

# **Islamic Religious Learning Groups and Civil Society: Contributions of the Cham Majlis Taklims to Civil Society in Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The desire to achieve civil society is very much present in Cambodia, although the actors involved are not yet quite debating directly. Instead, they express their willingness to achieve civil society either by criticizing others or through self-criticism, in their efforts to see a stable country. This study answers the question: How do Cham Islamic religious study groups contribute to or promote civil society in Phnom Penh, Cambodia? In other words, how do their discourses relate to spheres of civil society in Phnom Penh and its surroundings? This is reflected in their discourse on the ideal behavior that citizens should have. These actors express their ideas on how to improve the social condition of Muslims in Cambodia. Once a problem arises, each sphere of civil society (state, market, public, and private individuals) becomes quite critical of the others; each one encourages the others to perform justly and accountably. Each is ready to admit its shortcomings, with a project to realize. The *Mufti* (president of Cambodian Muslims) plays a focal point in both criticizing others and being criticized by others, in turn.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This research hopes to contribute to our understanding of a trend seen within Muslim groups—that of joining trans-national networks based on their Muslim and Southeast Asian identities (the Malay World). It defines the links between Islamic learning groups and the government of Cambodia, entrepreneurs, opinion leaders, NGOs or voluntary groups (civil society organizations), as well as active and influential individuals.

It maps out Cham activities of these groups, religious authorities, as well as their role and impact as agents between individuals, interest groups and administrations, in order to determine their contribution to civil society in Cambodia. However, their discourse is not about the idea of civil society as such. To begin with, it seems that a number of Muslim leaders have not heard of the concept. Rather, it is about real malpractices performed by and ideal conducts shown by each sphere of civil society.

From the 1970s to the 80s, the Chams, an ethnic and religious minority in Cambodia, were practically exterminated (Osman, 2006; 2002, Chandler, 2000, 1988; Nasution, 2002; Kiernan, 1996, Tully, 2006; Kamm, 1998). But since the 1990s, the Cham, along with other minorities, including Christians (see Cormack (1997), have resumed their religious practices and are rebuilding their communities.<sup>1</sup> The Chams are renovating their mosques, improving their schools, economic well-being, and health. Living under a socialist-communist regime is a challenge for them, since their activities extend to non-religious domains. However, the authorities are supportive of these groups as they substantially contribute to socio-economic and human development. However, these groups are at times feared, as they could develop into a political threat. Consequently, social dialogue and discourse between all actors needs to be constantly nurtured.<sup>2</sup>

Members of these groups include an active core of students and youths; university alumni working in the private or public sectors, individuals working in a non-professional capacity, and those with less formal education. These groups establish NGOs/foundations and hold regular formal discussions (their core activities) and periodic workshops on Islam and its social aspects, good governance, human rights, youths, family and community welfare, and democracy, on the relationship between minority and majority groups, as well as on ethnic and religious tolerance. Together with other organizations (mostly Muslims), they engage in human development activities, including fundraising to support specific humanitarian causes in Cambodia and the channeling of alms giving and charities.

Islamic religious learning groups in Cambodia have experienced tremendous challenge over times. The Muslims in this country mainly belong to Malay ethnic groups, called Chams. Descendants of the second century Champa Kingdom Muslims (who lived in an area encompassing most of today's Vietnam and part of Cambodia), they had shown a strong cultural, political, and economic development until the 15<sup>th</sup> century (see photographic expression in Hurlimann, 2001; and Cham sculpture in Parmentier, Mus, and Aymonier, 2001). However, together with other religious groups, they fell victims to persecution under the Vietnamese kingdom in 1471, as a result of which they emigrated throughout the Malay World, including Cambodia (EFEO, 1981, Tully, 2006, p. 5, 51-7, 68; Chandler, 2000, p. 58-9). The Khmer king, however, despite a long struggle between the Chams and the Khmers as well, granted the Chams the same status as the Khmer people. The Chams enjoyed this protection until the rise of Pol Pot (Saloth Sar) in the mid-1970s, who killed or persecuted half of the country's Cham population (Osman, 2002, 2006; Nasution, 2002; Nakamura,

2001, p. 11; Bajunid, 2001, p. 81). After the Pol Pot regime, however, the policy was reinstated and once again turned out to be beneficial. The fact that Pol Pot required the Chams to dissolve their identity turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as the Chams and the Khmers worked hand in hand to fight a common enemy, the Pol Pot regime. Today, the current government has adopted a peaceful approach to social development, and the Chams enjoy a status equal to that of other communities.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The early theoretical frameworks of civil society defined by Karl Marx & Engels (1976 [1846]) and others (such as Gramsci, 1971, Habermas, 1989, Cohen and Arato, 1992) focused on a non-state sphere of influence that emerged from capitalism and industrialization. A normative conception of the terms focused on judging the behavior of the state in relation to its citizenry, and on whether nations develop an effective civil society that protects individuals and groups from human rights abuses. However, the social science definition, which emphasizes the interaction of voluntary groups in the non-state spheres *vis-a-vis* the state, is adopted in this research.

