

# The Cham Muslims in Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the Cham communities in Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam. The Cham people are one of 54 state recognized ethnic groups living in Vietnam. Their current population is approximately 130,000. They speak a language which belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian language family. In the past, they had a country called, Champa, along the central coast of Vietnam, which was once prosperous through its involvement in maritime trade. While the largest concentration of the Cham people in Vietnam is found in a part of the former territory of Champa, particularly Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces, there is another group of Cham people living in the Mekong Delta, mostly in An Giang province near the border with Cambodia. There are differences in ethnic self-identification between these two groups of Chams living in the different localities. In general, the Chams living in the former territory of Champa equate being Cham as being descendants of Champa while the Chams of the Mekong Delta view being Cham as being Muslim. This paper is an attempt to understand the ethnicity of the Cham communities in Ninh Thuan Province through their religious system, particularly a dual structural principle in Cham cosmology called *Awar* and *Ahier*. In this paper, I argue that the concepts of *Ahier* and *Awar*, hold the key to understanding the way their ethnicity has been constructed and reveals an interesting aspect of their world view. In the course of the discussion, their indigenized form of Islam called Bani religion, which is peculiar to the Cham community will be introduced.

## Introduction

This paper discusses the Cham communities in Ninh Thuan province, Vietnam. The Chams are one of 54 state recognized ethnic groups living in Vietnam. Their current population is approximately 130,000. They speak a language which belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian language family. In the past, they had a country called, Champa, along the central coast of Vietnam, which was once prosperous through its involvement in maritime trade. While the largest concentration of the Chams in Vietnam is found in a part of the former territory of Champa, that is Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces, there is another group of Cham people living in the Mekong Delta, mostly in An Giang province near the border with Cambodia. There are differences in ethnic self-identification between these two groups of Chams living in the different localities. In general, the Chams living in the former territory of Champa equate being Cham as being descendants of Champa while the Chams of the Mekong Delta view being Cham as being Muslim.

This paper is based on the field research I conducted in Cham villages around Phan Rang city of Ninh Thuan province, Vietnam in 1995-1996. It is an attempt to understand the ethnicity of the Cham communities in Ninh Thuan Province through their religious system, particularly a dual structural principle in Cham cosmology called *Awar* and *Ahier*. In

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of my contribution to the book on My Son which is soon to be published in early 2008.

this paper, I present the argument that the concepts of *Ahier*, and *Awar*, hold the key to understanding the way their ethnicity has been constructed and reveals an interesting aspect of their world view. In the course of the discussion, their indigenized form of Islam called Bani religion, which is peculiar to the Cham community will be introduced.

### **Muslim people in Vietnam**

The earliest records of existence of Muslim communities in South Central Vietnam are around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Two Arabic inscriptions found in the former territories of Champa indicate that a Muslim community existed in modern Southern Vietnam in the latter half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the 11th century. It seems that the Muslim merchant communities existed in Champa as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century along the coast line of central Vietnam. They were merchants from the Middle East trading along the silk road of the sea to China. Significant numbers of Chams, whom were indigenous populations of Champa, converted to Islam in the latter half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (P-Y Manguin, 1985). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the French colonization (1867-1954), there were various Muslim ethnic communities from French colonies, for example, the Indian people from Pondichery had a prominent presence in Ho Chi Minh City. There are 2 major beautiful mosques in Ho Chi Minh City built by the Indian Muslim community. In cities such as Nha Trang, Da Nang and Hai Phong along the coastal areas, the mosques built by the Indian communities during this time still can be seen. However, the first mosque in Ho Chi Minh City called Masjidir Rahim was built by a Malaysian and Indonesian Muslim community. Hence, the Muslim population in Vietnam has different origins, and the most numerous and prominent group in contemporary Vietnam being the Cham people.

### **The Cham people in Vietnam**

According to the most recent National census, the population of the Cham in Vietnam was 132,827 in 1999. In terms of population, the Cham was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> largest of the 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam. There are 2 distinct groups of Cham people in Vietnam, when taken into consideration their place of residence, historical background and religion. The first group lives in the south central region of Vietnam, particularly Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces. These two provinces once formed a large province, called Thuan Hai, which covered a similar area to the part of the kingdom of Champa known as Panduranga. This is where the largest concentration of Cham people in Vietnam are said to be found with about 86,000 Cham living here<sup>2</sup>.

The second group lives in the Mekong Delta, most of them around Chau Doc city in An Giang Province, near the border with Cambodia. About 12,000 Cham people live in this region<sup>3</sup>, and almost all are Sunni Muslims. The Mekong Delta Cham also live in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces such as Dong Nai and Tay Ninh. In addition to this, approximately 20,000 Cham live in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh provinces, north of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan. This particular group is called Cham Hroi, which is classified as a sub-group of the Cham ethnic group. It is believed that the Cham Hroi were members of the population of the kingdom of Champa, whom were left alone without contact with other

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<sup>2</sup> According to 1999 National Census, the population of the Cham in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan is 86,493.

<sup>3</sup> According to 1999 National Census, the population of the Cham in An Giang and Tay Ninh provinces is 12,435.

Cham communities and developed different cultural traditions from the Cham living in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan<sup>4</sup>.

Chams are also found in various parts of Southeast Asia, the most numerous communities being in Cambodia, where the estimated population is somewhat between 300,000 and 700,000. After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, a number of Cham people left Vietnam for Australia, Canada, and France, USA, and other parts of the world.

### **The Cham people in Ninh Thuan Province**

In the past, the Chams were known as skillful seamen in the Southeast Asian maritime trade. Nowadays, however, Cham people live in villages far from the coast and no longer build boats or sail out to the ocean. They engage in the cultivation of wet rice and grow grapes. Some raise animals such as cattle, pigs, chickens and ducks. A few villages are also known for their handicrafts, such as textile and pottery which are mainly produced by the Cham women. With the increase of domestic and international tourism in Vietnam, Cham textiles are particularly widely marketed.

