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**REGIONAL INTEGRATION OF CHAM MUSLIMS IN THE MEKONG DELTA**

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**Abstract:** *An Giang province is located in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, recognized as Vietnam's Mecca for large Muslim population in Vietnam. This paper introduces the root of the Cham (Sunni) Muslims living in this southwestern part of Vietnam. The historical research and documentary research (in which relevant historical documents and articles were selected to review and comment) were utilized in the study. The paper shows some differences between the Cham Muslims in this region and the Hindu Chams (Balamon). More importantly, this paper indicates that the Chams in the Mekong Delta have had more mobile ways of life and a more highly regional integration in the ASEAN Community and a larger Muslim world rather than other Cham groups in Vietnam.*

**Key words:** *ASEAN Community, Cham Muslims, Hindu Chams, Mekong Delta, Regional Integration*



Map 1: Historical extent of the Kingdom of Champa (in green) around 1100 CE.

## I. Introduction

The paper provides a brief introduction of the Cham communities residing in Vietnam with comparison of their origins, their religious life, and some common daily activities of these ethnic groups of communities. The noticeable part of this paper is the discussion of why the new Islamic Cham people – also called the Sunni Cham Muslims, inhabiting in the Mekong Delta, are seen to be actively more dynamic in the integration process of the wider Islamic world and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) than other Cham groups. The final part of the paper is the conclusion and some suggestions for promoting the socioeconomic development of the Sunni Cham



people in An Giang province.

## II. Literature Reviews

Previous studies about Cham communities in Vietnam and other parts of the ASEAN Community were reviewed in this paper. The previous studies include the ones of Manguin (1985), Taylor (2006), Nakamura (2008), Agency for Science Technology and Research (A\*STAR), (2009), Yoshimoto (2012), Bray (2014), Parker (2014) and Angie (2016). From the review, the authors of this paper pinpoint the connectivity of the Chams in the wider ASEAN region and in Vietnam. The paper then provides a brief introduction of the root of the Cham people and outlines some major distinctions of the three main Cham communities in Vietnam. The three main groups of Cham people in Vietnam consist of Cham Balamon, Cham Bani, and Cham Muslims.

## III. Findings and discussions

In this section, the major findings of the paper were extracted after the careful review of selective articles, previous studies and documents related to Cham communities residing in Vietnam. After the review, the findings were summarized with the following themes: deep roots of Cham people; Cham people in Vietnam; the Chams' religions; the Cham people in An Giang province. Finally, the authors of this paper based on their indigenously local knowledge about traditions, habits, and cultures of the Cham Communities in Vietnam to suggest some comments of why the Cham people in An Giang province were seen to have more mobile lifestyles than the Cham communities in the South Central of Vietnam.

### 1. Deep Roots of Cham People

Most scholars believe that the Cham are thought to have arrived in Vietnam by sea from Borneo (Bray, 2014). Their ancestors were Malayo-Polynesian speakers. The ancestors of Cham people in Vietnam, in fact, were a group of the ancestors of Asians arrived first in India and later, some of them migrated to Thailand, and South to the lands known today as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Earliest known records of Cham presence in Indochina date back to the second century CE (Agency for Science Technology and Research (A\*STAR), 2009). The size of Champa was during its heyday in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century not substantially larger than during the formative period. Scholars also believe that the Cham are descendants of the Sa Huynh (roughly 1000 B.C. to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., when the Cham culture began flowering. Sa Huynh relics have been found as far away as Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia, indicating that the people sailed, traded, and settled around what was then the Champa Sea.



