

# ETHNICITY OF THE CHAM IN VIETNAM

RIE NAKAMURA

The issue I am going to present in this paper is drawing from my dissertation<sup>1</sup>. The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the diversities among the Cham ethnic group in Vietnam. In Vietnam, an ethnic group tends to be depicted as a homogenous group in the public sphere; possessing one language, one history, one religion, one tradition, and so on. In this paper, I would like to argue on the complexity of the Cham communities in Vietnam, and how their ethnic identity shifts in various social settings.

## 1. Where are the Cham?

In Vietnam the government has grouped up its population into 54 ethnic groups based on language, territories, economic system and sentiment<sup>2</sup>. The Cham is one of the recognized ethnic groups, and approximately 132,000 Cham<sup>3</sup> people living in Vietnam. Also there are close to 700,000 Chams living in Cambodia<sup>4</sup>. There are pockets of Cham people found in other Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand<sup>5</sup> and Malaysia. In Hai Nam Islam of China, the Muslim people there are claimed to be the descendants of Champa people<sup>6</sup>. There are also Cham communities found in France, Canada, Australia, and the United States.

By the localities and their historical background, the Cham people living in Vietnam are roughly divided into two groups; the Cham living in the south central coast area and the Cham living in the Mekong Delta. First I will introduce the Cham people in the central coast area.

## 2. Cham in the central coast area

The central coast area was part of old Champa kingdom called Panduranga<sup>7</sup>. The largest concentration of Cham is found in this area and about 86,000 Cham people living in this region (see picture 1). The Cham people living in this region are proud of their historical heritage, and worship deified kings and practice their

old rituals. They have kept their traditional writing system which was evolved from the Sanskrit (see picture 2)

The Cham people are known for their matrilineal and matrilocal family system. When the Cham people marry, a husband goes to his wife's house to live with her family. The Cham children belong to their mothers' lineage and their properties are passed through the female lines.

The Cham people in the south of central coast area prefer to live away from the Kinh (majority Viet) people. From the historical point of view, the Kinh people are the late comers who have migrated into the land of Champa. The Cham usually form their villages a little away from the provincial capital, markets, and the major roads where the Kinh population usually concentrates. The Cham villages are surrounded by their rice fields and vineyards, and often one has to cross a small stream before entering the villages.

The Cham people used to be sea people, who involved in maritime trade<sup>8</sup>. Now they are living inland and engaging in wet-rice cultivation, growing grapes, and raising animals. Some villages are specializing making a certain kind of product such as potteries and textiles. With the development of tourism in Vietnam, indigene's hand weaving textiles become quite popular and the Cham traditional weavings has been revived (see pictures 3 & 4).

The education level of the south central coast Cham is rather high. There are many Cham schoolteachers. The provincial hospital has quite a number of Cham doctors, nurses and pharmacists. There are some Cham lawyers and scholars working in museums and various research institution including the national university.

### **Balamon (Cham) and Bani:**

The Cham people living in the south central coast of Vietnam are divided into two groups based on their religions. One group, called *Balamon*<sup>9</sup> is adherents of an indigenized form of Hinduism. The people of *Balamon* are supposed to observe food taboos such as eating beef, and worship the god called Po Yang and their deified kings which are kept in the temples built before 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *Balamon* are usually cremated when they die<sup>10</sup>. they are led by a group of priests formally called *Halau Tamunay Ahier* (see pictures 5,6 & 7).

The other group called *Bani* is adherents of an indigenaized form of Islam. Each village where *Bani* live has a mosque where they worship *Po Alwah* (Allah). They are supposed to observe the foods taboos such as eating pork. It is quite interesting that although *Balamon* priests symbolize male and *Bani* priests symbolize female, they have something indicating the opposite sexes. Each *Balamon* priest has a yellow rectangle bag that they carry on their shoulder. When they die, they are all buried. They are led by a group of priests formally called *Halau Tamunay Awar* ( see picture 8).

Previously marriage between *Bani* and *Balamon* was strictly prohibited. Although intermarriage between *Balamon* and *Bani* is now allowed, it is still not very popular. Since *Balamon* and *Bani* live in different villages<sup>11</sup> and do not share their daily life, they do not know the details about each other's customs and traditions.