The education level of the Chams is relatively high, which is reflected in the large numbers of Cham school teachers. There are also Cham doctors, nurses and pharmacists working in the provincial hospitals, as well as, Cham lawyers and scholars working in Ho Chi Minh City.

Cham society is known for its matrilineal and matrilocal system<sup>5</sup>. When couples marry, the husband goes to his wife's house to live with her family. Then, when the sister of the married woman is preparing to get married, the married couple moves out of the wife's parents' house and build a new house nearby. The children of the Cham belong to their mothers' lineage and property is passed down through the female line.

The Chams of South Central Vietnam still maintain their traditional writing system, which is called *akhar thrah*. This script evolved from Sanskrit. All religious texts, legends and poems were written in *akhar thrah*. Nowadays, with provincial government support, a Cham Language Center (*Ban bien soan sach chu Cham*) has been established in Phan Rang, the capital city of Ninh Thuan province. Run by Cham people, the center is responsible for publishing the textbooks used in the Cham writing classes and for training teachers of *akhar thrah*.

The written script has the greatest authority over the Cham people's cultural knowledge. It has been previously noted that they value literature more highly than oral tradition (Blood 1981:6). Many Chams from South Central Vietnam think that if one lacks knowledge of *akhar thrah*, one cannot understand ilimo, culture. During my field research, I had to revise my original plans to visit different Cham villages to collect information, and instead spend a few hours every day studying *akhar thrah* at the Cham Language Center. This reflected a difference, in my understanding of Cham culture with my Cham teacher's interpretation of it. I understood the culture as something observable, while my teacher understood it as something found in texts. It became clear to me that Cham intellectuals place ultimate authority in texts. In answer to my questions, elderly Cham people often read and translated their books for me. This occurred often that I came to suspect that Cham intellectuals believe that the Cham culture only exists in written form.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Khong Dien, Cham Hroi was classified as a separate ethnic group by the state ethnic classification of 1974 yet it was merged into the Cham ethnic group at the time of general census in 1979 (Khon Dien 2002: 14-15, 24-25)

<sup>5</sup> Since Cham have adapted the Vietnamese name, the Cham children take their father's family name, but the children do belong to their mother's lineage not the father's.

This reliance on texts is peculiarly similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalists' attitude to their studies, described by Edward Said. The knowledge the Orientalists possessed about the Orient came from books. The "classical Orient" – found only in texts – was considered to be the real Orient while the modern Orient was seen in terms of problems to be solved. In the Cham case, their intellectuals' textual orientation can be understood as a denial of Cham modern cultural practices. Vietnamese government minority policies have resulted in the loss of many Cham religious ceremonies and the modification of their rituals. They probably see their contemporary cultural practices as impure, by comparison with the culture formerly practiced in the kingdom of Champa, which they deem genuine and truly original. For them, real original Cham culture can thus be found only in the texts; if one is seeking "correct" cultural information about the Chams, one should learn to read the Cham scripts.

### **Cham people in the Mekong Delta**

The Chams in the Mekong Delta are Sunni Muslim. They do not have much attachment to Champa. Some have even denied the connection and claimed their roots in Angkor. The Sunni Muslim Chams of the Mekong Delta tend to be seen as having lost the matrilineal and matrilocal principles, because of the influence of Islam. As a matter of fact, their living arrangements are ambilocal rather than strictly matrilocal. A couple's living arrangements often depend on their economic situation and access to the job market or education. But the basic rule remains matrilocal, as indicated by the forms of traditional wedding rituals. The 3-day-long Cham Muslim wedding culminates on the third day when the groom enters the house of his bride.

Religious leaders and educated Chams in the Mekong Delta speak Malay and write in Jawi script. A small number of Chams in An Giang province that were able to read old Cham scripts are featured in Marcel Ner's 1940s account of the Muslims of southern Vietnam (Ner 1942). In my experience, when I visited An Giang province in the mid 1990s, I did not find a single book written in *akhar thrah*. On one incident, an old man informed me that he owned several books written in *akhar thrah* which he had buried to save them from the confusion of war. After the war was over, he dug them out and found that the texts were no longer legible. The loss of *akhar thrah* among the Sunni Muslim Chams of the Mekong Delta is often viewed by the Chams of South Central Vietnam as a loss of culture, *ilimo*: the Mekong delta Chams are thus deemed to have lost their Cham authenticity. For the Chams of South Central Vietnam, their ability to access and process "authentic" knowledge of their past – of the kingdom of Champa – make them more authentic Chams.

### **Cham Balamon and Bani**

The Cham people of South Central Vietnam have abundant ritual traditions: approximately 150 different religious ceremonies are known. There are two distinct groups of Cham in this region, if we consider their religious beliefs. One group called Balamon adheres to an indigenized form of Hinduism. They worship their gods called Po Yang and their deified kings, and hold their ceremonies in the ancient Champa temples in their region, which were built between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are supposed to observe a taboo on eating beef, and are normally cremated when they die<sup>6</sup>. They are led by a body of priests, *Halau Tamunay Ahier*.

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<sup>6</sup> Those who die before age 15 years old will not be cremated. There are two small Cham Balamon villages called, Palay Rio and Palay Bingu located next to each other at the east of one of the largest Bani villages in Ninh Thuan

The other group, called Bani adheres to an indigenized form of Islam. They worship their god, Po Alwah (Allah) at their village mosque called *thang muki*. They are supposed to observe food taboo on eating pork, and are buried without cremation. They are led by a body of priests, *Halau Tamunay Awar*.

The Cham Balamon and Bani do not live in the same villages<sup>7</sup>. There are 22 Cham villages in Ninh Thuan province. Of these, seven are inhabited by Bani people<sup>8</sup>. As Cham Balamon and Bani do not share common daily life in the same village, they know little about each other's customs and traditions.

