



# **Transnational Islamic Movement in Cambodia**

**by Agnès De Féo**

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Shared out among 372 villages, the Muslim community of Cambodia divides itself from an ethnic point of view into two groups: The Cham originally from Champa, a kingdom formerly located in the south of Vietnam, and the Chvea, less numerous, Muslims of Malay extraction living rather in the south of the country. Muslims represent about 4 percent of the population of the small Buddhist kingdom, which is close to 13 million. Without any real reliable statistics, their number is estimated, according to the different sources, between 400,000 and half a million of inhabitants. They are for the most part located in the Center-East of the country (Kompong Cham, Kandal and Kompong Chhnang provinces) and on the southern coast (Kampot and Kompong Som provinces). But unlike Thailand, the Cambodian Muslims are in minority everywhere and thus cannot aspire to any territorial nor independence claims. Furthermore, contrary to Muslims from Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat provinces "colonized" by Thailand, Muslims of Cambodia are longstanding immigrants. Originally from the ancient hinduized kingdom of Champa, the Cham arrived to Cambodia by successive waves which marked the exodus of the Cham fleeing the attacks of the Viet army (from the northern Dai Viet kingdom) during its progressive expansion to the south, from the 15th to the 19th century. The coming of the Chvea into Cambodia is prior to the Cham's. They are originally merchants who came from the Malay Peninsula, from Java or also from Sumatra (from the Minangkabau country), settled in Cambodia from the 14th century onwards. They preceded the coming of the Chams in 1471, date of the fall of the capital Vijaya of Champa, whom they converted to châfiit Islam (legal school of Sunni, in majority in South East Asia).

Despite their minority status, the role of Muslims in Cambodian society is far to be negligible. Warmly welcomed by the Khmer monarchs as they were immigrating to the

country, Cham and Chvea have, in spite of some insurrectionary episodes, pledged the monarchy's allegiance and got access to important positions within the state, administration and army. From the 17th century until today, some Muslims have held positions at the highest levels of the state, like those of minister and vice-Prime Minister. About twenty Chams currently sit in the Parliament and in the government. The Cham did know how to integrate themselves by adopting the taboo jobs of the Khmer. Indeed, the Buddhists being able to eat animals but being not authorized to kill them, the Cham have embraced the careers of slaughtermen and butchers, while perpetuating their traditional profession of fishermen. King Sihanouk integrated them into the Cambodian nation by creating during the Independence, in 1953, the name of "Khmer Islam" in order to group the Cham and Chvea together under the Khmer identity.

### **Islam and Champa**

But even if they live in Cambodia for several centuries, a few Cham consider themselves as really Cambodian, the Khmer Islam appellation is rarely used and only among the Chvea. Except among the young generations, lots of Cham prefer to define themselves as refugees in a host country by clinging on to the myth of Champa, the original land of the Cham in their collective memory. Faced with the impossibility of regaining this mythical territory, the Muslim religion brought them closer to the Islamized Austronesian world, an ethnolinguistic family whom the Cham belong to and which groups together Malay, Indonesians, Jawi from the south of Thailand and Filipinos, in contrast to the China-influenced culture of Vietnam and the Theravada Buddhism of Cambodia. The Cham are thus the only people of the former Indochina to have embraced Islam, even if in Vietnam the Cham are only partially Islamized (with two thirds of Brahmanists). Because of this, the Cham of Cambodia traditionally maintain very close ties with the state of Kelantan (eastern coast of Malaysia) and the south of Thailand. Widely influenced by Malay Islam considered as an orthodoxy, they still relate to it today with the learning of Malay in the Koranic schools of Cambodia, as well as through their exchange relations kept with the *madrasa* of Pattani and Yala (south of Thailand), and Kota Bahru (Kelantan). Malay Islam thus allowed the Cham to keep their identity within immigration, in view of acculturation which a formerly Hinduized Khmer Buddhist culture, close to the Champa's, threatened them. One day, an oldest man from the village of Phum Roka exclaimed: *"If we were not Muslims, we would have become Khmer."* He expressed that way his fear to see his ethnic identity disappear.

