

The Cambodian Cham Community: From Genocide to Resurgence

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Abstract

Drawing on participant observations, desk research, and ethnographic fieldwork in Kroch Chhmar and Chhlong districts, this note explores the Cham Muslim community of Cambodia and their journey over the last half-century, focusing on their self-administration through Islamic principles and traditional institutions. The Cham endured devastating losses during the Khmer Rouge regime, which targeted their religious and cultural identity, resulting in over half the population perishing. Centered in Kroch Chhmar, survivors began rebuilding their community post-1979, reviving language, traditions, and religious practices. Key institutions such as the *ahl-mushawara* and the *hakem* have been instrumental in their governance and resilience, fostering community service, education, and cultural preservation. This remarkable resurgence underscores the Cham's strength and commitment to their heritage.

Keywords: Cham Muslim Community, Islamic Governance, Khmer Rouge Genocide, Resurgence, Islamic Institutions, *Hakem*, *Ahl-mushawara*.

The Kroch Chhmar and Chhlong districts along the Mekong River has long been considered the heartland of the Cham people of Cambodia. According to legends, it was the first place the Cham settled after emigrating from present-day Vietnam, which had been the center of the ancient Champa kingdom – a nearly two millennia old civilization that initially followed Hinduism, with later influences from Buddhism (see Lockhart and Tran 2011; Eng 2013). Today, the Cham (i.e, the ethnic group descended from the Champa polity; see Abdul Hamid 2008) are overwhelmingly Muslim, and the Kroch Chhmar district is home to a high concentration of the community as well as its leadership (Killeen et al. 2018, 19). This, however, was certainly not the case several decades ago when the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s saw a quarter of the country's overall population killed, and as much one third (Williams and Keo 2024) to over half (Tyner 2017) of the Cham population.

This exploratory note addresses the relatively little-known story of the Cham Muslim community of Cambodia over the last half-century, with the aim to arrive at a first outline of how the Cham communities self-administer, then and now, along Islamic principles and via traditional institutions, and how they contribute to Islamic Public Value (Drechsler et al. 2024; Drechsler and Chafik 2022). As such, The immediately following sections-based on participant observations over the years, augmented by desk research and ethnographic fieldwork in the Kroch Chhmar and Chhlong districts – provide some background of the tragic events in

the early part of this period, this is followed by a summary of the steady resurgence of the community since the aftermath of the genocide, with emphasis on the forms of village-level organization and service delivery that are imbued with the local Islamic tradition.

The Cham and the genocide

In 1973, the Khmer Rouge began forging their policies toward the Cham Muslim population of Cambodia, who ultimately did not fit into their vision of a homogenous, agrarian society (Thun and Keo 2021). In that year, six wealthy people of a prominent village of the Kroch Chhmar district known as Svay Khleang were called to a "meeting" and subsequently disappeared. This was followed by hundreds of more arrests in early 1974 (Osman 2006). To be clear, religious leaders, such as the wise elders (*hakem*), teachers (*tuons*), and assistant clerics (*me chum-ah*), along with former Royal government officials were all already singled out under the American-backed military dictatorship rule of the Khmer Republic from 1970 to 1975 under suspicion of aiding the Viet Cong (Bruckmayr 2006). Arrests occurred almost every night in Svay Khleang (Okawa 2014).

In early 1975, however, the year the Khmer Rouge ascended to rule Cambodia, the nature of repression qualitatively shifted. Cham religious leaders were among the first to be summarily executed as they were seen as influential figures who could inspire resistance or dissent against Khmer Rouge policies (Mowell 2021). In one incident in Svay Khleang, the government-appointed village chairman called villagers to prepare a plot of land for rice cultivation – a typical tactic the Khmer Rouge employed region-wide along the Mekong River (Kiernan 1988). The villagers were told to take along food for their lunch. While they were at work, the Khmer Rouge surrounded them and accused them of bringing food to the enemy. Only a few of those arrested were ever released (Osman 2006).

Along with the arrests during this period, the Khmer Rouge government began openly restricting religious practice and expression. For instance, in late 1975, around the time that a rebellion was brewing on the Cham island of Koh Phal on the Mekong, the Khmer Rouge went to Svay Khleang to confiscate the Quran and other Islamic texts, as well as any knives, swords, and other potential weapons (Osman 2006). Some youths buried their swords and Qurans. When the rebellion exploded at Koh Phal, the villagers of Svay Khleang were not aware of what was happening only 10 kilometers away. Some of them later reported that they had wondered about the sounds of artillery they heard from a distance, which made them think that perhaps a war had started somewhere. Some said they saw corpses floating in the river – surely the bodies of Cham people (Eng 2013).