There are a few legends, which explain the origin of their division. One of them I heard from an old *Bani* man goes like this:

A long time ago, there were no kings. The Cham people were constantly fighting among themselves for power. Everybody wanted to be the leader amongst them. A god saw the Cham people killing each other and was very concerned about them. He came down to earth to stop their internal fights. When he got to the Cham people the god realized that in order to create peace among them they must be divided into two groups and given certain roles. Thus he divided them into the group of *Balamon*, which took the role of male and the group of *Bani*, which took the role of female.

In the legends the division of *Balamon* and *Bani* was created in order to bring peace upon the Cham society. Also interestingly in the legends indicate that the *Balamon* has male attributes and the *Bani* has female attributes. Many Cham people express the similar idea of *Balamon* being men and *Bani* being women.

I found that the maleness of *Balamon* and femaleness of *Bani* are expressed by two groups of priests as their clothing and behavior. Both *Balamon* and *Bani* priests wear white turbans with red tassels at both end of the turbans on their heads. However *Bani* priests add the cloth called *khan djram* on top of the turban. The *khan djram* is the cloth for the *Bani* women and the way *Bani* priests wear the *khan djram* is the same way that *Bani* women wear them. During ceremonies, *Bani* priests sit with their feet under them and to the side

which is the way Cham women sit. Well mannered *Bani* women will never sit with crossed legs, which considered being the way men sit (see picture 9).

*Balamon* priests changes their turbans when they conduct a ceremony. The turban looks like a small white bamboo shoot had grown out on a head, and this turban symbolizes a linga. When they conduct a ceremony, they always sit with crossed legs (see picture 10). which symbolizes the uterus while each *Bani* priest has three bags, hanging from their neck and down onto their back. One of three bags is slightly larger than the other two which are tied by the same cord. These bags symbolize penis and testicles. The bags of both *Balamon* and *Bani* priests symbolize their acceptance of their counter parts (see picture 11 & 12).

There are several folk songs among Cham in Ninh Thuan province which talk about the relationship between *Balamon* and *Bani*. One of my Cham teachers taught me the following song which he often used to teach the Cham writing system among the Cham school teachers Cham (*Balamon*) and *Bani* are not separated far . Actually, since long time ago, we share the same blood Which gods created us? You are just like a grain of rice and I am just like a rice-husk.

In my dissertation, I argued that although the religion of *Bani* and *Balamon* have been treated as two different religions, it is important to understand each of these two religions in the relationships to one another. The *Bani* and the *Balamon* have the feeling of sharing their belief system, and their living environment, living in the last territory of Champa kingdom. *Balamon* and *Bani* do not seem to be very keen about articulating their differences for the outsiders. However in order to be a member of the Cham ethnic group, a person has to know the difference between *Balamon* and *Bani*. The knowledge of their dual organization is the token of their membership recognized within their own society. It is one of the reasons why the Chams in the central area separate themselves from the Chams from the Mekong Delta who do not share such knowledge with them.

### **3. The Cham in the Mekong Delta**

Now we shift to take a look at the Cham people from the Mekong Delta (see picture 13). In contrast with the closed and isolated central Cham villages the Cham villages in the Mekong Delta are quite open. Their villages are formed along the rivers or canals and always have a mosque at their center. In contrast to the situation of the Chams in the central Vietnam, where the Kinh people migrated into the land originally belonging to the Cham people, in the Mekong Delta, both Cham and Kinh came to the new land together. The Cham villages

are next to the Kinh villages, so that it is difficult to tell the boundaries between them.

The Southern Cham wooden houses are built on pillars, elevated about 1.5 m above the ground. Their houses are not surrounded by any fences, and their entrances face the road running through the villages. The Cham people often yell out to the street vendors from inside of their houses to get some snacks, daily groceries and daily necessities. Most of the street vendors are from the Kinh ethnic group.

