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Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 53(4), pp 733–761 December 2022.
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Praxis and policy*:* Discourse on Cham Bani religious identity in Vietnam

William B. Noseworthy and Pham Thi Thanh Huyen

Past scholarship has described the Cham Bani religious community as a heterodox and syncretic version of Islam. We argue for a more nuanced interpretation: assertions of orthopraxy and heteropraxy shape contemporary debates in Cham communities in Vietnam. Based on a robust selection of source material—including the positions of government officials, high-ranking clerics, community members, and local activists, along with historicised anthropological accounts, Cham manuscripts, and government documents—our multidisciplinary approach, combining in-depth interviews and historical analysis, suggests religious classifications cannot be viewed as static in Cham communities, especially in the case of the 'Cham Bani', currently best thought of as a Cham particularist religious community.

In 2017, the month of Ramadan—known as *Ramâwan* in the Cham language—was most eventful in Palei Pamblap Biruw, a small town in Ninh Thuận province, located along the south-central coast of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Locals hotly debated newly-issued government identity cards (Vn.: *chứng minh thư nhân dân*). Issued at the age of 14 and above, these ID cards carry typical categories of 'name' and 'birthdate', as well as 'religion'. The new cards read '*Đạo Hồi*'—meaning 'Islam'—instead of the previous 'Bà Ni'. Was the new term correct? Debates ensued in person and on social media, thus engaging transnational dimensions of the local community. The majority opinion disagreed with the classification of their community as 'Đạo Hồi'. They urged local Vietnamese governmental officials to correct the classification. The debate raised important questions about the translation and interpretation of Vietnamese terms. Could they be equated to meanings in Cham religious

William Noseworthy is a Southeast Asian Materials Specialist at Cornell University. Pham Thi Thanh Huyen is a Lecturer at the University of Social Sciences & Humanities, Vietnam National University. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: professornoseworthy@gmail.com.
We would like to extend our thanks to all members of the Champa and Cham Studies Scholarly community far and wide for cultivating our work. We are especially grateful to Gru Hajan, Gru Sakaya, and Gru Inrasara, along with Imam Điệp and Imam Cộng. We are also indebted to friend and colleague Nicolas Weber, who provided helpful commentary on an initial draft of this article. Support for the writing of this article was provided by the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, in Hà Nội and through Dr. Noseworthy's term as a Visiting Fellow at the George McT. Kahin Center for Advanced Research on Southeast Asia at Cornell University.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contexts? For scholars, we must ask: can they be approximated with English language terms? To begin with, we gloss Đạo Hồi as 'Islam' and Bà Ni as 'Bani' in English, while Ramâwan is 'Ramadan'. However, especially with 'Bani' and 'Ramâwan', further description is required. Ramâwan is not simply a Cham pronunciation of the traditional Muslim month of fasting, Ramadan. There are some similarities. Indeed, Ramâwan is the most important occasion of the year in Cham Bani communities. The Cham language colloquially describes the month as *Bilan Aék*—or the 'fasting month'—although the month is also bookended with ceremonies known as 'feasts of the ancestors' (*Mbeng Muk Kei*) that technically occur before and after the month. When we heard Cham Bani speak about Ramâwan as a ceremonial period of the Cham calendar, colloquially, both 'Bilan Aék' and 'Mbeng Muk Kei' were included within the concept.

The streets of Cham Bani communities—like Palei Pamblap Biruw—teemed with people during the month-plus ceremony of Ramâwan, especially just before and after Ramadan. Laughter filled the streets, as did the friendly conversation of distant family members, old friends, and acquaintances who might not have seen one another in quite some time. Palei Pamblap Biruw was disproportionately populated with the elderly and very young, along with farmers and a handful of government officials, during the rest of the calendar year. However, for Ramâwan family members returned from as far afield as France, Canada, the United States (especially California), Australia, and Malaysia. Additionally, the student population that had left the countryside for metropolises—Hồ Chí Minh City in particular—returned, injecting the small towns and villages with the excitement of the youth. Villagers who travelled for work, especially those who were travelling vendors of traditional herbal medicines, the specialty of the town, also returned. As we found most members of Cham Bani communities only return to their hometowns for certain life-cycle rituals for close family members, such as funerals and weddings, along with Ramâwan, the period has popularly assumed the function of being a dedicated time of year for families to put their affairs in order. Consequentially, the number of individuals who apply for and receive government identity cards tends to increase during Ramâwan. Additionally, since disparate family members may have developed independent ideas about their past and traditions during their time away, Ramâwan is a time for discussion, study, and re-centring of the community. Hence, while community members were surprised at the reclassification of Bà Ni as Đạo Hồi, scholars should not be surprised that the debate emerged during this time of year.

Figure 1 indicates that the household registration books (issued earlier) and the new government identity cards had different classifications in the 'religion' category for the same person. The former use Bà Ni, while the latter used Đạo Hồi. On 19 June 2017 the Council of Bani Clerics and Board of Religious Support in Palei Pamblap Biruw sent formal complaints to the local Religious Committee, the Religious Council of Hồi giáo Bà Ni and the Ninh Thuận Committee for Ethnic Minorities. They also petitioned the Central Committee for Ethnic Minorities, Central Committee for Religious Affairs, and Council for Ethnic Minorities of the National Assembly, in an attempt to gain national recognition. We have summarised the key aspects of the petition in a glossed translation:

> For a long time already, the identity cards of the Cham Bani [have] registered the categories as 'Ethnic Group: Cham; Religion: Bà Ni'. Due to an unknown reason in June

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. Household registration book and ID card (lower right) for an individual from the Cham Bani community. Photograph by Pham Thi Thanh Huyen, Palei Pamblap Biruw, September 2017.

> 2017, all cards began to register us as 'Ethnic Group: Cham; Religion: Đạo Hồi' when Cham Bani applied for new ID cards.
>
> This is incorrect for two reasons:
>
> - It misrepresents the traditional culture and beliefs of Cham Bani.
> - It is not realistic: the two religions Hồi giáo (or Đạo Hồi) and Bà Ni are entirely different, even though Bà Ni originated from Hồi giáo, it has been localised for a long time.
>
> Besides, this approach has contradictions:
>
> - Fathers and mothers are registered as Bà Ni on their ID cards, while their children are Đạo Hồi.
> - Old IDs are Bà Ni but new IDs are Đạo Hồi.
> - Birth Certificates record Bà Ni, but personal IDs record Đạo Hồi.

The phrase 'unknown reason' in the above petition indicates that community members felt they were not duly informed about the change. A second point relates to the terms 'Hồi giáo' and 'Đạo Hồi', which have been traditionally understood as synonymous, with the former being a Sino-Vietnamese term and the latter being its Vietnamese equivalent. However, the Bani acceptance of the use of the term 'Hồi giáo' to refer to themselves in the usage 'Hồi giáo Bà Ni', but rejection of the term 'Đạo Hồi' implies that the two terms now have different connotations. The past several decades of Vietnamese scholarship considered Bà Ni as a discrete subgroup of Hồi giáo (that is, Muslims) and Đạo Hồi as a direct synonym of Hồi giáo. Yet, the petition contends Bà Ni and Đạo Hồi are separate. Per our research, this view has not been universal among all Cham Bani individuals in Vietnam in all historical periods. We also found the 'unknown reason' was readily discoverable: according

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to a 2 June 2017 dispatch from the Department of Administrative Management on Social Order and Security sent to all police departments across all provinces of Vietnam, there were just 13 state-recognised religions (*tôn giáo*) and subgroup beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*) that were recognised under major religions, while the dispatch highlighted their precise classifications. According to these forms, major religions were shown, but beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*) were not.[1] Hence, the preconditions for the debate were set, as in June 2017, the head of police in Ninh Thuận issued a follow-up order to match the national system, while in August the Ninh Hải district chief attempted to abate the situation, 'correcting' the IDs from 'Đạo Hồi' to 'Bà Ni'. The head of police in Ninh Thuận issued a follow-up order to 'correct' the new IDs, so they would read 'Bà Ni' instead of 'Đạo Hồi'.[2]

The 2017 dispute in Palei Pamblap Biruw raises several questions: How are Vietnamese authorities interpreting the meaning of Đạo Hồi, Hồi giáo, and Bà Ni? How are Cham Bani community members interpreting these terms? And, perhaps most importantly, how do these understandings change over time with respect to their social context? To answer these questions, we draw on our combined fieldwork, which covers a period of seven years, from 2012 to 2019. The first author researched Bani communities in Palei Pamblap Biruw (2012–14) and Bani communities in Ninh Thuận during Ramâwan (2013). The second author studied Palei Pamblap Biruw in-depth during Ramâwan as well (2015, 2017 and 2019). Combining fieldwork with the analysis of Vietnamese government documents, historicised French anthropological accounts, analysis of Cham manuscripts, and interviews with members of Cham Bani communities, our understanding of the Bani community shows how it has taken shape over time, nuancing the comparatively static constructions of past scholarship. We considered whether the Bani community is a distinct school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) within Islam, a deeply localised and highly syncretic form of Islam, or a Cham particularist religious group.[3] We, however, did not find evidence in manuscripts to suggest that the 'Bani' are a distinct school of jurisprudence. Instead, we found characterisations overlapped and interpretations varied from individual to individual with the majority highlighting practices we can describe as 'Cham

1 Official Dispatch No. 1718/C41-C72, (2017), p. 2. It is worth noting that *tín ngưỡng* can be used for beliefs not linked to any world religion and is commonly used to designate such among state records of ethnic minority religious communities.

2 'Công an huyện Ninh Hải cấp phát giấy Chứng minh nhân dân tại xã Xuân Hải' (2017); http://www.ninhthuan.gov.vn/chinhquyen/congan/Pages/CONG-AN-HUYEN-NINH-HAI-CAP-PHAT-GIAY-CMND-TAI-XA-XUAN-HAI.aspx (accessed 20 Oct. 2017).

3 Although Philipp Bruckmayr uses the term 'particularism' in the title of his article, 'Between institutionalised syncretism and official particularism: Religion among the Chams of Vietnam and Cambodia', in *Rituale als Ausdruck von Kulturkontakt: "Synkretismus" zwischen Negation und Neudefinition; Akten der interdisziplinaren Tagung des Sonderforschungsbereiches "Ritualdynamik"* [Rituals as an expression of cultural contact 'syncretism' between negation and redefinition, an interdisciplinary meeting of the Research Centre on 'ritual dynamics'] Heidelberg, 3–5 December 2010, ed. Andreas H. Pries, Laeititia Martxolff, Claus Ambos and Robert Langer (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), pp. 11–42, the focus is on problematising 'orthodoxy' and the model of 'institutionalised syncretism', especially among the Imam San community in Cambodia. He mentions the Cham Ahiér (but erroneously conflates them with the Cam Jat) and mentions the Cham Bani, but does not articulate either in terms of particularism. Nonetheless, we derived these categories in response to such similar scholarly discourses that were present in the field of Cham Studies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particularism', which we have recently defined elsewhere as 'religious communities that explicitly state "being Cham" is an integral part of their identity, practice, language belief structures, and so forth that make up a religious community'.[4] While we do not seek to provide guidance for policy measures, we do suggest increased research focusing on these issues helps promote the understanding of religious practices in minority communities in Vietnam. Existing scholarship on Bani communities tends to rely on assumptions that they are heterodox, in contrast with an 'orthodox majority' of Cham Muslims, mostly in Cambodia. Although the notion that assertions of 'orthodoxy' are important in this context has a kernel of truth, we argue this approach has three problems. First, focusing on a Mecca-centred discourse of 'orthodoxy', in contrast with Southeast Asian 'heterodoxy', ignores that there are internal assertions of orthodoxy, specifically orthopraxy, *within* Cham Bani communities. Second, the heavy focus on *doxy* tends to miss the importance of *praxis*—or the role of practising, enacting, and applying religious concepts—with discussions of what is 'right' or moral conduct. Indeed, we found debates over orthopraxy vs heteropraxy were more prominent than other matters of belief and/or doctrine, especially in Bani communities.[5] In other words, debates emphasised *proper behaviour*, *ritual*, and *practice* most. Third, although almost all scholars do not acknowledge it, 'Bani' is a term whose meaning has in fact changed over the past several centuries and continued to change over the past several decades. These changes occurred within broader Southeast Asian regional contexts of syncretism, traditionalism, reformism, and particularism. To unpack our evidence and claims, we begin with assessments of the setting, geography, and demography of Cham Bani communities. We follow with a deeper critical examination of relevant scholarly literature, then delve into the positions on the classification on the Cham Bani according to community and governmental perspectives, before we offer a concluding discussion on the perspectives we gathered during research, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how Cham religious practices have changed over time.

