

## RESEARCH ON CHAM HISTORY IN MALAYSIA

### INTRODUCTION

Until recently, most Malaysians have found the countries of Indochina as rather strange and alien. This perception can be partly attributed to their different experiences of colonialism; Malaysia is composed of former British protectorates and colonies, whereas the Indochinese states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were under French rule. The Indochinese War, especially after its escalation in the mid-1960s, restricted the movement of people. However, in this regard, the Malaysian government was an ally to the southern Vietnamese (Republic of Vietnam) government. The post-1975 era, which saw all three Indochinese states come under Communist rule, further impeded the development of normal relationships with staunchly anti-Communist neighboring countries, such as Malaysia. With such conditions, as well as the official adopted line, it is not surprising that the Indochinese states hardly featured in academic research, except perhaps the study of the Vietnam War, as part of studies on the Cold War in Southeast Asia. In the school history syllabus, the struggle of the Vietnamese people against French colonialism was taught in the wider context of Southeast Asian nationalism. Beyond that, Indochina

remained a backwater in academia, including among historians and social scientists.

It was only in the 1990s that change began to occur. This change could be attributed to the open door approach of Vietnam, which was introduced through the Doi Moi policy; more interactions were suddenly occurring between Malaysia and the Indochinese states, including contact between individuals. In 1995, Vietnam joined the community of ASEAN and was followed three years later by Laos and Cambodia. It was under such conditions that Indochina once again became of interest to researchers, and courses were introduced at the tertiary level. Similar developments resulted in the initial development of Cham studies in Malaysia, mainly in the context of relations between the Chams and the Malays. Yet, the origin of this investigation would not have been possible without the mass arrivals of the Chams as part of the Vietnamese and Indochinese diasporas, resulting from the war in Indochina.

In 1975, shortly after the successive falls of Phnom Penh, Vientiane, and Saigon to the Communists, there was a massive exodus of people from Indochina. Many traveled on small vessels, trying to reach the nearest non-Communist country, with the hope of resettling in a third country (such as the US or France); hence, they earned the name “boat people.” Others left their countries on foot and attempted to cross into Thailand. The arrival of these people in Malaysia was initially received with a strong sense of sympathy, and help was made readily available. However, as the number of refugees increased by the day, there was concern that their presence would upset the socioeconomic balance of the country. Therefore, they were quickly processed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) mission in Malaysia and sent to third countries. The massive arrival of these boat people also created diplomatic conflicts between Malaysia and its neighbors when each one refused to accept more new arrivals. However, in spite of the Malaysian government’s general wariness towards the presence of these refugees—who were mainly ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese—several thousand refugees were permitted to remain in the country. These were the ethnic Chams who were mainly Muslims who had escaped Cambodia and southern Vietnam. The official explanation for allowing the Chams to stay was humanitarian considerations and the common Muslim brotherhood they shared with the Malays.

This paper is an attempt to provide an overview of the development of research on Cham studies in Malaysia by investigating the origins of such studies, which can be traced to the study of Vietnamese history. Mainly through the perspective of Cham-Malay relations, the paper will

also consider the development of Cham studies, which is an important area of research in terms of the interests of the country.

## **EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH INTO VIETNAM AND INDOCHINA**

Vietnamese History was first introduced in Malaysia as a study subject in 1973 at the Department of History of the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Vietnam was introduced by Dr. Heather Sutherland into her undergraduate course on Nationalism in Indochina. The following year, Dr. Lee Kam Hing included Vietnam in a course on the History of Post-1945 Mainland Southeast Asia in the 1974/75 academic session. Two years later, in the 1976/77 session, Modern Vietnamese History was taught by G. P. Ramachandran. After Ramachandran's departure the following year, the study of Vietnam was dropped until the 1987/88 session when it was reintroduced as part of a course offered by Dr. Omar Farouk on the Modern History of Indochina. When Farouk left in 1991, the course was discontinued until 1994, when Danny Wong reintroduced it. Since then, the course has been offered to final-year undergraduates. The emphasis in most of these courses was on the struggle of the Vietnamese against foreign domination as well as the search for a viable nationhood.

Even as the general perception of Vietnam began to change in the early 1990s, efforts were made to broaden the scope of the teaching of Vietnamese history at the undergraduate level. There was a shift of emphasis in some of these courses, with greater emphasis being placed on Vietnamese culture and the early history of Vietnam along with the discussion on modern Vietnam's quest for a viable nationhood. For this purpose, early Vietnamese history was incorporated into the introductory course on Early Southeast Asian History. Vietnamese history is also being incorporated into a course on Nationalism in Southeast Asia. Similar efforts have also been made to incorporate components of Vietnamese history into postgraduate (coursework) studies.