So, despite this official recognition and their participation to the country's economical life,

the Cham suffer certain exclusion within the society. Relegated to the villages where they are grouped together, they spark off suspicions linked to their ideal of a community. Their reputation of powerful magicians able to put a curse at a distance brings them respect, but also ostracism. The Buddhist Cambodians, in particular among the elders, are prolix to tell all kinds of legends which portray the evil spells of Muslims that no antidote can neutralize this. That's why they never visit any Muslim village, nor look at any mosque for not getting into trouble with the *"very powerful God of the Cham"*, as expresses any superstitious Khmer. Other immemorial myths denote a total absence of communication between both communities. To explain the fact that Muslims eat neither pork nor dog, Buddhists tell that these ones have an ancestor who was a king who fell in love with a sow, with whom he had a daughter. Later, the latter [the daughter] became herself the mother of a son, fruit of her love with a dog. That's the way the Cham race was created. That's why, the less educated Buddhists firmly believe that at the prayer's hour, Muslims worship statues of dogs and pigs. But with time, these coarse and sacrilegious myths, which feed the Cambodians' imagination, took the form of fantasies with a pejorative then xenophobic connotation that the September 11, 2003 attacks in the United States and the May 2003 arrests at Om-al-Qora school have strongly accentuated. They legitimize today the exclusion of Muslims. The Buddhists are still persuaded that the Cham are delighted at the death of non-Muslims: *"The Cham like only Muslims. If a Buddhist drowns, they wait for his death because they consider that rescuing him is not good for Allah. When he's dead, they are pleased"* is an old refrain recurrent in the countryside. Therefore, whereas the Muslims don't have to complain of discrimination at the official level, it's quite different in the rural areas.

The massacre which the Cham were the object under Pol Pot regime created a deep fracture in the society. From 1975 to 1979, Muslims particularly suffered from the Khmer rouge's atrocities. However, the issue of a specifically Cham genocide, as some Cham intimate it, is today under debate. Ben Kiernan, an Australian researcher and director of the Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program, estimates at 90,000 the number of dead Cham during the Khmer rouge regime for a Muslim population of 250,000 people before 1975. Still according to him, during the three years and half of civil war, 25 percent of Cambodians were killed (15 percent in the countryside), while 36 percent of the Cham died, which is a rate definitely higher<sup>1</sup>. Out of the 113 village imams before the war, only 21 of them did survive and 85 percent of the mosques were razed to the ground. The Muslims were humiliated,

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Kiernan: *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer rouge, 1975-79*, Yale University Press, New Haven (1996).

forced to eat pork and to turn their mosques into pigsties.

In 1981, which was two years after the fall of the bloody regime, Indonesian journalist Sabam Siagian published a report on the Cham showing that at that time, they were aware to have been persecuted for ethnic and religious reasons. The imam of the Kilometer 7 mosque, located north of Phnom Penh, spoke this way: *"Those people [the Khmer Rouge] were antireligious and couldn't stand the presence of the Cham."* In addition, this imam asked the journalist for financial assistance from Indonesia in order to rebuild the destroyed mosques, but also for the dispatch of Korans, of *toun* (religion teachers) and for the possibility for some people to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. After a disaster of this scale, the imam doesn't ask for a basic humanitarian aid in order to rebuild the community, but is focused on the religion, in particular the possibility to carry out the rites together. This assistance will arrive one decade later, and proselytism with it.

### **The community rebuilding**

Scorned under Pol Pot regime by Cambodians who welcomed them in the past, the Cambodian Muslim community will benefit from the great worldwide religious revival which appeared in the country in the early nineties, date of the Paris peace agreements which sealed the pacification of Cambodia.

From the 1993 general elections organized under the aegis of the UN, some Cham recently appointed to government positions launched a wide call to all Muslim countries through their respective associations. By doing so, they hoped to collect enough funds to rebuild a Muslim community that became moribund at the end of the war, and after ten years of Vietnamese occupation. The Islamic NGOs, most of them financed by the Persian Gulf's states, entered then the country by importing in it a Middle East religious form that the Cham name "Wahhabit".

Osman Hassan, Secretary of State at the ministry of Labor and president of the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation (CMDf), and Ahmad Yahya, Member of Parliament in the opposition and president of the Cambodian Islamic Development Association (CIDA), have received funds from different Gulf states and from Malaysia. These two associations organize studies abroad and pilgrimages to Mecca. Each year, for five years onwards, the Ahmad Yahya's association offers scholarships (500 US\$ per year and per student) to 300 Cham, to allow them to study at the private Norton University of Phnom Penh.

The great precursor of those calls for funding is Math Ly, who died in May 2004, an advisor to the King and respected among the Muslim community. He was the first Cham to get

access to the position of vice-minister of Interior after the liberation from the Khmer Rouge in 1979. He was also one of the very first to found a Muslim association, the Cambodian Islamic Association, in 1988. This one, funded by two sponsors from Dubai, Mahmoud Abdallah Kasim and Hisham Nasir, was supposed to allow about thirty Cham to go to Mecca every year. Above all, it contributed to the building of about twenty mosques, recognizable to their "Dubai" appellation attached to the name of the city. That's how the international mosque of Phnom Penh is called "Dubai-Phnom Penh", as mosques call themselves in their respective towns in provinces: Dubai-Koh Kong, Dubai-Klaieng Sbaek, Dubai-Ban Prul, Dubai-Sankun, etc.

