a "naturalistic" to a "symbolic" conception of tradition" (Wood 1993: 57). Drawing on Handler and Linnekin,<sup>1)</sup> Wood points out that "naturalistic" concepts of tradition have assumed that tradition is an objective entity, "a core of inherited culture traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object" (Wood 1993: 57). He notes that "Handler and Linnekin insist in contrast that tradition is always symbolically constructed in the present, not a 'thing' handed down from the past" (Wood 1993: 58). Moreover, Wood points out that:

...the definition of what is traditional in culture, the specification of links between an invented present and an imagined past, is constantly being symbolically recreated and contested. There is no objective, bounded thing that we can identify as 'traditional culture' against which to measure and judge change. What is defined as traditional culture, both for the past and for the present, is constantly being

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1) Handler and Linnekin (1984: 273)

reformulated (Wood 1993: 58).

In his analysis of Minangkabau society, Kahn (1993) argues that the aspects that seem to be traditional are often modern responses. Rationality as a characteristic of modernity is evident in the trade sector of the Minangkabau, but communal life remains the stronghold of Minangkabau women and traditional customs. Authenticity is often a product of social construction.

The Cham are a minority in Cambodia. Osman(2010) reports that the Cham constituted of 500.000, around 4 percent of the total population (13.6 millions) and mostly resided in Kampong Cham province. According to Collins (2009), if we look at the livelihoods of the Cham in Cambodia, they people were engaged in various agricultural endeavors, especially wet and dry rice farming. They also engaged in the cultivation of crops like maize, tobacco, castor-oil plants, peanuts, beans, and vegetables. They also domesticated animals, hunted, and fished. Along the riverbanks of the Mekong, Bassac and Tonle, the Cham were mostly fishermen, but cattle traders and butchers could also be found amongst them.

In a similar vein, we noticed that the Cham people engaged in many different types of work. In several villages along the Mekong riverbank in Kampong Cham Province, we found the Cham engaged in fishing while women make fishing nets sold in the markets or to the people who order them. We also found that certain Cham also work in rubber planting, especially those residing in Kampong Cham. Small-scale traders could also be found in many different villages in Kampong Cham, selling clothes, groceries, fish, vegetables and prepared food. They trade either in the traditional markets or along the main roads of their villages. The stereotype of Cham being fishermen begins to change as some of these people get engaged in other various jobs. Nevertheless, Cham people, especially those living on the riverbanks, are indeed focused on fishing for their livelihoods.

A few Cham have also been actively involved in politics. It seems the clear-cut division of occupation between Cham and

Khmer has been slightly changed as stated by a scholar from Phnom Penh during an interview:

In the past, Cham were mostly fishermen who were also engaged in agriculture. The Khmer, who comprise the majority of Cambodia, have been engaging in many different jobs. The Khmer Rouge has made Cham or Khmer victims. In terms of work, the Cham have also expanded to do what previously was only done by the Khmers. The difference between the groups after the Khmer Rouge has become blurred. Windows have opened for the Cham as well.

Indeed, his statement seems to be proven because nowadays we can find Cham people in the capital city, Phnom Penh, engaged in politics and working for the government. In an interview, Mr. Arifin, who has been a CPP (Cambodian People's Party) member of the Senate for several years, told us that the position of the Cham in the government and political parties has been improving. One Cham public figure was the advisor of Hun Sen. Another public figure has been a member of the CPP as well.

In terms of the political participation of the Cham, according to several informants, the Cham have opportunities to join in political activities, including participation in political parties. A few "elite" Cham support the Party in power. According to a Cham informant, it has been proven advantageous for them to be close to the government. The question of whether or not they struggle for the improvement of the lives of the Cham people is another matter. To some informants, the positions of Cham government officials are not clear as they still need to prove themselves first.