Following the social science definition, Thomas Janoski (1998, p. 12) believes that “Civil society represents a sphere of dynamic and responsive public discourse between the state, the public sphere consisting of voluntary organizations, and the market sphere consisting of private firms and unions.” This definition is in fact applicable to any country, which has private and public institutions or where there exist associations between family and state.

The social science definition of civil society, which emphasizes interaction between voluntary groups, i.e. the non-state spheres, with the government, entrepreneurs, and individuals, is adopted in this research. Indeed, the latter is framed according to the functions and roles of each of the four spheres (public, state, market, and private) in discourses between them in order for civil society to materialize. Religious learning groups have been involved in these discourses on civil society in the market, in the state, in private, and in social organizations. The contribution of these spheres to civil society will be underlined.

The concept of civil society is translated in the Malay world as *masyarakat madani*, as mentioned by Olaf Schumann,<sup>3</sup> or as *masyarakat sipil*.<sup>4</sup> For those who prefer the former translation, referring to an ideal Muhammad’s city-state of Medina, the city which Muhammad turned into an ideal Islamic city-state, civil society is not new to Islam. Those

who adopt the latter translation, however, believe civil society is a modern expression, born in the Western tradition (Europe), in modern times. It is therefore impossible, according to them, to apply these terms retroactively to a Muslim society. However, despite the similarity in pronunciation, the concept of “civil” cannot be translated into *sipil*. Indeed, while “civil” is an adjective in English, *sipil*, a noun in Indonesian, is the antonym of military (*militer*), which is not at all what a civil society is meant to be.

Unlike authors who first introduced the terms civil society, such as Marx and others, Malay-Indonesian Muslims understand civil society in terms of the public sphere *per se*, versus the state sphere. The role of the market and private spheres is not mentioned by these authors. How then can one establish a civil society without a balance of power between spheres? For example, civil society cannot exist without State intervention to regulate society. Similarly, civil society cannot exist without the support of the entrepreneurs who enliven the market. Thus, civil society has to be understood both as a means and as an end of a discourse between its four spheres, as suggested by Janoski,<sup>5</sup> in order for us to be able to apply the concept to a development approach and analysis of *da'wa* activities in Phnom Penh and its surrounding.

## **METHODOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES**

The following means have been used for data collection and analysis: 1. Non-structured in-depth interviews with members, organizers, and opinion leaders of study and discussion group members in Phnom Penh and its surroundings. 2. Participant observation of on-going activities of the groups, attending meetings and surrounding activities. 3. Review of the learning groups' media or publications in Phnom Penh (books, handouts, newspapers, bulletins, Internet discussion groups), as well as of supporting documents available in local libraries and on various web sites. 3. Field research was conducted in Phnom Penh over a six-month period. The research was fruitful: all elements of civil society (public, market, State, and private) were quite helpful during data collection.<sup>6</sup> I have completed interviews at all 13 mosques in Phnom Penh and at nine mosques around the capital.<sup>7</sup> I have also visited and done interviews at all Islamic schools (*madrasah*) established next to these mosques, as well as in the Islamic schools founded specifically for learning purposes, which also have mosques attached to them.

During the course of my visits to mosques and schools, I have interviewed all mosque leaders (*imam, hakim, bilal*), school principals, and teachers in Phnom Penh and its surroundings, all

of whom have been quite helpful. The fact that most of the activities of the Chams, including education, are held next to mosques certainly facilitated my access to all these resources. Indeed, most mosques have a *madrrasah* and the principals and teachers of these *madrrasah* are also the leaders and members of the mosque community.

### **3. NON-FORMAL EDUCATION/DAKWAH FOR CIVIL SOCIETY (*MASYARAKAT MADANI*)**

#### **Discourse of the civil society spheres by Muslims in Phnom Penh**

This research is about Islamic non-formal education in Cambodia. The objective was not, however, to narrow down research and merely study *majelis taklim*, as I proposed in my initial sub-question. Rather, I concentrated on the discourse of the civil society spheres amongst Muslims regarding Islamic religious learning groups in Phnom Penh in particular.

The Islamic religious groups are basically under the control and subject to the approval of the Mufti. Consequently, the paper brings to light the link between the four spheres of civil society in Cambodia, in general, and in Phnom Penh in particular, but also between these four spheres and the Mufti.