Photo 1: Present-day graveyard adjacent to an abandoned mosque in a Cham village in the Kroch Chhmar district (Source: Salah Chafik).

Two weeks after the Koh Phal rebellion and subsequent massacre, a day before the end of Ramadan i.e. *Idul Fitri* or *Hari Raya*, a group of observant Muslims from Svay Khleang asked the subdistrict chairman for permission to conduct the obligatory prayer in the mosque on the following holy day. It had been about a year since any prayers had been said in the mosque at all (Eng 2013). The sub district chairman did not respond to the request. The next morning, about a hundred Muslims conducted dawn prayer in the mosque, assuming that it had been permitted. They did not know that the chairman had sent his assistants to record the names of the worshipers that morning.

The Khmer Rouge cadres responsible for recording the names stayed at the home of a Svay Khleang villager, who managed to see the names on the list, which included the names of his relatives there. He whispered this news to his family members so they could flee to safety. The news of the list spread until the entire village knew about it, which led to a general state of confusion and alarm.

According to accounts, some youths beat a drum, calling for action. Trenches were dug around the village to serve as fighting positions. The people ransacked the village chief's house in an attempt to retrieve confiscated Qurans that had not yet been destroyed. Others slaughtered livestock and took food out of the cooperative warehouses. The elderly gathered and prayed together. Before dawn, the villagers began standing guard in their trenches, armed with knives, swords, and hatchets (Eng 2013).

That morning, troops from all levels of the Khmer Rouge military hierarchy (subdistrict militiamen, district soldiers, and regional troops) attacked Svay Khleang. Boats ran up and

down the river, firing into the village from all directions. The villagers, fighting with whatever they could find, had only two firearms with which to return fire. At first, the villagers carried bodies from the battlefield to observe their proper Muslim burial, but as the casualties mounted, there were not enough people to recover the bodies. Hundreds were killed and wounded.

The ground shook with explosions and houses burned down quickly with no one to douse the fires (Osman 2006).



Photo 2: Sword used by the Cham Muslim minority in their rebellion against the Khmer Rouge during Democratic Kampuchea (1975 – 1979). Photo: Jim Mizerski/Source: DC-Cam.

A Hakem's perspective

The following account is from an interview¹ with a village *hakem* (community elder and religious leader; see more below), and serves to illustrate the extreme and devastating repression the Cham faced regarding their culture, language, and, ultimately, right to exist.

This story, if we talk about it, is a long one, because it happened many years from the beginning and to the peak of the rebellion. The Khmer Rouge arrived in this community in 1973. At first, things were normal, but a few months later, they began to change the community by forcing Cham Muslim women to cut their hair short, not to cover their hair, to force them to eat pork, not to speak in Cham, and eventually not to practice religion at all. In the following years, their policy became to take people out of the

¹ Author's interview with *Hakem*, Male, age 67, at Village 5, Say Khleang subdistrict, Kroch Chhmar district, October 2023.

village one by one. *Hakems*, religious teachers, leaders, scholars, and wealthy people disappeared and were not seen up to this day. Others we saw killed in front of us.

This situation got worse day by day until 1975, when the Khmer Rouge won complete control of Cambodia. Our lives reached a very difficult level. We could not use the Cham language; we could not practice religion. The Quran and religious books were collected and burned. Now that we cannot live without religion, without language, we cannot remain silent anymore, because if we remain silent, we will die. So, I, a young man, and four other friends secretly met to talk about this without anyone knowing, because at that time gatherings were completely forbidden to prevent any village solidarity or coordination.

We were able to meet the night after *Idul Fitri* (Eid) in 1975, after hearing the news of the Cham Muslim uprising against the Khmer Rouge on the island of Koh Phal two weeks earlier. That night, Khmer Rouge soldiers came to arrest two of my uncles, including my name Sos Ponyamin, who were accused of being wealthy people in the old regime (before the Khmer Rouge regime). That night, my two aunts and I were patrolling the village with swords in our hands, and we knew that tomorrow or the day after tomorrow we would die because they had already written down our names. We had to take action so that the villagers could gather and unite. After *Isha* prayer, we met, and the Khmer Rouge secret police arrived, shining flashlights on us. We ran, and they reported to their commander that the village was in trouble and not safe.