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**Map 2:** Map of Borneo (Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.o>)

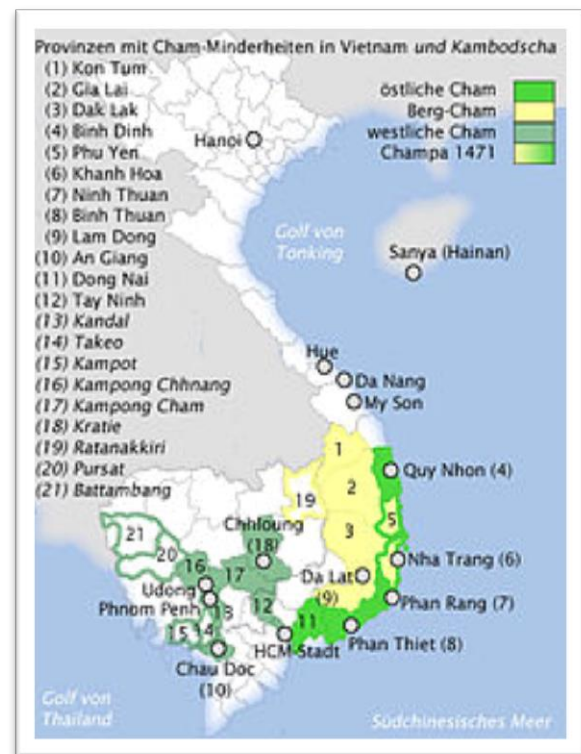


**Map 3:** Map of Borneo in the ASEAN region (source: [https://asiasociety.org/education/introduction-southeast-asia\)rg](https://asiasociety.org/education/introduction-southeast-asia)rg))



**Map 4:** Map of Kingdom of Champa (light blue) in 980, Kingdom of Đại Cồ Việt (Yellow) and Khmer empire (purple)

(Source: <https://www.tindachieu.com/news/wp-c>)



**Map 5:** Map of the distribution of the Cham in southeast Asia today [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/ChamPeople in Vietnam and Cambodia.jpg/uploads/2015/11/.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/ChamPeople%20in%20Vietnam%20and%20Cambodia.jpg/uploads/2015/11/.jpg))



## 2. The Cham people in Vietnam

As mentioned earlier, the **Chams**, or **Cham people** (named in the Vietnamese Language *người Chăm or người Chăm*), are an ethnic group of Austronesian origin in Southeast Asia. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century the Chams populated Champa, a contiguous territory of independent principalities in central and southern Vietnam. The population of the Cham people was about 132,827 in 1999. The Cham was ranked the 13<sup>th</sup> largest ethnic group in the total of 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam. The Cham was classified into two distinct groups of Cham people, in consideration of their residential location, historical background and religion. The first group lives in the south central region of Vietnam, particularly Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces, which these two provinces used to form a large province, named Thuan Hai province. This province covered a similar area to the part of the kingdom of ancient Champa known as Panduranga. It was recorded that the population of the Cham people in this area was about 86,000 inhabitants (Nakamura, 2008). The second group of Cham people resides in the Mekong Delta, most of them around Chau Doc city, An Giang Province, near the border with Cambodia. There were about 12,000 Cham people living in this region, and most of this Cham group is considered as Sunni Muslims. In addition, communities of Sunni Muslims are seen to live in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces such as Dong Nai and Tay Ninh. Moreover, approximately 20,000 Cham live in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh provinces. This particular group is called Cham Hroi, classified as a sub-group of the Cham ethnic group. It is believed that the Cham Hroi were members of the population of the kingdom of Champa, whom were left alone with a very limited contact with others (Nakamura, 2008).

## 3. Religions of the Cham people in Vietnam

In terms of religion, the Cham people in Vietnam can be categorized into three religions: the Cham group of Balamon Hinduism, the Cham group of Banis, and the Cham group of Sunni Muslims.

### 3.1. The Hindu Cham Balamon group and the com

The first group of Cham people who follow Hinduism. Originally, the Cham took up Hinduism early, which were likely to be converted by Indian traders, and combined it with their traditional beliefs. The Hindu Cham are called Balamon (Bray, 2014). The Balamon Hindus worship ancestors, deified kings, and their gods called Po Yang, and hold their ceremonies in the ancient Champa temples in their regions built between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are supposed to observe a taboo on eating beef, and are normally cremated when they die. They are led by a body of priests, Halau Tamunay Ahier (Yoshimoto, 2012).