In an interview, a Khmer scholar agrees that today, the Chams have the opportunity to be involved in politics. Previously, the Cambodian people are at large divided by way of their ethnicities, and even of their occupations. It was hard for the

minorities like the Chams to engage in government work in a structure dominated by the Khmer. Cham rebellions had added to the difficulty for the Cham to find jobs. The coming of the Khmer Rouge transformed the people of Cambodia when every ethnic group was pressured to have no religion and to be one identity, including the Khmers, the Cham, the Chinese and others. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the people of Cambodia—regardless of their ethnicities—started to rebuild the country. Freedom is given to the Cham to practice their own religion as well as to participate in politics (Maunati 2013). Chams also earned their liberty to express their identity and to use their language. The following are the experiences of the Chams in different sites—KM 8 of Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham Province and Kampong Chhnang.

### III. The Cham of the Outskirtsof Phnom Penh

In the KM 8, we found a big, 2-level brick mosque. The first level is provided for men, and the second, for women. This mosque is special because women have a place here to pray. Many mosques in Cambodia do not provide a particular place for women.

Many people in this locality have visited Malaysia, to work, study, or for business purposes. A middle-aged Cham lady whose business involves air tickets, stationery, and photocopying services told us that the Cham have a close connection with Malaysia. She explained that she wears clothes like the Malay women, *baju kurung*, and covers her head with a scarf. According to her, the Cham ladies in the area generally wear the same things the Malay ladies do. Many Chams went to Malaysia to study Islam like one *ustadz*, an Islamic teacher. This follows a pattern that has existed for generations. Muslim students from Cambodia have traditionally pursued their higher religious studies in Kelantan, Trengganu and Patani in South Thailand. Apart from this, young people also found Malaysia a suitable place to since the people in that area understands Islamic tradition. Indeed, Malaysia is a

place of hope.

Many informants told us that the Cham's material cultures had disappeared largely due to the destruction of their places of dwelling or Kampong during the Khmer Rouge. The Cham lady we interviewed can still recall how her family had to move out from their house, and how everybody was forced to flee from Phnom Penh. Many families were separated. Many were killed. She wept as she recalled the Cham people who used to be her neighbors. The long suffering in the rice fields during the Khmer Rouge compelled them not to concern themselves with their traditions since both cultural and religious practices were strictly prohibited. Today, after the years of repression, they tend to associate with universal Islamic symbols in decorating their houses. Arabic calligraphy or pictures of the Ka'bah adorn the walls of the houses of Cham families.

That Cham lady also told us that their community tried to rebuild their kampong after they returned to it along the riverbanks of Tonle Sap in KM 8. She had gone to Phnom Penh in 1979, but the memory of suffering haunted her. She still trembled as she retold the story of the Pol Pot period. Her husband and their neighbors had rebuilt the kampong, working together in relocating their houses. In the beginning, they simply built huts, and then slowly built properly elevated wooden houses. These elevated houses keeps the families safe from floods that often occur. The population, mostly from Kampong Cham, have been living there for generations. Though there are newcomers too. Although they have been allowed to reside along the riverbanks of Tonle Sap, they have no legal land certificates. According to an informant, the Cambodian government does not issue land certificates for lands along on the riverbank. The people have never been asked to move out from the settlement, while certificates for the lands on the other side of the street have been given out (Maunati 2011a; 2013).

In KM 8, Cham people are engaged in different types of jobs, like fishing, small trading, tuc-tuc driving, motodop work, and so forth. Many Cham people have worked in Malaysia as

garment factory workers and workers in other industries due to difficulty to find jobs in Cambodia (Maunati 2012b; Sari 2012). They also went to Islamic schools there. Effendy (2006) notes that sharing a similar language and culture have been the main reasons for Cham people to work in Malaysia or Indonesia. To the Cham of Cambodia, religious practice is often the important reason behind their coming to Malaysia, especially since they could pray during the afternoon, in the middle of working hours. Practicing Islamic rituals is obviously an important marker of identity for the Cham of Cambodia (Maunati 2013).

