

An Overview of Cham Islam in An Giang Vietnam

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Abstract

Located in the upstream of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta, An Giang is characterized by an agricultural province, which has both plains and hills, and has a border about 100km with Cambodia. An Giang is also the province with the largest number of Cham Islam living in the South. According to official document, the province has 15,327 Cham Islam, accounting for 0.67% of An Giang population. Although the population is less than the other ethnics of the province, the Cham community in An Giang always shows the spirit of solidarity and mutual affection. Cham Islam plays an important role and contribute to unique culture in An Giang.

This paper aims to clarify the progress of establishment, development and residential distribution of Cham ethnic group in An Giang, Vietnam. Authors utilized qualitative data gathered from exchange learning and in-depth interviews to examine how Cham Islam has emerged and developed in the study areas. It also focuses on their features of economy, culture, society, education and training, health, architecture, religion, and belief in comparison with Cham people in the central of Vietnam. Consequently, the researcher figures out the similarity and distinction of Cham people in the two regions; thereby, affirms positive values which need to be inherited and promoted in order to help Cham community integrate and develop in contemporary context.

Keywords: *Cham Islam, Cham value, Cham in An Giang, An Giang culture*

1. Introduction

An Giang, which is located in the upstream of Vietnamese Mekong Delta, is characterized as an agriculture province with plain, mountain and about 100 kilometers border with Cambodia. An Giang is also the province with the largest number of Cham Islam in the South. According to the statistics on religious work in An Giang (ASY, 2015), the province now has 15,327 Cham Islamists which currently account for 0.67% of the total of 2.16 million An Giang residents with eight Cham villages, 12 mosques and 13 small mosques (APPC, 2018). In spite of the fewer than Kinh people, the Cham community in An Giang with the cohesion of religion and culture always clearly shows the solidarity spirit and mutual affection. Cham Islamists in An Giang have made great contribution in forming a unique culture for the local Cham people and creating fundamental differences in cultural life.

2. The progress of establishment and residential contribution

According to some ethnographic documents and artifacts, especially decision of ethnical community verification of Vietnamese General Statistics Office on March 2nd 1979, it can be affirmed that the Cham people in An Giang and in South Central Coast as well as those in Ho Chi Minh City, Tay Ninh and Cambodia share the same ancient historical origin (Lam Tam, 1994). From the ancient or medieval time, in the central of Vietnam – residence area of Cham people, there was a powerful nation called Champa Kingdom which is still recorded in current historical document. According to ancient Chinese historical documents, Champa Kingdom, first named ‘Lam Ap’ - forest area, was established in 192 AD. Later, it was changed into ‘Hoan Vuong’ and then ‘Chiem Thanh’.

From the 10th century, after many failures in the battles with Dai Viet, Champa Kingdom had to move to the South. In 1471, after Champa King Ban La Tra Toan was captured by King Le Thanh Tong of Dai Viet, Champa territory was divided into three smaller countries named Chiem Thanh, Hoa Anh and Nam Phan (Nguyen, 1974). In the beginning of the 19th century, after the national reunion, with the strict control of Nguyen Dynasty, in 1822, the last Champa King – PoChonChan abandoned his throne and got over Truong Son range and escaped to Cambodia along with his family, soldiers and followers. In the middle of the 19th century, under King Thieu Tri’s command of security in 1840, most of them returned and settled in Chau Doc (University of Social Science and Humanity, Anthrology Department, 2006). Cham and Malaysian people along with their family recruited for the Nguyen Dynasty army also returned with Truong Minh

Giang's army, Imperial Assignee Le Van Duc and Vice Imperial Assignee Doan Uan of Nguyen Dynasty. Later, they have settled along Hau River (Katambong islish) and Khanh Binh (An Phu District, An Giang province) until now.