We went to get the drums on the *surau* (prayer hall). Their soldiers came with guns pointed at us. We drew our swords and attacked them. We each carried our drums and fought until one of them was killed. They brought a large army and fired guns at our village all night long and continued to fight until sunrise. They used guns, while our villagers only used swords, but we fought back and attacked as well by hiding in the sugarcane fields behind the village and attacking them. The sugarcane fields were full of blood. Some of us died, and we also killed their commander, Meng Hun, who was famous. After sunset, when we were defeated, they took us out of the village and evacuated us to different areas, but some of them refused to go and continued to fight some of them died in the village.

After the evacuation, we lived in misery as prisoners of war. What I am saying is a truthful account that the younger generation will find hard to believe. We sacrificed our lives to protect our religion and our village. This village was a large village with nearly 2,000 families and 2 mosques. When the Khmer Rouge regime finally ended, we only had just under 200 families remaining.

The aftermath of the genocide

In 1979, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, only 600 people survived to return to the village of Svay Khleang; most of them were women and children. When the Khmer Rouge first took control of Svay Khleang in 1970, the village held 6,200 people (Eng 2013). Homes, several *surao* (small prayer hall), and the village mosque had been destroyed.



Photo 3: Svay Khleang Minaret in the Kroch Chhmar district; likely the oldest standing structure found in any Cambodian Cham village. Visible burn marks from Khmer Rouge era pillaging. (Source: Salah Chafik)

The bodies of those killed during the rebellion had been thrown into wells or buried in graves scattered around the village. Years after the rebellion at Svay Khleang, villagers were still discovering buried prayer books (*keitap*) and Qurans along with human remains when they dug or plowed the land around their homes (Osman 2006). Perhaps, the only fortunate aspect of these discoveries is that they reflect the fact that many Cham began moving back into Svay Khleang, along with other villages that were either partially destroyed or even entirely abandoned, as early as the 1980s (Eng 2013).

Skipping to the present, the Cham community has proved to be a resilient community and is recognized to be a thriving minority (Bruckmayr 2006). However, in the aftermath of the genocide, Cham Muslims faced the formidable task of recovering their entire identity, the most critical source of which was the embodied knowledge of survivors, many of which, in particular women, took on not open rebellion but rather everyday forms of resistance to the genocide (Killeen 2021; Scott 1985). This legacy of everyday resistance translated into both momentum and hope for the Cham in post-genocide Cambodia, in terms of making everything from their language to familial and religious institutions and practices thrive once again. The latter was particularly essential: Much of the post-genocide trauma recovery and psychological healing of the community was performed through and because of the reconstruction of religious institutions (Van Schaack et al. 2011).

The following sections, based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Kroch Chhmar district in Fall 2023, briefly introduce two such institutions that remain pivotal to Cham community life today.

Ahl-Mushawara

Originating from the Arabic "people of mutual consultation" the institution of *ahl-mushawara* is essentially an autonomous village-level administrative body that frequents the mosque, *surau*, or *markaz* (Islamic cultural center) but is distinct from them. The group sees to the everyday affairs of locals, in the sense that it sees itself – and by eye-witness and oral account has a manifest, broad legitimacy – as responsible for ensuring or at least striving to establish a communal good life.

Ahl-mushawara is a hierarchical institution internally and does not operate on voluntary membership. Rather, to be a member, one must fit the following qualifications:

- 30 – 50 years old,
- married (and perhaps have children)
- studied traditional Islam either in Cambodia or internationally

These qualifications may appear to be discriminatory from a Western vantage point – in fact, they are. Unpacking them, however, helps bring to light some of the underlying values and strengths of the institution, which is an important exercise in itself. First, restricting membership based on that age range means that *ahl-mushawara* targets a certain level of mental and emotional maturity for its members. At the same time, the nature of the work – for example, continuously meeting and discussing with villagers to have a finger to the pulse of the community's status and needs as well as, planning and on-the-ground implementation of services and events – is such that an elderly person would likely struggle, and at the same time, in the context of Cham culture (and certainly elsewhere), should be, out of respect, on the receiving end of service delivery. The purpose of the second qualification is to ensure that a person is physically rooted and emotionally invested in a community's well-being. The third qualification confirms that membership is not a hereditary position, but rather, the result of a significant time studying and implementing the normative injunctions of Islam.



Photo 4: The *ahl-mushawara* in action at the village mosque after Friday prayer. (Source: Salah Chafik)

The typical gathering point for *ahl-mushawara* is in the local mosque, and on occasion for those villages that have one, a *markaz* (Islamic cultural center); they are responsible for the smooth operation of each institution. However, the *ahl-mushawara* are not simply mosque administrators.

