Cultural Identification and Adaptation of Muslim Minority: Evidence from Cambodia

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Abstract

It is evident that, Indonesia is home to world's Muslim majority with about 87.2% Sunni Muslim who can freely express and practice their faith with the attendant rituals. But this is not entirely the case about many countries like Cambodia where the Muslims are the minority. The purpose of this research is to identify the cultural identity of the Cambodian Muslim minority and study how they have been able to adapt co-existentially with their non-Muslim community. Cambodia is chosen for this research because of its religious importance in understanding the peculiarities of Muslim minority in Southeast Asia and how it can help in advancing better relations between Muslim minority and their non-Muslim neighbors elsewhere. This study uses purposive sampling and the data are analyzed qualitatively. The findings from this research show that the practice of Islam in Cambodia is becoming increasingly more open and expressive. The Cambodian Muslims now enjoy more religious rights than ever before like the rest of the population, although some challenges still remain especially as regards open practice of their faith in public places like schools, etc. This is the first research analyzing the cultural identification of Muslim people in Cambodia and their adaptation to their cultural environment. In fact, this research is expected to give an overview of the practice of Islam religion in Cambodia and to be used as reference for further study in the future. This study recommends tolerance and understanding among people of different cultural and religious backgrounds for peaceful coexistence and adaptation.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Adaptation; Cambodia; Muslims

Introduction

Islam is one among the fifth largest religions in the world. Islam is a faith of the majority for some countries and also a faith of minority in some other countries like Cambodia. Cambodia, a country at the southeastern part of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia, is bordered by Vietnam to the east and south, Laos in northeast, Thailand in west/northwest, and by the Gulf of Thailand in the west. The capital city of Cambodia is Phnom Penh and the official language is Khmer. Cambodia has an average population of about more than 15 million people; a Khmer Buddhist majority of about 95%, and the remaining 5% being shared by other religions prominently Islam with about 4 %. Among others, the Cham ethnic group make up the Muslim majority in Cambodia. The Muslims are otherwise referred to as Khmer Muslims. Even though there is no official definition of indigenous people in Cambodia, the Chams are seen as not fundamentally indigenous Cambodians having descended from refugees from the

ancient kingdom of Champa who fled from central Vietnam about 500 years ago. The Cham Muslim community who are mostly Sunnis, has faced two major dramatic persecutions. Federico Sabeone, (2017). The first began with the end of the Champa kingdom in the 16th century, when Cham, most of whom are Sunnis of Malay influence, were persecuted and murdered, thus having to migrate to Cambodia. A similarly tragic fate occurred from 1975 to 1979 in Cambodia under the infamous Khmer Rouge regime. The idea of Muslim persecution during this period based on race and/or religion has been dismissed by most scholars as the Chinese minority suffered an even higher death toll.

Subsequently, the Champa principalities experienced other countless political incursions of Southeast Asia with the process of Indianisation, who since the early Common Era as a result of centuries of socio-economic interaction adopted and introduced cultural and institutional elements of pre-Islamic India. From the 8th Century onward, trade and shipping of India came to be increasingly controlled by Muslims from places as Gujarat. Islamic cultural tenets and ideas became part and parcel of the vast tide of exchange treading the same path as Hinduism and Buddhism centuries before.

With the spread and acceptance of religious beliefs by men, one of the strongest cultural identities of a people is religion and Cambodian Muslims are not exempt. This religious cultural identification and attachment plays out whether the said group is the majority or minority. It is even more concerning when a religious group is in the minority as the case with the Cambodian Muslims in relation to their non-Muslim neighbors who are mainly Buddhists. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to show how the Cambodian Muslims have been able to cope with and adapt in a different religious cultural environment where they are the minority.

Culture is the people's way of life. It is seen as the totality of a people's identity in clothing, shelter, food, arts, technology, and of course religion in this case. Identity on the other hand is what distinguishes us from others and at the same time makes us the same as others. Stuart Hall, (1990).

