

Economy in Motion: Cham Muslim Traders in the Mekong Delta

Philip Taylor

The Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta address the problems and opportunities of Vietnam's liberal reform era with strategies of trade and mobility. This paper situates Cham trading activities in an ongoing history of movement and examines the spatial and cultural singularities of Cham economic life.

Keywords: Vietnam; Ethnic Minorities; Islam; Mekong Delta; Economy; Place

Making Sense of Ethnic Disadvantage

The transition from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy under way in Vietnam over the last twenty years has led to a national aggregate rise in incomes, increased expenditures and a decrease in poverty levels (Haughton *et al.* 2001; Taylor 2004a). Yet Vietnam's ethnic minorities, who officially comprise over fifty different linguistically distinct groups and account for around 15 per cent of the population, are widely seen as the losers in the liberal reform process. Their incomes and expenditures are much lower than those of the Kinh, Vietnam's ethnic majority group, and they have a greater incidence of poverty, lower participation in schooling and poorer health (Baulch *et al.* 2002; Rambo & Jamieson 2003).

Three principal explanations have been advanced to account for the failure of the economic reforms to benefit ethnic minorities in Vietnam. First, these groups are seen as physically remote from economic opportunities and government services, living as they do for the most part in the uplands and in geographically marginal areas (van de Walle & Gunewardena 2001; Vu Quoc Ngu 2004). Second, many ethnic minority peoples are thought to experience the problem of 'cultural remoteness' (Baulch *et al.* 2002, p. 17), their distinct linguistic, customary or religious heritage presenting cultural obstacles to their interactions with the wider society that inhibit

Philip Taylor is a Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, The Australian National University. Correspondence to: Philip Taylor, Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. Tel: +61 (0)2 6125 2300. Fax: +61 (0)2 6125 3023. Email: Philip.Taylor@anu.edu.au

economic advancement. This explanation differs little from that advanced in the pre-reform era by the ethnic Kinh-dominated state, which attempted to eradicate religious and customary practices of ethnic minority peoples that were seen as backward, divisive and harmful to socialist modernisation (McElwee 2004). Third, the state's sponsorship of market relations, migration and infrastructure projects in ethnic minority areas and the imposition of mainstream cultural values in the name of modernisation are believed by some analysts to have been counterproductive by undermining the socio-economic standing of people in such areas (Rambo & Jamieson 2003; Taylor 2004a). As a consequence, some minority groups have disengaged culturally and socially from the mainstream (Salemink 2003; Taylor 2004b, pp. 260–5), forms of resistance with the potential to compound their economic marginalisation.

The Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta exemplify in several respects the problems faced by Vietnam's remote-dwelling ethnic minority people during the liberal reform era. A community of almost 13,000 people, the Cham, who live near Vietnam's border with Cambodia, reside in ten small settlements where they follow a mode of life constrained significantly by the delta's riverine ecology. Culturally distinct from their neighbours, the Cham speak their own language—Cham—as well as Vietnamese, Khmer, Malay and Arabic. They have a unique style of housing and follow a distinct matrilineal post-marital residence pattern. Unlike their Kinh neighbours, who profess a southwards social and cultural diffusion narrative, the Cham claim diverse origins from Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Middle East, as well as from the kingdom of Champa, formerly located in present-day Vietnam. As a community of devout Muslims, the Cham community of the delta has been subject to recent attempts by the Vietnamese state to sponsor migration by ethnic Kinh migrants into settlements in which they previously comprised the majority. They have been encouraged to study in government schools and to learn Vietnamese. Yet Cham people's emphasis on their cultural and religious distinctiveness has, if anything, only increased during a period in which development policies have favoured urban-dwelling residents in particular and ethnic Kinh people in general.