#### **State sphere**

The Mufti institution in Cambodia was born during the early period of the French colonial government, at the time when the institution of the king of Cambodia was structured by the French. The French ruled from 1863 to 1953, and religious leadership was placed under the government structure. The title *Changvang*, bestowed by the king on all leaders, Muslims or Buddhists, was given to the Mufti as the top Muslim leader. In 1993, the Ministry of Cult and Religion Affairs of Cambodia, not the king, gave Haji Sulayman, of Phom Tria, which is a major Muslim concentration in Kampong Cham, the title of *Shaykhul Islam*, a position somewhat similar to that of Mufti in the past. In 1996, the same ministry eventually handed out the position to another renowned Muslim scholar, Haji Kamaruddin bin Yusuf (Kamry). Kamry kept his title until 2000, when the Prime Minister Hun Sen suggested to King Norodom Sihanouk to reestablish the Mufti institution (*Changvang*) as part of his own royal functions, and Kamry was appointed to this position.

The Mufti then suggested to the government (PM) that some Muslims be named as State Secretaries within the Department of Cult and Religions Affairs, senators, and MP candidates,

in particular within the ruling party (Cambodian People Party). Muslims were also to be hired as staff of the Secretary of State, deputy governors, deputy district heads, diplomats, as well as for high ranking positions in the military and the police. Among people appointed were also religious Islamic leaders/teachers. For example, Haji Zakariyya Adam, who used to be a religious teacher in Kroch Mar, as well as Sith Ybrahim, the present State Secretary under the Ministry of Cult and Religious Affairs. Unlike Zakariyya Adam, who is seen as having worked closely with the Mufti, Sith Ybrahim is often seen to criticize Islam as a fundamentalist institution, which perceives women as second class citizens, forcing them to stay home and cover themselves under black veils, a statement rejected by Muslim members of the CPP. Sermons in the KM-8 mosque sometimes explained that the justification for women wearing veils and staying home is basically, according to them, to follow the religious tradition of Islam in its early period. Understandably, however, Ybrahim and his wife are members of the FUNCIPPEC party, which is consistently critical of the ruling party.

In the eyes of the Mufti and many leaders of this mosque and of non-formal education institutions as well as some individual leaders, such as Ahmad Yahya and Kop Sleh, and Mat Marwan are not showing truly Islamic values: their lack responsibility, accountability, transparency, and commitment towards Islam. In fact, Mat Marwan was widely believed to have side-streamed the donation given by Tommy Soeharto, son of a former Indonesian president. However, after checking with Mat Marwan, it appears that this money was entirely used to buy soil to fill in the swamp surrounding the mosque. Marwan, however, needs to explain publicly what happened really in order to eliminate any misunderstanding. Another political party leader who, according to the Mufti group, criticizes the practices of Muslims is Ahmad Yahya. Yahya deplores the lack of education of Muslims as well as the fact that they are poor and tend to be orthodox. Although his observations are close to reality, many religious leaders within the Mufti networks, in particular among the ruling party leaders, have been upset with Yahya's criticism. Another object of criticism among Muslim leaders in the Russei Keo district is Kop Sleh (Shaleh Ya'kub). The later was apparently brought on board by the Mufti from his rural Kampong Cham, where Kop Sleh worked as a farmer. Aware of Kop Sleh's skills as religious leader, the Mufti had him meet PM Hun Sen, and suggested that Kop Sleh be hired as a government officer. Kop Sleh was eventually appointed district deputy of Russey Keo. However, although Kop Sleh is a neighbor of the Mufti, Kop Sleh has distanced himself from the Mufti and his people, including the mosques. He apparently sometimes drinks and likes to hang around at night, a behavior not acceptable for a Muslim, according to the Mufti's staff. Apparently however, Kop Sleh has avoided the Mufti people

not out of hatred for them, but because he is embarrassed about his own un-Islamic behavior. He does actually support Islamic activities when they occur.

Another religious leader, Haji Sufri, after the Mufti approached Hun Sen, was hired as Deputy Governor of Kampong Cham. While the Mufti does not criticize Haji Sufri, some Buddhist leaders have questioned his capacity to deal with secular affairs, as Haji Sufri does not have any secular training and degrees. However, the Mufti convinced the government that Haji Sufri is popular and respected among Muslims. In addition to speaking Khmer, Malay, and Arabic, Haji Sufri indeed has a lot of practical experience in leading and dealing with public in religious domain. Another important figure among Muslims in Cambodia is Haji Sulayman (widely known as Haji Lalai), who was appointed as a military police officer in the Province of Takeo. He is highly respected by Muslims and non-Muslims for his discipline and bravery, in particular for risking speaking against corrupt practices. The PM respects him as well. Both Haji Lalai and Haji Sufri of the state sphere of civil society are in support of the Muslim group called Jama'at Tabligh (*da'wah*/Islamic propagators) scattered in Cambodia.

