Islam became a profitable commodity, small commercial settlemen
ted appeared. Islam made slow but steady progress among the Cham aristocracy and educated classes. At the time of Champa’s final military defeat and territorial absorption by Vietnam in the 1490s, the Cham became quite badly. many Cham fled to Cambodia. The Cham royal court remained centred in Phan Rang until 1693, after which it moved to Cambodia and continued to function for over a century in a much diminished capacity. The Cham who remained behind were isolated by successive Vietnamese dynasties from the Islamized Malay world, with which they shared a common religion and culture and, to a lesser degree, language. With the incorporation of Vietnamese into the French colonial empire during the nineteenth century, all official assimilation policies stopped and were replaced by a policy of benign neglect.

Under the French, the Cham found themselves in two different colonies: Cochin China in the south, and Annam in the centre. As a result, the communities gradually became quite distinct from each other. This remains the case today, and has resisted all attempts at achieving ethnic unity.

The Cham of Annam
In Annam, the French set up the protectorate of Annam, which they ruled through a compliant court in Hue. The local Cham divided themselves into two groups: Cham Bani and Cham Kafir (or Cham Jahit). Both groups, although very unorthodox, saw themselves as true Muslims. Among the Cham Bani, each family provided one person to be trained in religious matters. Known as the ong chör, this person observed the cult of the ancestors and other religious duties in the village. The ong chör prayed and fasted on behalf of the community, while the villagers showed their devotion by prostrating during the prayers and bringing offerings to the temple.

The Cham Kafir followed the old ways. Their worship centered around two Cham kings: Po Klong Garai and Po Rome. Temples to these two kings still stand in Thap Cham (Phan Rang) and have become tourist sites. Each year, the faithful would go to the temple to wash and clothe the statues of the kings, and then parade them outside in a time-honoured ceremony. During the rest of the year, the temple was closed.

The Cham of Annam were concentrated around Phan Rang; in the districts of Phan Rí, Phan Thiet, Ah Phuoc, and Binh Thuoi. Originally, the French were in charge of their affairs, but during the 1930s and 1940s the French appointed Cham officials to manage their districts affairs.

Education, as in Chau Doc, was confined largely to Islam. The Cham ‘scholars’ taught the Qur’an and had considerable authority. The Cham today, however, demonstrate a much broader knowledge of the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Women are allowed to raise money locally and abroad. Islamic literature is allowed, but there are some restrictions. For example, among Cham Muslim Foundation have spent years translating the meaning of the Qur’an into Vietnamese, as well as books on basic Islamic beliefs, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and stories of his Companions. These books appear in Vietnam, they may or may not be banned. Books also come in through Malaysian and Indonesian diplomatic channels. In the near future, one thousand copies of the Vietnamese translation of the meaning of the Qur’an are scheduled to be printed in Vietnam. Cham students can leave the country to study Islam or other subjects, provided they are high school graduates and academically qualified, and if they have enough money. Almost no Cham can meet these requirements, as their communities are poor and the level of formal education is quite low. In addition, I was told that at least one Vietnamese government official has been sent to Saudi Arabia to study Arabic and Islam so that the government will have a better idea of Islam and Islamic culture.

The Cham Today
Today, the Cham in Vietnam number less than one percent of Vietnam’s approximately 70 million people. They are concentrated in three areas: the region surrounding the former Cham capital of Phan Rang, Ho Chi Minh City, and the southern provinces of Tay Ninh and Chau Doc. The province of Chau Doc hosts the local ‘institute’ of higher Islamic studies. Teaching is supplemented by village elders and others who have some Islamic knowledge. Cham communities remain isolated from the Vietnamese by mutual suspicion. Most of their members are poorly educated, as school is not compulsory and parents need their children’s labour in the fields and the home. Schooling is available in the Cham language for approximately 3 years, after which the language of instruction is Vietnamese.

The Cham Jahit have retained pre-Islamic religious elements. For example, I attended tenawh prayer services in a Cham Jahit mosque in Phuoc Nhon in 1993. Many worshipers, dressed in white robes, performed the Buddhist triple prostration while facing the direction of prayer. Only the Imam and his assistants were fasting and praying their version of the prescribed prayers. Their adhan bore no resemblance to the traditional Muslim adhan, nor did the prayer ceremonies which were conducted by roughly 10 assistants reciting and bowing before what appeared to be very tall candles while the imam sat to one side and talked with those sitting close to him. I was shown their Qur’an, which was a thick book containing Qur’anic verses in Arabic along with an interlinear Cham explanation. However, as very few of them could read Cham and none could read Arabic, we were told that the book was a mystery. When my travelling companion read it in Arabic and explained it to them in Cham, they were amazed.

The Vietnamese government’s attitude toward the Cham is becoming more relaxed, partly due to Hanoi’s good relations with Indonesia and Malaysia. Permits to expand or build mosques are granted, usually after lengthy bureaucratic procedures, and the people are allowed to raise money locally and abroad. Islamic literature is allowed, but there are some restrictions. For example, among members of the Cham Muslim Foundation have spent years translating the meaning of the Qur’an into Vietnamese, as well as books on basic Islamic beliefs, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and stories of his Companions. These books appear in Vietnam, they may or may not be banned. Books also come in through Malaysian and Indonesian diplomatic channels. In the near future, one thousand copies of the Vietnamese translation of the meaning of the Qur’an are scheduled to be printed in Vietnam. Cham students can leave the country to study Islam or other subjects, provided they are high school graduates and academically qualified, and if they have enough money. Almost no Cham can meet these requirements, as their communities are poor and the level of formal education is quite low. In addition, I was told that at least one Vietnamese government official has been sent to Saudi Arabia to study Arabic and Islam so that the government will have a better idea of Islam and Islamic culture.

Regional Issues

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The Cham Muslims of Vietnam