Given geographical, cultural and structural factors of a kind identified in the literature as the most common constraints to the well-being of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, it may not come as a surprise to learn that many Cham people describe their standard of living as low, or subsistence-level, earning only enough to live day to day. Living in a region with the poorest system of all-weather roads in the country, their settlements are difficult enough to access in the dry season. When it floods, as it does annually, they are cut off for months from the nearest urban and commercial centres. Few of them own motorbikes and the relatively high cost of cross-river ferry transport makes it difficult to access nearby service centres regularly. Many Cham say that in comparison with the majority ethnic group they lack education, connections and access to state power, resources that might help them to

engage in remunerative economic activities. They point out that recent state development initiatives have brought them few benefits as many of the new high-cost investments and technologically demanding jobs have been monopolised by non-Cham people. The Cham have resisted the state's efforts to define them as remnants from the kingdom of Champa, a state that was annexed by the Vietnamese. Instead, they emphasise a religious-based identity and highlight Islam as the sole basis for community membership (Nakamura 1999). The pronounced emphasis on Islam within their settlements has restricted interactions with their proximate neighbours and has also heightened consciousness among the Cham of their moral exclusivity in relation to their non-Muslim neighbours.

However, I also found that, in striking contrast to their neighbours the ethnic Khmer, who have similarly responded to their concurrent economic marginalisation by disengaging from contacts with mainstream society (Taylor 2004b), the Cham are prolific traders. They are more active in trade than the Kinh in that a greater proportion of Cham people work in trade. Surpassing even the ethnic Chinese, who are renowned locally as an entrepreneurial group, yet whose business activities take place principally within the urban contexts in which they live, the Cham specialise in trading far beyond their localities. In other words, they defy the stereotype of geographically and culturally 'remote', ethnic minority peoples as the economic underachievers of Vietnam's new market-based order. The paradoxes deepen when we investigate their situation further. Although the Cham undertake extended trading journeys far from home, where they act as skilled economic mediators trading among a variety of locations, they return to live in an out-of-the-way rural area. Despite their cosmopolitanism, there is clear evidence of their maintenance of a distinct cultural identity and, in their home settlements, of pursuing active isolationism. Existing approaches that address how Vietnam's remote-dwelling ethnic groups have been affected by the commercialisation of the economy do not prepare us for the Cham people's extraordinarily expansive trading activities. Nor do they equip us to analyse how or why, despite such engagements, the Cham have maintained their geographic and cultural separateness. These explanations—emphasising physical and cultural remoteness or structural marginalisation as factors that shape the fate of Vietnam's ethnic minority people—share a similar weakness in that they see locality as static. The ingredients of locality, defined here as place, culture and encompassment within an unfavourable external context are each taken as given.

To counter this perspective and to foreshadow my conclusions I argue that, first, we need to see Cham settlements as places in motion, constituted in a longstanding and ongoing history of movement to which these places owe their singularity. Second, we can find dynamic interdependencies between the Cham's cultural legacies and their mobile livelihoods. Finally, we can see the Cham as translocal agents, who have helped shape the spatial economy of the Mekong delta and who, through their extralocal agency, have also reproduced the localities in which they live.

Diverging Responses to Marketisation

The first part of this paper is descriptive. It addresses the question: how have Cham Muslim localities in the Mekong delta been impacted upon by the liberalisation of the Vietnamese economy?

In many respects the economic life of this community is markedly localised. The Cham live on islands formed by the Mekong River delta's channels. They reside in stilt houses raised above the annual high-water mark and use wooden boats to travel between settlements. Householders draw water from the river, which is stored in earthen jars and clarified with alum for cooking and drinking. Most families net, trap and spear fish from the river for their subsistence needs. Yet, despite the local abundance of fish, they rarely sell what they capture. They also practise small-scale agriculture, growing rice and legumes for domestic use. However, plots are small and few households cultivate enough land to make a living from commercial agriculture. Cham women use handlooms to weave sarongs, scarves and towels. They also embroider the scarves and caps worn by members of the community. They use silk, from silkworms fed on mulberry leaves, which were formerly grown locally, and harvest the *mac nua* berry, which is baked and crushed to make black dye. A few of these handicrafts are sold to visiting tourists but local outlets for these products are otherwise limited. Some families engage in petty trade with small stalls set up in front of their houses, yet there are no neighbourhood markets in most Cham settlements and the Cham seldom visit the nearest market centres across the river.