To support the notion of Islam as the marker of Identity of the Cham, Maunati (2011a; 2013) reports the Head of the Mufti of Cambodia as saying:

Cham people are not Khmer, but 'Malay Champa', who originally came from the Kingdom of Champa in Central Vietnam that was defeated by Vietnam in 1471. After that the Cham people migrated to many places, including Cambodia and parts of the Indonesian archipelago especially Aceh, Java, and Sumatra, and Singapore. In Cambodia, there was only a small number of Cham people. At that time and until now, the kings of Cambodia have received us with open hands. We Cham could also practise our religion, Islam, freely until now (Maunati 2011a; Maunati 2013).

Indeed, many informants told us that although freedom of religion exists, the support of the state in religious affairs is limited. According to the Chairman of the Mufti, the entity was reinstated by the Prime Minister on 7 April 2000, and has many sections, including mosque matters, Islamic teaching, *baitulmah*, marriage, social matters, etc. There are also in place *majelis syuro* (council) and *majelis ketua fatwa* (council of advisory elders). In essence religious activities, whether Islamic or Buddhist, are not restricted, yet not fully supported by the state. To the Cham, there are two problems: the Al Quran has not been translated into Cham or Khmer languages and religious

books are generally not available (Maunati 2013).

#### IV. The Cham of Kampong Cham

The Cham people have been residing in Kampong Cham for a long time since they migrated to Cambodia. Cham people can be found in many areas of the Kampong Cham Province. Near the city, there are many Cham living on the banks of the Mekong where they can catch a boat or alternately use the bridge to reach the city. In Kampong Cham city we could hear the *Adzan* (call to prayer for Muslims) and see a mosque on the other side of the river.

Like people in KM 8, many informants in Kampong Cham found it very hard to pinpoint their traditional culture. When asked, they often referred to the clothing, rituals, and the other aspects of Malay culture. Besides, they also refer to Islamic matters to show their identity. Through observation and interviews, we found that Malay clothes are their everyday clothes. Women usually wear *baju kurung* (long sleeved dresses) with *tudung* (ready to wear head scarves). However, the old ladies in the kampong mostly prefer to wear *krama* (khmer scarf) rather than *tudung*. As many people have been to Malaysia, a woman who used to live there informed us that they follow Malay ways since they are Muslims like the Malays. Those trained in Malaysia concur that Malay influence is indeed great. *Kompas* reports that some Chams from Cambodia pursued further studies in Malaysia (e.g. in Kelantan and Malacca) and Indonesia, with some well-off Cham, even sending their children to Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Friday, 10 December 2010: 59).

The influence of the Malay culture is clearly connected with the development assistance from the Malaysian government. Sari's study in 2011 reveals that the Malaysians have given large grants to support the Islamic Institute at Boeng Kak Mosque in Phnom Penh and provided some scholarships for Cham students to pursue higher education in both Malaysian and Cambodian universities. The Malaysian government aid also supports a

women's center and clinic at KM 7, in the middle of Cham-Chvea communities found along National Route 5, north of Phnom Penh. The Malaysian government has supplied the women's center with sewing machines and looms to provide livelihood for Muslim women. The association also provides training for women in family health practices and Malay language to increase female literacy and to improve access to contemporary books in Malay (Sari 2013). Moreover, the Malaysian government clearly respond to humanitarian crisis by assisting impoverished members of a Muslim minority who had suffered during the recent Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Furthermore, Malaysia has been involved in the institutionalization of Islam since the early 1970s and in providing development aid to the Cambodian Muslims from the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s (Bruckmayr 2003). Hence, the role of Malays in spreading the Islamic faith has probably been the most significant feature of recent historical change and cultural relations in Cambodia.