In 1854 and in 1858, many Islam Cham survivors of Khmer army's massacre who refugeed in Chau Doc were permitted to settle with other Cham people along border areas and Hau River near Chau Doc and Tay Ninh. The influence of historical events from the second half of 18th century led to waves of Cham people immigrant settling in the South of Vietnam after years of adventure. Therefore, Cham people in the South in general and An Giang in particular were formed by two major sources. The first one was the migrant from the Central of Vietnam directly move to the Southern new land. Meanwhile the second one returned from foreign country like Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia. At first, they settled mainly in An Giang, Tay Ninh and scattered in other Southern areas. Due to historical conditions, Cham people in An Giang had close relationship with Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia, which expanded to Muslim community in Southeast Asia and other countries. According to official documents, the Cham population was over 15,000 people, which constituted 0.59% of the provincial population and lived in Puks (hamlet) or Polay (commune) alternatively with Kinh people.

3. Highlights of Islam Cham people in An Giang

3.1. On economic life

Trading: Before 1975, about 60% to 70% of Cham households in An Giang worked as traders. Their characteristic of trading activities is that they did not open a store but bought and sold goods from places to places by boats to trade goods between Vietnam and Cambodia. Each of their trips usually lasted from 15 days to a month, sometimes two or three months. However, Cham people in An Giang do not trade all year but off on major holidays of Muslims such as Ramadan (in September of the Islamic calendar) and Tet (the end of December of the Islamic calendar). Besides, a number of Cham people who go to trade for a few months of the year return to their hometown to do fisheries in flood season. In recent years, Cham people's trading has been somewhat reduced as the transport of goods from urban areas to rural ones has become easier and trading activities and grocery stores in rural areas have increased rapidly. On the other hand, the decrease in the number of traders is also due to the policy of supporting and encouraging the agricultural and livestock production of the local authorities for Cham people.

Weaving: craft weaving which is one of the traditional crafts of the Cham people has been favored by many people because of its good quality, its specific dyeing techniques and unique patterns. The most famous handicraft is brocade weaving product and silk fabric with delicate patterns. Weaving products' uses are diverse from serving for daily life such as scarves, sarongs for men to high quality brocade items for sewing clothes, bags, pouches, etc. Especially, the combination of all brocade sheets types and colors creating a diverse but unique feature of each textile product. According to Islamic customs, Cham women are restricted from participating in social activities, so weaving becomes suitable for them and attracts a large number of female workers. The Cham people's products used to be widely traded on the domestic market due to its good quality, sophistication and ingenuity. However, in recent years, the craft weaving of Cham people has not developed strongly because industrial fabrics are increasingly cheap and ready-made clothes are sold everywhere.

Fisheries: Cham people in An Giang live along Hau river's sides, a branch of Vietnamese Mekong Delta River, so they have advantages to develop freshwater fishing. Fisheries seasons of Cham people in An Giang often have three common seasons (based on lunar calendar). The first season is from end of March to end of May – the beginning of rainy season. At that time, the river's water level is shoal and is the lowest level in the year. The second season is from June to August - flood season. People often use small eye net and medium eye net to catch white meat fish and fish with prongs. In this season, the fish often have eggs and go to the field to give birth, so they often follow the canals to the field. They can catch more fish in this season than in the beginning of rainy season. The last season is from September to the next March – the harvest season of fishermen in the Southwest region. This crop is full of fish, so the residents also make full use of fishing tools. In recent years, fishing has decreased because of the decreasing number of fishes; thus, fishermen are only a small part of the population. Currently, there are about 183 households living by fishing and are mainly Cham residents in Vinh Truong, Da Phuoc and Khanh Hoa.

Agricultural production: During the process of settling together with Khmer and Vietnamese people, Cham people got the experience of thousands of years about lowland rice cultivation, regenerate natural condition, transformed wild land into gardens and fields, and gradually transformed the wild face of An Giang into fertile islets and sediment fields. Cham people also use buffaloes and cows to pull, harrows and grow rice, crops and orchards. Cham people are currently recovering the breeding of buffaloes, cows and goats ... as

attraction for production and meat for sale. In fact, before 1975, each Cham village had only about 10 households working in agriculture; most of them were trading and weaving. At present, each village has a large number of households engaged in agricultural production combined with weaving and fishing.