The different sense of hygiene seems to separate the 2 groups, and also provides a perspective on their relative degrees of "progress". For example, my Cham language teacher was a Bani, and his wife often invited me for lunch when I was working in her village. She was very curious about my impressions of the Cham Balamon and often wanted to know what they fed me in their villages. She asked if I could eat their foods. I told her that although I was not familiar with some dishes, I had no problem eating their foods, including ceremonial dishes. She expressed her surprise in the following terms:

We (Bani) eat first and then conduct our ceremony, so our foods are fresh and clean; meanwhile the Cham Balamon do the ceremony first, then eat afterwards. That is why their foods are not fresh and clean. Even though I am Cham, I don't dare eat Cham Balamon foods. You are not Cham, you're a foreigner, but you can eat their foods. You are better than me. But you need to be careful about the foods in Cham Balamon villages. They are not clean as ours.

The Bani people's comments on the Cham Balamon ceremony always related to hygiene; "dirty", "unclean", "unsanitary" and so on. The Cham Balamon, meanwhile, often agree with Bani criticisms of their religious practices. They admit that the Bani are more progressive and that their ceremonies are simpler. However, they also argue that they are unable to simplify their ceremonies as the Bani do, due to the reason that the Cham Balamon people must maintain the authentic cultural traditions inherited from the kingdom of Champa without alternation or simplification.

### ***Ramuwan of Bani***

In order to introduce Bani religion, I will talk about their holy month of *Ramuwan*. *Ramuwan* takes place on the exact same day of the Ramadan. However, three days before the first day of *Ramuwan*, Bani people visit their grave yards. On the first day, the Bani people from a village north of Phan Rang city go to their oldest grave yard located on the sea shore. The next day, they visit another grave yard, located at a distant field from their village, and on the third and last day, they go to a grave yard near their village where the

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province. There are 3 temples (*bimong*) in Ninh Thuan province, where the Cham people worship deified kings, and all Cham Balamon villages belong to one of these 3 temples. However, Palay Rio and Palay Bingu do not belong to any of these 3 temples. The Cham Balamon from these two villages will not be cremated when they die. According to some Cham local scholars, the people of these two villages practice a pre-Hindu religion or animism, others argued that the people of Palay Rio and Palay Bingu are not allowed to have cremation since they are the descendants of landless slaves. Today the people of these two villages have their lands. However, because of lack of good access to water resource, the villagers do not engage in wet-rice cultivation as do Chams in other villages. According to a legend in Palay Rio and Palay Bingu, their ancestors used to live around the northern part of Hue, and for some reasons, they sailed down south and arrived at Panduranga.

<sup>7</sup> One village called Phu Nhuan or Palay Boh Dang in the Cham language is an exception. In this village both Cham Balamon and Bani live together. However their residence is not intermingled; the village is divided into the Cham Balamon residential area and the Bani residential area by a narrow street cutting through the village.

<sup>8</sup> Population of the Cham Balamon in Ninh Thuan Province is about 32,000 while the Bani is 22,000 (Sakaya 2002:39).

recently deceased are buried. The meaning of their grave yard visit is to invite their ancestral spirits back to their houses. After the 3-day grave yard visits, people make offerings to the ancestral spirits at their house. First, they prepare an offering of a meal to all their ancestral spirits, then they make an offering to individual lineage members who have passed away. The oldest woman of the household has the responsibility of remembering the names of the deceased up till 7 generations and at which grave yards they are buried.

The next day, after the sunset, the Bani priests enter the mosque, and this marks the beginning of the holy month of *Ramuwan*. The priests change their cloth and head cover to prepare for prayer. The priests who conduct the prayer will go outside of the mosque where a crowd of women and some elderly men who are all dressed in white watch. After the ritual cleansing, the priests come back in and sit facing the west wall of the mosque. Candles are lit. One of the priests stands up and moves to the corner where a drum is kept. He hits the drum which signals the beginning of the prayer. Another priest joins him and they perform a call for prayer while facing the west wall. A woman who holds a special ritual role called *Muh Poh* and the wife of the highest ranked priest, are the first people to pray. Then, women, first older, then younger follow their prayer. More number of women congregate for the prayer than men, and the men pray after the women finish praying. The women's participation in Bani religious ceremony is crucial and they hold a significant role in their religion.

After the prayer, the priests make a circle and greet each other. Bani people believe that it is from this day, that their ancestral spirits who visited the descendants' household enter the mosque and spend the next 30 days with the priests. During the month of *Ramuwan*, the Bani priests stay in the mosque, away from their families. The first 3 days of *Ramuwan*, the priests do not go outside of the mosque, where they abstain from speaking, drinking and eating. During these 3 days, mosques are closed and lay people cannot visit there. The lay Bani people do not observe fast, yet they are forbidden to eat meat for the first 15 days of the month of *Ramuwan*. The pregnant women fast with the priests for the first 3 days of *Ramuwan*. During this holy month, the Bani people must behave morally by refraining from activities such as heavy drinking, and quarrelling. A funeral cannot be organized for the first 15 days of *Ramuwan*.

### ***Ahier and Awar***

Certain legends explain the origin of the Cham people's division into two groups, and in these legends Cham Balamon and Bani are consistently identified as *Ahier* and *Awar*. Both words are from Arabic, with *Ahier*, meaning "back, behind, or after" and *Awar* meaning "front or before". In the legends, *Ahier* denotes Cham Balamon and *Awar* denotes Bani. In daily life, the Cham use these terms to differentiate between certain types of ceremony, or between people of the Cham Balamon group and those of the Bani. They also use this dual principle in their cosmological explanations.

In the Cham lunar calendar, a month consists of 30 days. But the days are not counted from 1 to 30; instead, the days 1 to 15 are counted twice. The first 15 days are called *bingun*; the second 15 days are called *klam*. The first *bingun* half of the month is denoted *Ahier* while the second *klam* half of the month is denoted *Awar*. Both Cham Balamon and Bani hold their wedding ceremonies on the Wednesday of the *klam* half of the month. Why Wednesday? Wednesday is seen as a day of balance, and is thus considered to be the best day for weddings. This notion of balance relies on the principles of *Ahier* and *Awar*. The Cham week consists of 7 days, as in the solar calendar. The first 3 days- Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday – are considered to be *Ahier*; fire and heat are attributed to these days. The last 3 days – Thursday, Friday, and Saturday – are considered to be *Awar*: water and cold are

attributed to them. Wednesday, on the other hand, falls between *Ahier* and *Awar*. Furthermore, the soil – representing growth and fertility – is attributed to this day, which adds to Wednesday's suitability for weddings.