Setting, geography and demography

Contemporary scholarly interpretations in Cham Studies view the Cham population of Vietnam as originating from the civilisation of Champā. This civilisation was a sometimes unified and sometimes segmentary, or even warring, collection of polities centred around riverine settlements stretching along the coastline of contemporary Vietnam. The major polities were called Kauṭhāra, Amarāvatī, Indrapura, Vijaya, and Pāṇḍuraṅga. In the uplands, recent scholarship has suggested a sixth substantial region, Madhyamagrāma.[6] The predominantly Hindu-Buddhist civilisation is internationally renowned for its artwork and archaeological sites: the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Mỹ Sơn complex, the famous Đồng Dương Monastery complex,

4 William Noseworthy and Pham Thi Thanh Huyen, 'Shared resonances: Cham Bani conceptions of divinities in contemporary Vietnam', *Religion* 51, 3 (2021): 382.

5 Several essays in Michael Feener and Chiara Formichi, eds, *Shi'ism in Southeast Asia: 'Alid piety and sectarian constructions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), mention the discourse of orthopraxy in Indonesian contexts from the 1970s onward as a potentially important concept. However, a serious consideration of orthopraxy and heteropraxy as concepts has never occurred in the context of Cham Studies.

6 For a summary on the scholarly debates on the structure of these polities, see Arlo Griffiths, Andrew Hardy and Geoff Wade, eds, *Champa: Territories and Networks of a Southeast Asian Kingdom* (Paris: EFEO, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the temple-towers of the Vijaya polity among them. The southernmost former Champā polity, Pāṇḍuraṅga, corresponds with today's Đồng Nai, Bình Thuận, and Ninh Thuận provinces. Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận contain numerous extant temple-tower complexes, shrines, and ancestral gravesites linking historical Champā to contemporary Cham religious communities. Substantial scholarly efforts have studied the art, archaeology, and history of Champā, with historical, anthropological, and linguistic works in the contemporary field of Cham Studies. However, the particulars of the history of Cham religions are not yet well understood, especially the development and coalescence of the Bani community into a coherent Cham particularist community.

Although it is frequently portrayed as a steady southern progression of conquest, Vietnamese conquest of Champā polities was rather staggered, occurring over the course of several centuries, across the Lý, Lê, and Nguyễn dynasties. Nonetheless, as Vietnamese militaries conquered portions of Champā, many of the peoples of Champā, including some Cham populations, continued to reside in Vietnamese lands. Substantial Cham communities remained in lands now called the provinces of Bình Định, Phú Yên, Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận, and Đồng Nai through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, by the nineteenth century, most were limited to the latter three provinces. Cham Bani communities are concentrated specifically in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận along the south-central coast. Over the centuries, members of various Cham communities have migrated to and settled in all parts of Vietnam, especially Hồ Chí Minh City. English language scholarship has commonly missed that there are now members of the Cham community living in every province in Vietnam. Historically, diasporic movements also increased Cham populations in areas around the Mekong Delta (including An Giang, Tây Ninh, and Đồng Nai), and Hồ Chí Minh City, as well as Cambodia. A substantial body of scholarship has begun to reconstruct the history of the Cham community of Cambodia, especially delineating connections to Cham communities in Vietnam. However, aspects of the social history of the early-modern period remain murky.

In the seventeenth to eighteenth century, 'Bani' appears in Cham manuscripts, but as a religious category rather than an ethnically exclusive term.[7] By the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term in present-day Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận takes on an ethno-religious connotation, although in Cambodia the religious connotations of the term remained primary.[8] 'Bani' appears only rarely in source material

7 A classic example would be the line from 18th to early 19th century text *Ariya Bini Cham (Nai Mai Mâng Mâkah)*, '*jawa bini ralaoh*', which uses the construction of *jawa*, meaning roughly 'the Malay world', *bini* as a feminised form of Arabic, and *ralaoh*, a Cham form of the phrase *urang Allah*, or 'people of Allah', but is nonetheless summarised in translation to contemporary audiences as 'Bani'. However, it is common to juxtapose Bani and Cham in manuscripts that have been passed down from very early periods. In the period in question Cham was not so much an ethnic group, but rather a religious category, equivalent to the modern and contemporary term *Awal*. We may therefore infer that 'Bani' in this context (*Awal* religion) was also a religious category being juxtaposed against 'Cham religion' (*Ahiér* religion). See Po Dharma, Gérard Moussay and Abdul Karim, *Nai Mai Mang Mâkah: Tuan Puteri dari Kelantan* (Ķuala Lumpur: EFEO, 2000), pp. 62–3, 72, 107, 112; Inrasara, *Văn Học Chăm: Khái Luận—Văn Tuyển* (Ho Chi Minh City: Văn Hóa Dân Tộc, 1994), pp. 316–17.

8 A classic example here would be the understanding in Cambodia that marriage by conversion in Cham manuscripts still used the phrase *tamâ agama Bani*, 'to enter the Bani religion' in the late 19th and early 20th century.

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from Cambodia during that period, although it was used much more frequently in Vietnam, almost always with an ethno-religious connotation. During the twentieth century, Bani also re-emerged in Cambodia as a term in rare colloquial usage, specifically in reference to local ethnic Cham Muslims who maintained 'traditional' Cham practices. Still, settlements in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận provinces, where Bani communities are concentrated today, are much more strongly associated with being the sole Cham indigenous communities living in areas historically associated with the Champā civilisation.[9]

Besides the Bani, there are three other Cham religious communities in contemporary Vietnam, according to a seminal study in the field of Cham Studies published in Vietnamese by Sakaya: *Cam Jat*, *Cam Ahiér*, and *Cam Asulam*.[10] Turn-of-the-century accounts treat Cam Jat and Cam Ahiér as the same community. Himself a member of the Cam Ahiér community, Sakaya contended that Cam Jat were limited to a few small towns, practising a blend of ancestor worship,[11] animism, and shamanism.[12] This contrasts with his description of Cam Ahiér as a syncretic religion specific to Cham communities, but one that blends Shamanism, ancestor veneration, and 'localised' or 'indigenised' (*bản địa hóa*) Hinduism. Cam Asulam, then, are simply 'Muslims'—albeit predominantly Shafi'i Sunni Muslims—according to Sakaya. He describes them as predominantly living in Ninh Thuận, An Giang, and Tây Ninh provinces, as well as Hồ Chi Minh City. He places Cham Bani on a spectrum between Cam Ahiér and Cam Asulam. Sakaya argues they are not members of one of the four major Sunni schools, although they uphold *practices* that are generally more in line with Islam than Hinduism. Thus, he explains, parallel to the Cam Ahiér, Cham Bani are adherents of a form of Islam that is '*bản địa hóa*'—'localised' or 'indigenised'. By emphasising 'localisation', Sakaya decisively transcends the argument as to whether Cham Bani communities are a heterodox form of Islam, or merely 'syncretic', but he does not go so far as to use the phrase 'Cham particularism'. Philipp Bruckmayr similarly hinted particularism might be useful in the case of Cham Bani communities, but focused on his ideas about 'institutionalised syncretism', especially in reference to communities that venerate the nineteenth-century saint, Imam San, in Cambodia, as well as their relation to the 'more orthodox' Shafi'i Sunni majority.[13]

9 See Nicolas Weber, *Histoire de la diaspora Cam* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2014); Alberto Pérez-Pierro, 'Historical imagination, diasporic identity, and Islamicity among the Chams of Cambodia' (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2012); William Noseworthy, 'Khik Agama Cam: Caring for Cham religions in Mainland Southeast Asia, 1651–1969' (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2017); Muhammed Zain bin Musa, 'History of education among Cambodian Cham Muslims', *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 38, 1 (2011): 81–104; Emiko Stock, 'Les Communautés Musulmanes du Cambodge: Un Aperçu' in *Atlas des Minorités Musulmanes en Asie*, ed. M. Gilquin (Bangkok: IRASEC; Paris: CNRS), pp. 183–216.

10 Sakaya, *Tiếp Cận Một số Vấn đề Văn hóa Champa* (Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh: Tri Thức, 2013), pp. 64–154. We should note that Sakaya probably derives this term from Cham *Akhar Thrah* manuscripts, which use 'Asulam' or the variant spelling 'Asalam' quite regularly. The term is also common in spoken Cham.

11 We rely on a normative distinction between ancestor worship, where ancestor spirits may be worshipped as deities, and ancestor veneration, where the ancestors may or may not be treated as deities, yet deeply respected just the same.

12 Sakaya, *Tiếp Cận Một số Vấn đề Văn hóa Champa*, pp. 64–154.

13 Bruckmayr, 'Between institutionalised syncretism and official particularism', pp. 11–42.

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Both did not emphasise the role *praxis* has played in distinguishing members of the Cham Bani community from other Cham religious communities, although Sakaya's fieldwork proves its significance. Indeed, the religious communities in question are reminiscent of those found in studies of Lake Toba Batak communities and Gayo communities in the Acehnese highlands on Sumatra, Dayak communities on Borneo, the *wetu telu* group on Lombok, and *abangan/kejawèn* distinctions on Java, where assertions of orthopraxy were also important historically.[14] Regardless of religious affiliation, our first author has found most Cham community members speak Cham as their first language and *at least* one other language—especially Cambodian, Malay and/or Vietnamese—entirely fluently. Common language and ancestry as well as, to varying degrees, interpretations of themselves as descendants of the classical Champā civilisation, are relatively unifying factors across Cham communities in Southeast Asia.[15] Consequentially, local Bani assertions that they are directly linked to Champā and therefore have an obligation to preserve 'traditional culture' tend to be stronger than in diasporic communities, regardless of whether those diasporas are in Vietnam, Cambodia, or elsewhere. By contrast, Philip Taylor and Rie Nakamura have demonstrated that Cham Muslims in the Mekong Delta, as well as those in Tây Ninh, articulate their identity much more in terms of religious adherence to Islam.[16] Granted that Nakamura's and Taylor's studies were completed a half-decade earlier and more, our first author found religious identities to have now become quite a bit more nuanced across Cham communities in Cambodia and Vietnam. He found that when 'Islam' was considered an important aspect of identity, individuals also often specified their lineage, their *madhhab*, and interpretations of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that contrasted them with negative stereotypes of Muslims. In other words, how their belief was *enacted* was a critical aspect of their identity.

In Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận, our first author found that individuals who were Sunni Muslims—who referred to themselves as Cam Asulam, Cam Islam, or simply Sunni Muslim—emphasised *how* their beliefs were enacted as a critical aspect of identity. The emphasis on *how* beliefs were enacted was essential for most members of Cham Bani communities as well. Fascinatingly, while 'beliefs' were not as uniform within religious communities as some previous scholarly publications have held, the trends of enacting beliefs per a fuzzy set of commonly shared 'right actions' were extremely apparent, especially in Cham Bani communities. For example, not all

14 M.C. Ricklefs, *Polarizing Javanese society: Islamic and other visions (c.1830–1930)* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007); David D. Harnish and Brigitta Hauser-Schaublin, *Between harmony and discrimination: Negotiating religious identities within majority–minority relationships in Bali and Lombok* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); William Noseworthy, 'Review essay: Comparative borderlands across disciplines and across Southeast Asia', *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 35 (2014): 197–217; John R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse: Religion and ritual in Gayo society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

15 Similar ideas have also been put forward elsewhere. See, in particular, Mohamed bin Abdul Effendy Hamid, 'Understanding Cham identity in Mainland Southeast Asia: Contending views', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 21, 2 (2006): 230–53.

16 Rie Nakamura, 'Awar–Ahier: Two keys to understanding the cosmology and ethnicity of the Cham people (Ninh Thuận Province, Vietnam)', in *Champa and the archaeology of Mỹ Sơn (Vietnam)*, ed. Andrew Hardy, Mauro Curcazi and Patrizia Zolese (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), pp. 78–9. This article was completed with reference to dissertation fieldwork finished in 1995–96, as is evidenced in Philip Taylor's book, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and mobility in the cosmopolitan periphery* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cham Bani ascribed to the same beliefs about their ancestors (*Muk kei*). However, they overwhelmingly emphasised the *proper practice* of Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies before Ramâwan. During Mbeng Muk Kei, they visited the graves of their ancestors and invited (*da-a*) them to return. These graves (*ghur*) are marked most often by a simple rounded head and footstone and are typically on the outskirts of a village or small town settlement. Older headstones have no writing on them. However, newer headstones may have *Akhar Thrah* script carved in them. Local oral historians claimed the practice had been upheld since the Cham Bani have existed. Yet, the oldest known extant graves at Ghur Ranaih[17] date to the seventeenth century or just before. This was one motivating factor in our choice to focus on the residents of Palei Pamblap Biruw, whose ancestors are buried at Ghur Ranaih, among other sites. Palei Pamblap Biruw is also the largest town associated with Ghur Ranaih.[18] From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century the area was associated with Pāṇḍuraṅga. Furthermore, 41.6 per cent of the nation's Cham population lived in Ninh Thuận province according to the 2009 census, a plural majority of those who self-identify as Cham.[19] Vietnamese administration groups the province's population into 34 towns, villages, townships, and hamlets—although they are grouped into 22 settlements (*palei*) in Cham understandings. Palei Pamblap Biruw is the largest *palei* in Ninh Thuận, comprising nearly 10 per cent of the province's Cham population, according to a 2017 journalistic survey.[20] The size and historical significance of the community explain our focus on Palei Pamblap Biruw as a sample of Cham Bani religious communities in Vietnam.

Scholarly positioning and literature

The most common local narrative about the origins of the Cham Bani community in Palei Pamblap Biruw is: Islam came to Champā between the ninth and eleventh centuries and was originally Shi'a influenced. The local history—like the common modern discourse of 'heterodox Islam'—is rooted in the scholarship of the colonial French School of the Far East (l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, EFEO). In the late nineteenth century Étienne Aymonier described 'the Cham of Annam'[21] as divided into '*Musulmans*' and '*païens*'. He wrote, 'the Muslims of Bình Thuận call themselves Bani or *Orang Bani*—"Muslim men" probably from the Arabic word *Beni*—"the sons"'.[22] The Cham Bani, for him, were *unorthodox*, as a result of their 'isolation' from the Islamic world and contact with the Cam Ahiér—the 'païens', or '*akaphier*' in Cham language, from the Arabic *kāfir*, or the French '*Brahmanisme*' and the Vietnamese *Bàlamôn*.[23] Antoine Cabaton also had

17 *Thôn* Mỹ Tường, *xã* Nhơn Hải, *huyện* Ninh Hải, Ninh Thuận.

18 William Noseworthy and Quảng Văn Sơn, 'Ramâwan: 2013', *The Newsletter,* 67 (Spring 2014), pp. 12–13.

19 Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, *The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census: Complete Results* (Hanoi: Statistics Publishing House, 2010), pp. 194–6.

20 The survey accounted for 6,567 residents, across 1,515 households. Kiều Maily, *Palei Phước Nhơn quê tôi: Địa dư chí* (Hà Nội: Trí Thức, 2017), p. 25.

21 Now Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận provinces.

22 E. Aymonier, *Les Tchames et leurs Religions* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1891), pp. 26–7.

23 Aymonier took the term Bàlamôn to be a Vietnamese pronunciation of Brahman, which is certainly the case. E. Aymonier, *The history of Tchampa* (London: Imperial & Asiatic Quarterly Review, 1893),

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

two classifications for 'Cham religions in Annam': Muslims—who use the autonym 'Cham Bani'; and 'Brahmanisme' in a local version.[24] Both Aymonier and Cabaton describe the Cham Bani as a Muslim group that diverged from Shi'a Islam, becoming 'isolated … after the conquest of Champā'. Both assumed all Cham Bani were Muslim. Both stated the Cham Bani had no contacts with their coreligionists, that is, Malay Muslims or the Shafi'i Sunni communities of Tây Ninh, An Giang, and Cambodia, all under French colonial rule in the early twentieth century.[25] Eugène Marie Durand claimed '[the Bani] … *practised the minority form of Shi'ite Islam like that of Persia and India, in contrast with the Sunni Islam of the majority of Muslims*'.[26] It is possible that there was no uniformity among the Cham Bani population in the early twentieth century. We could envision a situation where the riverine settlements around Phanrang were distinct by a shade, in terms of religious practices, from those of Phanrik. Furthermore, some individuals could have identified as Shi'a, with others, perhaps even all, identifying with a group that had a Shi'a-influenced past. It is also possible that one or more of these early descriptions was inaccurate. It is also possible that the early twentieth century scholars were simplifying the records for the sake of their own or their readers' understanding. Nonetheless, rhetorical connections to a Shi'a past resurface from time to time in Cham communities, regardless of whether or not one is in Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận, An Giang and Tây Ninh, or Cambodia.[27] However, all three of the aforementioned scholars had sustained contact with Cham Bani communities, and Aymonier even had expertise in the Cham language. Because of his expertise, many later scholars cite his anthropological observations as fact, without accounting for the simple fact that much has changed in Cham Bani communities, and indeed Cham communities more broadly, since the early twentieth century, especially in relation to dynamic religious and political shifts across Southeast Asia since the 1960s, which account for the emergence of strong Cham particularism.

In early twentieth century Island Southeast Asia, sentiment supporting reform (*islah*) grew in Muslim communities. Additionally, debates between modernists and

p. 24. However, it is unclear from our source material when the term *Bà la môn* entered Vietnamese language. Most likely, the Hán Việt 'Bà la môn' is derived from the Chinese *Poluomen*.

24 Antoine Cabaton, *Nouvelles recherches sur Les Chams* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901), pp. 3–4.

25 While Bình Thuận is some distance from An Giang and Tây Ninh, a similar distance does not seem to be a factor for the An Giang community, which kept in regular contact with Muslim communities in Cambodia. In part this is because the An Giang and Tây Ninh communities were populated by Cham from the Kingdom of Cambodia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Regardless, the location of An Giang communities (Cochinchina) in a different political unit from those in Cambodia seems to have resulted in a disconnect. Furthermore, our first author found during fieldwork that, when viewed from Phan Rang *Awal* clerics looked toward nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century manuscripts from Phan Rí (Phanrik) praising their higher degree of knowledge of Qur'anic Arabic as explained by the relatively greater connection to the Malay world, as Malays simply visited Phan Rí more often and there are records of at least one Malay *dakwah*/*da'wah* reformer who worked in the vicinity of Phan Rí during Aymonier's fieldwork.

26 E.M. Durand, 'Les Chams Bani', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 3 (1903): 54. Emphasis and translation from French by authors.

27 Emiko Stock has recently examined Shi'a connections in Cambodia. See Emiko Stock, '"For 'Ali is our ancestor": Cham Sayyids' Shi'a trajectories from Cambodia to Iran', in *Shi'a minorities in the contemporary world: Migration, transnationalism and multilocality*, ed. Oliver Sharbrodt and Yafa Shannei (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 227–56.

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traditionalists spread from Island Southeast Asia to the mainland.[28] The increased presence of reformists and modernists influenced Cham communities in Cambodia. Following the pattern of the Malay world, traditionalists were called the 'old group' (*kaum tua*), while modernists and reformists became the 'new group' (*kaum muda*). The new group broadly opposed saint-veneration, introduced their own understandings of hadith collections, supported secular education (Ar.: *ḥadīṯ*), and would criticise the old group's knowledge of the Qur'an. When Norodom Sihanouk introduced a nationalisation platform in the 1950s, the term 'Khmer Islam' was also introduced into the mix.[29] On the one hand, Shafi'i Sunni Muslims—whether of Cham or Malay descent— were increasingly incentivised to identify as 'Khmer Islam' from the 1950s through the 1970s, especially in affiliation with state-recognised institutions. However, many members of the Cham community preferred to identify internally—and even outwardly in some cases—as 'Cham Islam', drawing from historical references while asserting ethnic distinction and contrast with the 'Khmer'. According to oral accounts, some members of the community used the terms 'Khmer Islam' and 'Cham Islam' flexibly, in that they would change which term they identified with depending on to whom they were speaking. However, those that preferred 'Cham Islam' as a marker of their distinctiveness became a veritable social movement by the 1960s. Notably, the 1960s is also when 'Cham Islam' (*Cam Islam*) began to be used in Vietnam. In Cambodia, individuals in this 'Cham Islam Movement' often—but not always—emphasised ethno-nationalist sentiments, Champā irredentism, and supported FULRO (Front unifié de lutte des races opprimées)—an independence movement by various ethnic groups in the uplands of Vietnam, including some of those who lived across the border in Laos and Cambodia.

Those using the term 'Cham Islam' were more closely tied to the support of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam, 1955–75) and communities located in Tây Ninh and An Giang provinces. In Cambodia, they could be either traditionalist or modernist, although those influenced by the movement in Vietnam were more likely to lean toward acceptance of certain traditionalist stances, while attempting to perform outreach to Cham Bani communities under the auspices of reformism. As the Cham Islam Movement spread to Tây Ninh, Saigon, and Châu Đốc communities, the Cham language terms 'Cam Biruw' and 'Cam Islam'—which already existed in the Cham language—began to take on new connotations. Cam Biruw was used successively for Shafi'i Sunnis in Pāṇḍuraṅga in the early nineteenth century, for Cham in Cochinchina during the early twentieth century, and for reformists and/or modernists by the 1960s. These Cam Biruw were considered a subset of the older term Cam Asalam/Asulam, which was used in Cham manuscripts to refer to 'all Cham Muslims' in the nineteenth century. Finally, Cam Islam was, in effect, a new term that referred to the mid-twentieth century movement emphasising ethnicity and religious identity.[30]

28 These debates could take place entirely within Shafi'i Sunni communities, as was often the case in Cambodia.

29 It seems probable that there is a parallel with the use of the term 'Thai Islam' in Thailand. We would like to acknowledge previous discussions between our first author, Raymond Scupin and Katherine Bowie on this point.