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They make up approximately 25% of the overall Cham population. In all, approximately 50,000 Chams in Vietnam are Hindu, with another 4,000 Hindus living in Ho Chi Minh City; some of these are ethnic Cham, but most are Indian (Tamil) or of mixed Indian-Vietnamese descent (Hindus of Vietnam, 2018). Hinduism, adopted from India since early in its history, formed the art and culture of the Champa kingdom for centuries, as proved by many Cham Hindu statues and red brick temples being dotted the landscape in Cham lands. Mỹ Sơn, a former religious center, and Hôi An, one of Champa's main port cities, are

now World Heritage Sites (Parker, 2014).

Photo 1: Mariamman Temple (Source: <http://www.hinduhumanrights.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Mariamman-Temple.jpg>)

### **3.2. The Cham Bani group (traditional Islamic Cham group)**

The second group of Cham people (about 65% of the Cham population) is called Cham Bani who live in the central of Vietnam, with adhere to the Islamic faith, a conversion which began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD (Parker, 2014). About nearly half of the Cham Bani practice a Vietnamese religious category. The earliest records of existence of Muslim communities in South Central Vietnam are around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Two Arabic inscriptions found in the former territories of Champa indicate that a Muslim community existed in modern Southern Vietnam in the latter half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that the Muslim merchant communities existed in Champa as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century along the coast line of central Vietnam. They were merchants from the Middle East trading along the silk road of the sea to China. Significant numbers of Chams, whom were indigenous populations of Champa, converted to Islam in the latter half of the 15th century (Manguin, 1985). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the French colonization (1867-1954), there were various Muslim ethnic communities from French colonies, for example, the Indian people from Pondichery had a prominent presence in Ho Chi Minh City. There are 2 major beautiful mosques in Ho Chi Minh City built by the Indian Muslim community. In Nha Trang, Da Nang and Hai Phong along the coastal areas, the mosques built by the Indian communities during this time still can be seen. However, the first mosque in Ho Chi Minh City called Masjidir Rahim was built by a Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim community. Hence, the Muslim population in Vietnam has different origins, and the most numerous and prominent group in contemporary Vietnam being the Cham people.

The Cham Bani Muslims adhere to an indigenized form of Islam. They worship their god, Po Alwah (Allah) at their village mosque called Thang Muki. They are supposed to be prohibited to eat



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pork, dead meats, blood and alcohol. They are led by a body of priests, Halau Tamunay Awar. They do not live in the same villages with the Cham Balamon people. For instance, according to Nakamura (2008), there were 22 Cham villages in Ninh Thuan province, including 7 villages of Bani people. However, at the moment, it is possible that the number of Cham villages now in this location increases more than 22 villages in 10 years after this study. Since these two Cham groups do not share common daily life in the same village, they know little about each other's customs and traditions.

Cham people's eating routines can be seen as another difference between the Cham Balamon and Cham Bani. For instance, Cham Bani eat first and then conduct the ceremony, so they consider their foods are fresh and clean. Meanwhile, the Cham Balamon do the ceremony first, then eat afterwards. Therefore, the Cham Bani consider the foods of the Cham Balamon are not fresh and clean. It is likely that 'hygiene' is seen as an element in distinguishing between these two Cham groups. For instance, the Cham Bani often have comments on the Cham Balamon's hygiene: they view the Cham Balamon "dirty", "unclean", "unsanitary" and so on. Such comments are often agreed by the Cham Balamon about their religious practices. They admit that the Bani people are more progressive and that their ceremonies are simpler. However, they argue that they are unable to simplify their ceremonies as the Bani do, due to the reason that the Cham Balamon people must maintain the authentic cultural traditions inherited from the kingdom of Champa without alternation or simplification (Nakamura, 2008).