These principles also govern other cosmological beliefs. For instance, the upper part of the human body, from head to navel, is called *akhar* and considered *Ahier*, while the lower part, from navel to feet, is called *tanuh riya* and considered *Awar*. The Cham imagine the sky as the body of a human being, hunched over with the hands and feet on the ground; they thus see the part of the day from dawn until noon (the sky's upper body, head to navel) as *Ahier*. The period from noon until sunset (the sky's lower body, navel to feet) is *Awar*.

Legends about *Ahier* and *Awar* suggest that this two-realm division is meant to bring peace upon Cham society. One version of a legend I collected reads as follows:

A long time ago, the prophet Po Nubi Mohamat was an *Ahier*. At that time, the *Awar* became very strong and Po Nubi Mohamat was very impressed with them. So he tried to change all the *Ahier* people to become *Awar*. However the *Ahier* people opposed Po Nubi Mohamat, arguing that "in the world there should be men and women. If we have only women, how can we maintain the world?" Thus *Awar* between the *Ahier* people and Po Nubi Mohamat broke out. They fought for seven days and seven nights. Then Po Nubi Ichbrahim came between them as a mediator. He asked Po Nubi Mohamat, "Can you live with only one eye, only one hand, and only one leg?" Po Nubi Mohamat did not know how to answer this question and agreed that the rest of *Ahier* should remain *Ahier* but he himself became *Awar* on this occasion. After 7 days and 7 nights of battle, Po Nubi Mohamat felt thirsty; he brought out water by magic and shared it with all the *Ahier* people, so peace between them was restored (this legend was related to me by a Cham Balamon Shaman).

The dualistic tendency in Cham cosmology was pointed out by Blood, who lived among the Cham people for several years before 1975. Of the 2 realms in the system she described, one belonged to the father, the other to the mother (Blood 1981:43, 48). In the legend above, *Ahier* is male and *Awar* female. Many Cham people express a similar idea of *Ahier* representing men and *Awar* women and further explain that, to function properly, society must have *Ahier* and *Awar*. Thus *Ahier* exists for *Awar*, and *Awar* exists for *Ahier*. The mutual dependence of the 2 realms holds the world of the Cham people together.

The Male and female attributes of *Ahier* and *Awar* have many manifestations, which include the 2 groups' respective bodies of priests. For example, a local scholar of the Cham Balamon told me the following story about the birth of his first child. After their marriage, he and his wife were childless for some time. His mother-in-law became concerned and sent him to a nearby Bani village to ask the Bani priests for help. He brought offerings of special candles and soup to the priests. They read the Qur'an for him. He made several trips to the Bani village, eventually he and his wife were blessed with a son, followed by 3 other boys and 4 girls. He explained to me why his mother-in-law asked him to see the Bani priests, and not Cham Balamon priests (the leaders of his own religion) because Cham Balamon priests symbolize men and men cannot give birth; only Bani priests, who symbolize women, could help the couple have children.

The gendered attributes of Cham Balamon and Bani priests are also manifested in their behavior and clothing. When Cham Balamon priests conduct ceremonies, they always sit with crossed legs as the way Cham men sit. Bani priests sit with their feet under them and to the side, in the way Cham women sit. Priests of both groups wear white turbans with red tassels at both ends, but on top of the turban Bani priests add a cloth called *khan djram*. The *khan djram* is an item of clothing used by Bani women; the priests wear it in the same way as the women wear it. Bani priests shave their heads when they enter the priesthood, while Cham Balamon priests wear long hair tied in a bun at the top of their head. When they are

conducting ceremonies, the bun is covered by a white turban without red tassels tied in a special way which represents the male sex, a linga.

Cham Balamon	Bani
<i>Ahier</i>	<i>Awar</i>
Male	Female
Right	Left

*Ahier-Awar* complementarity is also expressed in number cosmology. The Cham community identifies itself through a symbol called *hon kan*, composed of two numbers and two figures. The symbol's center is a circle representing the sun, under which there is a crescent. The number 6 is set above the sun, and the number 3 below the crescent. The sun and the number 3 are considered *Ahier*, while the crescent and the number 6 are *Awar*. For the Cham, the number 9 is the largest number in the script. The *Ahier* number 3 plus the *Awar* number 6 join to form the number 9 which is the most complete number. Thus the *hon kan* symbol – composed of *Ahier* and *Awar* elements – represents the most complete form of existence; unity, balance, stability and peace. In other words, when *Ahier* and *Awar* co-exist, the world of the Cham finds unity.



We may also pursue the idea of complementarity in the symbolism of priesthood, as we have seen, Cham Balamon priests symbolize men and Bani priests symbolize women. But they also bear attributes representing something from the opposite sex. The Cham Balamon priests carry a yellow rectangle bag on their shoulder which symbolizes the uterus.

The Bani priests have 3 bags, which hang from their neck down onto their back. One of 3 bags is slightly larger than the others, and the 2 smaller bags are tied by the same cord. The Bani priests' bags symbolize the penis and testicles. These bags symbolize the acceptance, within *Ahier* and *Awar*, of their counterparts.

Janet Hoskins, who studied indigenous notions of gender and agency among the Austronesian-speaking Kodi people of the Western tip of Sumba in the lesser Sunda island chain, argued that gender is the most consistently evoked structuring principle within this “complementary dualism” (Hoskins 1987:174). She argues that male and female, as abstract categories, provide a language for talking about ways of effective action; “male and female are simply used to express contrasts which may be applied recursively: Male con-



tains Female, Female contains Male: Inside contains the Outside, the Outside the Inside; Black, White, White, Black” (Hoskins 1987:197).