Cultural Identity or Cultural Identification basically defines a pattern of sharing, figure assumptions that a particular group of people has been learning and solving its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; and that this has been working well enough to be considered valid to be taught to new members as the right way of perceiving, thinking, and feeling in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1992: 373). This can also breed liberal multiculturalism aims at advancing equality between groups and freedom within groups (Kymlicka, 1995: 152). Liberal multiculturalism can be described as the position that some forms of minority rights advance basic liberal values such as individual freedom, democracy, and social justice.

The preserving of cultural identity is based upon difference and it is a decisive force in society where cosmopolitanism gives individuals a greater sense of shared citizenship. When groups like the Cambodian Muslims emerge overtime, they are faced with two key challenges: integrating individuals into an effective whole, and adapting effectively to the external environment in order to survive. As groups finding solutions to these problems over time, they engage in a kind of collective learning that creates the set of sharing assumptions and beliefs that we call culture. (Schein, 1992).

Moreover, adaptation could be seen as a suffix of ability typically applying to individual differences. Adaptability has been used as a label for enacting behavior as well as individual differences in willingness or ability to adapt.(Kozlowski et al., 2001; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Pulakos et al., 2000).

In this sense as in the case of the migration of and settlement of Cham Muslims in Cambodia, this can also be regarded as Cross-cultural adaptation which is "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (p. 31) in order to achieve "an overall 'fit' between the individual and the environment to maximize the individual's social life chances" (p. 31). Kim (2001). Demographically in the minority, it is this cultural notion above that the Muslim Chams in Cambodia have been trying to cope with. This numerical concern informed the

definition of Minority by the Former Special Rapporteur of The United Nations, Francesco, and also Capotorti (1997) as a group which is numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state and in a non-dominant possession, whose members possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which are different from those of the rest of the population, and who if only implicitly, maintain a sense of solidarity direct toward preserving their culture, religion, traditions and languages.

I have tried to capture the key concepts in this study to show both its relevance and originality especially at it relates to the Cham Muslim minority in Cambodia. Indeed there are basically three groups of Muslims among the Cham Muslims. These include the Malay influenced Shafi'I and which constitutes 90 percent of total Muslim population. Then Wahabis which is about 6% modeled after the Saudi-Kuwait-Islamic faith and then traditional Imam San which makes up the remaining 4%.

Though these various denominations of Islam exist, they have little or no friction and all share one common identity of being in the religious minority as Muslims. Granted that several academic writings and researches have been done regarding the Southeast Asian Muslims in general and the Cham Cambodian Muslims in particular, these previous researches entirely overlooked or cursorily touched on the people's religious cultural identification and adaptation but focused more on such hot topics like terrorism, militancy , radical Islam and Islamic violence and economy. As a result, the religious rights of these minorities are not completely respected despite being having some institutionalized pronouncements such as this:

On the matter of rights, the highland peoples Plan quotes the following three provisions from the IMC's draft General Policy for Highland Peoples Development:

1. The government *"shall ... ensure that Highland Peoples can practice their own cultures"*

2. *"Highland Peoples shall have the right to be fully informed about, determine the priorities for and to exercise control over their economic, social and cultural development"*

3.*"Highland Peoples' communities shall be given the opportunity to participate and take responsibility in all decisions regarding infrastructure projects that affect them. The affected community and persons must have agreed, after being fully informed in a language that they clearly understand, of the project and all its consequences for them and their natural environment, before any development project may proceed"* (World Bank, 2003: 5).

It is imperative that all along, the Cham and various highland peoples are included as Cambodians, despite the fact that most were neither Khmer nor Buddhist, and only the Vietnamese and Chinese were excluded (Edwards, 1996: 138; Heder, 2007: 301), besides having a fairly equal economic and political integration, several obstacles remain with respect to full religious freedom and expression by the Muslim minority. In fact, there is no rule discriminating against Muslims or any practical barrier that prevents them from having equal education or job opportunities vis-a-vis the Buddhist majority. However, both in schools and in working places, there was until recent years a general sense of discrimination and sometimes even intimidation towards those Muslims who strictly practiced Islam. For instance, the failure of some schools to be flexible in their dress codes has reportedly led some Muslims, especially females wearing head scarves, to drop out of school rather than going against their beliefs. These and more are the issues bothering this paper.