3.2. On sociocultural

Cultural activities of Cham people in An Giang province are very diverse. During the year, Ramadan is one of the largest festivals of Cham people in An Giang province. The Cham people call this the holy month. *Plānoh*, which is the other name meaning “fasting month”, is celebrated continuously for thirty days from September 1st to September 30th. After the end of the fasting month, the Cham people celebrated the end of fasting ceremony (Roya Eidil Fitri) on October 1st. On this night, everyone celebrates with songs and exciting activities. The next morning, the men in the community went to the mosque to celebrate and pray, and then went to pay respect to their relatives' graves and visit relatives in the village. During this holiday, everyone is willing to forgive all mistakes done onto each other, happy to greet and bestow good wishes. The pilgrimage to the holy land Mecca (Raya Haji) is an important Mass for the Cham people. According to the Islamic calendar, pilgrims must prepare so that they are present in Mecca precisely on December 9th. If they arrive on October 10th (Roya Ajdha day), it is considered a vacation and the pilgrims will not be awarded the title Hadji. For those who live in hamlet, they celebrate the festival on December 10th Islamic calendar and often gather to slaughter cows, goats, and etc., and then divide the share equally for each family within the mosque area. During the major festivals, the activities create a very joyful atmosphere in the Cham community. Previously, due to the prohibition stated in Islamic law, folk cultural activities were not developed. But in return, Cham people in An Giang province have formed a culture so colorful with all kinds of tales. Through the stories, we can see that the Cham people in An Giang province always uphold the value of spousal love and brotherhood like in the story *Đôrya the modest*, and *Amách and Sifoah*, etc. A notable feature in most of the stories of Cham people is that there is always a spiritual element in them. The spiritual element manifests to help resolve the circumstances that humans cannot. In addition, they also have jokes, fables, and myths about Mohammad and angels according to the Qur'an. Names of characters often borrowed from the Arab language. The characters' ways of living are similar to traders of the Near East countries, who have to travel far away from home for long periods of time. The stories are often similar to the ones from *One Thousand and One Nights*. It can be stated that Vietnamese literature has contributed greatly to the Cham Islam community's literary treasure.

Music activities of Cham people in An Giang province are not alike with the music of Cham people in Central Vietnam. They do not use any string or wind instruments aside from the Ráp Pà-nà drum (different from the Paranung drum and Gineng drum of Cham people in Central Vietnam - Central Cham people believe that Saranaí trumpet, Paranung drum, and Gineng drum are symbols of heaven, earth, and people; that they express unity. This is why it is necessary to play these three types of instruments to show the harmony of these three elements). The ancient drum set Rap Pà-nà in An Giang province, if still intact, would have twelve drums and would have been preserved for about 300 years. But due to the war, the drum set is incomplete with only six drums remain including one "male" drum (lead drum) and six "female" drums. Due to the need for cultural exchanges, Rap Pà-nà drum in An Giang Province got the chance to perform in festivals just like Paranung drum. Although playing only with drums, the artists skilfully interlace a variety of rhythms and melodies into the song. From the Rap Pà-nà drum, we can see how the Cham people have developed a flexible and creative way of playing with folk songs as: Chanty, rhymes, lullaby, rhymes, folk song Pa-nuọc Pa-dát. In the cultural activities, instead of seeing charming Cham girls with fan dance like in Central Vietnam, we only see them swinging to the sound of beating drums. The drumbeat represents something sacred and is considered the soul of the Cham people and always presents in weekly prayers or major ceremonies at the mosque.