Take, for instance, the Friday midday prayer in the village, which is an obligatory prayer for all adult male Muslims to attend at a mosque, provided they are healthy and physically able (barring emergencies). This practice is widely observed in Cham villages, and as such, *ahl-mushawara* utilizes the pre-*khutba* (sermon) time as an informal but extremely effective public service platform. For example, if there is a community member in need, financial or otherwise, this is an occasion to make their situation publicly known and to organize broad support. Other examples include assembling volunteers for some type of village matter, such as public works or service delivery, and announcing important community events.

Women also have their own, separate *ahl-mushawara* equivalent known as *Janum mai mai* or *ahl-mushawara kamei* in Cham language: it means Grandma or women meeting. The women's group does not have as many meetings as the men's group, they only meet in the area where they live in different parts of the community and are brought together by the representatives of each group before the decision is made to inform the men's group. They continue to seek solutions until they reach the same decision as the men.

Hakem

The second institution shares the name of the key individual at its core: *hakem*. The word is derived from the Arabic root, which can signify either to rule over/decide something or wisdom, although most Cham would likely say it is both, that is, wise leadership. Each village has a *hakem*, who is an elder of good character (based on the ethical standards of Islam) selected by the community, and in turn, is responsible to them. A *hakem* can and often is associated with *ahl-mushawara*, although his role and physical presence go beyond the four walls of the mosque/*markaz* to quite literally be one among the villagers.



Photo 5: Typical Cham house. (Source: Salah Chafik)

The vernacular architecture of Cham villages, often in close proximity or just at the bank of rivers, heavily features stilt or pile dwellings with a lower section functionally used for social gatherings. This architectural feature facilitates spontaneous or planned gatherings between villagers and wandering *hakems* doing their rounds, or, in modern governance terms, co-designing grassroots services.

A village *hakem* usually has around five personnel who are there for support on implementation, that is street-level bureaucrats. It is important to note that a *hakem* is the most local part of a wider system of religious administration:

- mufti – a leader capable of giving religious rulings (i.e., fatwa) that is applicable to the entire Muslim community of Cambodia; voted in for a life-term;
- imam iqlimi (imam khaet) – a provincial imam or leader; selected by the mufti;
- imam srok – a district imam; selected by the imam iqlimi; and
- hakem – community imam/village leader; selected by community election and confirmed by the imam srok.

This structure aligns with the official administrative divisions of Cambodia, which include *khaet* (provinces) and *srok* (districts), which reflects the fact the *hakem*, *imam*, and *mufti* system is both recognized and supported by the government of Cambodia.

Notably, the *hakem* is the paramount point of contact for the central state within this system. Although informal, the *hakem* serves as the bridge for communication, delegation, and consent between the villagers and the government. The latter is aware that the *hakem* is how one is able to get genuine buy-in and support from locals.

An example of how this dynamic plays out in practice is in the domain of education, specifically elementary to secondary Islamic schools, which in Cham villages are often part of or run by the local mosque. At least a portion of the land surrounding schools is often purposed as agricultural farmland. This policy, coordinated and overseen by the *hakem*, empowers the community financially: Local farmers can earn a living alongside teachers, and the mosque has a source of income in addition to voluntary (*sadaqa*) and obligatory (*zakat*) donations to continue to fund the school system.

The schools are officially sanctioned by and sometimes even funded by the government. Other times, transnational Islamic networks, whether official agencies/governments of Muslim-majority countries or informal private individuals, provide funding. In all scenarios, ensuring that the sources align with the local community's objectives and effective implementation happens is something that the *hakem* once again is the focal point for.

There are no school fees, and students are typically required only to pay for food fees (equivalent to 12 EUR per month) and are given a place to stay. Students attend from all over Cambodia and top performers go on to study Islam abroad regionally, for example, Indonesia or Malaysia, or internationally, for example, Egypt or Medina, and eventually return home to teach in Cham villages – likely to become a *hakem* one day.

Conclusion

The Cham Muslim community of Cambodia serves as a salient testament to resilience in the face of unimaginable repression and suffering. As this brief paper outlined, the Cham socio-cultural resurgence is largely a story of restoring traditional forms of organizing and administration based around and upon religion, in this context Islam. The institutions of *ahl-mushawara* and *hakem* are two distinct parts of and represent an informal yet officially recognized and relied upon village-level governance system. What the *hakem* and *ahl-mushawara* do share in common is the fact that individuals involved are not salaried, but rather, operate on a voluntary basis, specifically the concept of *fi sabilillah* (literally: "in the way of God"), which is a belief that divine rewards will result from assuming the responsibility of community leadership and service. Thus, the Cham and their spiritual traditions march on.

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