

**A Review of *Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity Among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia*, by Alberto Pérez Pereiro**

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of contemporary Cham Muslims in Cambodia. In it, the author lays out a number of intertwining and complicated questions that he subjects to the insights of long-term community engagement and the power of ethnography. Pereiro addresses the intertwined conceptions of religious proscriptions and cultural performances that give rise to Muslim identities in light of historical consciousness and coexistence within a Buddhist state. He also attends to the relationship between the Cham, the Khmer, and the Cambodian state, as well as their situation within the broader Muslim community.

Chapter 1 is quite dense and covers a lot of ground to set the scene for the ethnography. It deals with the historical trajectory that informs the lives of contemporary Cham Muslims in Cambodia, with the academic nomenclature used to define and classify the Cham, and with their situated place within Khmer society. It provides historical background related to the Champa civilization and Cham migration to Cambodia, to the French protectorate, to the Khmer Rouge, and into the present day. There is a detailed, well researched rendering of ancient history that situates the Champa state in relation to other states and also to the people who inhabited the mountainous hinterlands of the Annamite chain, with whom ties of affiliation remain. He also opens up here, and explores later, the importance of Brahmanic traditions to Cham relations with the Khmer and also with the French. Although neglected by the French, the Cham were not isolated during the protectorate, and Pereiro details the active interchange with the Malaysian Muslim communities that lasted until the Pol Pot period and have emerged again in the post UNTAC era. This first chapter also deals with a definition of the classificatory system applied to Cham Muslims in Cambodia through academic and political inquiries as well as the ways that Cham inhabit, attribute, and deflect these externally applied categories. Finally, chapter 1 presents the Cham through the eyes of the Khmer majority; this is also a vehicle to discuss the other minority groups in Cambodia and explore the Khmer discomfort with foreign minorities connected to external states as opposed to internal minorities unconnected to another state. Through this tension in the Khmer imaginary of the internal 'other', Pereiro highlights the fear, the derision, and the delicate dance of inclusion and exclusion that articulates relations between the Khmer and the Cham.

Chapter 2 deals with the question of religious change in the Cham community since the end of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). In this chapter Pereiro explicates Islamic practices and terminologies as well as their reinterpretation in contemporary society. The discussion details the influx of foreign missionaries and their attendant ideologies of morality, purity and development in conversation with constructions of Cham ethnicity and diasporic identity. This chapter contains rich ethnographic detail and attends to the interrelations between the Islamic missionizers, those Cham Muslims who convert to their ways, and those who do not. Pereiro situates this discussion inside the literature on Islamic history and global movement, attending especially to the contemporary era, and offers detailed descriptions of the practices and celebrations that define each community.

Chapter 3 is an intimate portrait of the Imam San community who strongly associate their ethnic identity with the historic Champa polity, which implies a particular relationship with the

institutions of the Cambodian state. The Imam San are engaged in cultural preservation, and the chapter contains rich ethnographic data of their various rites, ceremonies, and traditions. Through the performance of 'culture', they become the "protectors of real Cham culture" for the purified Muslim majority (p. 126). They also establish a place for themselves amid the Khmer majority, with whom they share a history of Brahmanic state traditions brought down through kingly infatuations with Vietnamese women, and of traditions of spirit possessions. This chapter engages with Michael Herzfeld's notions of cultural intimacy, through which communities are bound together by shared cultural practices that may be shameful in the presence of outsiders. The cultivation amid loss of the cultural practices outlined in this chapter are seen by other Muslims as both 'wrong' and 'authentic', but are interpreted by Imam San youths not as a burden to be shed for a modern or a Muslim identity, but as a foundation from which they aspire to professional positions amid the larger community. Pereiro suggests that tension between culture preserving elders and culture expanding youths is a matter of historical imagination: the elders suffer from what Herzfeld calls structural nostalgia, in which the pasts of their childhoods are imagined as golden eras, while the youths inhabit a modernity grounded in the historical past of the Champa kingdom and projected into an imagined future.