In the Mekong Delta, some Cham are engaging in wet-rice cultivation, but they do not have enough land, so their harvests are not even enough for their own consumption for a year. Some of them engages in fishing, but it is rather for their domestic consumption. Some Cham people are raising fish in the river. It can bring a large profit but it needs a certain amount of capital to start the business. There are a few villages making textile, which are sold locally or exported to Cambodia. Many of Cham from the Mekong Delta engage small business which involves distant traveling, and selling such as selling used clothes or textiles (see picture 14 & 15).

The Cham in the Mekong Delta speak different dialect from the Chams in south central coast area, and it is quite similar to the dialect of the Chams in Cambodia. Though these two dialects are mutually comprehensive, they have to depend on Vietnamese when they communicate by writing. Before 1975, some books written with the Cham script were kept amongst the Cham communities in the Mekong Delta, but they seem to be lost after the war, and nobody can read the script now. Now instead of using Cham script, they use Arabic script. Almost all Cham in the Mekong Delta are Sunni Muslim. The children are sent to study the Koran. The Cham parents start to teach their children Arabic alphabet from their young age. The Cham parents tend to emphasize the importance of Islamic education over Vietnamese standard education, which gives an impression that they do not pay much attention to “education”.

Since the Cham people in the Mekong Delta are all Sunni Muslim, it tends to be said that they have lost their matrilineal principle because of their Islam influence<sup>12</sup>. However their basic rule is still matrilineal. A bride groom will go to the bride’s house on the wedding day (see picture 16).

### **Ethnicity of the Cham from the Mekong Delta:**

Compared to the Cham people in the central coast area, the Cham people living in the Mekong Delta do not have a strong sense of historical continuity from the Kingdom of Champa. The religion of Islam is the focal point of the lives of the Cham in the Mekong Delta. The fact that the religion of Islam is serving as the basis for the construction of Cham ethnicity also indicates the possibility of transferring ethnicity. For instance, although a person was not born as a member of the Cham ethnic group, the person becomes a Cham if the person became a Muslim. For the Muslim Cham people, the important thing is not the children's genealogical background but their faith in Islam. It does not matter whether the mother is Cham or Kinh. The children will be raised as Muslim; therefore the child is a legitimate member of the Cham ethnic group. The Cham in the Mekong Delta will not lose their members of their community by intermarriage. They can mold a non-Cham person upon becoming a Muslim to transfer his or her ethnic identity to Cham.

#### **4. Ethnic negotiation**

Such difference in meaning to be Cham between the Chams from the central coast area and the Chams from the Mekong Delta creates the separation between these two groups. The Chams in the Mekong Delta do not like to be identified as the same Chams as the Chams in the central coast area, while the Chams from the central coast area consider the Chams in the Mekong delta as the Chams who have forgotten their origin and despise them as "they do not have culture".

Most of the images and portrait of the Cham and their culture in the public sphere such as books, museums, cultural shows, art products, depict the Cham from the central coast area. When I discussed with the Vietnamese scholars about my research on Cham, every single of them without failure recommended me to go to the south central coast area to study the Cham communities there instead of going to the Mekong Delta. The south central coast area is viewed as the place where the "pure, genuine Cham" live. Many Cham from the Mekong Delta argued against this view by saying that the religion of Islam will help the Cham to maintain their differences from the Kinh, and keep their distinctive ethnic identity.

However, the Cham in the Mekong Delta has to have a marker other than being Muslim to represent themselves to be understood by non members as "Cham". Cham are historically known for their dance and music tradition in Vietnam. The fan, which determined the dance style in rituals of the Cham in

south central coast area have been adapted by the theatrical performance, and the fans became an indicator of Cham ethnic elements in the theatrical performance. When Kinh dancers perform the Cham dance, they use fans without exceptions. A fan dance performed by a group of Cham females which ends up with a rotating circle of fans like a flower is a newly created Cham dance and has become one of the popular Cham dance piece.