Their way of life is well adapted to this riverine ecology and the factors impinging on their economic practices consequently appear in many ways to be localised. Yet there is also strong evidence of a secondary trend that Cham economic localism, far from being uniquely a time-honoured adaptation to ecology, is also due to more recent extralocal factors. For instance, some people put to me that the reason they do not practise commercial agriculture on a large scale is that they have been displaced from their land by immigrants. In the past, members of the Cham Muslim community owned far more land than they do now. Several families' land used to be cultivated for them by tenant farmers, ethnic Kinh settlers who arrived there originally as landless migrants. Many of these tenants became the beneficiaries of state land readjustment policies in the 1970s. Far from being a long-standing adaptation to local ecology, the small-scale subsistence agriculture practised by the Cham is a product of the state's support for new migration and reconfiguration of the local land ownership structure. Fishing offers another example. Although formerly renowned as a specialised fishing community, the Cham have for the most part been shut out of the explosive boom in caged catfish aquaculture, which, since the mid-1990s has made many ethnic Kinh townsfolk wealthy. Their marginalisation from the local fishing economy is described by Cham people as the result of their lack of necessary capital, collateral and technical knowledge, as well as absence of connections with those investing in and purchasing the fish.

The most striking example of the marginalising effects of the liberal reforms comes from the local weaving industry. Once a thriving cottage industry, in the late 1980s many Cham households owned up to seven looms, operated in some cases by hired labour. The hand-made silk textiles woven by Cham women were not only worn locally but were in demand farther afield. In the past, the black pyjamas favoured by farmers in the Mekong delta and the scarves and sarongs worn by the ethnic Khmer were made by the Cham and traded by them into remote rural communities in Vietnam and Cambodia. By the late 1990s the home-based weaving economy had almost entirely collapsed due to competition from imports. Now even the Cham themselves wear mass-produced sarongs and shawls, purchased at a fraction of the cost, some imported from as far away as Indonesia. A few households still operate looms to produce fabric for sale to foreign tourists; however, the net effect of opening the economy has been to decimate this industry.

In these instances, the relatively localised subsistence-based economy practised by the Cham and the lack of alternative local employment opportunities result not from their isolation from the market economy, but from too much exposure. One consequence of marketisation in the Mekong delta has been the undercutting of formerly viable economic activities, some of which were previously large in scale and geographically extensive.

A third observed tendency is that, like the ethnic Khmer of the Mekong delta, the Cham have in some respects become more insular since liberal reforms were introduced. This is illustrated by the recent intensification of their Islamic identity, which entails a strong emphasis on residential separatism, dietary restrictions that limit interactions with community outsiders and proscriptions on marriages with non-Muslims. Mosques and madrasas have been refurbished, many community members have been exposed to a stricter form of Islam when travelling to study in Malaysia and the Middle East and increasing numbers of people depart annually on the Haj. While the intensification of Islam amounts to greater exposure to the Islamic world it has also led some Cham to assert their religious and moral distinctiveness in relation to the surrounding community. One explanation for these emphasised differences might be as a response to the marginalising effects of recent economic changes. Another factor might be the Vietnamese state's educational efforts, which have resulted in increasing numbers of educated Cham youth who are disaffected due to the lack of local opportunities for meaningful employment.

However, the argument that the Cham have retreated 'inward' as a result of market liberalisation is dramatically countered by evidence that in recent years the Cham have become the region's most successful long-distance traders. Many Cham families trade goods bought from the Cambodian border, where they live, into the provinces of the Mekong delta. In the past, they mostly traded imported fabrics. More recently they have begun to sell tariff-free gas cookers, also imported from Cambodia. It is common for people to embark on trading journeys of two to three months in duration. Many Cham youths travel continuously, returning home only briefly to

visit their families and make new purchases. Cham traders use the Vietnamese and Khmer languages, depending on the communities they visit. They reside temporarily in the localities where they find a demand for their wares and sell from door to door. In recent times, the geographical extent of their trading journeys has increased, so that many now travel as far as the Central Highlands, Hanoi, Malaysia and even China. Many travel and live in boats when trading into rural areas of the Mekong delta. For journeys further afield they will go by bus or ride a motorbike and commission a larger vehicle to transport the goods. Although more Cham men engage in long-distance trade than women, an entire family will sometimes embark on an extended trading journey. At any given time a sizeable proportion of the residents of a Cham settlement are away trading. In the early 2000s, a resident of La Ma hamlet, Vinh Truong village, estimated that in a busy season up to three-quarters of his neighbourhood's households would have at least one member away on a trading journey.