The Gulf's countries remain the first source of financial and logistical aid. Some mosques and Islamic centers have been built in Cambodia directly by foreign organizations. A few organizations with an international diffusion operate in the country. The Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), an NGO based in Kuwait, was the first to officially register in Cambodia, in 1996. It funded eight centers and/or orphanages for boys, equipped each of them with mosques. The biggest, Choum Chao, which is also the headquarters of the association, is located in Phnom Penh near Pochentong airport. It use to receive 300 students-residents. At Kilometer 7, in the district of Chang Chamrès, north of Phnom Penh, the Nurur-Islam mosque also welcomes an RIHS school. Musa Mohamad Ali (Saali), *hakem* of the mosque since 1982, has received in 1993 the visit of "*Kuwaiti who came to help the Muslims of Cambodia by creating schools*". It is at this time that he associates himself to the example came from Kuwait. The six other RIHS centers are located in Kampot, Takeo, Koh Kong, Kompong Chhnang, Battambang and Chumnik (Kompong Cham province).

The Saudi organizations are also present in Cambodia. Disappeared from the country after the closing of its center in May 2003, Om-al-Qora International Organization, registered in 1998, is a small charitable organization who's branches are also found in Thailand. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth Charity Organization (Wamy) is registered in Cambodia since 2002 and offers some help to poor Muslim families, like the distribution of sacrificed animals for the Aïd festival. It has notably initiated an aid program in four villages of Kompong Cham province. More recently, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) and the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation also work in Cambodia.

Fourteen years after the call of Cham politicians for the community's rebuilding, this one offers a good example of vitality. The new mosques which establish themselves at a regular rate on the road from Phnom Penh to Oudong, as well as on the banks of the Tonle Sap toward Kompong Chhnang, show a real Islamic revival in Cambodia. From about twenty

mosques in the eighties which resisted the Khmer Rouge's destruction (out of 113 before the war), the country counts 280 today. Nevertheless, these new buildings don't look like the traditional mosques anymore, with their sloping roofs just like the Buddhist pagodas, but now imitate the Indian and Middle Eastern styles with a dome and a flat roof. The old mosque of Chumnik (Kompong Cham province) was closed and replaced by an international Islamic standard mosque. That's how the old traditional village of Chrok Romeart has acquired a mosque with a huge dome.

However, the importance of this Kuwait-Dubai-Saudi Arabia fringe group, that the Cham name themselves quite simply "Kuwait", don't have to fool anyone. It doesn't seem to score the success expected by the generous donors who often content themselves with financial payments. Their influence is more than limited on the Cham, more often than not restricting itself to the village where the mosque was built. It comes up against competition from another movement on a larger scale, the Tabligh international trend coming from the Indo-Pakistani sphere. This group managed to spread very far in the countryside and to divert the mosques financiers' ideology on behalf of themselves. For example, in the village of Kiromit (Tbong Khmum district, Kompong Cham province), the mosque funded by Dubai is gone today under the Tabligh influence.

### **The Dawah breaker**

A lot of proselyte movements, based on the *dawah* (preaching) concept, flourished in South East Asia in the seventies, like the Darul Arqam movement of a Malay extraction banned in 1994. The Jamaat Tabligh is the *dawah* movement which managed the stronger breakthrough in Cambodia, where it entered from 1991. The climate of regained peace encouraged the Cham who became preachers of the Tabligh during their exile in Malaysia to come back to the country in order to spread the new faith. In the late nineties, the return from Malaysia of Hadji Suleiman, who will become the leader of the Cambodian Tabligh, gives a new boost to this movement with the building of the great center of Phum Trea (Kompong Cham province) which includes a big mosque built in 2000 as well as a *madrassa* dedicated to the *hafiz* (memorization of the Koran) and to the *halim* (case law). Then, within the space of a few years, the Tabligh will pursue its spread throughout Cambodia. Pietistic, created in India by Muhammad Ilyas in 1927, at the time of the great reforming movements and in a tense India between Hindu and Muslims, this movement owes its success to its voluntary, compulsory and militant proselytizing, but also to its clothing strictly modeled on the Prophet's which meets the search of identity of the young people.