Apart from Malay culture, we found a different perspective on culture in Kampong Cham itself. Maunati (2013) notes that one public figure originally from Kampong Cham, Mr. Ibrahim, also sought Cham roots by looking at the Cham culture in Central Vietnam apart from the use from the obvious Malay influences. He has attempted to introduce Cham culture through traditional musical instruments, songs, and dance to the Cham in Kampong Cham. Mr. Ibrahim told us that it has been hard to introduce the cultural traditions of fellow Chams from Vietnam to Cambodian Chams due to differences in interpreting Islam. In this case, some Cambodian Cham believed that the musical instruments, traditional songs, and dance were not suitable for good Muslims. Therefore, they have not been eager to accept them. This is despite the fact that Mr. Ibrahim introduced these traditions as "authentic" Cham culture passed on from generation to generation. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Champa located in Central Vietnam has been referred to by the Cham people in Cambodia as their place of descent. The associations with the Kingdom of Champa has been deemed important for Cham identity, especially in differentiating it from the Muslims and the



Khmer. The Cham's practice of praying five times in a day, for instance, is a slightly different Islamic interpretation. Many influences, like Malaysian, Middle Eastern, as well as other Islamic streams, have also contributed varying interpretations. Additionally, men and women have specific relations to mosques. In many mosques in Kampong Cham, women are not allowed to pray, like those in the outskirts of Kampong Cham city. In KM 8, however, women are allowed to pray in the mosque in the second floor. In a village in Kampong Cham, we also observed many young girls studying religion in the mosque after school. There seems to be no singular way of characterizing Cham identity.

It is common for diasporic peoples to look for their identity by searching for their origins. For example, Eriksen (1993) discusses Indians in Mauritius and Trinidad who looked for their identity and yielded different kinds of identities. The Cham, as mentioned, look to both the Kingdom of Champa, as well as the Islamic world. The difference primarily is in the practice of Friday prayer and five-times-a-day prayer. The Cham of Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh seem to be looking to their Islamic roots more since the fall of Pol Pot and after reclaiming religious liberties. In the Pol Pot period, the informants recall, Cham people could not practice Islam, to the extent that they were even forced to deny their beliefs by eating pork and not praying. The Malay appearance is partly one of their identities in today's Cham society. Some Cham have also looked to Cham culture in Vietnam. This easily reminds us of the Indians in Mauritius and Trinidad noted by Eriksen (1993).

For the Cham who pray five times a day, being identified as Muslim also means dreaming to make a pilgrimage to Mecca (Maunati 2013). However, they need to get enough funding to do so. *Kompas* reports on Cambodian Muslims in Roka village, and says that in Kampong Cham only six people were able to perform the pilgrimage that year (Friday, 10 December 2010: 59). It is projected that the number will rise to the following year since performing the pilgrimage is still expensive for the Cham. Several Cham public figures, however, have performed the pilgrimage. Having a title of haj (*haji*) yields high respect in the

Cham community in Kampong Cham. According to some informants, there were cases where the Cham people were funded by Middle Eastern institutions to perform the pilgrimage with the expectation that they would follow the Islamic teachings of the funding institutions.

Kampong Cham exemplifies current religious freedom in the country. In our observations and interviews, we were informed that the Cham have not been disturbed in practicing their religious rituals. Funding in the name of religion has also been around though not everybody enjoys such funding. An informant from Kampong Cham, a teacher at an Islamic boarding school, told us that the elite Cham who receive funding only distribute it among their groups. He explained that his salary as a teacher comes from Malaysian donations kept in Phnom Penh. One of the teachers goes to Phnom Penh to claim the salary and the cost of travel is shouldered by all the teachers. His salary is 50 Malaysian Ringgit (around USD 16) per month (Maunati 2013).

In a village in Kampong Cham Province, we found different wedding rituals as expressions of Cham culture. We observed a wedding ceremony held by a Cham family which was rather similar to that of the Khmer community in terms of venue decoration and wedding clothes. This is different from that of the Malay culture adopted by many Cham (Maunati 2013). The decoration of the venue was very colorful, in bright shades of pink, red, green, and yellow. We observed similar decoration in the Khmer parties along the way to the Cham community. The guest receptionists, mostly young girls, also dressed like Khmer women, wearing black silk tops and silk skirts and no veils to cover their hair.