The most critical Muslim leader is Sabu Bacha, a senator of the Funcinpec party, now chairman of the Commission on public works, transport, civil aviation, post and telecommunication, industry, mines, energy, commerce, land management, urban planning, and construction. He is quite critical of the CPP leaders, of their attitude, and of the Mufti's policy in dealing with Muslims and Islam. He supports non-formal education and worries that the fate of divined Islamic values will be misunderstood by non-Muslims as a result of the non-Islamic behavior exhibited by Muslims. For Sabu Bacha, Hun Sen is starting to be a single power, which is not conducive to democracy and civil society. In the words of Mehta and Mehta (1999), "Hun Sen is a strong man of Cambodia."

Sabu Bacha is very critical of the Mufti's approach to Islamic development. In fact, he told me that he had talked with the Mufti, and asked him: "Why do you, as the Mufti, support only one party? You belong to the whole Muslim community in Cambodia. You are highly respected by the Muslims. All members of the Muslim community would like to ask for your help. Why are you supporting only one party?" Apparently, the Mufti answered: "I have been part of the CPP since its inception. Thanks to God, the CPP has become the ruling party and has the majority. As a minority, Muslims need the support of the majority. Members of the minority can always come to me for help, and I can ask for the government's help."

Haji Sles Sen (Husein Shaleh), former Vice-Governor of Kampong Chhnang until 2008, now resides in the province of Kampot, where he prepares himself to become MP for the CPP. The Mufti's staff believes that this leader will be successful, as he is supported by the Mufti. He has been very supportive of Islamic non-formal education. In particular, during his term as Vice-Governor. He encouraged people to increase their knowledge of Islam and improved quite significantly the development of *madrasahs*. He also supplied food to all mosques during Ramadhan. He had a good contact with the Mufti and was involved in the large public meeting of the *Jamaat Tabligh* held in Kampot. Indeed, not only is he very committed to Islamic teaching development, but he also has a strong support from this group.

Peang Penyamin is also with the CPP, where he represents the Muslims in Prek Pra, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. He also works closely with Haji Zakariyya Adam and Haji Sufri, as fellow religious Islamic teachers. Like Zakariyya, Sufri, Mat Marwan, Sit Ybrahim, he speaks Malay.

Another prominent person in the state sphere, Nan Sy, a Cham Muslim, gained his government position through the lobbying of the Mufti. While Nan Sy was appointed as ambassador to Brunei Darussalam, the Mufti staff members often express their disappointment. Indeed, while Nan Sy was initially close to the Mufti, he has never directly paid attention to the Muslims in Cambodia since his appointment. In addition, he seems to have failed to meet the expectations of the Muslims.

### **Market sphere**

The Cham Muslims generally work in small enterprises. As most reside on the bank of the Mekong or Ton Le Sap rivers, many traditionally work as fishermen. Since the fish stock is diminishing, many Chams have come to work as farmers, carpenters, tailors, weavers, butchers, small retailers, and *motodop* or *tuk-tuk* drivers in Phnom Penh or in other provincial capitals. In general, Chams living in towns are poor, and let alone those living in rural areas.

A Cham originally from *kampong* (rural area), Othsmen Hassan, has become very wealthy. He owns a large restaurant in the heart of Phnom Penh. The City Cat restaurant is known as a *halal* food restaurant, but its guests are mostly non-Muslims who use it for business or private meetings and sometimes for dating. Othsmen Hassan also owns a hotel (Puncak Hotel) in Phnom Penh, which hosts mostly Malaysians visiting Phnom Penh. Othsmen Hassan works hand in hand with the Mufti. According to Bacha, "all Muslim community members look up



to Othman Hassan, a rich man who supports the Mufti, as he is very generous in giving money to the poor people in mosques.” Bacha added, “he made promises to people, promising for example to increase public facilities (mosques). In fact, he came through and built a number of grand mosques (Masjid) and small mosques (*suraus*). Not all funds came from himself but from other sources as well, although he did not say so, but came claimed it was his own money. Building mosques like this, however, makes beggars of Muslims.” Indeed, after building a mosque, you need to ensure its maintenance. Poor people cannot maintain the building without the support of the CPP. Thus it creates dependency and does not teach self-sufficiency. According to Bacha, “Muslims should be taught to develop themselves. Like other Malays living in Malaysia or Indonesia, they can build their own mosques for themselves. We have to teach our people to become like the Jewish people, who are very strong in community relationship, as they are business-oriented. Halal (lawful) food, for example, should be managed for the benefits of the Muslims.”

Attended by several of the Mufti’s staff members, a dinner was organized by Othman Hassan in his restaurant for young people sent by the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports. The mandate of this group was to engage in social work and development, including building wells, mosques, bridges, homes, clinics, etc. In his address, Othman Hassan told the audience that “we are happy to serve you food, which is paid for by the people of Cambodia, since we use the profit of this restaurant, serving Cambodians, to serve you. Indeed, the money does not come from Othman Hassan personally.” Othman Hassan thanked the government of Malaysia for its concern about the Cambodian Muslims’ development. He concluded that a lot more needs to be done in order for his country to realize a truly civil society.