A group from the Mekong Delta has been creating performances by emphasizing their Islamic background. Many songs they sing at the music festivals are from Malaysia or other Muslim countries whose lyrics are translated to the Cham and Vietnamese. Those songs are all introduced as the Cham music. They had not dance on stage because of their religious background. But this group has started to adapt some dance movements to make their performance more enjoyable and attractive. They created a dance piece with the help of a Kinh choreographer for the cultural performance competition in Ho Chi Minh City. In this newly created Cham dance they have adapted fan. Five girls dressed in Malaysian style Muslim dress with full head covers dance with two big fans in each hand to a Malaysian music. Some fan movements and a pattern of steps are similar to the ones of the Cham from the central coast area (see pictures 17 & 18).

The popular theatrical Cham dance from the central coast area provided the ground for this new Cham Muslim's dance to be identified as "Cham" dance. The audience can recognize the elements of the central coast Cham culture that they were more familiar with in this Muslim Cham dance. In order to articulate their ethnic identity to the non-Cham audience, they have adapted the ethnic markers of the Cham from the central coast area despite the fact that they usually do not want to be identified with them.

Moreover, the fact that the Cham from the Mekong Delta who are not familiar with the central coast Cham dances performed in actual ritual setting adapted the fan to cooperate into their performance indicate that the theatrical Cham fan dance was taken for granted as a part of Cham culture.

## Ethnicity of the Cham in Vietnam



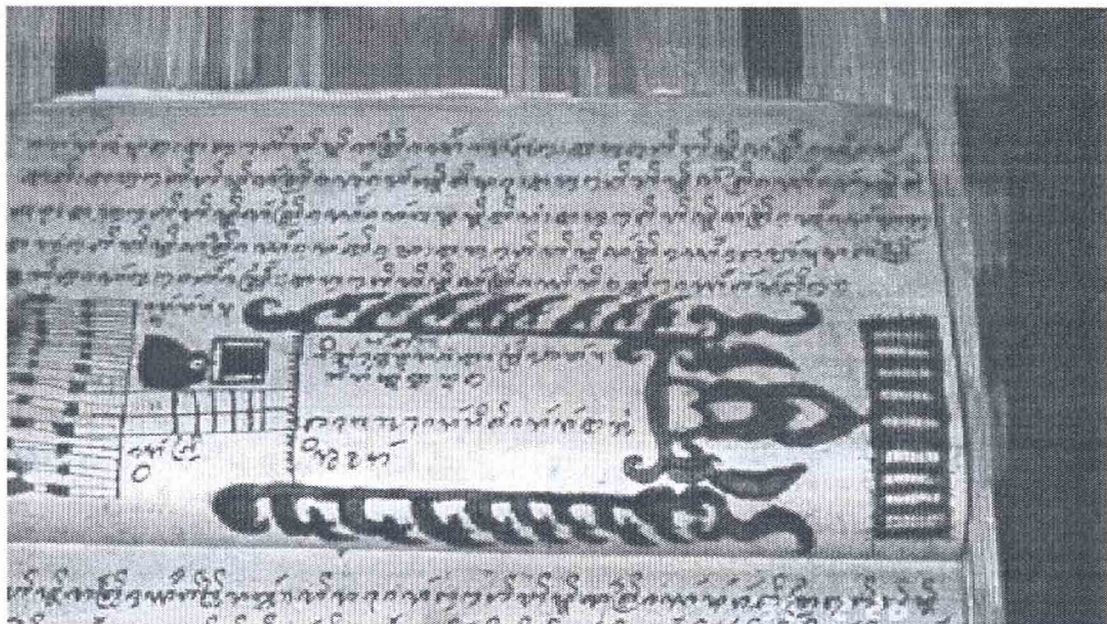
Picture 1

Cham women near My Nghiep village, Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Rie Nakamura)