3.3. On architecture

The Cham Islam people in An Giang province also show their ingenuity and skillfulness in architectural art through the creation of the mosque. These architectural works are mostly designed, built, or restored by Cham people. An Giang province has 12 mosques and 15 Minor Mosques, of which the most significant is Mubarak Mosque. Mubarak is considered a mosque with a typical architectural style of the Cham community in An Giang province. The architectural structure denotes its unique characteristics, bearing the Islamic culture in general and the culture of Cham people in the South in particular. The main gate is arch-shaped. On the oval roof of the mosque, there is a large two-story tower with a crescent moon and a star, the symbol of Islam, at the foot of it. There are also two round towers that rise high in the middle of the roof. In the four corners rises four smaller towers. From the main door of the Mosque to the sides, each side

has two pointed arches, each about 2.4 meters apart. On each side, there are also six pointed arches. Inside the Mosque, there is no altar or image of any god or saint. At one end of the Mosque, there is a special place serves only for dignitaries to lead the ceremonies and there is a minbar where the Imam teaches at the Friday ceremony every week. The large, spacious room is painted in white and light green with polished tiles to keep space cool. Chandeliers contribute to adorn the interior, adding to the solemn and formal atmosphere of the Mosque. Traditional houses of the Cham people are wooden stilts style. However, due to the lifestyle, and objective factors along with economic conditions, today most of the house is similar to the Kinh people.

3.4. On health, education and training

The communes with Cham ethnic minority people all have capable medical clinics. Each clinic has doctors, midwives, pharmacists, etc., in accordance with regulations. These clinics are equipped with sufficient medical equipment and operating funds. The health sector in An Giang province also regularly organizes medical examinations and provides free medicines for Cham's policy-based and poor households. Promotion activities on disease prevention, population and family planning, reproductive health care, childcare, sanitation, food hygiene, etc., are often carried out to help raise awareness and knowledge of health protection in the Cham community.

The issue of Islam education is always placed first for the Cham people in An Giang province. From the moment the child was born, the father already read to the child religious text of Islam. By the age of 6, every morning or afternoon, the Cham child has to go to school to receive teachings from the Tuól (teachers). The textbook used to teach is Kidam (the book of beginners) and the Qur'an (catechism book). Over three to four years, the child can read and write fluently in Arabic letters, which belong to the doctrinal content. In addition to teaching Arabic characters and internal community teachings, Cham children also participate in general education programs like other ethnic groups in the community. Previously, the Cham community was only interested in teaching Arabic characters to read the Qur'an and the doctrine but in recent years, along with the country's socio-economic development, a small part in the Cham community in An Giang province has paid much attention to learning Vietnamese to interact with other ethnic groups and improve educational level. Every year, many Cham students are recruited for preparatory universities and universities. The percentage of Cham students has increased significantly in recent years; many have even been sent to study in Malaysia and Indonesia.

3.5. On costume and, cuisine

Traditional Cham costume, in general, is produced in combination with special textile materials to create this unique look, which makes it easy to recognize. Women often fashion rectangular scarves made of soft thin white fabric with many colorful details embroidered at the hem. Cham Islam people often only use white scarves, whereas other Cham groups might include more colors; for example, Cham Hroi often wears indigo scarves. When wearing the scarf, they often cover their hair, wrap around the head, or wrap in a crisscrossing pattern. When wearing formal attire, Cham women wear big scarves (up to 23m long) with a variety of red, white, and yellow patterns. The piece is worn from on top of the head, down to cover the shoulders, then across the hips of the white dress. Cham women's skirts often have a red-purple background, harmoniously combining with other colors such as blue, apricot yellow or white, etc.

Traditional costume of Cham men is a skirt and pants. They often wrap sarongs in brown, red, purple, green, and blue colors. Men's sarongs often have cloth woven vertically to form a pattern of colors different from the background color. When worn, they wrap the sarongs but must calculate so that the colorful pattern is in the middle behind the back. Another characteristic of Cham's male attire is the way they design the shirt. It has a scoop neck with one cut straight down the middle for both the short and long style. Men of Cham Hroi group often wear bright or dark round-neck button-up waistcoats with an open front and embroidery on the fringes; round metal pieces are attached to the two front hems. In addition to waistcoats, the Cham men also have a red or white sleeveless long shirt for holidays. For a wedding in An Giang province, Atica bride wears a red velvet long dress with purple tinge without waist slits; a white lace scarf on her head; hair and ears are set with flowers, and brooches on the head. They also wear various jewelry pieces: gold ring, necklace, rings, etc. Facóp groom wears a traditional white Muslim long dress with sà pành scarf - a characteristic headscarf uses by Cham people during major festivals. However, sometimes the groom does not like to wear sà pành scarf but prefer a capé hat. It has a round shape, without rims, and beautifully decorated. In addition to the traditional costume, many grooms choose to wear a suit (usually black). In general, the costumes of Cham people in An Giang with various delicate and soft patterns (squares, waves, clouds, mulberry, lanterns, stripes, etc.) gracefully combined with silk, cotton, and complicated traditional