Hoskins’s notion of complementary dualism may be observed in Cham ceremonies. One peculiar thing is that one can often find more *Awar* elements in *Ahier* ceremonies than *Ahier* elements in *Awar* ceremonies. For instance, during *Ahier* funeral rituals, Cham Balamon priests make a triangle by placing their hands above their forehead to pray to Po Nubi Eta, Po Nubi Atam and Po Nubi Mota, all of who are *Awar* deities. According to a Cham Balamon priest, they have to pray to invite *Awar* deities to their funerals, weddings and other ceremonies, such as the celebrations held on the construction of new houses. On these occasions, the Cham Balamon prepare 2 different sets of areca nut and betel leaf, which are essential offerings in every religious ceremony. One is called *hala kapu*, which is the *Ahier* set; the *Awar* set is called *hala tam tara*. While *Ahier* people often present both *Ahier* and *Awar* set at their ceremonies, *Awar* people rarely present *Awar* set. The only time I observed the Bani people using *Ahier* set was on the occasion of a funeral.

According to Po Dharma, the strong Islamic influence in the Balamon religion was a result of the political situation of Champa during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Comparison of old documents kept among the Cham in Ninh Thuan province with oral traditions led him to the discovery that *Awar* deities were placed higher than *Ahier* deities in the religious pantheon of Champa. He then came across documents on the origin of a ceremony called *Rija prong* explaining why the *Awar* god Po Alwah took the place of the *Ahier* goodness Po Inu Nugar. During that period, Champa tried to ally with military powers on the Malay Peninsula to fight against the Vietnamese, who increasingly threatened Champa. In order to maintain these alliances, in the context of ongoing Islamization of the Malay world, it was crucial for the court of Champa to show an interest in Islam. The replacement of *Ahier* deities with *Awar* deities in the state religious pantheon was made to meet political needs (Po Dharma 1990).

Po Dharma’s argument is a convincing explanation of the existence of more *Awar* elements in the *Ahier* rituals. However, I would like to look more closely at the nature of the ceremonies, in order to understand how *Awar* elements work in *Ahier* ceremonies. I found that those *Ahier* ceremonies which contain *Awar* elements often bear meanings relating to “life” or “birth”. For example, *Ahier* cremations contain the meaning of rebirth in the other world. All participants in the ceremony implicitly play the different roles involved in childbirth – including the newborn’s parents, other relatives, godparents, midwife and so on. The funeral continues for 4 days with a day off on the third day. On the first day, a bowl of rice and a boiled egg are prepared for the deceased, and this meal symbolizes the meal for a pregnant woman. Thus the deceased impregnates a new life in his/her body.<sup>9</sup> When the deceased’s skull is saved from the flames and the 9 pieces of bones are removed from the forehead, the deceased gives birth to his/her new life in the other world. Immediately after this ceremony – whereby the 9 pieces of bones are placed into the container, *klong*, a ceremony called *patrip* is performed; *patrip* symbolizes the new-born person’s first meal in the other world.

The Cham Balamon people erect a special ceremonial house called *kajan* to place the body of the deceased person and to carry out funeral ceremonies and also a small shed called *rap*. The *rap* is usually occupied by musicians, and by the craftsmen who make the ornaments for a cremation carriage. Cham Balamon priests may not step into this *rap*, and some argue that this is because the *rap* is *Awar* territory. The *rap* is built for *Awar* deity, Po

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<sup>9</sup> In this symbolical context, deceased’s actual sex seems to be disregarded.

Nubi Mohamat. Getting help from another *Awar* deity who holds a torch to light up the inside of the *kajan*, the Po Nubi Mohamat observes the sequence of the ceremony from the *rap*. The assistant of the prophet is symbolized by a torch-like thing inside of the *kajan*<sup>10</sup>. The *Awar* deity, Po Nubi Mohamat, is present at the *Ahier* funeral because the *Ahier* funeral contains the meaning of the rebirth. *Awar* here takes on a female role, giving birth and symbolizing fertility. With both elements *Awar* and *Ahier*, the life cycle – of which a death is a part – is complete.

### ***Ahier* and *Awar* amongst Bani**

Up till here, I have discussed *Ahier* and *Awar* as religious distinctions between the respective groups of Cham people of the south central region. However, within the Bani community itself, *Ahier* and *Awar* also mark differences in religious status. For the Bani, *Awar* refers to the body of Bani priests, while *Ahier* refers to the Bani lay people who do not enter priesthood. Thus, the *Awar-Ahier* opposition, as it is used within the Bani community, distinguishes between the sacred and secular in the Bani religion.

The terms *Awar* and *Ahier*, as used by the Bani people, also bear male and female attributes. But an attempt to unravel which realm bears which gender attribute can lead to considerable confusion. Once, in discussion with the Bani, I repeated what I had learned in a Cham Balamon village about the male and female realms indicated by the directions right and left in a Bani village. I had understood that a person's right hand belongs to the domain of *Ahier*, indicating the male attribute, while a person's left hand belongs to the female domain of *Awar*. This caused a big debate among the elderly men. Finally the heated exchange ended with a bland sentence articulated by a Bani priest: "*Awar* is male". For the Bani religious community, *Awar* (normally regarded as female) when used to refer to Bani priests belong to the male realm; *Ahier* used in the context of Bani lay people belong to the female realm.

Bani lay people	Bani priests
<i>Ahier</i>	<i>Awar</i>
Female	Male
Left	Right

Being of the male realm, the Bani priests (*Awar*) need assistance from the female realm<sup>11</sup>. Within the priesthood, there are 6 different ranks<sup>12</sup>, and according to a principle of seniority, the Bani priests gradually climb up the hierarchical ladder. The highest rank is *Ong Guru*, of which there is one at each mosque. During the period of my field study, the *Ong Guru* of one Bani village passed away, but the Bani priest in line to take the position of *Ong Guru* had not been promoted; the village had not had an *Ong Guru* for quite some time. Without an *Ong Guru*, the village was unable to organize several important ceremonies, including funerals, led by the priests of their own village. The reason for this situation

<sup>10</sup> The torch-like thing in the funeral house is called *troi* which indicates the prophet *Po Nubi Mohamat's* assistant, *Ja Tin*.

<sup>11</sup> Women and unmarried men cannot enter the Bani priesthood.