Apart from the University of Malaya, the Department of History at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has also introduced a course on the history of Indochina.

Research at the postgraduate level (Master of Arts) began at the University of Malaya in 1990 with a study on the bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia. This dissertation was later published by the University of Malaya Press [Wong 1995]. Three years later, a com-

parative study on the manifestation of nationalism in Vietnamese and Malaysian history through a study of Vietnamese and Malaysian newspapers was conducted by a Vietnamese academician for a Master of Arts degree at the University of Malaya. More recently, two Master of Arts theses focusing on Vietnam were completed. The first is a study of the Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War, and the second examines relations between Vietnam and China during the Nguyen dynasty [Ong 2002; Ku 2005]. Apart from postgraduate-level research, several minor research studies on Vietnam are being conducted at the undergraduate graduation exercise level.

Apart from the various programs that these universities offer, other projects on Vietnamese studies are in progress in Malaysia. Chief among them is the “Malay World and the World of Indochina” program, which is a joint effort by the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the *École Française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFEO/The French Far East Research Center). The goal of the project is to promote the study of cultural and human contacts between the Malay Peninsula and Indochina, of which Vietnam is the main component. Researchers involved in this program are from the EFEO, the University of Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysian National Museum, Malaysian National Library, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (National Language and Publication Agency), as well as some from Vietnam. To date, the program has published some of its research documents as well as veritable documents, particularly on Champa. In 2003, a separate joint collaboration program of a similar nature was established between the EFEO and a team from the Department of History at the University of Malaya. In many ways, it was through this program that research on Champa was first introduced in Malaysia.

## **EVOLUTION OF CHAM STUDIES IN MALAYSIA**

Efforts to promote studies of the historical and cultural relations between the Cham community in Indochina and the Malay community in the Malay Peninsula are a by-product of the study of Vietnamese history and Cham studies in Malaysia. The process of reconstructing Cham-Malay relations is a new development in the study of Vietnamese history, as well as Cham history. While most scholars believed that earlier ties had existed between the Chams and the Malays, it is only during the last twenty years that this subject has attracted scholarly interest. Pioneering works by French colonial officials during the early stage of

French colonialism in Vietnam indicated such ties [Labussier 1880; Aymonier 1880]. However, other aspects of Cham lives were of interest to the earlier scholars who researched the Chams. These included the study of history, language, customs, and religion.

This early research resulted in the emergence of an Indian-centric approach to the study of the Chams and their links with the region beyond their borders. While the Chams were acknowledged as being Malay in origin, these early French scholars argued that they had acquired their religion and civilization from India. This idea echoed the thinking of the era when Georges Coedès' theory on Indianization prevailed.

Despite its strong presence during the first millennium CE, this dominant Indianization process was not sustained beyond the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. French colonial scholars concluded that much of the glorious chapters of the Indianization of the Chams came to an end in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. After that time, a period of gradual decline was detected in almost every aspect, including arts, architectural skills, and religious practices. In the latter case, it was determined that the original Hindu beliefs of the Chams lost their purity and clarity. Cham syncretism had apparently corrupted the "purity" of Hinduism. Even the practice of Islam, introduced to Champa in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was considered to be a poor reflection of the religion and varied from the common practices of the Shafie sects of insular Southeast Asia, including the Malay Peninsula [Cabaton 1901:4–9].

As the history of Champa is a story of decline and eventual disappearance from the political map of modern Vietnam, it is not surprising that the image that emerged from earlier research was that of a nation as the victim of its neighbors' expansionist policies (the Vietnamese in this case). The earlier accounts of French Christian missionaries usually portrayed Champa as a victim of successive Vietnamese military campaigns. They also described Champa—or what remained of it in the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries—as a vassal of the Vietnamese rulers. This image of Champa as victim was reinforced by later studies, particularly those undertaken by colonial officials and pioneering scholars. In his monumental work *Le royaume du Champa*, Georges Maspero, who utilized resources such as Chinese and Vietnamese historical documents as well as Cham inscriptions, described the rise of Champa and its eventual demise in 1471 [Maspero 1928]. It was in this light that initial investigations on Cham-Malay relations began.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

Contacts between Indochina and the Malay world were not confined to trade and official missions. Beneath this long-standing relationship was a somewhat neglected dimension that hinged on the historical and traditional ties that existed between the Chams in Indochina (particularly Vietnam) and the Malays on the Malay Peninsula. The topic itself has recently become the focus of certain scholarly works. In this regard, most of the studies were being conducted by French scholars who, due to their colonial connections with Indochina, were naturally the pioneers of the research on the Chams and their ancient kingdom of Champa.