30 Noseworthy, '*Khik Agama Cam*', pp. 335–55. See also Nicolas Weber, *Histoire de la diaspora Cam*; Pérez-Pierro, 'Historical imagination'; Musa, 'History of education', pp. 81–104.

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The similarity between Cam Asulam and Cam Islam may have been intentional, although we cannot be certain. From the perspective of many Bani, they began to use the term Cam Islam to refer to an individual attempt to 'convert' (*đổi đạo*) Cham Bani, although we may suppose that from the perspective of Cam Biruw/Islam/Asulam they instead viewed Cham Bani as communities in need of 'invitations to reform' (*dakwah*/*da'wah*).

To add to the nuancing of interpretations, Republic of Vietnam government documents further conflated Cam Biruw, Cam Asulam, and Cam Islam into 'New Islam' (*Hồi giáo mới*) and Bani with 'Old Islam' (*Hồi giáo cũ*).[31] Soon, self-described Cam Islam were regularly claiming they were the only legitimate followers of Islam. Additionally, before 1975, scholars in the Republic of Vietnam—including Cham themselves—continued to use French Orientalist classifications of Cham religions. Dohamide—a member of the Shafi'i Sunni community from An Giang—for example, described the Bani as members of the broader Muslim community, even as he criticised them for being 'unorthodox', although this accusation was more specifically rooted in the claim that they did not adhere to orthopraxy, even if the author did not use the term.[32] Nguyễn Văn Luận also described the Cham Bani as 'Muslim but not orthodox'—assuming that all members of communities in Tây Ninh and An Giang were orthodox.[33] After 1975, the Cham Bani community attracted the attention of numerous foreign, Vietnamese, and Cham researchers, although the same colonial-era tropes of classifications persisted. Nguyễn Xuân Ngĩa and Phan Văn Dốp called Cham Bani 'a modified Islam',[34] and *The Encyclopedia of Islam* described Cham Bani as 'varying a great deal from the fundamental norms'.[35] Lương Ninh described Cham Bani as 'an early but not deep Islam'.[36] Similarly, Nguyen Thieu Lau has written,

> After the defeat [of Champa], the Cham who fled to Angkor [Cambodia] reestablished their ties with the Malays and other Islamic peoples but those who remained [in Pāṇḍuraṅga] *became increasingly isolated and less orthodox*.[37]

Numerous studies of Islam written in Vietnamese refer to the Cham Bani by terms of their ascribed lack of orthodoxy, that is, heterodoxy. Past studies published by scholars belonging to Cham Bani communities, such as Bá Trụng Phụ, have argued the

31 William Noseworthy, 'Articulations of Southeast Asian religious modernisms: Islam in early 20th century Cambodia and Cochinchina', *Suvannabhumi* 9, 1 (2017): 109–32.

32 The distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy probably would have not been meaningful to the author at the time. Yet, it is worth mentioning, since it is meaningful to scholars today. Dohamide, 'Người Chàm ở Việt Nam hiện nay', *Bách khoa* 136 (1962): 9–13; Dohamide, 'Hồi giáo tai Việt Nam', *Bách khoa* 193–4 (1965): 53–9.

33 Nguyễn Văn Luận, 'Những đặc điểm trong việc hôn nhân của người Chàm Hồi giáo', *Tập san Văn hóa* 6 (1972): 101–14.

34 Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa and Phan Văn dốp, 'Vài suy nghĩ về văn hóa Chăm trong bối cảnh văn hóa Việt Nam', *Tạp chí dân tộc học* 1 (1987): 66.

35 C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), vol. 9, p. 17.

36 Lương Ninh, 'Đạo Hồi với người Chăm Việt Nam', *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 1–2 (1999): 55.

37 Nguyen Thieu Lau, 'Cham community of Vietnam', in *Encyclopedia of the world Muslims: Tribes, castes and communities*, ed. Nagendra K. Singh and Abdul Mabud Khan (New Delhi: Global Vision, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 326–7. Emphasis added.

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distinctions lay in the Shi'a roots suggested by French scholars.[38] Furthermore, the orthodoxy vs heterodoxy discourse remained present among publications by Cham scholars, until recently. The rethinking internally warrants a rethinking by etic scholarship as well, as Talal Asad has argued, since Islam is defined through discourse.[39] There have been many recent critiques of the use of the term 'orthodox' both in Islamic Studies in general and in Cham Studies in particular.[40] Unhistoricised Orientalist classifications adopted from early twentieth-century French scholars are not suitable for contemporary scholarship, especially when we have a wealth of recent fieldwork manuscripts, and archival materials available. What we mean by this is: we cannot simply take the works of Aymonier, Durand, and others, as accounts of the fabric of Cham communities today. The definition of the term 'Cham Bani' is historically contingent, dynamic, and connected to regional contexts, as Noseworthy has argued: 'not all "Bani" identify themselves as Muslims' and furthermore, historically, 'between China and Arabia', "being Muslim" was rooted in local, rather than global, interpretation'.[41] Mindful of these contingencies, we turn to a discussion of local distinctions between various local perspectives on Cham Bani classification.

Perspectives on Cham Bani classification

Clarification of the terms Hồi giáo, Đạo Hồi

Numerous Vietnamese language terms have been used to describe Cham Bani communities since the 1950s. In the 1950s, the Cham Bani were commonly called *Hồi Hồi* in Vietnamese.[42] In the 1960s, they were often called *Hồi giáo cũ*, after the discourse of modernists and reformists who held prominent positions in the Republic of Vietnam. However, by the 1990s, the common Vietnamese term had changed to *Hồi giáo Bà Ni*, in contrast with *Hồi giáo Chăm Islam*. The terms Đạo

38 Bá Trung Phụ, 'Bani Islam Cham in Vietnam', in *Islam at the margins: The Muslims of Indochina*, ed. Omar Farouk and Hiroyuki Yamamoto (Kyoto: Centre for Integrated Area Studies, Kyoto University, 2008), pp. 24–34.

39 Talal Asad, *The idea of an anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986), pp. 1–22.

40 Note, however, that Bruckmayr ('Between institutionalised syncretism and official particularism', p. 21), defended the use of the term 'orthodoxy' in the context of discussing Cham Muslims, although he did not complete fieldwork in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận. By contrast Yosuko Yoshimoto, who did complete fieldwork in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận, criticised the usage of the term 'unorthodox' in 'A study of the Hồi giáo Religion in Vietnam with a reference to Islamic religious practice of Cham Bani', *Southeast Asian Studies* 3 (2012): 490. In this context, it is interesting that the critique of the term orthodoxy and emphasis on orthopraxy seems even more common in the field of Hindu Studies than Islamic Studies. Among some of our colleagues, this has raised the question of whether or not Bani emphasis on orthopraxy has been arrived at through collaboration with Ahiér contexts, whether it is entirely part of Islamic contexts, or whether it is a common feature of Hindu–Muslim interactions, or, alternatively 'a combination of all of the above' as it were. Although we currently have not assembled all the historical evidence necessary to prove or disprove these hypotheses, they could be the subject of a future study.

41 Noseworthy, 'Islam in early 20th century Cambodia', p. 111. The Cham poet Inrasara, who is a member of the Cham Ahiér community, for example, has recently opined that Cham Bani should no longer be classified as Muslims. See Inrasara, 'Tôn giáo Chăm Awal ghi: Bàni hay Hồi giáo Bàni hay Đạo hồi', *Inrasara.com*, 19 June, 2017; http://inrasara.com/2017/06/19/ton-giao-cham-awal-ghi-ba-ni-hoi-giao-ba-ni-hay-dao-hoi/ (accessed 2 June 2019).

42 *Hồi* is from the Chinese term *Hui*. However, the usage of *Hui* in Chinese is much broader. In Vietnamese, the historical usage *Hồi hồi*, now uncommon, appears to be exclusively a reference to the Bani in the 1950s–60s. Similarly, a historical Chinese usage *hui hui* is now no longer in use.

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Hồi and Hồi giáo were also used interchangeably through the 1990s. However, the distinctions *Đạo Hồi Chăm Islam* (for Cam Asulam, Cam Islam, and Cam Biruw alike) and *Đạo Hồi Chăm Bà Ni* (for Bani) were also commonly used in Vietnamese language by the 2000s.[43] By the 2000s to 2010s, the former was often shortened in casual conversation to simply *Đạo Islam* and the latter to *Đạo Bà Ni,* with both terms being recognised as subdivisions of Hồi giáo, but only the former being recognised as an equivalent of Đạo Hồi among Vietnamese language materials found locally in Ninh Thuận. These changes and glosses are reflected by internal discourse in Cham Bani communities, which speak both Cham and Vietnamese together, often mixing Vietnamese terms in with a majority Cham language lexicon. In 2006, Nguyễn Văn Tỷ, former principal of the Cham-only Po Klong school in Ninh Thuận and past head of the Cham Textbook Compilation Board (Bản biên soạn sách chữ Chăm), appeared on film stating, in French, that Cham Bani practised, 'an Islam, but an unusual Islam'.[44] In 2009, writing in Vietnamese, he opined that 'Cham Bani and Islam' communities *were not the same* because the 'orthodox Muslims' would never accept veneration[45] of divinities (*yang*)[46] and Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies of the Cham Bani because they considered them *haram*, that is, inappropriate or forbidden for Muslims.[47] He also argued that Cam Islam[48] did not dare attend Katé,[49] as attendance was interpreted as worshipping a deity other than Allah.[50] Furthermore, Nguyễn Văn Tỷ relied upon the Five Pillars as a distinction, suggesting all *Islam* follow them, while *Cam Bani* do not, except for the *Ppo Acar* (Bani clerics) who perform more of them. Hence, he concludes that three different religions exist among Cham communities in Vietnam: 'Balamon,[51] Bani, and Islam'.[52]

Curiously, Nguyễn Văn Tỷ's interpretation explicitly conflicts with his past statements regarding the classification of the Cham Bani and contemporary evidence does not support his initial claims. Our first author not only found two Cham Bani

43 See for example, Ngô Thị Chính and Tạ Long, *Ảnh hưởng của các yếu tố tộc người tới Phát triển kinh tế* (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2007).

44 Agnès De Féo, *Un Islam Insolite* (Paris, Film: 2006); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFcQHYq5E3c (accessed 2 June 2019).

45 The phrase *thờ* and *thờ cúng* could imply both worship and veneration. Previous scholarship in Cham Studies has trended toward an emphasis on 'worship' as a translation, although *cúng* also implies 'to make offerings' in many Vietnamese language contexts. We use the term 'veneration' instead of 'worship' to mean that Cham Bani might not think of *yang* as god(s). Some do, some do not. Therefore 'veneration' is a better usage here. For more discussion see Noseworthy and Pham Thi Thanh Huyen, 'Shared resonances', pp. 385–7.

46 *Yang* is a broad categorical term in Cham language. It could include gods among Cham Ahiér, nature spirits among Cham Jat, or saints among Cham Bani. A full discourse on *yang* would require its own article.