## **V. The Cham Jahed of Kampong Chhnang**

As mentioned earlier, in terms of identity, Cham people are not a singular entity. In fact, the Cham Jahed (Cham Bani) in Cambodia have unique practices of religious rituals. The most crucial one is that of only praying once a week, every Friday at

noon. We observed their prayers on a Friday during our study in Kampong Tralach, Orussey Keo, Kampong Chhnang Province. Their leader emphasized that Friday prayer was the most important religious practice for the group. Sokhom (2009: 60-61) reportst hat in terms of religious ritual, especially praying, Cham can be divided into three groups: (1) the Cham who use the Cham language and Khmer and consequently use the Malay and Arabic texts as the foundation for religion. They follow Sunni teaching, pray five times a day, and are open to new ideas and influences from the Middle East and Malaysia; (2) the Jahed-Imam San which is known as the *Kom Jumat* (from the Malay language, which mean "Friday group"), referring to the tradition of praying only once a week, on Fridays. They reside in several areas like Oudong, Pursat and Battambang and follow their ancestors' tradition by utilizingthe Cham language for their holy teaching and other texts; and lastly, (3) the Group of Chvea-Khmer Islam, a group of Muslim Cham who cannot speak Cham. They speak Khmer and Malay and are ashamed to be called Chvea, being aware of the negative connotation of the Malay and Javanese origins of their practice. They follow Sunni teaching and pray fivetimes a day.

If we follow Sokhom's explanation, these practices are different from that of the Chams who reside in KM 8 of Phnom Penh and in some villages in Kampong Cham, categorized under the first group who pray five times a day. We visited the Cham Jahed, the second group which keeps the tradition of praying on Fridays, in Kampong Chhnang province. They also believe that their practices is "authentic" coming down from their ancestors. We also found that the Cham Jahed have close relations with the Cham of Vietnam. They even practice similar rituals: both pray on Fridays only. Cham identity is indeed contested.

Many scholars have argued that identity is fluid and constructed (Eriksen 1993; Kahn 1995; Wong 2007; Maunati 2012a). Eriksen clearly notes that identity is contested, depending on the context and situation. Based on our research in Cambodia, the Cham and Cham Jahed are clearly of the same origin but have developed slightly different traditions. This is a

kind of indication that identity is a product of social and historical construction. Nevertheless, there emerge questions: Is there any end to such construction? Is there any stopping point or will it continue to be constructed? Bayar (2009) believes that while there is a process of construction in the beginning, primordial elements have been important as markers of identity and will stay for a certain time. We believe that the markers of identity are dynamic and subject to change. Therefore the process of construction and reformulation may continue due to certain interests and contexts. The Cham Jahed is acase in point.

The Cham Jahed have a different identity from the Cham who pray five times a day, though they are both considered Chams of Cambodia. The Cham who pray five times a day, however, are not necessarily a single entity since they also have different orientations; some tend towards the Malays of Malaysia, while others tend towards the Middle East. According to several informants, Middle Eastern countries have paid serious attention to the Cham of Cambodia by providing funding or scholarships to Islamic boarding schools. The Mufti of Cambodia has the duty to control such activities in order to avoid any misuse of the funding, especially for terrorist activities. Indeed, the Mufti makes sure that the Cham do not fall into the trap of terrorist networks (Maunati 2013). Terror networks could jeopardize the freedom to practice religion. Some are concerned with the radicalism that may influence the Cham who pray five times a day; there is less concern with the Cham Jahed because their different practices, for one, is quite challenging to displace. Some informants retored that there have been efforts to persuade the Cham Jahed to reform their practices of prayer by sending some of them to perform the haj pilgrimage. Informants however, say that this has not altered their practice altogether.

For centuries, the Cham have maintained strong relations with fellow Muslims, as evidenced by pilgrimages to Mecca and by their sending of students to Malaysia, South Thailand, and Egypt. Today, various international Muslim movements can be found among Cambodian Cham-the reformist "Wahhabism" from the Middle East; the "Dawa" or "Tabligh" proselytism from India,

and smaller movements such as the "Ahmaddiya" from Indonesia. Many of these have been met with enthusiasm. According to Osman (2010), this is because most of the missionaries from abroad hold the view that Cambodian Cham Muslims do not adhere sufficiently to Islam and thus are in need of purification. Each Muslim sect from outside Cambodia wants the Cham to accept its theology. The Cham are told that their traditional practices are not very pure and that they must now adopt other ones which are the purest. Some yield and accept the new practice. Each group considers itself the best practitioner of Islam.