Picture 2

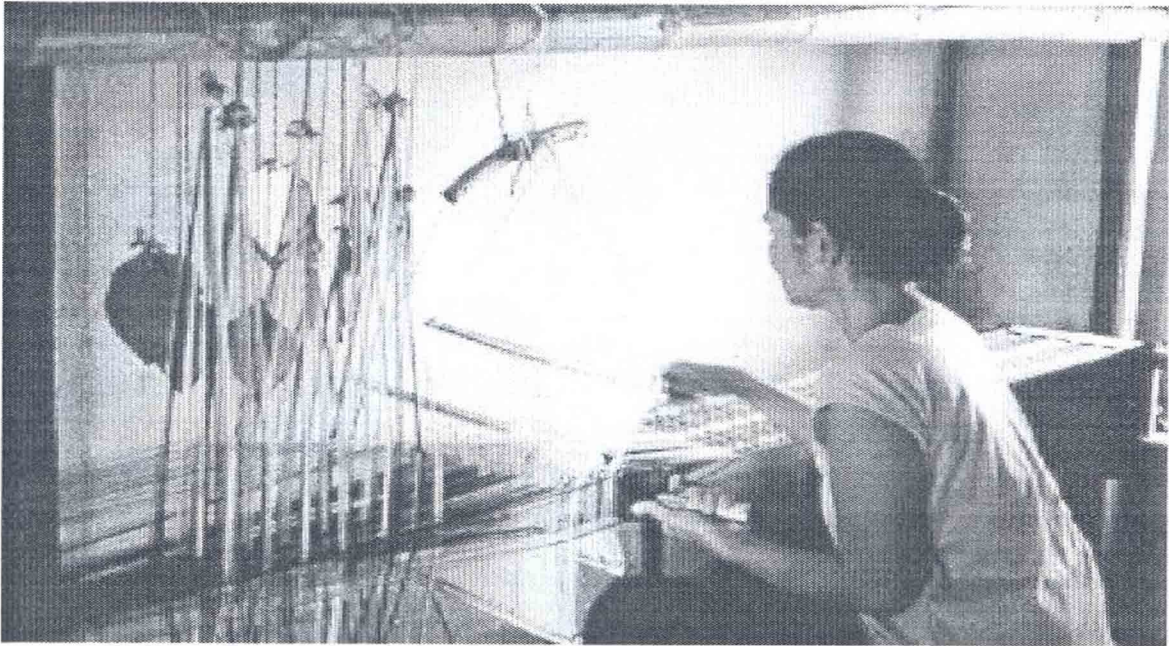
A Balamon woman making a pottery in Bau Truec village, Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Rie Nakamura)