Among actors of foreign market spheres active in upholding Islamic education are the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) of Dubai, Bina Holding Co (Malaysia), and some individual philanthropists from Middle east, Central and South and Southeast Asia and North American companies, which channel these charities through NGOs and the Mufti.

Many other Chams own *halal* restaurants. For example, a Malaysian man and his Cham wife opened a restaurant, although quite smaller than Othman Hassan’s.

### **Public sphere**

Though the Mufti does not draw a salary, his main task is to manage the Muslims’ activities in religious domains. He controls the 420 mosques established since the Pol Pot regime. Each

mosque has a *hakim*, who represents the Mufti at the local community level and who manages mosque activities, including marriage and social activities as well as charity and donations from community members. The *hakim* manages the mosque staff, including the *imam*, *khatib* and *bilal*, and religious learning groups held in mosques or in attached *madrasah*: Thus, there are at least 420 *madrasah* as well. Since this staff does not draw a formal salary, they are paid by their community through the mosques' donation box. Donations also need to cover electricity, water as well as the maintenance of the mosque and its renovation. As a result, no member of the religious apparatus merely relies on these donations. All of them also work outside, mainly employed as manual laborers. Similarly, religious teachers do not draw salaries and it is up to members of the community to provide money for them or not. These teachers are very critical of Muslim leaders in Cambodia, the Mufti included, as they do not receive a salary from the government/Mufti. Normally, however, each teacher receive about 30 USD a month from the community. Well-off parents give more if, for example, they see that their children studying in a *madrasah* are doing well. This donation is perceived as a token of their gratitude towards the teachers. For example, if a child memorizes by heart some Qur'anic chapters or some sayings of Prophet Muhammad, or stories of prophets, the parents might feel happy to give some money to his or her teacher. Sometimes also, they receive money from Malaysian visitors. "The Mufti and other prominent people in Religious Affairs do not care about our salary," said all the *ustadz* (Islamic religious teacher) I met.

The Mufti also supports the establishment of Muslim NGOs. There are several Islamic NGOs in Cambodia with headquarters in Phnom Penh, the most influential being the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation (CMDF) with branches in all Cambodian provinces. Established in 1997, it is financially supported by Othman Hassan. The main preoccupation of this CMDF is education. It helps students apply for scholarships to study abroad, such as in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Its main sponsor is the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) in Dubai. Within this program, ten students were sent to Indonesia to study natural sciences in UGM, IPB, etc. However, some candidates complained that access to scholarships is limited to the people close to Othman Hassan and the Mufti. Some graduates of these IDB-scholarships also complained that there was no employment available to them available upon their return to Cambodia.

CMDF also manages pilgrimages to Mecca/Medina (*umroh*) and organizes Ramadan donations and activities. Some individuals (community members) obtain free plane tickets to Mecca from the King of Saudi Arabia. In the festival of Idul Adha, the Foundation also

collects donations from Cambodia and abroad to buy cows for *qurban* (the meat is distributed to the needy). As a result, at least 1000 cows are slaughtered and their meat distributed every year. During Ramadhan, the Foundation collects alms giving (*zakat*), but many philanthropists of Arab origin make donations (*sadaqa*) beyond Ramadhan. The money collected is used to build wells and for emergency relief, following natural disasters, for example, or to build schools and mosques. The Foundation also has clinics targeting the needy in Kampong Chhnang. But the most visible part of its work is the building of mosques, including for the Zahidin group, more inclined to Sufism and Shiism. However, some imams complained as their mosques did not get any cows through the Mufti. In addition, only certain villages were given cows, while most were not. I then asked the Mufti staff about this issue, and they told me that they alternate yearly which villages are given cows.

The CMDF works with several small NGOs targeting particular development issues. For example, CAMSA (Students), IMAC (Medical), CIWODA (Women), CIYA (Youths), ILDO (Local), CTEC (Education and Culture), CMIA (Intellectuals), INMDC (democracy).<sup>8</sup> Each has to report periodically to Othman Hassan (CMDF), and together they collectively report periodically to the government. Othman Hassan has a strong influence on the PM, as he is the only Muslim advisor to Hun Sen. Another NGO which is has been very active in the development of the Muslim society is The World Association of Muslim Youths (MAWY), whose work is seen all over Cambodia, including in Kampot, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom, and in Kratie.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the public sphere in civil society is seen by the presence of mosques scattered across the country. The Muslims in Cambodia are found in all provinces of Cambodia. Wherever Muslims reside, there are mosques and some *suraus* (small mosques) as well as *madrasah* (Islamic religious schools). Religious teachers give Islamic religious instruction to prepare the Muslims to be more religious.