<sup>12</sup> From high rank to the low rank; *Ong Guru*, *Ong Imam Krah*, *Ong Imum tum*, *Ong Katip*, *Ong Mu Tinh* and *Po Char*.

was both simple, and to me unexpected. The wife of the *Ong Guru* candidate was very sick, lying in hospital; Bani priests can be promoted only if their wives are healthy and have good moral conduct.

The priests' promotion ceremony is performed on the last day of the month of *Ramuwān*. On this occasion, the wives of the promoted priests wear a cloth similar to the one they wore at the *Karah* ceremony, by which one enters the Bani religion. They wear as much gold jewellery as possible, and sit in a guest house attached to the mosque to observe the ceremony. If she is sick or menstruating at the time, she cannot attend the ceremony. If they do not attend, the priests cannot be promoted. The Bani priests, as male, need assistance of the female.

The ceremonies conducted by the Bani priests require the presence of a woman, *Muk Poh*. In each Bani village there is 1 or 2 *Muk Poh*. Most of the Bani rituals involve an offering of rice to the priests. When each household prepares the offering, an unmarried young girl is chosen from the household to do the preparations: then, during the rituals, it is the *Muk Poh* who offers the rice to the priests. Bani priests cannot conduct rituals without the *Muk Poh*'s assistance. During Friday prayers the first lay persons to pray are the *Muk Poh* and wife of the *Ong Guru*. Their prayer acts as a signal to the other women to begin their prayers.

### ***Ahier Awar and Akafir:***

Within the Bani community, the gender attributes of *Awar* and *Ahier* – with *Awar* as male and *Ahier* as female – are consistent and possess their own internal logic. The reversal of the normal *Ahier* and *Awar* gender attributes within the Bani community can be explained by the contextuality of *Awar – Ahier* principles.

The Cham Balamon are excluded from the *Ahier* and *Awar* categories used within the Bani community. They are classified instead as *Akafir*. This term is equivalent to the Arabic term, *Kafir*, denoting non-Muslims. The terms *Awar*, *Ahier* and *Akafir* are, however, used only for people belonging to the Cham ethnic group. Initially, as a Buddhist Japanese, I thought I would be categorized as *Akafir*; later on, I was told that I was neither *Ahier* nor *Akafir* but Japanese. While Muslims generally use the term *Kafir* without regard to a person's nationality or ethnic background, the Cham use these terms only within their own ethnic boundaries.

Let me attempt to summarize the discussion so far. Firstly, when these symbols are used in the context of Cham religion as a whole, *Ahier*, (Cham Balamon) is male and *Awar* (Bani) is female. Secondly, within the specific religion of the Bani people, the gender attributes of *Ahier* and *Awar* are reversed; *Ahier* (lay people) is the female principle while *Awar* (priests) is male. Thirdly, when the terms *Awar* and *Ahier* are used in conjunction with the term *Akafir* as a set of three, the terms *Awar* and *Ahier* lose their male and female symbolism. Instead, they indicate the degree to which one embraces Bani religion. To the Bani, the relationship of *Awar*, *Ahier* and *Akafir* indicates relative distance from Po Alwah. The Bani priests (*Awar*) enjoy the greatest proximity to Po Alwah, the Bani lay people (*Ahier*) are the next closest, and the Cham Balamon (*Akafir*) exist at the greatest distance. Thus the distinction between *Ahier* and *Awar* reflects the different levels of multiple religious relationships. But in any case, when the 2 terms are used as a pair, they maintain the attributes of the male and female realms.

Cham Balamon Religion	Bani Religion	
	Bani lay people	Bani priests
<i>Akafir</i>	<i>Ahier</i>	<i>Awar</i>
	Female	Male
	Left	Right

### Cham Traditional Religion

The terms *Ahier* and *Awar* are fluid. They change according to the group and its characteristics. Their meaning depends on the context in which they are used. This fluidity differentiates them from very fixed terms like Cham Balamon and Bani, and illustrates the interdependency of the 2 religions of the Cham people living in the south central region. At a glance, Cham Balamon and Bani seem like 2 completely different religions, of Hindu and Islamic origins, but they are in fact 2 different outcomes of the religion grown in the same ground. Cham Balamon religious attributes make sense only when in opposition to Bani religious attributes, and vice – versa. For the Cham people of south central Vietnam, this binary principle is the dynamic that constructs their world.

Young Cham Balamon and Bani students have opportunities to meet at high schools or universities, but the older people, especially women, have fewer chances to communicate with each other. Clear boundaries and differing cultural forms might seem to mark these 2 groups as 2 different ethnic groups. However, when I questioned about their ethnic identity, none of the Bani people answered that they belonged to the Bani ethnic group: they simply said that they were Cham. Neither group seems keen to articulate their differences for outsiders. The group division only matters within the ethnic group.

Relations between the 2 groups also take literary forms. Within the tradition of Cham lyric poetry, there are 3 significant poems: one of them is called Cham-Bani, and it is a story of unfulfilled love between a young Cham Balamon woman and a young Bani man. According to Inrasara, it was written around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and became the most popular lyric poem among the Cham of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces. It relates the story of how a Cham Balamon and Bani fell in love, against the taboo of inter-religious relationship. Facing strong disapproval from her parents, the Cham Balamon woman escaped from their house in the village and secretly went to live with the Bani man. Later, however, she was caught by the Cham Balamon people, brought back to her village and punished with death. During her funeral, her Bani lover jumped into the cremation fire: they were reunited in the other world (Inrasara: 1993:175-181)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> In the lyrical poem, *Ariya* Cham-Bani, Cham Balamon is represented by a woman and Bani by a man. The Bani man throwing himself into the funeral pile can be understood as sati committed by a man. This lyrical poem has reversed male and female roles as I have discussed in this paper. I knew several inter-religious marriages amongst the Cham during my field study. It was mostly between Cham Balamon women and Bani men. Though I know only one case of Bani woman being married to Vietnamese man (Kin), I had never come across a case of Bani woman married to a Cham Balamon man during my field research and these cases of inter-religious marriage coincide with the relationship depicted in the poem.