The stories told by the Cham about their involvement in extensive extralocal trade indicate that, since the liberal reforms were introduced in the late 1980s, the Cham have come into their own as long-distance traders. Their trading experiences significantly contrast with accounts that depict Vietnam's remote-dwelling ethnic minority communities such as the Cham as isolated or excluded from the intensification of market exchanges in their areas or, alternatively, resisting them.

These processes of articulation with the market economy are diverse and appear to be contradictory. The Cham are culturally insular and yet are engaged in a translocal economy; they are apparently undercut locally and yet successful extralocally. In short, one finds evidence for several competing scenarios: localism, marginalisation, resistance and expansionary engagement.

Putting Place in Motion

To account for the unexpected and seemingly contradictory ways Cham Muslim localities in southern Vietnam have been affected by economic liberalisation it is useful to examine critically the attributes associated with ethnic minority status that are thought to influence economic success. The first of these is the condition of remoteness. According to the 'market integration' philosophy currently influential in Vietnamese leadership circles, people in remote areas (*vung sau vung xa*) are insulated from the enabling effects of the market. To rectify this, the state, funded by international development agencies, has extended roads, markets and other forms of infrastructure to such regions in order to connect them to more dynamic economic centres and allow an inflow of goods and information (Taylor 2004b, 2006). As in the case of the Cham fishing and weaving economies, such processes may also, to the contrary, attenuate existing forms of economic engagement, making formerly connected communities more remote.

In other words, to be remote carries the connotation of being tied to place. However, while not discounting the constraints imposed by ecology or recent policy

shifts, the places where the Cham live can also be seen as in process. They have been constituted by the Cham in a history of movement. At the same time, the mobile livelihoods followed by the Cham have been shaped by their adaptations to the places where they live. This is the picture one gets from listening to the accounts the Cham have given for their involvement in trade, which, although diverse, situate this activity within a longer history of movement into and out of their present-day home.

Some accounts told by Cham people about how they came to be involved in trade relate to a history of coerced movement. Relocating to their present area centuries ago as refugees, fugitives or as bonded mercenaries of the Vietnamese army, they had no choice but to adapt to the economic realities presented by their place of exile. In these accounts, the frontier region where they were resettled offered some localised subsistence opportunities but also the opportunity to trade. While over time more people engaged in trade, they also continued to fish and raise crops for subsistence purposes. Many people report that the income generated from their trading journeys is uncertain and never large. As new marketplaces have been built in the localities in which they have long sold their goods, the profitability of this activity has subsided further. Always on the move, unable to put their children through school and lacking the capital to be involved in more lucrative and stable activities such as government service or agriculture, people have found it difficult to break free from the constraints imposed upon them by their legacy of continuous movement.

Equally prevalent are narratives of opportunism. According to some accounts, the Cham are descended from the people who came to this place from Malaysia, Minangkabau or the Middle East, expressly to take advantage of its favourable location. Some say that the first settlers here were traders who were attracted by the trading opportunities in this interstitial region. Other accounts attest that the earliest settlers came here to fish or alternatively to propagate the faith and only later turned to trade. These accounts stress the flexible and adaptive nature of Cham economic life. According to some, the pursuit of diverse local options has always been governed by what at the time is profitable. For example, one person who formerly operated several weaving looms under his house disagreed with the proposition that his family had been forced out of this cottage industry by the globalisation of the textile economy. Rather he said that the decline of local handicraft production in the 1990s was due to locals chasing after more profitable opportunities, such as the possibility to trade the newly available imported textiles to other rural communities. Nevertheless, the very extent and duration of their trading journeys, which appear truly remarkable, are attributed by some locals to the persistent restrictions they face as an economically powerless people. Many Cham people describe their involvement in trade, like all their economic activities, as small scale. Over time they have simply extended the scope of formerly localised trading practices to venture further afield. Despite the increasing expansiveness of their trading journeys these pursuits have been limited by their existing adaptations to their

locality and by their meagre resources. Hence, many people trade only by boat to other water-based communities in the Mekong delta. They service out-of-the way rural areas rather than urban markets, where competition is stiff, and have to accept selling on credit to cash-strapped farmers. This explains why their journeys normally take so long. Close to the margins of subsistence, they have seldom taken risks and have always acted within their means. This is the reason given for why so few Cham people moved into the lucrative but also risky local aquaculture economy when it began to take off in the 1990s. Instead most preferred to focus on safer, less capital-intensive trading activities, which took them further from home for longer periods of time.