The Tabligh is radically opposed to the Saudi and to their funding system to export Islam. It works towards the internationalization of Islam through other ways: not through the humanitarian aid, but through compulsory proselytizing. Each new follower immediately becomes a Tabligh propagandist, or *tablighi*, able in his turn to spread the faith by working thus to an appreciable transformation of the society. Each *tablighi* must devote himself to proselytizing following a very codified timetable. For two hours and half a day, he has to explain Islam to his family circle. Then, three days each month, forty days a year, lastly three months a year for the most experienced, they do the *khourouj*, the outing in groups that they finance themselves and which consists in going along the roads in order to bring the Muslims that they meet back to the assiduous religious practice by an efficient rhetoric based on kindness and the edifying good word.

Ostentation is customary in the Tabligh, as for the prayer in groups. Men are strongly encouraged to go to the mosque for the five daily prayers. They sleep there on Thursday night from the *magrib* prayer. The Tabligh has a center in each of the provinces of Cambodia. In addition to the great center of Phum Trea, the most important are Preik Pra (Phnom Penh), Chumnik (Kompong Cham), Preik Pis (Kompong Chhnang), Phum Norea (Battambang) and Ochru (Kompong Som) with the great Almuhajirin *madrassa*. The intellectual of the group, Abdul Coyaume, is a French-speaking doctor, a former companion of Math Ly and a translator into Khmer of some extracts of the *Fazail-e-Amal* ("*The merits of the practices*"), the canonical book of the Tabligh. Written in Urdu from 1928 to 1964 by Muhammad Zakariyya, the main ideologist of the movement, it inculcates the obligations and bans which have to adjust all the moments of the day, and the benefits the believers take advantage of<sup>2</sup>.

The members are in addition careful not to get involved with politics, which allows them to get the full blessing of the authorities who consider the *Tablighi* to be obedient citizens. And yet this apolitical nature also concerns the sphere of power, some Cham politicians actually claiming to follow this movement today. Osman Hassan, Mufti Sos Kamry and Ahmad Yahya go every year to the annual *ijtimah* (most important meeting) in Phum Trea in order to show their support to that very popular movement among the Muslim.

### **Divisions and conflicts**

A deep change is today perceptible among the Muslim of Cambodia, since the early nineties. The Cham and the Chvea claim their difference in order to counter their social

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<sup>2</sup> See Marc Gaborieau: "Islam revival or secret political strategy? The jama'at Tablighi in the Indian subcontinent and throughout the world", in *Religious revivals in Asia*, Catherine Clémentin Ojha (publisher), French School of the Far East (Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient) publications (1997).

marginalization, pointing to the Muslim exception. The Arab-style clothing, formerly reserved from the pilgrims back from Mecca, has widely spread throughout Cambodia as an identity sign. Except in the villages which remain traditionalists, the *krama* (the national Cambodian scarf), thrown on the head of the Cham women as well as the Khmer's, is today replaced by the *tudung* from Malaysia, which doesn't let any hair escape. In some regions, the black *purdah* which hides the face is in favor with young girls. Men also experienced a very fast evolution of their appearance. While old pictures show Cambodian Muslims wearing the *songkok* - the black Malay fez -, or the *kopiah* - the white skull cap -, many today wind around their heads the *serban*, or turban, often made with the help of a *keffieh*, which they let an end hanging in the back. They have in addition swapped their out-of-fashion checked sarong for the *jubah*, the dress-shirt which goes until the calves in order to imitate the Prophet. The beard, similarly, is strongly recommended. This ostentation aims, at the same time, to the social recognition of an identity which claims to be different from the national Buddhist majority, but also seeks to be linked to the re-Islamization movement of an international range that extol the virtues of the Islamic purity. By these dress code expressions, corollary of a new form of self-affirmation, and of a hardening of the communal separation between Muslims and non-Muslims, the Muslims of Cambodia have started a process of self-marginalization by accentuating their exclusion and by refusing to take part in the modernization of the Cambodian society. In addition, the mass sending of young people to the *madrassa* of the south of Thailand, of Medina or Malaysia, provokes among the new scholars the dissatisfaction due to frustration. Although they believe that they are invested with a great prestige when they come back, they are forced to accept small jobs or unemployment, because no position of *tun* is offered to them. While the Sino-Khmer study in business schools, the Muslims perceive the development only in religious terms. Cambodia, with one third of its population living under the poverty line, is far to be able to fulfill their ambitions of erudition. Their religious fervor brings them only to take more refuge in themselves.