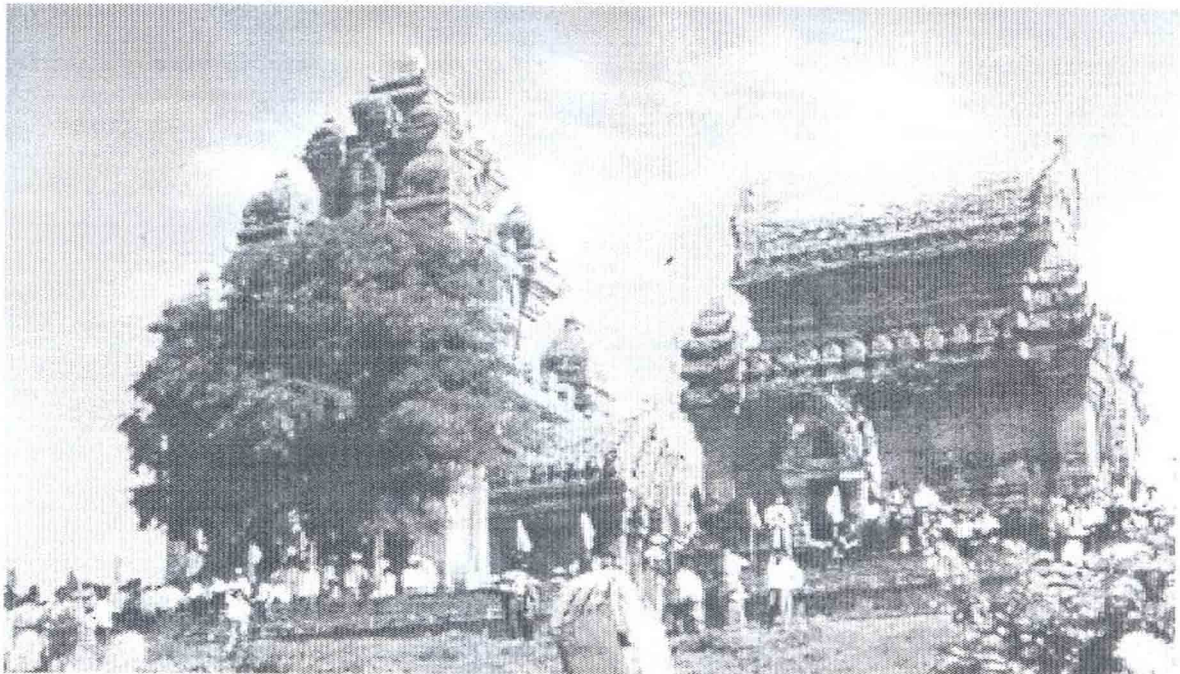
Picture 3

A book written by the traditional Cham script.  
(Photograph: Rie Nakamura)





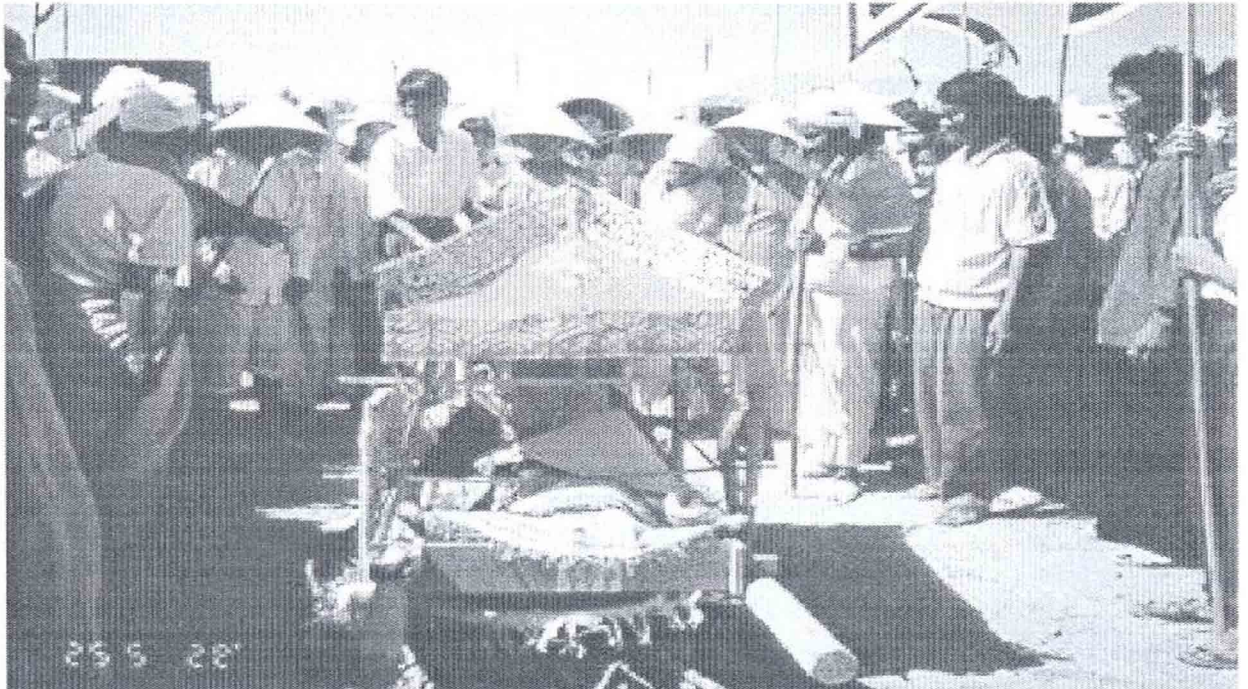
Picture 4  
A Balamon woman weaving in My Nghiep village,  
Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 5  
The temple called Po Klong Garai where the Balamon make offerings to a  
deified king Po Klong Garai, in Thap Cham, Ninh Thuan province (Photo-  
graph: Ric Nakamura)