Other people describe trade as the adaptation of an old way of life to new conditions. The Cham have stuck with their traditional economy in woven textiles but have switched their mode of participating in it, from manufacture to distribution. The sites for engaging this economy have also changed from household-based production to extralocal purchases and sales. In the process, male traders have taken over from female weavers as the primary agents in the woven textiles economy. Although few Cham women now engage in loom weaving some have turned to seamstressing, using sewing machines at home to make clothes on order. Many also embroider caps and shawls to satisfy a new demand for these items in Malaysia.

What of the view that in their trading occupations the Cham have simply responded to recent state policies that promote market-based livelihoods? I have heard some Cham put this view as consistent with their own experiences but it was disputed by others who pointed out that members of their community had been trading for generations before the reform policies were inaugurated in the mid 1980s. Several people also told how the Vietnamese state's restrictions on trade in the 1970s and early 1980s and its military conflict with Cambodia at the same time forced many Cham to escape overseas. Indeed, they say, it is only due to the remittances sent back from their overseas relatives that many have been able to trade at all.

In other words, Cham people's accounts of their trading lifestyle do not neatly mesh with the national narrative, often told, of Vietnam's transition from an autarchic to a market-based way of life brought about by the state's opening of the economy. Nor has the state's attempt to overcome the perceived remoteness of their rural settlements by extending roads and building schools significantly improved their local economic opportunities. The reason these narratives of spatial opening and connection do not apply well to the Cham is evident in their own accounts, which situate their trading activities in the context of an ongoing history of movement.

Culture in Process

If we understand place in motion, what of culture? A second explanation for ethnic minority groups' underperformance in the market economy is their supposed

'cultural remoteness'. Do certain cultural attributes or 'endowments' explain why the Cham Muslims, unlike other remote-dwelling ethnic minority groups, are involved in extralocal trading activities? I explored two factors, religion and kinship, in order to gauge how these cultural resources are associated with the spatial and historical singularity of Cham economic life.

Following a 'cultural remoteness' paradigm, I learned that the Cham do indeed characterise these cultural elements as a constraint on their economic engagements with wider society. Cham people have told me that the food and marriage proscriptions imposed by their faith impede the development of more extensive social relationships that might aid business. The requirements of five-time daily prayers, which bind them to residence in close proximity to mosques, are said to have a similar effect. Economic ventures are curtailed for a month each year as people return home to observe Ramadan. Some note that the restrictions placed on Cham women's social interactions make it hard for them to work away from home, which constrains economic progress and accounts for the relative poverty of their community.

Yet these cultural elements are also seen as a precondition for their activities as traders and a reason for their success. Some say there is less crime and conflict in Cham settlements in comparison with those of their ethnic Kinh neighbours, and attribute this to the bonds forged by shared religious practice. One trader told me that Cham people's devotion to religion has earned them a reputation for honest and fair dealing, essential to the occupation of trade. The disciplining and socially constraining effects of religious taboos are said to reduce traders' involvement in expensive and potentially harmful drinking, feasting and gambling while they are away on their extended sales trips. The aspiration to undertake the Haj once in one's life, along with pressures to contribute to religious festivals and mosque and communal cemetery upkeep, serves as a stimulus for accumulating savings. These locally salient status ambitions also keep traders focused on their home communities during periods of extended absence.

Another cultural factor that has a bearing on Cham trade is their matrilocal post-marital residence pattern. When Cham people marry, the husband normally goes to live at his wife's parents' house. Cham say that the groom is 'taken' by the wife's side and brought home to live in the wife's natal home. When the couple gains an amount of economic independence they may set up a new residence of their own. More often a husband will live largely away from home over many years on a series of extended trading trips, while his wife stays at home with her parents and children, accompanying him when the children are young or during the school holidays. These patterns are variations on matrilocal residence, with the wife's natal residence serving as the centre and point of return for the married family's mobile members.