Several folk songs among Cham in Ninh Thuan province broach the relationship between the Cham Balamon and the Bani. One of my Cham teachers taught me the following song, which he often used when teaching Cham scripts to the Cham school teachers:

Cham Balamon and Bani are not separated far  
 Actually, since long ago, we share the same blood  
 Which gods created us?  
 You are just a grain of rice and I am just a rice-husk.

The song suggests that the 2 share the same origin, that they are different parts of the same thing. Another song describes the pumpkin and the gourd, their vines ever tangled on the same trellis. The pumpkin and the gourd, of course, symbolize, the Cham Balamon and Bani. According to an ancient Cham text kept by a shaman, the Cham gods appear in different guises. They transform themselves from one form to another, crossing the boundaries between the 2 religions. For instance, one of the earliest and most supreme gods of the Balamon religion, called Po Ku, transformed himself into the goddess Po Inu Nugar. Po Inu Nugar means the universe, she is the mother goddess of Champa. She created human beings and the kingdom of Champa. She also taught the Cham people agriculture, sericulture, and weaving. Po Inu Nugar transformed herself into Po Alwah, the supreme god of the Bani religion. In another example, a Balamon god called Po Alwah Hu transformed himself into the Bani Po Nubi Mohamat. But Po Alwah Hu is the name given to the god when he is in the sky while Po Nubi Mohamat is the name given to him when he is on earth. In this way, the Cham Balamon and the Bani deities are the same.

Cham Balamon	Bani
Po Ku → Po Inu Nugar-----→	Po Alwah
Po Alwah Hu -----→	Po Nubi Mohamat

Despite their differences, the Cham Balamon and Bani share the same system of beliefs – “the Cham religion” – and believe in the same gods. It might appear that they believe in separate traditions. But in actual fact, their gods are the same gods known by different names and worshipped in different ways by 2 different groups of the Cham people. The Cham Balamon and Bani may not know each others’ customs and traditions well, yet they do express that they belong to the same ethnic group.

No distinction is made between them in the way they are depicted in Vietnam today: in this context too, they are the same ethnic group. They are, however, more often represented – in the choices made by people involved in assembling museum collections, books on minorities and other media – by the Cham Balamon. Bani people see no problem in being identified as Cham Balamon in the public sphere. Their religious differences do not create differences of ethnic identity. Sharing a belief system, a sense of belonging to the old kingdom of Champa and common ancestry, both Bani and Cham Balamon assert a common ethnicity to outsiders.

Within the ethnic group, however, a clear boundary surfaces, which temporarily disappears when they relate to outsiders? Members of the Cham ethnic group know the difference between Cham Balamon and Bani. Knowledge of this dual organization is a recognized token of membership in their society. This goes some way toward explaining why the Cham in south central Vietnam often omit the Mekong Delta Cham when they talk about

the Cham in Vietnam. The Mekong Delta Cham do not share this specific knowledge, so the south central region Cham do not acknowledge them.

### **Sunni Muslim Cham in Ninh Thuan province**

Sunni Islam – know as *Jawa* by the Bani – was first introduced into Ninh Thuan province in the 1960s. The Sunni Islam converts in Ninh Thuan province claim that they belong to the realm of *Awar*. Neither Bani nor Cham Balamon agree. The Sunni Islam converts are thus excluded from the *Ahier* and *Awar* dichotomy which is a defining concept for the ethnicity of the Cham in south central Vietnam. The Sunni Islam converts have, as a result, become rather marginalized among the Cham communities of Ninh Thuan.

At present, there are 4 Sunni Islam mosques in the Bani villages of Ninh Thuan province. During my field research, 70 Sunni Muslim families lived in Phuc Nhon village, amounting to about 10 % of the population of this Bani community. In this village, I was told that Sunni Islam had been introduced by a college student from the village. This student was studying in Can Tho city, in the Mekong Delta, when he heard about the Cham living in a neighboring province, An Giang. Out of curiosity, the student visited the Cham in An Giang and found that the Islam they were practicing was different from the Bani Islam he knew. He returned to Phuc Nhon village and told Bani priests about the Islam practiced by the Mekong Delta Cham. None of the Bani priests knew about the Sunni Islam, but they did not approve of the way the Mekong Delta Cham practiced Islam.

Coincidentally, around this time a group of Cham people from An Giang, including Mufty Omal Aly and an Indian Muslim named Ismael Maulawi, visited Phuc Nhon to proselytize Islam. The student asked them the same questions he had put to the Bani priests; clear answers were given. Some of the Bani were impressed by their profound and extensive knowledge of Islam. In 1962, 15 Sunni Islam converts asked the Bani priests to open the mosque on a daily basis, so they could pray every day. Their request was rejected, so they decided to build their own mosque. The mosque was completed in 1963 with financial support from the local government, the Muslim community in Vietnam, Ismael Maulawi, and the *Hiep hoi Cham Hoi giao Viet Nam*, which was an association of Muslim Cham people established in Saigon as a part of Southern Vietnam government's ethnic minority policy.

As Islam gained ground among the Bani, the antagonism between the converted Bani and the remaining Bani increased. Some sympathized with the Muslim converts. Most of these were relatives of Sunni Islam converts, and they argued that religion should be chosen through individual will. These sympathizers were called *walai*: the villagers – including the priests – divided between the *walai* and anti-*walai*. Antagonism within Phuc Nhon village reached its peak in 1969 to 1971. There were a few violent incidents. Sunni Islam converts had to put up with various kinds of bullying from the Baritone elderly. A Sunni Islam person recounted that during the time of enmity, Sunni Islam converts could rely only on Allah and the local government.

The relationship between the Bani and the Sunni Islam converts softened after Vietnam reunification, when any kind of religious proselytizing was prohibited. Although Sunni Islam proselytization among the Bani people of Ninh Thuan has reemerged since the onset of the *doi moi* reforms (1986), and the number of converts is slowly increasing, the violent incidents of the past have not been repeated.