Furthermore, the community became divided along the fractured line of the two great proselyte contemporary trends known as Kuwait and *dawah*, the Gulf's charitable Islam and the Tabligh's proselytism. Each trend seeks to extend its influence in the country by discrediting the other faction. Thus the "Kuwait" supporters reproach the Tabligh for its *biddâ* ("innovations"), like "making *dawah*", sleeping in the mosques, inventing some *hadith*, etc. As for the *Tablighi*, they accuse the "Wahhabit" to have divided the community by importing the Hanbalit legal school, formerly unknown in South East Asia. Rare are the

Muslims who don't commit themselves on these parish-pump quarrels. A few claim to be independent, like Musa, the *hakem* of Klæing Sbek village (Kandal province) who financed himself his trip to Mecca and which the mosque received funds from Dubai. Very recently, this village was still an example of exception, the villagers lived peacefully on the banks of Tonle Sap. Until a *dawah* group split the village into two by asking for the building of an independent prayer room in order not to pray in a mosque built by Dubai. Some regions, like Kompong Cham province that counts one third of the Cham villages of the country, are prey of internal fighting. When the two trends coexist in the same village, like in Chumnik and Ampel where a RIHS center is settled next to an important mosque of the Tabligh, it's the village itself which imposes its segregation. The supporters of each faction don't mix together anymore. In Phum Soi village, the case reached its height with the building of a wall inside the mosque itself in order to separate the faithful of both persuasions. Similarly in Phnom Penh suburbs, the Chang Chamrès district is divided into three villages: Km 7, Km 8 and Km 9. If the first village supports Kuwait, the two other ones are *dawah* and refuse to go to pray in the mosque of the first one or even to speak to its imam, Musa Mohammad Ali.

Actually, this denominational split among the Cham is not recent and similar cases of quarrels which divided into two factions the Muslim community already took place in the past. Marcel Ner<sup>3</sup>, in the first half of the 20th century, noticed the antagonism between the *kobuol*, of a distant Arab influence, and the modernistic *trimeu* of Malay influence. Then another major division of the 20th century divided until 1975 the *kaum tua*, the traditionalists' group, with the *kaum mude*, the reformists'. This ideological struggle deeply hurt the Cham society<sup>4</sup>.

One could worry today about the current situation, for a lot of Cham became sectarian proselytes seeking to gain ground for their respective ideologies. They threaten not only their own social entity, but also the symbiosis set up with Cambodians for five centuries.

On the Khmer side, Ang Chouléan, an ethnologist working at the Angkor conservation, fears a withdrawal of the Cham and an abandonment of their cultural wealth. Sorn Samnang, the president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, is also worried about the Cham's evolution towards an unprecedented upheaval of the society due notably to the "*worldwide Islamic networks*". He even considers the Cham's attitude to be "*a major step backwards, because they don't want to define themselves as Khmer Islam anymore*", an attitude that Khmer

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<sup>3</sup> Marcel Ner: "The French Indochina Muslims", *French School of the Far East (Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient) bulletin* (1941), pages 151-200.

<sup>4</sup> William Collins: *The Chams of Cambodia*, Center for Advanced Studies (1996), in full on the website: [www.cascambodia.org/chams.htm](http://www.cascambodia.org/chams.htm)

consider to be an ingratitude and which sparks off a great irritation among many.

On the Cham side, they are a few to worry, like the former Undersecretary of State Ismail Osman: *"As regards the Cham, religion is not enough, you also have to practice culture. For if you help only religion, the Cham will die. For the moment, there are a lot of religious associations, but no cultural association."* And Member of Parliament Ahmad Yahya adds: *"The problem is that in the countryside, the Cham are more interested in religion than in education. I don't like that."* As a proof, *hakem* Musa of Siem Reap just doesn't want to know anything about Champa, because *"anything which preceded Islam must be forgotten"*. This amnesic reaction complies with the directives of Islam that are taught today in Cambodia in the *madrassa* of the Tabligh. According to accounts given by Bjørn Blengsli, the grave of Cai Po Behim in the village of Rokapo Pram (Tbong Khmum, Kompong Cham province) was formerly the subject of a worship bringing baraka [*"luck"*] and [the place] kept, following the example of a myth of origins, the history of the loss of Champa, of the prince defeated by the Viet army and the settlement of the Cham in Rokapo Pram. But this practice was condemned by the religious authorities, depriving the village of its historical context. The other mythical figures' graves of the great Cham epic have even started a process of total disappearance.

The new proselytes treat the distinctive ethnic identities with disdain to impose a universal Islam. The Cham, who owe the survival of their identity to Islam, could thus end up losing their Champa in their frenetic zeal to get closer to a purified Islamic model.