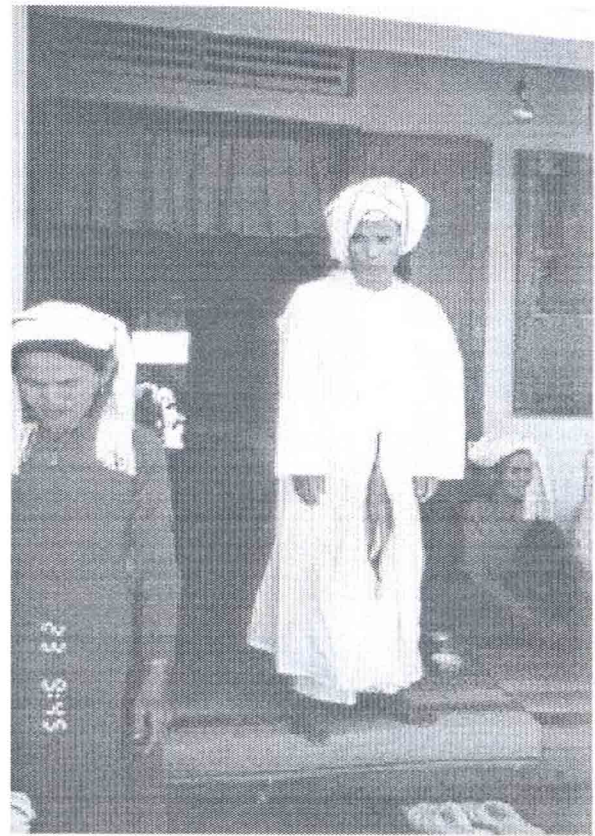
Picture 6  
Inside of Po Klong Garai  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 7  
Balamon funeral in Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 8  
Bani funeral in Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 9  
A Bani priest with khan djram, and a Bani woman wearing her khan djram in An Nhon village, Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



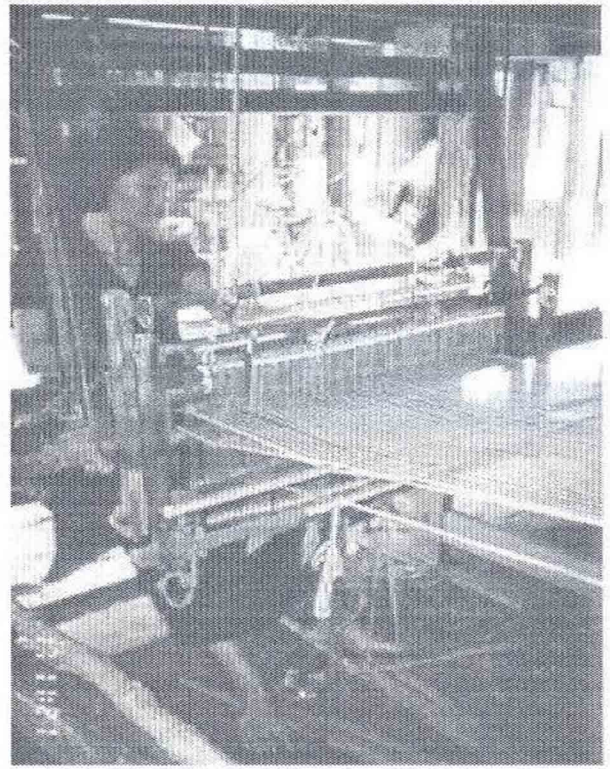
Picture 10  
Po Xa Po Rame (the highest ranked Balamon priest of Po Rame temple) conducting a ritual at Kate festival in Ninh Thuan province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 11  
A Bani priest in An Nhon village, Ninh Thuan Province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 12  
Cham women from An Giang province in  
Ho Chi Minh City (Photograph: Ric  
Nakamura)



Picture 13  
A Cham woman weaving in Chau Phong  
village, An Giang province (Photograph:  
Ric Nakamura)



Picture 14  
A Cham man fixing his fish net in Chau Giang village in An Giang province  
(Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 15  
A Cham bridegroom going to his bride's house on the wedding day in Chau Giang village, An Giang province (Photograph: Ric Nakamura)

Picture 16  
A fan dance performed by the Cham from south central coast area (Photograph: Ric Nakamura)



Picture 17  
A fan dance performed by the Cham from Mekong Delta (Photograph: courtesy of Kampulan Qasidah Nashrudiniyah in Ho Chi Minh City)

## Conclusion

The Cham people are one of 54 state recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam. The Vietnamese state makes conscious effort to represent equally all the ethnic minority peoples living inside of their national borders. Their catalogue like depictions are however not able to portrait the complexity of their community. There are so many different kinds of Cham who construct their ethnic identity differently based on the social context and social interactions.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nakamura 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For ethnic classification of Vietnam, see W. Connor (1984), C. Keyes (1987), Phan Ngoc Chien (1997), and Yoshizawa Minami (1982).