Methodology

This research use qualitative methods approach which were selected to elicit information from a small, but wide representative sample of Cham including leaders who work at the national level and reside in the capital city; local leaders who work and reside within specific Cham communities, primarily within the rural areas; and Cham parents and students of various age, educational background and socio-

economic status. This is important given the fact that possession and usage of internet media like emails, WhatsApp, among others by the respondents is a sine qua non to getting the required and more reliable information about the research using the unstructured questionnaire prepared by the researcher for both convenience and necessity since the researcher cannot have a one-on-one field interview with the interviewees. The sampling is purposive. The unstructured questionnaire is fit for the interviews of this study because the interview is based on a limited number of topics with the emphasis being very much on encouraging the respondents to talk around a theme.

The data collection instruments having qualitative surveys as well as unstructured questionnaires (with open-ended questions), asked respondents to offer their views about themselves (individual level information), their communities (community level information), and state institutions as well as mainstream society (institutional level information). However, a number of factors can affect the accuracy and completeness of reporting sensitive perceptions and thus less overt experiences of religious minority discrimination are not easily detected. This study owes its sources from secondary data because the researcher could not muster the resources for a one-on-one field research and interviews with the respondents. These data are nevertheless as reliable as they would have been if they were field research-driven because even though residing in Indonesia the researcher is part and parcel of Cham Muslim community, and the unstructured questionnaires are comprehensive enough covering all the themes and subthemes of the subject matter. The quality of the selected respondents poses little or no bias as to the validity and reliability of the data garnered. In addition to the questionnaires are documented literatures on the subject matter including previous researches, articles, books, among others. More subtle or indirect experiences of exclusion are often not even recognized by the targets, which can result in an increase in under-reporting feelings of discrimination.

40 informants aged between 20-70 years were self-selected. That is they chose to be interviewed of their own volition and they were from various Cham communities with relative maturity and experience to enable more thoughtful reflections. The structured interview questions were sent to them via emails, WhatsApp and other available social media platform.

All the interviewees were Cambodian Cham residing in Cambodia between the months of July-September 2018. The interview focused on any experiences of religious discrimination or otherwise coming from cultural identification and efforts of adaptation. And even though the respondents were all Cham Cambodians and Muslims, they were also at liberty to provide their responses from any part of the globe since the medium of interview was internet media.

Research Findings and Discussion

According to the History, it is shown that the Cham Muslim minority in Cambodia are not significantly discriminated against. Except the inability to practice their faith openly especially regarding dress codes in such places like schools, they have always enjoyed almost equal rights and freedom like the rest of the population. This is evident in the following areas:

Politics

When the Cambodian first leader Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970 by his cousin, Prince Sirik Matak, and his army chief, Lon Nol, who later became president of the 'Khmer Republic'. Lon Nol advocated the superiority of the Khmer race and a violently anti-Vietnamese nationalism. He introduced a new constitutional definition of Cambodians as those who possessed "*Khmer blood, Khmer traditions, Khmer culture, Khmer language and who were born on the territory that is the heritage of our Khmer ancestors*" (quoted in: Edwards, 2007: 252). Lon Nol's May 1970 broadcast to the nation, which declared martial law, began:

"*We are Khmer. Khmers are descendants of the warrior race, courageous in struggle and never bowing down before their enemies. They sacrifice their life for the service of the nation. Khmers, fervent Buddhists, know perfectly how to distinguish between good and evil. So each compatriot must bear himself honestly and accomplish dignified acts of the citizen who truly loves his country*" (quoted in: Slocomb, 2006: 382).

Nevertheless, according to a research by Stefan Ehrentraut , the Cham and various highland peoples were included as Cambodians, despite the fact that most were neither Khmer nor Buddhist, and only the Vietnamese and Chinese were again excluded (Edwards, 1996: 138; Heder, 2007: 301). General Les Kosem, a prominent Cambodian Cham who had been involved in the formation of the Front for the Liberation of Champa and of FULRO, rose to political prominence under Lon Nol and was enabled to form a Cham battalion in the Cambodian Security Forces (Collins,1996: 51). Lon Nol and Les Kosem shared strong anti-Vietnamese feelings, and Les Kosem's objective to ally irredentist movements among the Cham, highland peoples, and Khmer Krom resonated with Lon Nol's 'neo-Khmerism', his vision of reuniting what he considered to be the ancient Mon-Khmer peoples of Indochina (Collins, 1996: 51).