47 Nguyễn Văn Tỷ, 'Tìm hiểu lịch sử các tôn giáo Chăm', *Tagalau* 10 (2009): 147.

48 He uses the term *Islam* in the essay although we read it as equivalent to Sakaya's term *Asulam* meaning all Cham Muslims with the Bani excepted. Although writing in Vietnamese, the primary readership for the publication is members of the Cham community.

49 Katé is a high holiday of the *Cam Ahiér* that generally occurs in the fall, involving feasting, ancestor veneration and worship of Cham specific gods at temples and shrines.

50 Nguyễn Văn Tỷ, 'Tìm hiểu lịch sử các tôn giáo Chăm', p. 147.

51 'Balamon', the Sino-Vietnamese rendering of 'Brahman' in the context of Cham communities, has been used to refer not to actual Brahmans but the Ahiér community.

52 Nguyễn Văn Tỷ, 'Tìm hiểu lịch sử các tôn giáo Chăm', p. 147.

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communities that regularly attend Katé out of respect for their ties to the Ppo Romé temple-tower clans to participate in Mbeng Muk Kei veneration, but also members of the Cam Asulam community[53]—especially youth—who were regular attendees of Katé ceremonies between 2012 and 2014, with reports confirming similar patterns through 2019. When travel restrictions were imposed during the global SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic, they sent their greetings instead. On occasions when they were able to visit for Katé, most Cam Asulam practitioners noted they came to celebrate 'Cham culture'. Furthermore, Katé had become such a large ceremony for the Cam Ahiér that members of Cham Muslim communities from Cambodia have regularly attended. There are a variety of interpretations of Cham Bani participation in Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies and *yang* veneration, as we detail in the following section. The discussion also raises the question of how Nguyễn Văn Tỷ interpreted the Five Pillars. According to Bá Trụng Phụ, also a member of the Cham Bani community, the Cham Bani observed the Five Pillars, but simply interpreted them in a much 'less strict' fashion.[54] New evidence has been considered by Thành Phần, a leading anthropologist and another member of the Cham Bani community—with ancestral connections to both Palei Pamblap Klak and Palei Pamblap Biruw. These considerations temper his earlier interpretations. In the 1990s, Thành Phần argued the Bani

> adopted Islamic thoughts and culture but they did not accept them passively or mechanically; instead, by creatively and selectively adopting them, they assimilated the new religion into their own economic and cultural practices.[55]

Here, Thành Phần points toward a well-accepted practice of 'independent reasoning' in contrast with passive reception. Although we should be very clear that he did not use these terms, readers may find the contrast parallels the contrast between *ijtihād* and *taqlīd* as a discursive distinction elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including in Cham Muslim communities in Cambodia and the Mekong Delta. Given the rhetorical expectations of traditionalist and modernist discourses that have occurred elsewhere in Southeast Asia, scholars might expect Thành Phần's wording would emphasise the traditionalism of Bani communities. However, his inversion of what some might expect, asserting that Cham Bani used independent reasoning in contrast with blind imitation of Islamic norms is notable. It also could be read as a criticism of Cam Biruw in Ninh Thuận province, or even Muslims from Tây Ninh and An Giang broadly construed, even if the author did intend this criticism to be overt. The language is significant precisely because some later Cam Biruw took a similar rhetorical approach when they adopted a modernist stance to criticise the communities of Châu Đốc, An Giang, which they argued were too traditionalist. In numerous more recent studies, Thành Phần has criticised the use of Vietnamese language terms, such as 'Bà la môn giáo' and 'Hồi giáo'. Instead, he argues in favour of using Cham

53 In this case, this included people who were Shafi'i Sunnis from Ninh Thuận, individuals from various communities in Cambodia, along with individuals from both Tây Ninh and An Giang.

54 Bá, 'Bani Islam', pp. 24–34.

55 Thành Phần, 'Tổ chức tôn giáo và xã hội truyền thống của người Chăm Bàni ở vùng Phan Rang', *Tập san khoa học* 1 (1996): 166. Translation adapted and corrected from Yoshimoto, 'A study of the Hồi giáo religion', pp. 500–501.

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terms to describe a collaborative relationship between two religious communities: the localised Hindu-oriented 'Cam Ahiér' and the localised Muslim-oriented 'Cam Awal'.[56] He additionally notes that the Cam Awal are the clerics of the Cham Bani community, while the term 'Cham Bani' may apply to the community as a whole, or especially the laity, a point which our fieldwork has confirmed.[57] In contemporary research, Thành Phần has suggested Cham Bani communities were potentially influenced by Sufi concepts in the past.[58] Finally, in conversation with our first author, he suggested that the first Awal clerics were likely members of the Buddhist community in Champā, who began to convert to Islam as early as the tenth century, but did so more decisively by the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. As evidence for this claim, he pointed out the dates associated with the historical decline of Buddhism in Champā,[59] which roughly coincide with the subsequent rise of Islam, while pointing to several contemporary practices of the Cham Bani: the practice of bringing food offerings to Bani *sang mâgik* (from Cham *sang*, 'house', and Ar. *masjid*, 'place of ritual prostration), elements of ancestor veneration practices, Awal blessing food for communal consumption, Awal shaving their heads, the use of the *swastika* and Bodhi tree leaf as symbols in the clerics' robes, and the pattern of pronunciation during recitation of Qur'anic verses which is thought to resemble the tonality and rhythm of Buddhists' methods of *sutra* recitation. All of these practices became considered part of the *adat Cam* (ethical practices of the Cham community), which distinguished the Cham Bani from both Cam Asulam and Cam Ahiér. It is thus the emphasis on praxis which emerges as particularly important. While Thành Phần's interpretation did not refer to the 'Five Pillars' many individuals in the Cam Asulam and Cham Bani communities did.

Localisation and the Five Pillars

In common understandings of the Five Pillars of Islam—the declaration of faith (*shahada*), the performance of five prayers a day (*salat*), the performance of charity (*zakat*), the performance of fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*), and the completion of a hajj pilgrimage to Mecca—the perception is that these precepts are mandatory. In fact, aside from the first, there are degrees to which exceptions might be provided, depending on the context. For example, the conditions of the hajj, even in the most common interpretations, include conditional statements that would have exempted most Muslims in Southeast Asia for the entire history of Islam in the region, especially before the twentieth century, and even today. Thus,

56 This approach has also been generally adopted by Japanese scholars doing work in Cham communities in Vietnam, almost all, if not all, of whom have studied with Thành Phần.

57 Thành Phần, 'Một số vấn đề nghiên cứu liên quan đến tín ngưỡng—tôn giáo truyền thống của người Chăm hiện nay ở Việt Nam' in *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở Việt Nam: những cách tiếp cận Nhận học*, ed. H. Lương et al. (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Đại Học Quốc Gia, 2010), pp. 4–8; Thành Phần, 'Palei—Một hình thái cư trú của cộng đồng Chăm ở Việt Nam', *Rua Dua Bhap Ilimo Cam* 1, 1: 7–8.

58 Thành Phần, 'Palei', p. 4.

59 We should note that Hindu–Buddhism is a broadly accurate way to understand the Champa religion. Yet, the point was the continuity of Hinduism and the Cham Ahiér, whereas the Buddhist community declined in number, while monks converted to become *Awal* clerics.

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becoming a haji (indicated by the title 'Hj.') was viewed as a title of import and quite rare, even in Cham Shafi'i Sunni communities in Cambodia through the second half of the twentieth century. Additionally, both in Cambodia and in Indonesia, we have evidence of divisions among Muslim communities about the number of prayers being completed per day, whether they be five, three, or so forth. We also found this to be the case in Cham Bani communities, which have some normative internal interpretations about proper practice concerning the interpretations of each pillar. Both our first and second authors found individuals who claimed all five pillars were required for Cam Asulam, but not for Cham Bani. Still, our first author did not find a single person who claimed the hajj—or any other pillar except the first, for that matter—was absolutely obligatory without conditions in either Cambodia or Vietnam. Furthermore, our first author met with a Cham Bani cleric who became a haji in 2012 who explained, 'most Bani are so poor, it does not matter'. Indeed, he only completed the hajj with the support of his Malaysian colleagues. However, there are several members of the Cham Bani community, often laity, who vehemently disagree and do not want the implication that the pillars are part of Cham Bani practice, except with the understanding that there are very localised interpretations of the proper ethics of the *shahada*, *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and hajj that delineate appropriate observance, distinguishing between the Ppo Acar/Awal clerical class of the Cham Bani community and the laity.

Shahada *and Bani conceptions of* yang

The *shahada—lā ilāha illā llāh muḥammadun rasūlu llāh—*is the profession in the belief of the oneness of Allah (*tawḥīd*) and that Mohammed (PBUH) is his prophet. While conducting fieldwork in Cambodia and Vietnam, our first author found oral accounts asserted the *shahada* was more popularly recited in Cham communities in what is now Cambodia than those in what is now Vietnam by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These oral accounts stated that by the mid-twentieth century, reformists associated with the rise of the Cham Islam Movement pushed for more regular recitations of the *shahada*, especially by Cam Biruw, who were joining the movement from Bani communities. This increased the sense from the 1960s onward that the *shahada* was not obligatory at all for the laity of Bani communities. However, for the Awal clerics of the Bani communities, the recitation of the *shahada* is clearly evidenced from manuscripts dating from the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries onward.

The Awal have a substantial hierarchy: the *ong gru* position is held only by a few senior Imam in the whole province of Ninh Thuận. The other classes of Awal generally match onto classes of Islamic clerics: *imâm* (Ar. *imām*), *katip* (Ar.: *khaṭīb*),[60] and *mâdhin* (Ar.: *mu'aḏḏhin*). The lowest rank, those in training, are called *Acar*. Although the term does not exist in Ahiér Hindu-oriented contexts, *acar* is likely derived from the Sanskrit *ācārya*, and thus related to the Pali *ācariya*. These terms are also related to the Thai *ajahn* and Khmer *acharn*, notably both Mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist contexts. It is possible that *acar* was absorbed into the

60 Scholars have typically used the Arabic 'prayer reader' for this position, although the Arabic/Persian notion of a 'scribe' (*kātib*) matches Bani contexts more closely.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cham language lexicon from either the Hindu-Buddhist contexts of Champā into the Awal community, per Thành Phần's hypothesis *or* from nearby usages elsewhere on the mainland. The clerics are also occasionally referred to as an entire group by the laity as 'Ppo Acar'. Importantly, we could not find evidence of the acar position in Cham Shafi'i Sunni communities more broadly in contemporary history and its popularity appears to be exclusive to Cham Bani communities. While the role of imam may even be familiar to readers who are not familiar with Islamic contexts, it is worth noting the other positions: *katip* are manuscript copyists, in training to be *imâm*, while *mâdhin* are simply responsible for announcing the call to prayer.

In accordance with their past interpretations of adat Cam, there should be at least one acar for each household. However, this guideline was recently loosened to 'at least one acar for each household group' to account for young men taking positions in other occupations. Furthermore, there are now at least some acar who live in Hồ Chí Minh City—or elsewhere—who are obliged to return to Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận provinces for Ramâwan. Those households with *mâdhin, katip, imam* or *ong gru* are also especially proud of the learned achievements of their family members, as they interpret this as a demonstration that these families have accomplished ethical track records. These Awal know important Qur'anic prayers by heart and regularly use the *shahada* in their prayers, while the laity may or may not. Many assert they do not find it obligatory. However, we do not have clear enough surveys to indicate whether this represents a tiny portion of the laity or the vast majority. We do, however, have a clearer sense of the interpretation of the *shahada* in conversations about Cham Bani understandings of *yang*.