Chapter 4 deals with the Cham Muslims in the greater urban periphery of Phnom Penh and also the extension of Cham Muslims into the mountainous highlands. It opens by outlining the ways that the Cambodian members of the Ummah of global Islam situate themselves in relation to foreign proselytizers and closes with a story of Cham missionaries working to convert Cambodian highlanders. The Cham are at once missionized and missionizers. This chapter is grounded in the literature on global Islam and Islamic studies, as well as the orientalist critique of western-centered histories. There is a lengthy discussion of the different strands of international Islamic influence active in Cambodia, one from the Middle East and one from Malaysia, and the variety of practices, identities, and mobilities that each offers to the Cham. The Arab community offers excellent education and external migration opportunities, but is tinged with the burden of rejecting modern tenants and occupying the position of a second class citizen amid the Arabic Ummah. Malaysia is culturally closer to the Cham and while the material benefits are not as elaborate, the focus is less on purity of practice and more on the embodied experiences of Islam that create a community separate from the non-Muslim world, in this way it also offers an easier model with which to be modern Muslims with a place in contemporary society. This chapter also details the difficulties that urban Cham face through close habitation with the Khmer majority and the problems of urbanization. Drugs, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency figure prominently as elements of community diffusion, but this chapter also describes the ways that these forces are ameliorated through the erasure of Muslim identity enacted by the offenders.

Chapter 5 explores the literature of diaspora. It travels away from the Cambodian focus to situate the Cham amid Jamaican Rastafarians, Irish militants, and Hutu militiamen. In so doing, Pereiro offers a reinterpretation of the analytical rubric of diaspora, proposing that population movement alone is insufficient and perhaps not necessary to understand a community as diasporic. What is more important, he suggests, is the "transformation of space and time into moral symbols" that are deployed in the service of communal identity through both geographic and temporal terms (pp. 14, 253). With detailed descriptions of other diasporic peoples in other times and places, the

history and contemporary challenges of Cambodia's Cham are situated in a larger field of mobile bodies and established landscapes of meaning.

This dissertation provides a fresh treatment of the multiple social spaces inhabited by contemporary Cham Muslims in Cambodia. Pereiro attends to the richness of each particular self-segregated Cham community in ways that skirt essentialist categorization by positing an at once expanded and constrained conception of the term diaspora as an analytic. This terminological restructuring brings the disparate Cham communities of Cambodia into an interpretive field that provides space for both their shared history and their divergent strategies for survival as ethnic and religious minorities. The reader encounters the spatial, historical, and ideational configurations that conspire toward contemporary manifestations of what it means to be Cham and to be Muslim in Cambodia. This piece is an important intervention into the desolate landscape of contemporary Cham studies in Cambodia. It will be of interest to scholars of diasporic communities, of migrant identity formation, and minority studies.

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### **Primary Sources**

National Archives of Cambodia

### **Dissertation Information**

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Arturo, this is a lovely piece, rich with ethnographic detail and insight. I like the way you intertwine the relationships between the Khmer and the Cham, both in terms of history and the moral and political economies of daily life. I think your intervention into 'diaspora' as a potentially more useful analytic is indeed useful and insightful—showing yet again how ethnography *makes* rather than deploys theoretical rubrics. It is clear that your treatment of your data facilitated your insights. When you decide to do the book, putting this reconfiguration up front will help you navigate your copious amounts of data with a little more purpose, or with a direction that is more clear to the reader. By the end, I got what you were doing, but there were a number of moments in the middle when I was not sure where we were going. You covered a lot of ground and offered a great deal of ethnographic data, which is wonderful, but difficult. If you had a stronger theoretical driver, it would have been easier.

As a little fussy side note, I would have liked closer attention to sources and references. I was especially interested in some of the bits of your rendering of Champa history that had no citations. I understand that much of what you know about Cham history has settled in over the many years of your engagement, but as a tool for further scholarship, the dissertation is lacking. Attention to simple things, like page numbers from the sources you do cite, can direct future scholars to where they might begin their own searches.