The Bani tend to see Sunni Islam converts as people who have abandoned their original religion and the Cham tradition; they are deemed to be committing a sin by neglecting *muk kay*, the ancestral spirits. According to them, denying *muk kay* means denying oneself, as without the ancestors one would not exist. They also criticize the converts for abandoning Bani religion to gain development and humanitarian aid from foreigners. The Sunni

Muslim in Ninh Thuan are connected to Muslim communities around the world and have received donations from foreign Muslim visitors, and financial aid from foreign Muslim organizations. Because of such foreign connections, they teach English in addition to regular Qur'anic study. I was often surprised to meet Cham students in their mosques who spoke to me in English. The converts' foreign connections and access to foreign aid provoke envy among the Bani people.

The converts often become upset when they hear about such criticism from Bani people, and argue that they converted to the Sunni Islam in order to "follow the right path", and not for monetary gain. One of the members of this group told me that conversion to Sunni Islam and belief in Sunni Islam is a "revolution among the Chams". They believe that the Bani religion is a degraded form of Islam and that its practice is not right. It is steeped in superstition. It is unscientific and backward. Sunni Islam is scientific and more advanced. The converts often consider themselves more educated, more scientific, and more developed than Bani people, because they understand the theology of their faith and practice Islam "correctly".

Furthermore, although the Chams in An Giang province have adhered to Sunni Islam for much longer than the Chams in Ninh Thuan province, the newly-converted in Ninh Thuan claim that they are religiously superior. They admit that the Mekong Delta Chams can read the Qur'an more skillfully, that they are more familiar with the religious practice of Islam. But they also argue that the Muslim Chams of the Mekong Delta are narrow-minded and obsessed with religious practice, caring little about education. Few of their families send their children to school. According to these converts, the Mekong Delta Chams only know how to read the Qur'an, but they do so without understanding the meaning of it, and suffer from various superstitions caused by their lack of scientific knowledge.

Responding to the Bani people's criticism that they have renounced their Cham heritage, they argue that they have no intention of abandoning Cham tradition and culture: by maintaining *akhar thrah* literacy and by participating in traditional ceremonies – such as visiting their ancestors' graves before the holy month of Ramadan – they preserve their cultural and historical traditions, unlike the Muslim Chams in the Mekong Delta. They especially emphasize their efforts to preserve knowledge of the Cham script. They showed me signs in their mosques written in both the Arabic and Cham scripts. Someone from a mosque came to my Cham language teacher's office to discuss how to eradicate Cham script illiteracy amongst the Sunni Muslim. They were critical of the Mekong Delta Chams who cannot read *akhar thrah* and know nothing of the history of Champa. Thus the sense of superiority among Sunni Islam converts in Ninh Thuan towards the Mekong Delta Chams takes more than just a religious form.

Unlike the Chams in the Mekong delta, whose ethnicity is constructed around Islam, the Muslim Chams in south central Vietnam cannot use Islam alone to construct their ethnic identity. They need to include elements of tradition connecting them to the ancient kingdom of Champa: *akhar thrah* and the Cham language hold a significant place in their construction of ethnicity.

## Conclusion

An ethnic classification often gives a homogenous and monolithic image to "a group", while in reality people's ethnic identity is complex and quite dynamic. Being a Cham in Vietnam has various meanings: from being descendants of the kingdom of Champa, to being Muslim from being honest to being backward: all depends on whom one is interacting with and in what kind of social context. The ethnic boundaries which determine the ethnic content always need to be articulated and readjusted according to the various relationships

to other groups, and the social context. Ethnicity is fluid and malleable. It is an “ambiguous aspect of social life” (T. Eriksen 1993:31).

The ethnicity of the Chams in south central Vietnam has been constructed around a connection to the past, the kingdom of Champa. Beyond their communities, they assert their ethnicity by claiming this heritage, by making links with the ancient kingdom which once established a civilization quite different from Vietnamese civilization and at least as prosperous as Vietnamese civilization. They assert their respect for and preservation of cultural traditions expressed through continued ritual practices, maintenance of cultural knowledge including the writing system, constant searching for the origins of the Cham culture, and a reluctance to marry non-Cham outsiders. Meanwhile, internally, their ethnicity is demonstrated by an intricate and fluid dualism, the concept of *Ahier* and *Awar*, the male and female realms. The fluidity of these terms illustrates the interdependency of the 2 religious groups, Cham Balamon and Bani and their construction of an ethnic identity as Cham.

Various local Cham scholars have identified *Ahier* and *Awar* as the *linga* and *Yoni*, the sacred symbols of Hinduism, the religion of Champa. Paul Mus argued that Hinduism was probably accepted by the population of Champa without resistance, as a result of a certain cultural predisposition. He explained this as follows. The area from the Bay of Bengal of India through Indochina, Southern China, Indonesia and other Pacific islands used to belong to a single cultural area called Monsoon Culture. In Monsoon culture, people believed in animism. Among the spirits, the spirit of the earth was one of the most important. To worship the earth spirit – an abstract being – people erected stones at sacred places. The erected stones were sometimes personified by heads of communities who played a significant role as links between the earth spirit and the community. In such a religious environment, the people of Monsoon Culture did not perceive the newly introduced Hindu religion as a totally foreign practice, but rather as something familiar. Mus argued that this local religious background led to the localization of indigenization of Hinduism, or in other words Cham Balamon religion (P. Mus 1975).

According to Tran Phuong Ky, a specialist of Champa art history, the dual principle of the Cham people can be observed in the structure of the sanctuary at My Son<sup>14</sup>. He further argued that the location of the 2 sanctuaries – My Son in Quang Nam province and Po Nagar in Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa province – reflects certain characteristics of the cosmological dualism. My Son, the sanctuary for the god Siva symbolizes the father/male realm, while Po Nagar, the sanctuary for the goddess of Po Inu Nugar symbolizes the mother/female realm (Tran Ky Phuong and R. Nakamura 2007). My anthropological research shows that this dual structure lies at the heart of the dynamics of identity which constructs their ethnicity and the world of Cham people in central Vietnam.

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<sup>14</sup> Personal conversation with Tran Phuong Ky during my visit to My Son in 2005.



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