Integration and Sense of belonging

The expression 'Sharing the same fate' is often used to describe the reason behind the lack of discrimination towards Muslims in Cambodia. Indeed, Cham Muslims and Cambodians both experienced the same suffering under the Khmer Rouge regime. The Cham were enabled by the ousting of the Khmer Rouge to re-establish their devastated communities, too, and to return to their previous lifestyles. Indeed, the Cham became a showcase for the PRK/SOC to distinguish its moderate brand of socialism from the radical policies of the Khmer Rouge (Goshal et al., 1995: 11). Islam was recognized alongside Buddhism as state religion and Cham were appointed to offices in state institutions. Besides, as far as political integration is concerned, there is a fair political representation of the Muslim community in the government due to the presence of prominent Cham leaders in the current administration. This has led to the Muslim community being characterized by a strong support to the ruling party. However, as the community now seeks new types of integration (e.g. economic), a switch in their political support seems to be occurring. A demand for change, generally perceived in Cambodia not only among Cham, combined with the presence of Muslim personalities in the opposition party is producing such switch.

In contrast, expression of Chinese identity remained the subject of strong repression, mainly due to conflict between China and Vietnam. Cambodia's ethnic Chinese were not allowed to reestablish Chinese association or language schools or to use Chinese signs in public (Goshal et al., 1995: 16). The Chinese minority was regarded as a fifth-column, blamed for pursuing the interests of the People's Republic of China (Edwards, 1996: 146).

However, contrasting views regarding the existence of discrimination against the Cham remain, leading to the lack of a true integration of Cham Muslims into the Cambodian society. The Cambodia 2015 International Religious Freedom Report released by the US State Department underlined the fact that the "Cham Muslim community continue to face barriers to full integration into society" and that "some members of the Buddhist community and other minority groups reportedly continued to view the Cham with suspicion and superstition as purported practitioners of 'black magic'". On the other hand, may be to sound politically correct, both government officials and Cambodian Muslim leaders stress that Cham and Khmer people live in absolute harmony and have the same rights. But the said harmony remains a pipe dream as discrimination still exists especially in the area of education and social interests and gatherings.

Education

As for the economic integration of the Cham community, several obstacles remain. In fact, there is no rule discriminating against Muslims or any practical barrier that prevents them from having equal

education or job opportunities vis-a-vis the Buddhist majority. However, both in schools and in working places, there was until recent years a general sense of discrimination and sometimes even intimidation towards those Muslims who strictly practiced Islam. For instance, the failure of some schools to be flexible in their dress codes has reportedly led some Muslims, especially females wearing head scarves, to drop out of school rather than going against their beliefs. Further reason is also due to the fact that the Cham have never been encouraged by Muslim leaders to go to public schools. A clear example of discrimination faced by Cham is represented by a TV program, named "Manpower and Destiny", aired in 2005 by the Cambodia Television Network featuring a Cham as a leading character for the first time. However, the series depicted the Cham character as an indolent who relied on destiny rather than his own efforts. In addition, the actor portraying the Cham character wore an earring (which Muslim men are not allowed to do) and clothing that is supposed to be worn for praying and religious ceremonies only. Besides, he also drank beer. An outcry from the Cham community contributed to the series being taken off the air. According to Sabeone, (2017) following this episode and similar discriminations, like refusing to issue identity cards to women who were wearing a hijab, the Cham community as well as the public opinion pressed the government to take action. As a result, in 2008 the government issued a directive to allow traditional clothing in schools to be applied nationwide. More specifically, Cambodian public and private schools were advised by Prime Minister Hun Sen to allow Muslim students to wear headscarves or any other traditional Muslim clothes for the sake of national unity.

Moreover, it must be pointed out that the Cambodian government has worked to better incorporate the Cham into society by not only allowing traditional clothing in schools but also through building a prayer room at Phnom Penh airport and appointing dozens of Cham to high-level government positions. According to the Cambodian Muslim Student Association, many more Cham are attending colleges or universities in the country than before and this is considered to be the direct result of the government's actions directed at Cham integration. An August 2009 survey found that the majority of the Cham feel they have become more involved in Cambodian society over the past ten years. Only 2 percent felt they get along poorly with the Buddhist community. However, 23 percent of Buddhists felt that they have a poor relationship with the Cham community.