### **3.3. The Cham Sunni Muslim group (the new Islamic Chams)**

The third group of Cham consists of the remaining 10 % of the Cham in Vietnam who practice Sunni Islamic faith with contacts and connections with the Islamic community through pilgrimages to Mecca, or studies abroad in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia (Yoshimoto, 2012). These Cham (Sunni) Muslims concentrate in the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam (including An Giang, Tay Ninh, Dong Nai provinces and Ho Chi Minh City) with a population of 13,000 Cham (Taylor, 2006). The Cham Sunni Muslims in the Mekong Delta were considered to have a very limited connectivity with Champa, but have better connections with wider Islamic world. In interview, some denied their connections with Champa and claimed their roots in Angkor. They tended to be seen as having lost the matrilineal and matrilocal principles, because of the influence of Islam (Angie, 2016). For instance, Angie's findings showed that the living arrangements of the Cham people in this region are ambilocal rather than strictly matrilocal. A couple's living arrangements often depend on their economic situation and access to the job market or education. But the basic rule remains matrilocal, as indicated by the forms of traditional wedding rituals. The Cham Muslim wedding lasts for three days and it ends on the third day when the groom enters the bride's house. Unlike Cham Bani group living in the South Central region of Vietnam, Mekong Delta's religious leaders and educated Chams speak Malay language and write in Jawi script. A small number of Cham people in An Giang province that were able to read old Cham scripts



(Angie, 2016). Interestingly, in comparison between the Cham Bani and Cham Muslims, in her study, the author found that Cham Bani considered the Sunni Muslim Chams in Mekong Delta as a loss of culture because not many Cham Muslims still keep ‘Akkar Thrah’ (the Cham’s traditional writing system) while the Chams in South Central Vietnam have better ability to access and process the authentic knowledge of their past time of the kingdom of Champa to enable them more indigenous Chams (Angie, 2016).

*Table 1. Muslim people in Vietnam*

	<b>Islam (Cham Islam), New Islam</b>	<b>Bani (Cham Bani) Old Islam</b>
<b>Branch</b>	Sunni	Bani
<b>Places of living</b>	An Giang province, Tay Ninh province, Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai province, Ninh Thuan province	Ninh Thuan province, Binh Thuan province (old territory of Panduranga-Champa)
<b>Authorized organizations</b>	Ho Chi Minh City Muslim Community Representative Committee (1992~) An Giang Muslim Community Representative Committee (2004~)	Bani Religious Leaders Council (2006~)
<b>Population</b>	25,000	41,000
<b>Places of worship</b>	41 Masjids, 19 Surao	17 Thang Mugik
<b>Religious Clerics</b>	288	407
<b>Religious features</b>	Islamic rules and rituals are fully observed; pilgrimages to Mecca; networks with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia	Strongly influenced by local, traditional customs and beliefs and incorporated elements of Brahmanism and matriarchy, no pilgrimages.

*Source: Vietnam, GCRA (2006)*

It was documented in Vietnam’s official statistics in 2009 that the population of Vietnamese Muslims was approximately 75,000, and most of them are Cham people. The Muslims in Vietnam are divided into two main groups.

- **Group 1:** the Muslims reside South Central Vietnam, mainly in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces. This group of Cham Muslims is called ‘the Old Islamic Group’, ‘Cham Bani’ or shortly named ‘Bani’;
- **Group 2:** the Muslims live in the Mekong Delta (mostly in An Giang province) and other provinces such as Tay Ninh, and Dong Nai provinces and Ho Chi Minh City. These Cham communities are named ‘the New Islamic Group’, ‘Cham Islam’ (see Table 1). There are considerable differences between the two groups in terms of religious practices: the Cham Bani are strongly influenced by local and traditional customs and beliefs and have incorporated elements of Brahmanism and ancestor worship. They also have no contact with



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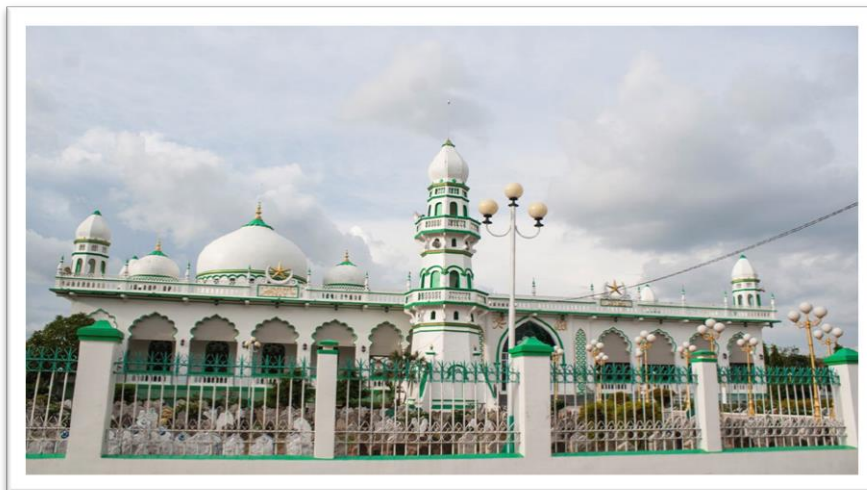