We strongly contend that the majority of scholarly discourse on *yang* with regard to praxis in Cham Bani communities has been shaped by community members attempting to explain spiritual concepts to: first, outsiders who have little or no understanding of the Cham language; and second, individuals who may be Cham themselves, or outsiders, but do not have a firm understanding of Islamic concepts. Our contention matches the majority position held by Awal clerics across Ninh Thuận as of 2012 through 2014. Vietnamese-speaking scholars are likely to gloss *yang* as '*vị thần*', which then becomes frequently rendered in English as 'gods'.[61] This gloss is understandable, as it also reflects the usage of the term *yang* in Cam Ahiér Hindu-oriented communities. However, in Cam Jat communities, the rendering 'spirits' might be a better English translation of the concept.[62] Indeed, the word *yang* or *hyang* is an Austronesian root term that can refer to spirits, saints, gods, a supreme god, and, even Allah in various Southeast Asian socio-historical contexts.

The ubiquitous term *yang* can refer to Allah, the prophets, angels, and saints, in Cham Bani contexts. There are many saints, prophets, and angels (*thánh, tiên tri,* and

61 See also Nguyễn Đức Hiệp, 'Bước tiến trong nghiên cứu văn minh Chăm—văn học Chăm', *Tagalau* 11: 114; examples of such a translation are found widely, such as in Phan Văn Dốp, Phan Quốc Anh and Nguyên Thị Thu, *Văn hóa phi vật thể của người Chăm Ninh Thuận* (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nông Nghiệp, 2014). This seems to contrast with Vietnamese (Kinh) cultural contexts, where *vị thần* is usually translated into English as 'spirits'.

62 Cham Jat and Cham Ahiér conceptions of *yang* have also been described elsewhere. See Noseworthy and Pham Thi Thanh Huyen, 'Shared resonances', pp. 388–94.

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thiên thần)[63] and only one god, Allah (Thượng Đế) according to the majority of Awal clerics, yet all of them are given the Cham title Ppo. These may include Ppo Ualah (Allah), Ppo Mohamat (Mohamed), Ppo Gibrail (Gabriel), Ppo Ibrahim (Abraham), Ppo Isa (Jesus), Ppo Ali and Ppo Adam. Cham Bani also use the title Ppo Yang Amâ for Allah and Ppo Nâbi for Mohamed, following similar patterns of having multiple titles for these figures in Island Southeast Asia—or even Arabic, in the case of Allah. In the case of Ppo Isa this seems to follow patterns of Muslim communities in Island Southeast Asia.[64] Some scholars have repeated the early twentieth-century French Orientalist assertion that Ualah and Ali (referring to the Prophet's cousin) are the same rank based on an erroneously flat understanding of the term 'Ppo'. Surely, Ppo Ualah and the Ppo Acar are not granted the same rank, even according to most laity. Furthermore, *Ppo Sang*—the this-worldly master of a house, and typically the eldest male in the vicinity—was considered less awesome than Ppo Ualah, according to virtually all interpretations.

'Ppo' is indeed a flexible honorific, just as *yang* is a flexible descriptive. For example, Ppo Inâ Nâgar, a mother goddess from the Cam Ahiér pantheon, has been incorporated as a saint in many Cham Bani contexts, even to be understood as a god by some laity. However, we should be careful to note that there are also many Cham Bani who describe their belief in a singular divine essence that is immanent and/or omnipresent, which could be misinterpreted as 'polytheistic' among uninformed audiences in these cases. Our first author interviewed a young woman in 2013, who listed the names of angels, saints, prophets, and Cam Ahiér gods, then stated, 'they are all the same to me, they are all everywhere, they are all *Thượng Đế* [the Sino-Vietnamese term applied to the God of the Abrahamic religions, in this case Allah] … they are forever present'.[65] Nonetheless, the second author also found several individuals who were Cham Bani laity and seemed to adhere to a sense of polytheism.

Salat and Bani prayers

A parallel question regards the position of Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies in Cham Bani communities in relation to *salat*. In Islamic contexts, *salat* is the performance of prayer that should take place five times per day. However, there can be exceptions granted for those mentally or physically ill, menstruating, and those who have just given birth. Depending on interpretations in Cambodia and southern Vietnam,

63 These are Vietnamese terms we used to clarify concepts in interviews.

64 This includes *sembahyang*, a common Malay term for *salat*, *Hyang Manon* or *Hyang Widi* as terms for Allah; *Gusti Allah hyang maha suktji*, *Gusti Allah hyang maha luhur,* or *Allah Hyang Maha Agung* as 'names of Allah', or even *Hyang Allah*. See: Indrajati, *Kitab wéḍa mantra: ngemot chiasing ngèlmu kesektèn gaib sarta ngèlmu2 kang kagem Kengdjeng Sunan Kalidjaga, kawuwuhan piwulang bab mantra sarta wedjangan warna-warna: 220 wejangan* (Surakarta/Solo: Sadu-Budi, 1969), p. 11; M. Jandra and Krisnanto, *Hasil penelitian organisasi kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta* (Yogyakarta: Proyek Iventarisasi Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa), p. 56; Ding Choo Ming, *Traces of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Javanese and Malay literature* (Singapore: ISEAS- Yusof Ishak Institute), E-book; J.C. van Eerde, 'De Kalanglegende op Lombok', *Tijdschift voor Indische taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 45 (1902): 57.

65 She uttered the explanation in Cham first, using the Vietnamese term Allah, even though the discussion had taken place mostly in Cham up until that point, as just one example of how polyglotism can appear in everyday conversation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

travellers may have shortened prayers, be only required to perform three prayers, or be generally exempt, although most imam will insist that travellers should still complete *salat*. Additionally, among some individuals, there is a common understanding that missing *salat* is more acceptable when Muslims are travelling or residing in non-Muslim countries.[66] This understanding is important for our research because in the 1830s, during a period of Nguyễn dynasty cultural repression,[67] the Vietnamese destroyed several Bani prayer houses (*sang mâgik*). Further, between 1831 and 1837—and onward to 1840 in some areas—Bani clerics were forbidden from performing ritual actions, while the lowest class of Awal were forced to leave the sang mâgik entirely, no longer shave their heads, and forced to break their fasts.[68] Consequentially, it is not a surprise that we find that *salat* was only held on Fridays and during the month of Ramadan in late nineteenth and early twentieth century French accounts. Furthermore, the popularity of *salat* continued to decrease throughout the early twentieth century. By the 1960s, only the Awal and educated scholarly elite knew how to perform *salat*. In contemporary contexts, the acar and all other Awal perform ritual prayers as part of the Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies before Ramâwan. Furthermore, more senior Awal perform ritual prayers for life cycle rituals (birth, coming of age, marriage, and death). Yet, we found that Awal only performed *salat* inside the sang mâgik during our period of research, although we also found that clerics carefully participated in ritual washing (*ricaow*) before entering, while laity tended to perform *ricaow* at home, before attending. Most laity only attended prayers either on the odd Friday or during Ramâwan. Further, a sang mâgik—although a prayer hall with a *minbar,* from which an imam may read Qur'anic passages—is not usually organised in the same fashion as a 'typical *masjid*' at present.

We found the organisation of space within the sang mâgik impacts the method of prayer for each individual. The Awal clerics are at the forefront. Older male laity sit cross-legged behind them, with the older men sitting more toward the front. During prescribed parts of prayer ceremonies, they lift their hands, touching them together at the front of their foreheads in a *mudra*-like fashion. Middle-aged men sit behind them and perform prayers in a similar manner. The eldest women sit cross-legged in the back of the sang mâgik, dressed in white with red touches, such as with their earrings and sashes. Most elder women attending prayers during our surveys of Ramâwan did not wear any form of hijab or hijab-like head covering, although a few did. During the most significant evening prayers of Ramâwan, the doors of the sang mâgik are left open to a courtyard teeming with activity. Those members of the laity who do not rank high enough to sit inside the sang mâgik enter and offer prayers in a cycle: middle-aged women first, then young men, then teenagers, then pre-teen youth last. As the laity enter, they prostrate themselves fully on the floor, face-down, with arms extended forward, forming the same *mudra*-like folded hands outward beyond their head. This is the same method of prostration Cham Bani laity use during the

66 Such practices seem to be widespread among Muslims elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Europe and the United States.

67 The period was part of a broader context of Emperor Minh Mạng's attempt to impose Vietnamese practice on non-Kinh populations. While it was not only Cham communities that were targeted, there is a lingering sense among Cham communities that they were *especially* targeted.

68 From the Cham manuscript, *Sakarai di On Tai di Hamâ Liman*, est. 20th century.

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Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies before and after the month of Ramâwan, specifically when members of the Bani take part in the ceremonies where they visit ancestral gravesites (*Nao ghur*).

In Vietnamese, the term *thờ cúng* ('to worship and make offerings') is often used to describe these rituals, contributing to confusion in scholarly interpretations. However, the Cham term *ngap* ('to do/make/work/perform') is more accurate. A better description of the process in many cases is 'veneration' (*tôn kính*) since we can still use the term 'veneration' to connote showing ritual respect, even if the majority of the population are not explicitly worshipping a god. Acar and other clerics are present during these ceremonies, where they offer prayers in worship to Ppo Ualah before individual family members prostrate themselves before the gravesite and invite (*da-a*) their ancestors' spirits (*muk kei*) to return to the earthly realm. The *muk kei* join the family for the month of Ramâwan and return to the heavenly realm afterward. Furthermore, temporary ritual spaces are set up in the home, along with simple dishes, cakes, sweets, local flowers, and tea to make the *muk kei* feel welcome (fig. 2). From the perspective of most Cham Bani, especially those in Palei Pamblap Biruw, Ramâwan cannot be enacted properly without the Mbeng Muk Kei ceremony. This matter of praxis clearly distinguishes Cham Bani communities from other Cham religious communities.

As a matter of praxis for the Cham Bani, keeping *muk kei* properly respected, caring for gravesites (*ghur*), and worshipping Ppo Ualah are all critically important. This helps explain the understanding that a 'proper' household should have at least one *Acar* to perform prayers during these rites. The knowledge of *Akhar Bani*—a localised form of Arabic script used to write Qur'anic prayers—is highly prized, as are Cham Bani manuscripts, and study may begin at the age of 12. Most of these are not the complete Qur'an. Instead, they are ritual prayer manuals (*tapuk*) containing only the most critical sections of the most vital Qur'anic verses, often with mnemonic formulas and ritual descriptions written in the Cham standard Indic script (*Akhar Thrah*). As of 1971, Palei Pamblap Biruw's religious committee published an Akhar Bani textbook, *Fundamentals of venerating your ancestors according to traditional rituals*.[69] The assertion of the text is, essentially, that with proper study, Cham Bani could maintain *orthopraxy*. We found similar emphases in discussions of notions of fasting among Cham Bani sources.