However, interestingly, despite all these aforementioned antagonisms against the Cham Muslims, they have always adapted and coexisted peacefully with the people, remained law abiding citizens, and never taking laws into their hands.

Even the Islamic foreign influences except in few instances were largely turned into positive energy instead of breeding extremists and fundamentalists as is the case in some other nations. According to a 2010 cable from the US Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's "porous borders, rampant corruption, easy access to forged documents and black-market weapons" might "work together to make Cambodia an attractive haven for criminals and extremists, and make the Cham, especially the unemployed youth, susceptible to the potential of radicalization and violent extremism.

However, already since 2002, when the Bali bombing mastermind Riduan Isamuddin, known as Hambali, was caught while staying at a Muslim school in Cambodia, Cambodian officials enhanced their capacity to monitor the Cham community and foreign influences while the ruling party started to work at the same time with Cham leaders through including them in the government's administration.

According to Farina So, the 1993 elections represented a turning point for the Muslim community in Cambodia, as the country became more open to the world and, consequently, transnational Islamic networks started to attract the local Muslim community. The necessity to rebuild the identity of the Islamic community after a troubled past and the young Cham's desire to strengthen their bond with the international Islamic community represent crucial factors for the development of the Cambodian Muslim community.

In this sense, Malaysia especially played a key part in influencing the Cham, both for its historical role in promoting Islam and for being a country symbol of rapid economic growth and successful

educational reform policies. Several international Islamic NGOs from Arab countries and Malaysia appeared as well as numerous Cambodian Islamic NGOs to channel foreign aid and coordinate the activities of the Muslim community. Besides, an increasing number of Cham students began to have the opportunity to major in Islamic studies both in Cambodia and abroad. In particular, most of them travelled to Saudi Arabia and Muslim majority countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and Indonesia after receiving scholarships funded by Islamic foundations in Cambodia, by the government or by the destination country. This contact led to the emergence of new currents and versions of Islam, most of them quite radical, being imported by young Cham upon their return to Cambodia. However, according to Farina So, radical messages did not generally find a positive reception in the country.

Generally, growing influences from other Muslim countries are demonstrated by the increasing number of mosques being built in the last decades, often in a Middle Eastern architectural style, and the adoption in many Cambodian Muslim villages of stricter separation of the sexes in communal gatherings and the wearing of Middle Eastern dress, including women going fully veiled.

In line with some previous studies especially as done by American Institutes for Research, the key findings could be summed up as follows:

❖ As a group, Cham in Cambodia feel very united, yet inter-relationships among them are complex.

❖ Cham Muslims are forging connections to Islamic communities outside Cambodia, where they are exposed to new ideas and information. These connections create both challenges and opportunities for them and contribute to their changing attitudes and practices.

❖ Cham parents want to send their children to school and their first preference is for children to be able to participate in both state schools and religious studies. However, some Cham perceive access to state schools is still limited due to both economic factors and cultural differences.

❖ Gender bias (favoring boys) and conservative attitudes about educating girls, as well as a perceived lack of access to state schools (i.e. schools are too far away) are key factors that affect Cham parents' decisions about level and type of schooling for their daughters

❖ Cham feel they share a common vision with mainstream society on the development of their community and the larger society. They also acknowledge additional factors that help facilitate understanding between Cham and Khmer, including an increased number of Cham leaders in the government, globalization, and an increasing number of Cham and non-Cham marriages

❖ Most Cham perceive access to health services as quite limited. Critical barriers include those factors which are endemic and fairly well-documented within Cambodia's fledgling public health system (e.g. poor quality of treatment at health centers), as well as factors which are more specifically related to gender inequities and cultural vulnerabilities among Cham.

❖ Job diversification and economic opportunities are increasing among Cham, however, Cham feel that their low capacity due to lack of formal education is still a significant barrier to getting higher-earning, skilled jobs.