weaving techniques with long production process has created a unique and bold Cham cultural identity. It can be noted that the Cham Islam costume is a combination of many factors. First of all, it is the inheritance of traditional elements in their national costumes.

It can be noted that the Cham Islam costume is a combination of many factors. First of all, it is the inheritance of traditional elements in their national costumes. In the process of exchange and acculturation, the costume, having received and influenced from other ethnic groups in the same residential area together with the development of the era, has had certain changes. For example, traditional Táh shirt of Cham women in An Giang province used to be a long, oversized garment with long and tight sleeves; a heart-shaped collar that was wide enough to be worn in one go. Today they improve it the modern style of Vietnamese: standing collar and raglan sleeve. Cham women, when meeting customers or going outside, wear scarves on their heads to cover their hair but does not cover their face like Muslims in Saudi Arabia. Today, Cham girls adore the scarf made of shimmering lamé yarns. This is partly due to the influence of Malaysia.

Cham cuisine is quite diverse. Many traditional dishes of Cham people in An Giang province are still maintained. Most popular among tourists are meat dishes such as beef sausage, curry, cà púa, etc. In addition, the Cham people here also have traditional cakes such as pây-nung, pây-kgah, nặm-prăng, h-pum, cha-doll, din-pà-gòn (made with sticky rice mixed with coconut milk, put into a fresh bamboo tube and then burn till cooked; it has a fatty taste with special aroma). Cham Muslims have these special notions such as not eating pork, meat from animals that dies abruptly, animals killed by strangling, falling, head injury, falling, being knocked down or being torn apart by predators. The types of meat Muslim Cham eat can only be from their own doing. Blood dishes is also prohibited, because Cham Muslims think that blood is the factor that produces the sexual or animalistic qualities of animals. Cham Muslims conceive that drinking alcohol and beer will distract the spirit and lead to bad actions such as forgetting their duties in the traditional beliefs of the nation.

3.6. On religions

An Giang Cham people are Muslims - Sunni Islam that shares the same schools of Islamic law Shafi'i with Muslims in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, etc. Muslims do not maintain ancestor worship custom or folk rituals. Their belief only lies in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic teachings preach of the soul in each individual, reincarnation theory, the dead not being reincarnated but wait until the end of the world, and of God judgment on the worthiness of a soul and its place in heaven or hell. The Qur'an contains not only all Islamic teachings but also the principles of social organization, law, and morality. Therefore, all aspects of the material, cultural, spiritual, and customary life of the Cham people, in addition to complying with the laws of the State, must comply with Islamic law.

4. Conclusion

Cham Islam people have a long history of forming and developing here on An Giang province. From tradition to contemporary with the community factors, economic, cultural, and social characteristics, etc. forming unique values, adapting to the requirements for sustainable development accepted shared, and nurtured by the community. From there, it controls all aspects of the material and spiritual life of Cham people here. Through many ups and downs of history, Cham people in An Giang province always united closely with other ethnic groups to work, build, and defend the country. Simultaneously, they also create material and spiritual values for the community, affirming the spirit of our nation as well as the unified culture, rich and diverse both in content and form. The study of the Cham Islam in An Giang can not forgo the new factors due to the exchange and acculturation of indigenous culture in particular and Vietnamese culture in general; can not forgo the comparison with Cham people in the Central to see its similarities and differences. Thereby affirming the positive values to inherit, and promote the development of the economy, culture, and society is very important and judicious, creating the best conditions for the community to rise up and be prepared for integration and development.

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