Sawm and *Aék*

The Arabic word *sawm* typically refers to practices associated with ritual fasting from dawn to dusk during Ramadan. There are, of course, interpretations that allow for exemptions for the sick, elderly, and travellers. The breaking of the fast occurs with Aid al-Fitr (Eid) at the end of the month. *Aék* is a general word in Cham that refers to fasting. Hence, Ramâwan is also sometimes called Bilan Aék, 'the month of fasting', a

69 The Cham title uses the word '*bhuktik*', which means 'to serve' or 'to venerate', in contrast with the Cham term *lamah* 'to worship'. The Cham phrase *kajait (kajaik) bhuktik muk kei* suggests the meaning is neither 'serve', as Yosuko Yoshimoto suggested based on the Vietnamese *phụng thờ*, nor 'worship', but rather 'venerate'. Yoshimoto translated the Vietnamese as 'The basic textbook to serve your ancestors' although this was a partial translation of the Vietnamese and did not reference the Cham text. See Yoshimoto, 'A study of the Hồi giáo religion', p. 497.

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Figure 2. A place for the ancestors (*Danaok Muk Kei*) in the house of members of the Cham Bani community, three days before Ramâwan. Photograph by Pham Thi Thanh Huyen, Palei Pamblap Biruw, May 2017.

term that is used colloquially in Cambodia and Vietnam alike. However, Bilan Aék takes on a slightly different meaning in Cham Bani contexts, as Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies, including feasting, take place three days *before* the fast. Ancestors may also

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receive symbolic foods during Mbeng Muk Kei. Furthermore, ritual food offerings are brought and prayers are given at the sang mâgik before the start of Bilan Aék, where food offerings are blessed by the Awal clerics and then redistributed before it is consumed in a fashion reminiscent of Buddhist ceremonies in Southeast Asia.[70] Cam Ahiér might also visit and join in the preparation of ritual food offerings and feasting afterward. The laity celebrates by visiting the home of relatives, sharing in good cheer, and singing into the evening. According to local oral historical records, this pattern of feasting has become increasingly similar to those during the Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết Nguyên Đán) for the past 180 years, ever since nineteenth-century Emperor Minh Mạng's assimilation campaigns. The same oral records point out that red and gold are common decorative colors and individuals may journey to their natal villages or hometowns from the city, while the feasting elements of the ceremonies have become quite elaborate. Furthermore, in recent decades, children have also received 'lucky money' (for which the Vietnamese term *lì xì* is commonly used)[71] as per influence of Vietnamese culture. Additionally, although Cham Bani interpretations of Cham ethical codes (*adat Cam*) prevent consumption of pork, lizard, any meat improperly killed, and drinking of rice whiskey or beer, increasing Vietnamese influence has made these practices more common, except for eating lizard, which is still considered taboo.[72] Of course, Muslims have been known to drink elsewhere in the world and Cam Ahiér influence may also play a role in increasing the popularity of drinking alcohol. Nonetheless, it is notable that drinking beer, in particular, has been increasingly accepted among male laity in Cham Bani communities, especially during the evenings of Mbeng Muk Kei before Ramâwan. In this context, there are numerous individuals who advocate taking the month of Ramâwan to adhere more closely to orthopraxy established by adat Cam. They may take on ascetic practices such as not cutting fingernails, toenails, hair, or shaving during the month while increasing time devoted to the study of Akhar Bani.[73] Others might take on a 'vegetarian diet' (*ăn chay*), described as a 'fast' (*aék*) by removing meat altogether from their diet, fasting during the day, or only eating certain types of meat (typically goat or chicken). These distinctions have led some members of Cham communities—not necessarily Bani themselves—to assert Ramâwan is simply not Ramadan, even if the former originated from the latter.[74] However, we should be careful not to misinterpret these comments. They are created out of a specific cultural context and do not necessarily represent a claim that there are no similar localisations to Ramâwan elsewhere in

70 Similar practices may be found in the ancestor worship of Vietnamese and Raglai communities. The closest parallel is among Khmer Theravada Buddhists.

71 The southern and central Vietnamese term *lì xì*—as opposed to the northern dialect *mừng tuổi* —is derived from Cantonese and generally refers to red envelopes with small amounts of money given to children, most often during the lunar new year.

72 Nguyễn Tường, 'Tết Ramưwan năm 2016 của người Chăm Bàni tỉnh Ninh Thuận', *The Government Committee for Religious Afairs* (2016); http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/248/0/9490/Tet_Ramuwan_nam_2016_cua_nguoi_Cham_Bani_tinh_Ninh_Thuan_ (accessed 2 June 2019).

73 Akhar Bani is an Arabic-derived script used to write Qur'anic passages and prayer guides in Cham pronunciation. While it is similar to Arabic script, because there are certain phonemes that exist in Arabic but not in Cham, these phonemes are dropped or approximated with others. Additionally, there are nasalisations in Cham that do not exist in Arabic, resulting in additional glyph forms in Akhar Bani that do not exist in Arabic.

74 Jashaklikei, 'Lễ hội Ramawan của cộng đồng người Chăm *Awal* (*Bàni*)', *Tagalau* 18: 168.

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Southeast Asia, Asia more broadly, or Africa. We are not prepared to assert that there are direct parallels elsewhere at this time and such parallels would require a separate article to explore. Yet, it is notable the majority of individuals in Cham Bani communities seem to practice increased notions of community charity during Mbeng Muk Kei and Ramâwan.

Zakat and Hajj

Zakat is charity or a contribution to the community as a whole. *Zakat al-Fitr* is broadly understood as important during Ramadan. The Cham word *sadakah*[75] is a similar concept, although more contemporary Cham language may also use the Vietnamese derived *mban* and *mbanji*. The previously mentioned 'exchange of rice' ceremony that occurs during Mbeng Muk Kei may also be used to redistribute food in a communal fashion and may continue, using the sang mâgik as a hub, during the evening hours of the month of Ramâwan.[76] The concept of charitable giving is considered a paramount ethical action to support poor households in Cham Bani communities since many families are not well-off. Consequentially, even according to ethical considerations elsewhere in Southeast Asia, almost all Cham Bani households would be considered exempt from the hajj. Only a small percentage of the members of Shafi'i Sunni communities in Cambodia, whether Khmer Islam, Malay Muslims, or Cham Islam, completed the hajj in the middle of the twentieth century. However, according to oral accounts, the ease of travel increased, as did funding, resulting in a seemingly ever increasing number of haji by the 1960s. The state-approved Cam Islam leadership in the Republic of Vietnam attempted to fund haji in the 1960s and 1970s in Vietnam. In effect, this meant that haji only came from either Asulam communities or Cam Biruw who were previously Bani. Today, there are many more haji in Cambodia than Vietnam. In Vietnam, haji still tend to be concentrated in An Giang and Tây Ninh, along with the Hồ Chí Minh City metropolitan area, that is, individuals from Cam Asulam communities. There are a very small number of Cam Asulam haji in Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận, who completed the hajj in the 2000s–2010s, including from Palei Pamblap Biruw. There are also at least a few Cham Bani who are haji as per our research, including at least one Awal Imam in Ninh Thuận, who our first author interviewed. However, we are not aware of any Bani haji who are not Awal clerics, nor are we aware of any haji who are Awal clerics from Palei Pamblap Biruw.

Vietnamese governmental positions and Bani perspectives

Based on our analysis of local history, praxis has played a vital role in distinguishing Bani religious communities from other Cham religious communities. From the 1960s through our fieldwork in the 2010s, the distinctions between the Bani and their Awal clerics and the Cam Asulam have become more apparent. Members of Shafi'i Sunni communities, especially reformists—including both traditionalist reformists and modernist reformists—have asserted all Cham Bani do not practice Islam properly. On the other hand, in 2013, our first author found members of the

75 Variants include *dakhat* and *dakhak*.

76 See also Inrasara, 'Kiến trúc tôn giáo Chăm trong môi trường "sống"', *Tagalau* 11 (2010): 11.

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Cham Bani community have often contended that those they call Cam Islam or Cam Biruw have 'abandoned their ancestors' (*klak muk kei*)—based on a sense that Mbeng Muk Kei is justified by the Bani orthopraxy of adat Cam.[77] There is also disagreement over food, as members of the Shafi'i Sunni community argue that Bani cooks do not follow halal practices properly. One Bani interviewee noted in May 2017, 'I have no problem with them [Cam Islam] … I just don't know why in a party held by the [government-run] Women's Union, we will eat all the things they cook, but they never eat what we cook.'[78] In October 2017, a Cham Bani high school student proclaimed, 'even if my father becomes Cam Islam, I will not'. She explained her father had joined the Cam Islam with his family in his youth, as they shifted away from the Bani community toward an Islamic modernist orientation, in practice. However, he later returned to the Cham Bani community via marriage, rarely contacting his Cam Islam relatives even though they lived in the same town. Despite apparent tensions, our research found the norm for Bani communities was to retain close friendships with Cham who are Shafi'i Sunni Muslims. We should note that although we found debate and discussion were often deemed acceptable, the strong trend in many more interactions across our years of fieldwork was toward friendly ribbing at worst and communal celebration, partaking of food, and guitar singalongs or home-karaoke sessions of Cham language songs at best. Contemporary Vietnamese governmental policy attempts to reflect the nuances discussed in this article but seems to be behind the times. Based upon early twentieth-century French studies and Republic of Vietnam era statistics, we see the former 'Hồi giáo' category now divided into two groups in the 1990s and 2000s: Hồi giáo Chăm Islam and Hồi giáo Chăm Bàni.

As per table 1, the Vietnamese government counted Cam Islam and Cham Bani as two parts of the same community, at least through 2009. The combination of the two communities into a single record exacerbated the sense the local government was registering information inaccurately as Bani were being considered a subgroup of Islam. The census record created the sense these two communities were comparable to distinct *madhhab* (schools of jurisprudence)[79] within Islam; that is, they had distinct religious traditions of jurisprudence or proper practice. In Vietnamese, they were described as two 'lineages' (*dòng*). Some Cham Bani even accepted the idea that they were separate 'branches' (*nhánh*). However, a Government Committee of Religious Affairs publication then stirred further debate with a publication of official statements

77 A similar criticism has been levied by Cham traditionalist Sunni Muslims in Cambodia who are members of the Imam San community, and Gayo traditionalists levied a similar criticism as observed by John Bowen in his fieldwork in the uplands of Sumatra. See Bowen, *Muslims through discourse.*

78 Cham Ahiér and Awal-Bani dietary practices are well recorded since at least the middle of the 19th century in accordance with Cham ethical codes (*adat Cam*). Bani dietary practices have been broadly halal. Generally speaking, alcohol is not consumed, pork is not kept in Bani settlements (*palei*), nor have Bani consumed pork, nor other *haram* animals. Instead, the majority of the diet has been a combination of halal foods: domestic fowl, vegetables, fish, and shellfish. However, the vast majority of Bani households in Ninh Thuận would not have the resources—and perhaps not the desire—to obtain halal certification for small shops or food stalls. Thus, the assertion that Bani are not following halal cooking practices 1) may be based on perception rather than reality in some cases and 2) in other cases may be based on more fine-grained understandings of halal foods, requiring that they are purchased from a certified halal vendor, rather than simply broadly halal.

79 Our usage of *madhhab* here is analytical only.

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Table 1. Hồi giáo in Vietnam: Census statistics comparing registered followers of Cam Islam and Cham Bani communities.