Most *imams* and religious leaders of these mosques complained about welfare. The most critical were found at Imam Masjid Dubai, Tuol Tempong, Masjid KM-7, and Dar al-Aytam. At all four institutions, it is believed that Othman Hassan's concern is to build a large number of mosques. These individuals argue however that "what we need is welfare, jobs, and scholarships for our children. While mosques can be built through funding from our own community, when someone donates money to build a mosque, we cannot reject it and we build a mosque. This is worshipping God (*ibadah*) in Islam. Indeed, in our speeches, we

always encourage our fellow Muslims to donate to mosques. Regardless of the intention of the donors, which might be politics, what we need most are funds to pay salaries to our teachers.”

However, it seems to me that while the mosque and its boarding school are also teaching this tradition, the political aspect of Wahhabism is not taught. In fact, it is this political element that made Wahhabism seems radical and extreme. Wahhabis tend to be anti-government, which is seen as secular, atheist, and nihilist in Cambodia. However, this mosque and its boarding school are criticized by other imams, as they suggest that Muslims make donations and *qurban* (animal or meat distributed to the poor) during the 10-13th of Zulhijjah (the days of pilgrimage) not only to Muslims, but also to non-Muslims. According to the KM-7 imam, giving to charity should be sincere should only be done to help those in need, as practiced by Muhammad. It should not be used to convert people to Islam

As for the Kai Toam (the Zahidin leader of the Sufi order, appointed Mufti by the King), most Sunni imams comment on the imperfectness of his teaching. They believe that Kai Toam does not practice the truly Islamic values and teachings.

### **Private sphere**

Amongst the individuals who contribute significantly to the Mufti activities, first is Cek Mazlan. He collects money from philanthropists, in particular those leading the Al-Amin company, in Malaysia, to pay the salaries of the al-Ni'mah school teachers and management. The money is also used to buy animals for the Idul Adha celebrations (10th of Zuhijjah month of the Islamic calendar plus the 11-13<sup>th</sup> of Zulhijjah, called in Islam the days of *tasyri'*), and for the celebration of a child's birth (*aqiqah*), as well as to support the Mufti's salary, his staff, and their everyday activities. Cek Mazlan also supplies books for Al-Ni'mah schools written in Malay. Everyday during the Qurban period, he brings groups to Cambodian Muslim communities to witness the slaughtering of the animals purchased for the needy.

Another important individual contributing to the Mufti's activities is Haji Gazali. He sponsors the selected al-Ni'mah graduates and trains them in the Mufti's offices (a hall for learning and meeting) for two years, as well as in Kelantan for one year, following the standard of the Malaysian STAM (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Malaysia--Islamic Senior High Schools). He continues sponsoring them in Malaysian universities. So far, he has sponsored 60 students to Malaysia (13 students in 2003, 7 in 2004, 17 in 2005, 14 in 2006, and 9 in 2007). For 2008, the sponsorship applications were being processed during the present research. However,

graduates from Umm al-Qura complained, wondering why they were not selected to study abroad too, as they believe they are qualified. Indeed they are, as they trained in both English and Arabic in addition to studying within the Khmer system which provides its students excellent facilities made possible by the support of Saudi Arabia. The Mufti explained to me that those students were not prepared to study within Malaysian system of education; which is quite different from the Saudi's approach to learning.

In addition to these two individuals, Haji Gazali is very supportive to Al-Ni'mah. Haji Gazali, an Al-Azhar (Egypt) graduate, is working closely with philanthropists in Malaysia, in particular with the Bina Group. However, some imams wonder why the al-Ni'mah curriculum and system of hiring teachers are not applied to all *madrasah*. The Mufti explained to me that "our goal is eventually to be applied to all *madrasah* in Cambodia. For the time being however, we do not have a large enough budget. For this reason, we do it one at the time".

Last is Haji Musthafa, who is quite helpful to the Mufti's projects. He manages grand mosques (*masjid*) and small mosques (*mushalla/surau*) in Trengganu, where he collects money from almsgiving, endowments, donations, and charities for the community. The money enables him to purchase rice fields, to develop land into rubber plantations and to build bricks factory for the benefit of Muslims in Cambodia. He has so far bought 50 hectares of land in Ratanakiri from non-Muslim Chams. However, he intends to buy more land in other provinces, including in Battambang and Tanah Merah. For the time being, a number of lots of land are for sale, but they don't have certificates. "We need certified lands, to avoid problems with the government and the law," said a member of the Mufti's staff to me.

In addition to Al-Ni'mah, *Jamaat Tabligh* activities are developed by several individuals. First is Haji Sulayman. Since 1993, when the PM appointed him *Shaikhul Islam* (Muslim Elder), Haji Sulayman has been involved in *Jamaat Tabligh*. Haji Sulayman is very knowledgeable in Islamic Studies. In fact, during the Pol Pot regime, he had fled to Vietnam, married a Vietnamese woman and left for the US. He stayed in the US for two years, before going to Egypt to complete a BA in Islamic Studies in Al-Azhar University. He remained there until 1990 when he returned to Phnom Tria.