Perhaps it is matrilocal residence that predisposes a man to travelling and to an extralocal occupation such as trading, for the kinship structure tends to make all men into travellers. Most Cham men grow up with the expectation that they will relocate households when attaining adulthood. A Cham man expects to move into his

wife's house at marriage and thereafter reside permanently away from his natal home. Hence it is a small step for Cham men, and a familiar one, to work in an occupation that is based on travel and residence away from home. Cham people also describe the matrilocal household as the site for the transmission of craft skills from mothers to daughters, enabling Cham women to earn an income that complements that of men and allowing them a traditionally high degree of economic autonomy. As a place for complementary economic activities and a base for men to rest and replenish trade goods between trips, the matrilocal household is regarded as an institution that sustains Cham men's involvement in long-distance trade.

Such cultural legacies may not be pre-determining or independent variables but instead may stand in dynamic relationship with their economic life. For instance, one could see matrilocality as adaptive to traditions of male extralocal travel. Cham say their men have long journeyed away from home as soldiers, traders, labour migrants, religious scholars and pilgrims, an observation confirmed in independent accounts (Labussiere 1880). A matrilocal residence pattern provides flexibility and continuity, allowing men to stay away from home for a significant period of their lives without disrupting succession or the raising of children. Islam can also be seen as a consequence of Cham people's history of movement. Some Cham people see Islam as a result of their exposure as migrants to Muslim communities in Cambodia and Malaysia. Some say this creed derives from their occupational association as traders with the region's Muslim traders. Cham people certainly find strong affinities with the cosmopolitan dimensions of Islam, reflecting perhaps their intercultural livelihoods as frontier dwellers and traders. Proscriptions against certain forms of intercommunal exchange may have gained in prominence as the Cham have engaged increasingly in trade, such restrictions minimising the potential for divisiveness posed by prolonged family separations.

Just as place for the Cham is not static, nor does it appear appropriate to view culture in such a manner. Rather, their cultural attributes exist in a processual, interdependent relationship with the Cham people's histories and present practices of movement. As with the Sufi transnational regional cults that have emerged in the context of Pakistani international labour migration (Werbner 1999, p. 33), the Cham people's own distinct cultural institutions have been reproduced in the context of their mobile ventures.

Reinventing Economic Space

I turn finally to the translocal context. One explanation for the poor economic performance of Vietnam's ethnic minority communities in the reform era is that they are systematically disadvantaged by a development model that favours those who enjoy close ties with state authorities, access to extralocal sources of capital, competency in the national language, participation in urban-centric information networks and entrepreneurial experience (Rambo & Jamieson 2003; Taylor 2004a). Lacking access to some or all of these resources many ethnic minority people have

been excluded from the benefits of economic liberalisation. In response, some have turned to religious conversions, political protests or cultural fundamentalism to resist the encompassment of their localities by an external context that also makes their former way of life untenable (Salemink 2003; Taylor 2004b). However, this scenario is not entirely applicable to the case of ethnic minority groups such as the Hmong or Cham Muslims, whose migratory, mobile or multi-local strategies comprise an alternative means for evading encompassment. Having learnt something of their extralocal trading activities we are in a position to appreciate better the agency of the Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta as they engage with something as seemingly given or deterministic as the 'market economy'.

As for multi-locale people everywhere, economic space for the Cham is multiply inhabited and complexly enfolded. Different locations and modes of engagement with the market economy sustain each-other. Cham people's extralocal economic activities as migratory workers and traders sustain their local communities as 'translocalities,' in the sense used by Appadurai (1996, p. 192). We see this in the money Cham migrant workers and traders remit and bring home to their families to be spent on house renovations, schooling and the purchase of land, boats, vehicles and other forms of capital. Profits from trade are also spent on mosque renovations, financial support for religious leaders and educators and the hosting of community festivals such as Ramadan and El Fitri. In turn institutions such as the matrilineal household, mosque and madrasa sustain the extralocal ventures of family and community members. While traders are away on their extended journeys their children are nurtured and educated by home-based family members and their religious education and cultural literacy are attended to within collectively funded mosques and schools run by religious and community leaders.