	Registered followers			
Official category	**1999**	**2001**	**2005**	**2009**
Hồi giáo total	*63,146*	*64,991*	*66,695*	*75,268*
Hồi giáo Chăm Islam	23,516	n.r.	25,688	n.r.
Hồi giáo Chăm Bàni	39,630	n.r.	41,007	n.r.
Religious clerics total	n.r.	*699*	*695*	n.r.
Hồi giáo Chăm Islam	n.r.	n.r.	288	n.r.
Hồi giáo Chăm Bàni	n.r.	n.r.	407	n.r.
Places of worship total	n.r.	*77*	*77*	n.r.
Hồi giáo Chăm Islam	n.r.	56	41	n.r.
Hồi giáo Chăm Bàni	n.r.	1	19	n.r.
Bà ni sang mâgik	n.r.	20	17	n.r.

Note: n.r. data not recorded in source material.
Sources: For 1999: Hoàng Minh Độ (chủ biên), *Tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo trong cộng đồng người Chăm ở Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận* (Hà Nội: Lý Luận Chính Trí, 2006), p. 65; for 2001 and 2005: Government Committee for *Religious Affairs, Religion and policies regarding religion in Vietnam* (Hà Nội: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2006), p. 89; for 2009: Central Population & Housing Census Steering Committee, *The 2009 Vietnam Population & Housing Census: Complete results*, (Hanoi: Statistics Publishing House, 2010), p. 289. Data on Cam Jat and Cam Ahiér is aside from our present inquiry.

of the Muslim community in Vietnam. This divided 'Cham Muslims' (*Hồi giáo Chăm*) into two groups: the first in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận, the 'Old Islamic Group'; and the second in Châu Đốc, An Giang, Tây Ninh, Đồng Nai, and Hồ Chí Minh, the 'New Islamic Group'. They also compared Ramâwan to the Vietnamese Lunar New Year and the Katé holiday of the Cam Ahiér. Local community members commonly object to such comparisons because these holidays have their own meanings, they reject further Vietnamisation of their holidays, and both Awal and Ahiér communities have their own New Year holidays based on the Cham calendar (*sakawi Cam*), which correspond to neither Ramâwan nor Katé.[80] Imam Đạo Văn Tỷ, of Palei Pamblap Biruw, has long criticised such presentations.[81]

Many individuals, especially women our second author interviewed, agreed that the Cham Bani are 'Hồi giáo' but did *not* accept the terms 'Muslim' or 'Islam'. This reflects a circumstance Yoshimoto found in Bắc Bình, Bình Thuận in the early 2010s, which she has argued indicated that 'Hồi giáo' was a 'polythetic class'—borrowing a term from biology, meaning that they have many, but not all properties in common with a related social group—and thus should not be translated as 'Muslim' in the context of Cham religious communities despite decades of scholarly norms.[82] In other words, although Hồi giáo has a long history as the Vietnamese translation of

80 Nguyễn Tường, 'Tết Ramuwan năm 2016'.
81 Imam Đạo Văn Tỷ, interview, Palei Pamblap Biruw, Sept. 2017.
82 Yoshimoto, 'A study of the Hồi giáo religion', pp. 487–505.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'Islam' or 'Muslim', among Cham the connotations of this term have changed in recent years as Bani have also increasingly self-disassociated from being identified with broader Muslim communities. Although in most day-to-day instances, the term Hồi giáo would only be used with Vietnamese speakers, the high degree of bilingualism among Cham youth and large number of visitors to Cham communities has probably increased the usage of Hồi giáo among Cham as well. Ong Gru Thanh Thẳng of Châu Hanh township, Phan Tánh commune, Bắc Bình district, Bình Thuận province, referred to his religion as 'Đạo Hồi giáo Bà Ni' during his ordination ceremony, shortly after Yoshimoto's fieldwork.[83] We found both the older mid-century variant Hồi hồi and more contemporary Hồi giáo as names for Bani religious buildings and the Bani 'Council of Dignitaries', which was formally recognised in Ninh Thuận province in 2006. We should also note that Bani buildings use both the term *thánh đường*, which is a popular Vietnamese term for mosque, as well as the term *chùa*, which is the Vietnamese word for Buddhist temples, leading to the sense that the Bani 'house of prayer' (sang mâgik) did not fit neatly into either category.[84] We also found that Cham Bani generally had a more positive perception of the term 'Hồi giáo' than 'Islam', partly because 'Islam' was associated with Cam Islam. However, our first author found that perception of the English word 'Muslim' or the French 'Musulman' was generally more neutral, albeit only among educated literati who knew those languages. In almost all cases, we found as long as the Cham Bani were explicitly given some form of distinctive name recognition, there was not an issue.

Conclusion

As we have shown throughout this article, the preferences of Bani communities for changing terminology to refer to themselves is influenced by several factors, including internal debates. During the course of writing up our research, we also developed a hypothesis that the pervasive global climate of Islamophobia, especially since the 2000s, has impacted Vietnam. Although we never heard of hate crimes against Muslims or Cham Bani specifically in Vietnam, the context suggests some Bani were motivated to proclaim themselves even more distinct as a means of pre-emptive self-defence against outside criticism. Numerous individuals interviewed took great care to emphasise the 'flexibility' of Cham Bani practices, the 'kindness' of the community, and assured our first author they were 'never violent'. This context has combined with nearly five decades of Cham Shafi'i Sunni Muslims asserting that they are the 'true Islam' while Cham Bani are not.[85] Most Cham Bani individuals in our research preferred Cham language terms: Bani, Cam Bani, or Agama Bani—and at the very least, the Vietnamese 'Hồi giáo Bà Ni'. However, using the term 'Hồi giáo' without specifying 'Bà Ni' was increasingly rejected over the period of our research.

83 Bá, 'Bani Islam', pp. 24–34.
84 *Chùa Hồi Hồi Palei Pamblap Biruw*, *Chùa Hồi giáo Thanh Lâm*, and *Hội đồng sư cả Hồi giáo Bà Ni*, as well as *Thành đường Hồi giáo Bani Lương Tri, Thành đường Hồi giáo Bani Thành Tín*.
85 These critiques can also be found in diaspora in the United States. See: Ustaz Yakkob Sulaiman, 'Al-Fatihah in Cham Phan Rang/Tôn giáo Bani là Tôn Giáo Islam … Nhưng họ đi lạc lối', *Viet Nam Islam*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv4-0U9YEOw (accessed 2 June 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For us, this raises an important question. Through our research, we explored the idea that 'Cham Bani' was a deeply localised form of Cham particularist Islam—between Cam Ahiér and Cam Asulam communities—an interpretation that seems valid for many community members. Yet, the more recent discourse raises the possibility of a newly emergent conception of Cham Bani as simply a 'Cham particularist religion', which is to say that it is a religion that is specific to Cham ethno-linguistic communities and not practised outside these communities except by members. While a few individuals may have joined Cham Bani particularist communities via marriage in recent history, most membership is defined simply by birth and praxis. The trend suggests many members of the Bani community have absorbed the accusations of 'heteropraxy' from the 1960s onward, countering them with assertions that adat Cam has its own form of Cham Bani orthopraxy. This is especially clear in accusations the Cam Asulam 'abandoned their ancestors'. Furthermore, in the above discussion, we have emphasised matters of practice that make the Cham Bani distinct with respect to the Five Pillars of Islam (*shahada*, *salat*, *sawm*, *zakat*, and hajj). Thus, based on our research between 2012 and 2019, the Cham Bani community is certainly a Cham particularist community, and perhaps a distinct religion.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam claims it has adopted a policy of national unity without restrictions on religion and all five constitutions since 1945 have guaranteed religious freedom. In 1982, the government signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees freedom of religion in Article 18.[86] The 2013 Constitution states, 'Citizens have the right to freedom of belief and to follow or not follow any religion' and the 'state shall respect and protect the freedom of belief and religion' although 'No one is allowed to take advantage of religion in order to act against the law'.[87] In April 2015, the Vietnamese Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) introduced a comprehensive draft of a new law that would protect freedom of religion. The National Assembly passed the law on 18 November 2016 and it entered effect on 1 January 2018.[88] Thus, individuals believed they would receive increased protections from the Vietnamese government, although the government has already faced numerous challenges, as it is difficult to negotiate between party interpretations of socialist thought, religious pluralism, and their understandings of localisation. As Reg Reimer and Hien Vu have argued, this creates tension between 'retain[ing] the Marxist model in which religion is perceived as a threat to [the state's] monopoly of power … or tak[ing] serious steps toward the more liberal, internationalist model of freedom of religion and belief'.[89] However, the authors do not highlight that there may be religions deemed 'non-threatening'

86 Đỗ Quang Hưng, *Chính sách tôn giáo và nhà nước pháp quyền* (Hà Nội: Đại Học Quốc Gia, 2013).
87 Nguyen Sinh Hung, 'The Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam', *Việt Nam News*, 15 Jan. 2014; https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/250222/the-constitution-of-the-socialist-republic-of-viet-nam.html#u2vXUMlruh7cWirR.97 (accessed 2 June 2019).

For more on the history of religious policy, see: Claire Trần Thị Liên, 'Communist state and religious policy in Vietnam: A historical perspective', *Hague Journal of the Rule of Law* 5, 2 (2013): 5.
88 Ban Tôn Giáo Chính Phủ, 'Giới thiệu Luật Tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo', *The Government Committee for Religious Affairs*, 11 Nov. 2016; http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/248/0/10478/Gioi_thieu_Luat_Tin_nguong_ton_giao (accessed 2 June, 2019).
89 Reg Reimer and Hien Vu, 'Towards the rule of law for freedom of religion and belief in Vietnam', *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 14, 4 (2016): 80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463422000868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the Marxist-Leninist state model. Indeed, there is no evidence of clashes between Bani communities and 'the state' comparable to Protestants in the central uplands or Hmong communities in northern Vietnam. The question is more one of the recognitions of enactment, actions, and ritual performance of religious matters as forming a distinct grouping, especially with respect to *nao Ghur* and Mbeng Muk Kei ceremonies.

In follow-up inquiries, we found the ID card incident in Palei Pamblap Biruw was potentially resolved as of 2019. 'Bani' was registered as a category of 'religion' (*tôn giáo*) in accordance with existing household registrations. However, we had heard there was a plan to remove religious identification from ID cards entirely. Thus, we were not surprised when we followed up again in 2021, we found the planned removal of religious identification sections in government documentation had indeed provoked some arguments about the need for visibility, as we had previously predicted would be the case. In light of such circumstances, we would suggest a more nuanced approach for scholars. Utilising discussions of *praxis* would assist in understanding Cham Bani communities, the contours of minority religious communities in Vietnam, and more recent trends emerging in the past decades. For example, Thành Phần, Bá Trụng Phụ, Po Dharma, Trương Văn Món and others have placed strong emphasis on utilising Cham concepts of religion—like the *awal-ahiér* model of cosmological dualism—to explain how adat Cam distinguishes the Katé ceremony of the Cam Ahiér from the Ramâwan of the Cham Bani, and both are distinct from the 'Tết' of Vietnamese communities. We have also found new efforts to reach out to the Cham Shafi'i Sunni Muslim communities in the past two decades through the creation of new traditions, such as the annual Katé-Ramâwan ceremonies held in Hồ Chí Minh City. During Katé-Ramâwan, students and their families from all Cham communities gather together in a multi-confessional event, with days of musical performance, theatre, and games, to promote how they each understand 'being Cham'. Inevitably, within such events, one still may find discussions about heteropraxy and orthopraxy. Furthermore, such events, as others in Vietnam, were greatly hindered by the pandemic. Nonetheless, greater attention to such discussions may provide fruitful avenues for better understanding of the realities of everyday religious life in Southeast Asia, especially in Cham religious communities.

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