During his exile, however, he traveled abroad (*khuruji*) to attend *Jamaat Tabligh* activities. As a member of this organization, he thus left his family behind and traveled from mosque to mosque, either 3, 7, or 40 days within the country, or for four months in a row. He had to

sleep in mosques, to pray collectively five times a day, and even followed the suggestion of praying 10 times each day. Most importantly, members of this organization are asked to pray at least 11 sets early in the morning (around 2 to 3 am). Everyday, they are encouraged to go door-to-door visiting neighbors whom they encourage to come and pray collectively at the mosque nearby. Prayers in the mosques are very much recommended in the tradition of the Prophet. Taking part in collective prayer in a mosque is in fact 27 times more valuable than praying by oneself at home.

The second individual is Haji Abdul Qayyum and siblings. Abdul Qayyum was former secretary of state in the Ministry of Health. His father had been an MP, prior to Pol Pot regime. Since his retirement in 2000, he has been active in *Jamaat Tabligh*. His home, adjacent to the mosque al-A'la Prik Prak, is the *Jamaat Tabligh* center in Phnom Penh and this proximity provides him an easy access to mosque activities and enables him to pray collectively at least five times a day. He translated the handbook of the *Jamaat Tabligh* (entitled: *Fadhail al-Amal*) into various Khmer languages. By the completion of the present research, Abdul Qayyum had translated the first out of seven chapters. He intended to complete the translation for the whole volume.

Among those individuals working to collect funds in Malaysia from philanthropists is Hasan Basri. He established some mosques in Cambodia. However, members of the Mufti's staff told me that Hasan Basri is "not good, as he is corrupt. He keeps some of the funds he receives from Malaysia. Sometimes he just renovates a mosque and tells donors in Malaysia that he completely rebuilt it. He plants a sign on the building, writes the name of the Malaysian donor, and take a picture which he sends to the donor." But the donor often never visits the mosque. "Sometimes as well, he just sends the Malaysian donor the picture of any mosque." Many also believe that Hasan Basri has used some of these funds to build his own house.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In the 1970s, even if they were in support of civil society, many Chams were killed, including their leaders, by the Pol Pot regime, together with other religious individuals. From the 1980s, Islamic religious learning activities were conducted underground, until mosques were allowed to operate again, at the end of the 1990s. However, since 2001 and the 9/11 attacks on the New York twin towers (World Trade Center) associated with Muslims, Islamic religious learning groups have come under scrutiny and have been suspected to cultivate links with

terrorist groups. Today, however, the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen is very supportive of the activities of Muslims. Consequently, suspicion has subsided. The Mufti (Kamaruddin Yusuf) now working together with the government (State sphere), establishing mosques and institutions, obtaining funding from philanthropists and business people (market sphere), and attracting individuals and influential people both from within and outside Cambodia (private sphere), as well as establishing and organizing NGOs for Muslims in Cambodia (public sphere).

However, the Mufti is not free from criticism, particularly amongst the Muslim Senators and Muslim members of parliament who belong to small parties, as they believe that the Mufti should be neutral and independent from the ruling party or any party in Cambodia. The Mufti should belong to the whole community in Cambodia, they believe he cannot be active in a single party, and put aside the others. The Mufti should be above all Muslim leaders. He should do what a Mufti has to do. He cannot be co-opted by the government, the ruling party, or the market sphere, or by individuals who are very influential. Indeed, by doing so, he lowers himself. People will not look up to him. People will not respect and appreciate his work, even if he also works hard.

The imam and teachers in Cambodia also criticize the Mufti, as the teachers have no salary and there isn't any curriculum for elementary schools. There are no systems of grading and evaluations. Students just study together with no division between the younger and the older kids, from 6 years to 12 years. They all learn Qur'anic shorter verses (*Muqaddam*) together, and receive the same type of instruction from the teacher in afternoon classes.<sup>10</sup> They are told not to steal and not to lie, and not to commit adultery, to kill, and to drink alcohol. They are taught to be polite and to respect guests and foreigners. One has to love people and other creatures. Muslims believe that whoever practices these basic learnings of Islam will be qualified by God as a good Muslim, a civilized Muslim. It is in this perspective that many Muslims believe that civil society will be achieved through the implementation of Islamic values.

Also, the Mufti receives some criticism from philanthropists, when it comes to establishing and building mosques, he does not manage as well as the way he organizes Muslim activities. There are no sanctions and rules towards such a failure to perform. Consequently, many unscrupulous individuals have pretended to be collecting funds from donors on his behalf, while they are in fact corruptors and manipulators.

However, most *imams*, individuals, and business people as well as most Muslim members of parliaments of the ruling party (CPP) are quite respectful of the Mufti and say that he has done well, that he should continue in the same direction. In fact, they hope that the Mufti has a long life in order for his projects to bloom, including the establishment of al-Ni'mah junior high schools across Cambodia. Many believe that the Mufti has really committed his whole work for the betterment of the Cambodian Muslims.

