

Position paper on

The Cham Muslims, Bani and Hindus of Vietnam

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Champa is a kingdom which located in what is now Central Vietnam. It dates back ninth century with the establishment of capital Indrapura (875-978) to Vijaya (978-1485) and Panduranga (1485-1832). In 1832, after the revolt of Katip Suma, Vietnam's Emperor Minh Mang conquered what was previously known as the kingdom of Champa. Subsequently, many Cham people took refuge in other countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, China's Hainan Island and Cambodia. In fact, during Khmer Rouge reign, around 100,000 Cham people out of 250,000 were killed.

Today, although there is no exact data, it is estimated that there are around 400,000 Cham people globally, with most found in Vietnam (more than 160,000) and in Cambodia (over 200,000 people). Most other Cham can be found in Malaysia, France, China, Thailand, the United States and Laos.

Cham communities follow different belief systems, chiefly Islam, Hindu, and Bani.

Cham Muslims: In the mid-11th century, Champa become a busy commercial port, a bridge of trade in the region. Muslim traders from the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East were the first to bring Islam to Champa. Until the 15th century, Champa was not only a trading center for Muslims in other countries, but also an ally of other Islamic communities in Southeast Asia. By the 1670s, the bulk of the population, including the Cham royalty, were Muslim.

In Vietnam today there are around 15,000 Cham Muslims, mainly living in South Vietnam.

Cham Bani: The Bani religion is a blend of Islam with Hinduism and indigenous practices, such as ancestor worship. The Bani live predominantly in Vietnam's Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận and Bình Phước Provinces.

The estimated population of Cham Bani is around 40,000 people. However, more recently, many Cham Bani have converted to Islam.

Cham Hindus: Hindu was the first religion adopted by the Cham since the establishment of the Champa Kingdom. Hindu temples are known as *Bimong* in Cham language, but are commonly referred to as *tháp* "stupa", in Vietnamese. The priests are divided into three levels, where the highest rank are known as Po Sá, followed by Po Tapáh and the junior priests Po Paséh.

There are approximately 50,000 Cham Hindus now in Vietnam. Cham Hindus mainly are living in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận Provinces

PERSECUTION OF THE CHAM PEOPLE

- Loss of Self-Determination: While the Cham in Vietnam are recognized by the Vietnamese government as one of 54 ethnic groups, there remains no acknowledgement of their indigenous status. Self-determination in demarcated territories was lost after 1975. Previously, communal lands were distributed to religious dignitaries, mosques, and temples with villages headed and managed by a native Cham. In 1975, this system was dismantled as all land was seized and redistributed to be under government management. With no knowledge of Cham traditional or culture, this shift meant the destruction of long-established religious and social structures of the Cham.
- Conversion of Religious Spaces to Tourist Attractions: Many Cham places of worship, such as the Hindu Po Naga temple in Nha Trang, have been converted into tourist attractions. Hindu Cham must now purchase tickets to open enter their own temples. This loss is not only a tragic violation of religious rights, but also helps to allow Vietnam to present itself to foreigners as a place vibrant in religious diversity.
- De Facto Rules and Stigma on Attire: Traditional and religious attire are de facto restricted for the Cham. Cham Muslim women are not welcome to wear Hijab at schools or workplaces. Cham men wearing traditional sarong are ridiculed and mocked by the Kinh majority.
- Government Control and Interference: Like all religions in Vietnam, the State controls leadership appointments and representative committees are under the control of the government. This interference with management and direction of the religious activities means that Cham religious groups are guided by government interests rather than the will of adherents, scripture, or long-held traditions and beliefs. There are no independent groups allowed.
- Land grabs and Cultural Rights: In 2010 and 2013 several incidents occurred in Thành Tín and Phước Nhơn villages where Cham people had conflicts with Vietnamese about the ownership of Kut or Ghul areas holding graveyards of Cham Bani and Hindus. No sensitivity or understanding was given to the importance of such sites according to traditional Cham belief systems regarding ancestors.
- Attacks on Communities: In 2012, Vietnamese police in Chau Giang village stormed into a Cham Mosque to take away the electric generator, which used to produce electricity for around 40 households in the village.
- Economic Hardship and Encroachment on Lands: More generally, Cham Muslims in the Mekong Delta have also been economically marginalized, with ethnic Kinh Vietnamese settling on land previously owned by Cham people with state support. As there are limited local economic opportunities, Cham villages are left with grandparents and grandchildren and the social and religious fabric of communities are severely damaged.

Requests to Vietnamese government

- Respect and enhance the right of religious and belief which has noted in Article 9 of the Human Rights Act.
- Respect and protect the right of Cham people to have full freedom in directing and managing our religious activities.
- Return the temples and places of worship to the Cham people with full ability of community management and use.
- Protect and expand the understanding of our religion for the whole of society, thereby, erasing the stigma and discrimination we face.