the wider Islamic world. Meanwhile, the Cham Islam are Sunni Muslims and they have connections with the wider Islamic community in regional countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia and even have connections with Saudi Arabia in the Middle East through pilgrimages to Mecca or studying abroad.

#### **4. Cham Muslims in An Giang Province**

An Giang province is located in the Mekong Delta, in the southwestern part of the country, sharing a border with Cambodia to the northwest. An Giang province, a richly fertile land created by the alluvium of Hau River (a branch of the Mekong River when flowing into Vietnam) is the residential place of many Vietnamese ethnic groups (Cham, Khmer, Chinese, and Vietnamese). Now it is the home to over 10,000 Cham people who reside mainly in districts of An Phú, Tân Châu, Châu Phú, and Châu Thành. An Giang is seen as Vietnam's Mecca, for a quite large Cham Muslims here. Cham people in An Giang province are considered to be hard-working, and they live mainly on wet rice cultivation, small business and handicrafts. Cham people here follow orthodox Islam because they still maintain many rituals and regulations of orthodox Islam in comparison with their root-family in the Central Vietnam (Yoshimoto, 2012).

In the Joshua Project, it was reported that the precise origin of the Cham people in the Mekong delta are the survivors of the Champa kingdom (flourished from A.D. 2 until A.D. 1471). Their ancestors were actually poor Cham peasants who settled down in this region of Vietnam whereas most aristocrats fled to Cambodia when the Vietnamese invaded their kingdom (Joshua Project, 2005).



**Photo 2:** *Masjid Jamiul Azhar is one of the largest mosques in An Giang Province, located in Chau Phong Commune. Built in 1959, it has undergone upgrades, and the biggest one is in 2012. With domes, crescent moon symbols and the Islamic architecture, this work is becoming one of the most beautiful mosques in Vietnam. (Source: <http://buffalotrip.com/an-giang/photo-travel/mosques-in-an-giang-province.html>)*





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According to this project, it stated that this Cham group (namely the Western Cham, found in near the delta provinces of Chau Doc and Tay Ninh in southwestern Vietnam) is a mixture of Cham and Malay, with whom they traded during the time of their powerful kingdom. Similarly, Nguyễn Văn Lợi (1974) stated that the Mekong Delta's Cham people belonged to one of the two religious groups – Cham Balamon and Cham Bani. However, since the emergence of converts to Sunni Islam in the 1960s, another religious group – Cham Islam has developed. The Cham Islam is usually described as followers of 'Hồi giáo mới' in Vietnamese, which means “new Islam,” or Cham biraw in Cham, which means “New Cham.” The “New Islam” began to emerge in the 1960s, when some of the Cham Bani were exposed to the practice of Sunni Muslims in places such as Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) (Nguyễn Văn Luận, 1974). Nakamura (2009) stated that after realizing that their own religious practices were not authentic, this Cham ethnic group shifted to purer Islamic practices. After conversion, they abandoned their ancestor worship and with the support of the Islam Community, they built mosques in their villages (Yoshimoto, 2012).