Based on our observation and interviews, the Cham Jahed are indeed unique in both their prayers, wedding rituals and other aspects of the practice. We observed and participated in a Friday prayer and a wedding ceremony in Kampong Chhnang. Maunati (2013) notes that most men prayed in the mosque, while women did not. Women came to the mosque to bring different kinds of food to serve to everybody in the mosque. Most men wore all-white trousers/sarong, a shirt, and a Cham Jahed head covering. A few did not wear white but wore the striped Khmer head-scarf called *krama*. During the actual praying, some men did not pray, but sat inside the mosque behind those who did, while women did not enter the mosque but stayed in the verandah instead. Women mostly wore black blouses, though some wore colorful dresses with the Khmer traditional scarf of plaid or stripes in red, black, white, etc. It seems that there is no strict tradition in to wearing the Cham Jahed traditional scarf; they even have the option of wearing the Khmer scarf. Also, Cham Jahed believed that black blouses for women is a long-time tradition. In our visit, the women arrived at the mosque carrying food on decorated trays that are placed on top of their heads. Each woman brought something different: fried bananas, oranges, glutinous rice, fruits, vegetables, meat, fried sweet potatoes, crackers, sweet corn, grapefruits, etc. The reason for bringing food is to gain merit or blessings (Maunati 2013). According to Mr Ibrahim of the Cham, he went to Vietnam many times and found similar patterns between Cham Jahed and

the Cham of Central Vietnam, especially in rituals and the food-serving traditions for women. He showed us a photo of some Cham of Vietnam with similar but more colorful trays.

In the Friday prayers we observed and listened to at a mosque window, an *imam* lead the prayers on stage and chanted in Cham language. After praying, people stayed for lunch in the mosque verandah and partook of the food brought by women. The *imam* sat in the middle of the verandah near the entry to the mosque. Men sat in two parallel lines facing one other. The women's duty was to serve the food before they formed a circle to have their own lunch two to three meters away from.

For the leader of the Cham Jahed, the *Imam* Kai Team, the Cham of Vietnam have the same tradition. He said: "Cham Jahed are the authentic Cham; we follow the traditions of our ancestors originating in Vietnam." The Cham Jahed mostly lives in groups, like those in Kampong Chhnang. This proximity and intimacy has something to do with the rituals to be performed together. They have to be accessible to each other. According to informants from both the Cham and the Cham Jahed, some people who have begun to pray five times a day moved to other places, like the main road of Kampong Chhnang or onto the city where could practice like other Chams. They also practice different rituals from the Cham Jahed. In an interview with the five-times-a-day prayer adherent and owner of a Muslim restaurant on the main road of Kampong Chhnang, we were told that many young Cham Jahed have converted to praying five times due to the influence of the Cham practitioners and the prevalent openness to Chams, as well as intermarriages (Maunati 2013). Trankell and Ovesen (2004), in their article on the Cham Jahed, report that the older generation of the Cham Jahed is concerned with conversion of many young people to praying five times a day. Indeed, this has been happening, but to the *Imam*, the number of Cham Jahed who follow and maintain their traditions in general is still significant. He told us of the assistance of the United States in publishing books and establishing the Cham Cultural Centre so that the Cham Jahed could continue to maintain and learn these traditions, including

the Friday ritual. He showed us several books ready to be distributed to the followers, friends, and benefactors (Maunati 2013). This has been a powerful strategy in keeping the followers who have been challenged by many parties. Those parties have used many methods to change the traditions.