❖ Traditional gender-based inequalities still exist within some Cham families. One-third of the men in this study claim they would not allow their wives to work outside the home. However, national Cham leaders recognize the importance of continuing to work with local Cham communities toward achieving more moderate views of Cham women.

❖ Evidence from indirect measures that examined interpersonal relations and perceptions of exclusion, did not point to any feelings of alienation (a critical factor in creating terrorists), or extremism among the Cham communities interviewed.

❖ Overall, local and national Cham leaders are positive about the future outlook of Cham There is also widespread agreement among Cham leaders that all Cham need to: 1) continue to learn about and follow Islam, 2) ensure that all Cham are achieving access to higher education that will lead to improved social development, better living conditions and increased economic opportunities, and, 3) strive to preserve Cham identity and to live in peace and harmony in Cambodia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Religious freedom in Cambodia was restored in 1991 and today, with outside funding from other Muslim countries, the numbers of Mosques continue to increase, and today Cham make up the largest ethnic minority group in Cambodia, with estimates of more than 500,000 Cham in Cambodia today, representing about 3.5% of the population.

Interviews reveal that most Cham feel that differences in religious practices, as opposed to any cultural or language difference (whether they speak Cham or not) is what most distinguishes Cham from one another. This is not unusual since ethnic groups usually do not utilize all aspects of their culture or history as markers of their identities. In addition, as one leader stressed, *"many Cham do not even know their cultural background,"* while another leader confirmed that *"while we are separated by language and culture from Khmer, it is our Islamic practice that is still strongest and defines us."*

Cham interviewed in this study made very few direct comments about their ethnicity and focused more on describing their identity in terms of their religion. Previous (anthropological) research has identified that;

Many Cham believe that stressing Cham ethnicity or nationality in Cambodia is dangerous. Issues of nationality, says the Cham, referring especially to the situation of the Vietnamese, quickly lead to violence. Whereas religion in Cambodia is much less a problem. The Cham point out that Khmers are generally tolerant of various faiths. And according to Muslim Cham, an emphasis on Cham ethnicity and national heritage might lead to controversy and violence (Collins, 1996).

Several Cham respondents in this study suggested that they simply want to 'live in peace and harmony' in Cambodia and perhaps they recognize that identification by religion enhances their chance for security and peace in Cambodia

In view of the fast-paced economic and political developments happening in Cambodia, the Muslim community seems ready to emerge and to be a proactive part of these changes rather than a marginalized and underdeveloped minority. Thankfully, the Government has taken specific actions to ensure that Cham feel part of the mainstream society (e.g. officially naming Cham "Khmer Islam"), yet these actions may also indicate suppression of non-Khmer ethnicity. It is not surprising that very few respondents were confident enough to offer specific examples of being marginalized or discriminated against. However, the findings illustrated references to marginalization at the individual and institutional level that were expressed by some respondents. Most notable were actions or inactions by the state that marginalize or make it more difficult for Cham to access or use state education and health services. This suggests that despite efforts to assimilate and integrate into mainstream society, there is also a need for the government, donors and NGOs to recognize that Cham (and other minority groups) have diverse cultural concerns that need to be considered in program planning.

Findings in this study reaffirm an already identified need to improve State education and health systems through central level actions and policies. However, findings also suggest the need to address particular cultural barriers at the community level in order to significantly improve access and use of state services for the Cham minority in Cambodia. Capitalizing on Cambodia's decentralization efforts and taking action to implement positive changes at the local level are necessary to lessen any feelings of exclusion by Cham residents.

Furthermore, it is recognized that the Government generally respects religious freedom in practice and continues to make efforts to demonstrate its tolerance and acceptance of other religions. Two specific actions taken in 2008 by the Government that illustrate their acceptance toward the Muslim community are the construction of two Islamic prayer rooms at the Phnom Penh International Airport, and a Government directive that all Muslim students be allowed to wear Islamic attire in class.

In conclusion, it seems safe to say that compared to other countries, the Muslim community in Cambodia is quite well integrated; not much in terms of economic integration as of yet, but at least in terms of thought.

This study therefore recommends a more religious tolerance for the Cham Muslims and other religious minorities across the globe for better peaceful coexistence and adaptation for all.

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