Finally, even if the Mufti is widely criticized by some and praised by others, the Mufti or his successor should keep in mind the sole development of Muslims in this country



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## 1

Cambodian Muslims consist of two: (1) Muslim people, which include various nationalities living in Cambodia, such as Malaysians, Indonesians, Indians, Pakistanis, and immigrants from Arab countries. Some have migrated over a century ago, and they are considered to be Khmer Muslims, and some are considered to be immigrants or foreign workers. (2) Cham Muslims, who have been in Cambodia for over three centuries, probably in fact since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when Cham people invaded Angkor Wat. Though the king of Champa was not Islamized at the time, it was not impossible that some of his people had already converted to Islam. After the persecution of Cham Muslims in Vietnam, more Chams left the country and came to Cambodia, then part of the Champa kingdom. Thus, these individuals did not see themselves as immigrant arriving from a different country, but as people who have moved from one area to another within their own territory. According to oral history, however the Chams moved over three hundred years ago. Some areas of Champa used to be occupied by the Khmers, later on occupied by the Vietnamese, including Saigon and Chawduc (Kampuchea Krom). At the time, the whole Champa kingdom in Vietnam was occupied by Vietnamese.

<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that, due to the several collisions the Cham Muslims have experienced throughout the centuries, having been persecuted and invaded and their houses having been sacked, they tend to select a safe strategy which enables them to maintain the recognition from all spheres of civil society. Today, in fact, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen is very supportive of the Muslim's activities. Consequently, suspicions have subsided. The Muslims are now working together with the government, establishing mosques and educational institutions, orphanages, obtaining funding from philanthropists, and attracting individuals as well as influential and affluent people both from within and outside Cambodia. The present discourse is not between Muslims and non-Muslims; rather, internal debates on who is doing what in paving the way to the betterment of his or her fellow Muslim seem to be the core subject nowadays in Phnom Penh and its surroundings in particular.

<sup>3</sup> Olaf Schurmann, "Dilema Islam Kontemporer: Antara Masyarakat Madani dan Negara Islam" (Contemporary Islamic Dilemma: Between Civil Society and Islamic State). *Ibid.*, 48-75.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussions on the uses of both terms, see Hendro Prasetyo and Ali Munhanif, et al., eds. *Islam & Civil Society: Pandangan Muslim Indonesia* (Insights on Indonesian Muslims) (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2002); Various authors in *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Paramadina* 1, No. 2 (1999): 7-87.

<sup>6</sup> The following is the queries that need to be further explored in this paper: 1. What is the leadership composition of the learning groups and networks (public sphere)? 2. What strategies have they adopted to aid in sponsoring the dissemination of their ideas and to implement their welfare and other programs (market sphere)? 3. Which links, if any, do they have with government authorities and policy makers (state sphere)? 4. Who are the individual opinion leaders invited to play an active part; or how are individual members (family, neighborhood, network of friends and acquaintances) approached or solicited to participate in religious learning and study groups (private sphere)?

<sup>7</sup> The following is the lists of the mosques Phnom Penh and its surrounding, under the control of the Mufti: Masjid al-Azhar, Chroi Chang Var Luar (Kuala Loam); (2). Masjid A-Rahmah, Chroi Chan Var (near the bridge); (3). Masjid Darussalam, Chroi Chang Var Dalam. (4). Masjid Koh Koi (But this has been sold to a company), then the community members were moved to Prek Tameak, where there is already a mosque. (5). Masjid Jami Phnom Penh, commonly known as the Dubai mosque as it was built through a donation by the King Of Dubai, and the land was donated by King Sihanouk. Tommy Soeharto also contributed 10 000 USD. (6). Masjid al-A'la Prek Pra, (7). Masjid Khleang. (8). Masjid Toul Tompong (built by Pakistanis). (9). Masjid KM 7 (Masjid Nurul Ihsan). (10). Masjid KM8 (Masjid Nurul Naim). (11). Masjid KM 9. (12). Masjid Prek Reang . (13). Masjid Popel Khae KM 17. (14). Masjid Chroi Andet (across the river from Popel Khae). (15). Masjid Prek Kdam (3 mosques); (16). Masjid Toul Ngok; (17). Masjid Zaidin; (18). Masjid di sekolah Kuwait, KM 18 National Road 4. (18). Masjid Ummul Quro, National Road 6A, KM 30. (19). Masjid Prek Thnot (Masjid al-Azim) National Road 2. (20). Masjid Swae Loam (4 km from Tak Mao/Prek Tnot/Prek Tepou). (21). Masjid Kamp. Bren (15 km from Tak Mao/Prek Tnot/Prek Tepou). (22). Masjid Thom (60 km from Tak Mao/Prek Tnot/Prek Tepou).