As the Cham make a living away from home they draw also on capacities and competencies that have emerged in the context in which they live. Since they live along the river in an area that floods annually, their way of life is dependent on water-based transport. Cham households rely on boats for local transportation and these have been used also as a means of transportation and accommodation for trading journeys undertaken to the other settlements in the delta to which Cham settlements are connected by water. The Cham people's close proximity to the border with Cambodia provides them access to trade goods which are sold in areas where the goods are in demand. Their frontier location also means that most Cham people are multilingual. They are strongest in Cham, Khmer and Vietnamese, the main languages spoken by the people who live along the Mekong River in Cambodia and Vietnam. Many Cham traders use Khmer to make purchases at or across the Cambodian border and sell extensively into areas of southern Vietnam that are populated by Khmer-speaking people. They use the Vietnamese language for purchases and sales in locations where ethnic Kinh and Chinese people live. Their facility in communicating across the linguistic divides and within diverse cultural contexts that characterise their home settlements is a variety of cosmopolitanism that serves them well when they travel to distant points of sale. Their success in these

ventures depends on their ability to understand the conditions of life in several different contexts, to respond to different local needs and to adjust to prolonged periods of residence in culturally unfamiliar areas. Bringing such capacities into action far from home the Cham translate local cultural competencies into extralocal advantages.

The way the Cham articulate spatially with the market is also highly original. Unlike the ethnic Kinh majority in the delta, who mostly patronise proximate neighbourhood markets, the markets the Cham engage with are uniquely mobile, extralocal and remote. As specialist long-distance sellers, Cham traders are always on the move. Travelling to a community that is not serviced by markets, they set up a provisional base—their boats or rental accommodation—and take their goods from house to house. They reside in the vicinity until their goods are sold and payment has been secured. In an intriguingly parallel manner, those who remain at home, of whom women are in the majority, are also serviced by mobile traders. The traders, ethnic Kinh men and women from surrounding settlements, move through the Cham settlements, pushing barrows and poling boats loaded with household consumables of every variety. As they move from house to house, female householders come out to the doorway or street front to make their purchases. One of the reasons this door-to-door sales system prevails in Cham settlements far more than elsewhere in the delta is that Cham women are required by their faith to restrict their interactions beyond the family. This is why they trade less frequently than Cham men and it probably also explains why their settlements, unlike those that surround them, lack neighbourhood markets. That we find these duplicate scenarios playing out at home and away is not due to geographical remoteness nor to the exclusions Cham people face within the imposed conditions of a market economy. Rather it reflects the projection locally and extralocally of a gendered mode of exchange that reflects and perhaps also in turn consolidates Cham people's own cultural priorities.

This discussion of Cham people's complex and multi-sited engagements with the market economy rebuts the notion that the spatial arrangements of the market economy are necessarily pre-determined, and that economically weak local actors have no options but to conform to or resist them. The Cham have geographical agency. They reinvent economic space through local and extralocal trading practices that draw upon and also sustain their distinct cultural competencies and institutions.

Conclusion

In the course of this investigation into the Cham Muslim economy in motion the assumptions informing my initial proposition have, perhaps not surprisingly, shifted ground. The question I began with—how have Cham localities been affected by the national switch to a market-based economy—has changed into an appreciation for the ways the Cham have reproduced local forms of sociality extralocally and how through this means they reproduce their localities.

The economic practices of the Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta expand our ideas of place and culture, and of the structural constraints facing ethnic minority peoples in Vietnam and elsewhere. The findings of this study require us to modify existing explanations for the economic marginality of ethnic minorities in today's marketised conditions. The notion of geographical remoteness is not particularly helpful, and in line with Cham experiences we should recontextualise place in terms of longstanding and ongoing histories of mobility, the most salient being migration and trade. For other groups these histories of mobility will certainly differ, yet conceiving of place in terms of histories and practices of motion provides a fuller understanding of the significance of place in economic life. The notion of 'cultural remoteness', of cultural attributes that help or hinder people in their economic ventures, has been replaced by a sense of the mutually determining relationship between culture and economic life. The idea that the Cham are subject to a pre-given translocal market economy has given way to an appreciation of their geographical agency, economic multilocality and enfolded experience of space. This appreciation of their geographical agency is pertinent for all groups who, as migrants, inhabit space in a complex way. It is relevant to those for whom kinship, religion or gender orders cross political borders or span great geographical distances, and for those who, as migrant workers, traders, transport workers, soldiers or pilgrims, variously make their living by moving around.

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