<sup>3</sup> According to Vietnam General Statistics Department, the population of Cham in 1999 was 132,873.

<sup>4</sup> For studies on the Cham in Cambodia, see B. Kiernan (1988) and W. A. Coolins (1996).

<sup>5</sup> For a study on the Cham community in Bangkok, see R. Scupin (1997).

<sup>6</sup> For studies on the Cham community in Hai Nan, see P. Keng-Fong (1996).

<sup>7</sup> The Champa kingdom described as a *Mandala* Kingdom. The word *Mandala* was used by O. W. Wolters to describe characteristics of socio-political systems which are commonly found in ancient Southeast Asian nations. Wolters explained that *Mandalas* were circles of kings. In each *Mandala*, there was one *Mandala* overlord who identified with divine authority and claimed hegemony over other rulers in his *Mandala* who in theory were his obedient allies and vassals. The *Mandala* overlord was the only one who had the prerogative to receive tribute-bearing envoys and the prerogative of supreme command of the military (Wolters 1982: 16-17, 20). Kenneth Hall explained the political and economic networks of the Champa kingdom by applying B. Bronson's model which Hall called a "riverine exchange network". According to this model, the exchange network system has a coastal based trade center usually located at a river mouth. There are also distant upstream centers that are initial concentration points for products originating in more remote parts of the river watershed. These products were produced by the non-market oriented people living in upland or upriver villages (Bronson 1977, K. Hall 1985. Each *Mandala* has its own such a riverine exchange network.

Thus the characteristic of the Cham state can be seen as a loose, marginally interdependent alliance network among a series of river-mouth urban centers whose very nature was politically and economically unstable. The Cham political authority was concentrated in coastal and riverine centers near the coast. The Cham royal center was shifted among several of these river-mouth urban centers over time which has been explained as representing corresponding shifts from one dynasty's rule to that of another (K. Hall 1985).

The Champa kingdom was a multiethnic country. Champa was divided into different geographical areas by branches of the Truong Son mountain range, which generally runs from north to south in central Vietnam. There were five areas divided by them which corresponded to the coastal plains. These were called from north to south; Indrapura, Amaravati, Vijaya, Kauthara, and Panduranga.

<sup>\*</sup> See A. Reid (1993), (1995).

<sup>9</sup> The word *Balamon* is a term used by researchers and scholars. The Cham themselves do not use this term; instead they use the word “Cham”, the same as their ethnic name. In this article, I use the term *Balamon* in order to avoid confusion.

<sup>10</sup> There are villages called Palay Rio and Palay Bingu, located next to each other at the east of a large *Bani* village called Van Rang in Ninh Thuan Province. The *Balamon* belong to these two villages do not cremate their deceased. All the *Balamon* villages in Ninh Thuan provinces belong to one of three temples, Po Inu Nugar, Po Klong Garai, and Po Rame, but these two villages do not belong to none of these three villages. Some Cham intellectuals think that the *Balamon* of these two villages were descendants of slaves, thus they were not allowed to be cremated. There is a legend amongst them explaining that their ancestors came from north of Hue and migrated toward south by boat.

<sup>11</sup> There are 22 Cham villages in Ninh Thuan Province. Among them seven villages are occupied by the *Bani* people. One village called Palay Boh Dang in the Cham language is an exception because in this village both *Cham* and *Bani* are living together. However their residence is not intermingled; the village is divided into the *Cham* residential area and the *Bani* residential area by a narrow street cutting through the village.

<sup>12</sup> See, Phan Thi Yen Tuyet 1993.

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