#### **5. The regional integration of An Giang Province's Cham Muslims**

As previously mentioned, there has been a historically close connection between the Cham Muslims in An Giang province and Cham communities in Cambodia (namely Western Chams) due to the land and river bordering share between An Giang province and Cambodia. An Giang Cham Muslims followed purer Islamic practices of the Sunni Muslims in Malaysia than the Cham communities in the Southern Central of Vietnam. An Giang Cham people even have been involved into a wider Islamic world to other Islamic communities in the ASEAN region such as in Indonesia and Thailand and in the Middle East region such as Saudi Arab, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, etc. Angie (2016) found out that there were fascinating migration patterns – both formal and informal by plane, car, and on foot – of the labor mobility of An Giang Cham people to Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Angie's (2016) findings showed that most Cham men informally went to Cambodia for up to ten months or one year to fish for living at the Tonle Sap Lake because there is still more fish in Cambodia than in the Mekong River (consisting of Hau River and Tien River) where their home villages were located. Meanwhile, Cham people travelling to work in Malaysia were in both formal and informal ways because they found it not much difficulty to communicate with Malay people due to some similarities between Cham and Malay languages. For instance, the Cham women in the Mekong Delta region often formally joined in the labor market in Malaysia in intensive work such as textile/garment, food processing, electronic/electrical areas whereas the Cham men tended to be in more capital intensive work such as plastics, consumer/industrial materials, mechanics, and furniture. In terms of informal labor mobility, most Cham men got outdoor work as wandering vendors, and wandering ice cream sellers, and sometimes they also got indoor jobs like packaging chicken and duck eggs small family shops owned by Malays or Chinese people. Young Cham



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women, conversely, tended to get indoor jobs as household or restaurant cleaners, and baby-sitters. For outdoor jobs, some could work as assistant salespersons of fabrics, clothes or miscellanea (Angie, 2016).

Associated with the circular migration pattern, the Cham people often based on their operation retail channels in Malaysia. For instance, they initially bought one-way tickets from Vietnam to Malaysia to work. Then, when the visa expiry nearly ended, they moved to Thailand for several days and returned back to Malaysia to apply for another 1-month visa. They went and returned from Thailand to Malaysia for several months, then went back to their hometown to visit families for nearly six months, and (possibly together with their families) returned Malaysia to earn for living again. Fortunately, many Malaysian employers tacitly approved such practices by pretending 'one eye closed, one eye open' to accept them back (Angie, 2016).

It is likely to say that, due to living near the borders (both land and water) with Cambodia, having the same Cham language and sharing common Islamic practices with the Cham people residing in Cambodia, the Cham people in the Mekong Delta have a closer connectivity with the wider Islamic world in the ASEAN region and even in the cradle of Islamic world in the Middle East. Together with the inheritance from the ancestors' routineness of trading mobility, they travel to further distances within or beyond Vietnam's boundaries for their survival activities. In conclusion, the Cham communities in the Mekong Delta have more better and advantageous conditions such as religion, language, geographical locations, and merchandising networks than the Cham communities in the South Central of Vietnam.

## **6. Recommendations**

An Giang is a typical province in the Mekong Delta that has diverse ethnic groups and religions where there are many Islamic Mosques and still remain traditionally and religiously ritual festivals of the Cham communities. However, the education level and financial incomes of the Cham people here are still quite limited in comparison with those of the whole province. Thus, local authorities need to help the Cham communities to improve their living conditions. The Cham people need to be provided with both suitable policies and financial support for them to work abroad. In reality, there are a few Chams working in some ASEAN nations; however, they merely have low-skill jobs with low wages. Many even travel to work abroad illegally. Therefore, it is in a great need that the local authorities should provide more legal lessons.

## **7. Conclusion**

Due to time constraint, the authors of this paper find difficult to update newest data about Cham people in Vietnam conducted in two recent years (after 2016). Thus, the data about Cham population and the number of their villages in Vietnam cannot be sufficiently updated for readers who are interested in. However, it is likely to draw a brief conclusion from this research paper that



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the paper provides readers an interesting life story of Cham communities inhabiting in Vietnam with a general overview of the origin, religious life, and some common daily practices of the Cham ethnic groups. Remarkably, the authors of the paper give some comments why the Cham people in the Mekong Delta region and in An Giang province are more actively engaged in the regional ASEAN integration as well as in the wider Islamic world. Finally, the writer of the paper finally gives recommendations to promote not only the sustainable development of economy, culture, and society of An Giang's Cham People and this province's tourism development.

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