Besides Friday praying, there are many other unique traditions among the Cham Jahed. For example, while the other Cham have imitated the Malay customs in the wedding ceremony and wedding clothing, the Cham Jahed people have their own styles of which they are proud. A brief example of a wedding ceremony which usually takes at least two days can be illustrated as follows: Early in the morning, in the groom's home, women prepare various traditional foods, particularly the fermented fish called (*prohok* in the Cham language), and *penong* (snack made of glutinous rice), and other foods like young bamboo shoot and fish. In this ritual *prohok* must be served. During the first day, early in the morning, the bride and groom visited their family graves to receive blessing from their ancestors. In the afternoon, a group of men led by a religious leader prayed for the well-being of both. After this ritual, the bride, leaning on the shoulders of her parents, walked around the house, followed by the people present there. The bride's side holds a party for family and friends. The following day, the main ritual of the wedding (*ijab kobul*) was held. The presentation of the couple sitting on stage is performed in the bride's house. There is much preparation in the morning before the arrival of the groom at the bride's house. During this time, an elderly woman was joined by several young women in preparing three carved silver bowls (*phau* in the Cham language) containing cigarettes; betel leaves (*la* in the Cham language); and lime and betel nuts to be sent to the groom's family as presents. In effect, the elderly woman, deemed wise in knowing such rituals, was teaching the younger generation how to prepare the gift as part of the Cham Jahed traditions. When the bowls were filled, three young boys dressed as girls came to pick them up. The bride, in traditional bridal dress and complete make-up, sat in her wedding room decorated with colorful materials while several young boys beat drums and

sang. A man, an expert in religion, offered prayers and advice while a drum was beaten (Maunati 2013).

In the early afternoon, the ritual started with the arrival of the groom in a litter (*tandu* in the Malay language) equipped with an umbrella. The idea is to present him as king of the day. Men were ready to offer prayers and to conduct the actual marriage ceremony between the bride's representative and the groom in the yard of the bride's house. The groom stayed under a straw roof where men sat on mats. In front of the religious leader (*penghulu* in the Malay language), the father of the bride "married" the groom with his daughter, while all present stood to bear witness. The dowry of 666,000 Real was presented. The number 6 is very important since it represents the 6th pillar of faith (*rukun iman* in the Malay language). The dowry is pegged at number 6 and ranges between 60,000 to 600,000 Real in area. The bride waited in her wedding room, staying on the platform that was to become the matrimonial bed. After the ritual, there was a procession for the meeting of the groom and the bride. The groom walked on a mat since traditionally, he is not supposed to walk on the soil. Before the groom ascended the steps to the bride's house, an elderly woman washed his feet with waters of three kinds: natural water, clove-wood scented water, and flower water. The idea behind this ritual is to clear any bad spirits. She also poured yellow rice (*brahuyi*) on the soil for fertility, accompanied by prayers. The bride and groom met in the front of the wedding room then sat side by side on the platform (Maunati 2013).

This tradition has been maintained in order to keep the purity of the Cham Jahed and strengthen their identity. In this time of conversions to "pure" Islamic practices, the challenge for the Cham Jahed is to keep their unique traditions like praying on Fridays only and rituals like wedding ceremonies.

## VI. Conclusion

Clearly, the Chams are not of a single identity. For instance, the



Chams who pray five times a day are also may be oriented towards the practices coming from Malaysia or the Middle East. Middle Eastern countries have also developed different streams. Therefore, if we look at Cham identity through the notion of Islam, it is indeed contested. The explication of the identity of the Chams in general is complicated as identity is a work-in-progress.

Bayar (2009) who question the end of construction seems to be right that in certain situations, a group uses primordial elements as markers of identity. This seems to be continuously contested and reconstructed due to certain influence, like rapid global influences. With the Islamic world widely influencing the Cham from all sides, identity will surely yield different streams. Therefore, Cham culture may be reconstructed, but with different markers of identity.

Additionally, the argument of Eriksen (1993) that identity is stronger when a group is under threat seems to be still relevant here because in the case Cham Jahed, the use of the local language in translating their holy book aspires to strengthen identity in the face of influences and transnational Islamic financial aid. The Cham Jahed relies on the young generation to continue their tradition. It is therefore important to make sure that the young generation understands their tradition. The holy book in their language is indeed strategic way to face the outside influences.

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