However, it must be noted that most early French scholars, such as George Maspero [1928], Etienne Aymonier [1890, 1891], E. Durand [1905], L. Finot [1901], and George Cœdes [1968], focused their works entirely on establishing the historical positions of the Chams and Champa without paying much attention to the links between the Chams and Malays.

It was an Englishman, G. E. Marrison, who recognized the possible connection between the two peoples. In an essay written in 1951, Marrison suggested the idea of a long-established link between the Malays and the Chams. In his essay entitled "The Chams in Malacca" [Marrison 1951], Marrison drew his evidence from the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) where it is reported that some princes and noblemen from Champa were received by the Sultan of Malacca after they had fled from Champa. The event most likely took place after the catastrophic 1471 fall of the Champa capital, Vijaya (in present-day Binh Dinh) to the Vietnamese army of Le Thanh Ton. The event was considered as a watershed in the history of Champa (and Vietnam), since the Chams have been in constant retreat from further Vietnamese encroachments since that time. Marrison demonstrates the close links that existed between the Malays in Malacca and the Chams, at least between the ruling houses. It was reported that the Cham princes were given positions in the Malaccan court and that a Cham community eventually thrived in the great emporium of Malacca.

In a later essay on the literature of the Chams, Marrison endeavored to establish the early ties between the two peoples [Marrison 1985]. He points out the many similarities between Cham and Malay literature. According to him, the two groups shared a common corpus of literature that included both epics and folk literature. However, Marrison was quick to explain that many of the similarities were actually derived from

the common Hindu culture to which both peoples subscribed prior to accepting newer religious influences, including Islam, as well as the Khmer influence.

Despite Marrison's efforts in 1951, the idea did not generate much interest among scholars in Malaya (subsequently, Malaysia) until much later. It was the French who assimilated the idea during the 1980s and began to explore the historical linkages that once existed between the Chams and the Malays. The pioneers in this area were Denys Lombard and Henri Chambert-Loir. In 1987, Lombard tackled the study of Champa's relations with the Malay world with a proposal of adopting a view of Champa from the south. However, by "south," Lombard meant the links between Champa and Java. As a scholar known for his studies on Sumatra and Java, it is no surprise that Lombard formed his view based on what he had witnessed as possible links between Champa and the Malay Archipelago, especially Java. The existence of Cham links with Srivijaya and, later, Java, including the supposed existence of a grave attributed to a princess of Champa, provided evidence for further discussion. Chambert-Loir began this research a few years prior to Lombard, but concentrated on the *Hikayat Dewa Mandu*, an epic shared by the Chams and the Malays [Chambert-Loir 1980].

A team of scholars from the Center for Indochinese Research began to investigate this aspect of Cham history. P. B. Lafont, originally a specialist on ethnic minorities in the highlands of Vietnam and Laos, began directing research projects that investigated this area. This culminated in a seminar on Champa in Copenhagen, at which several papers relating to the Chams and the Malays were discussed. They included Lafont's introduction, entitled "On the relations between Champa and Southeast Asia" [Lafont 1994] and Henri Chambert-Loir's paper, entitled "On the historical and literary relations between Champa and the Malay world" [Chambert-Loir 1988, 1994, 1995]. Another paper of similar interest, examining the ethnicity of the Chams, was written by Eric Crystal; it explored the broader question of Champa as a factor in the study of Southeast Asia [Crystal 1991]. Nguyen The Anh's "Indochina and the Malay world: A glimpse on Malay-Vietnamese relations to the mid-nineteenth century," published in *Asia Journal* in 1996 [Nguyen The Anh 1996], is a somewhat related paper; however, it focuses mainly on the Vietnamese dimension.

The most influential member of the team is perhaps Po Dharma, who initially began researching the post-1471 Cham kingdom of Panduranga. Through this study, Po Dharma was able to connect the links that had existed between the Chams of Panduranga and the Malay



world. Since then, most of his work has focused on this dimension [Po Dharma 1981].

The study of the relations between the Chams and the Malays also espoused a local dimension when works relating to the topic began appearing in Malaysia. Initially, these studies were pioneered by non-academic scholars who, nevertheless, began earnestly probing this issue. Among these pioneers were Abdullah bin Mohamed (Nakula) [1980, 1981, 1989] and Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi [1987, 1988a, 1988b], two natives of Kelantan who undertook serious research on the cultural and historical links between the Chams and the Malay Peninsula, and specifically with the northeastern state of Kelantan. Another individual who was keenly involved was Nik Mohammad Nik Salleh [1965, 1975a, 1975b, 1980], a former senior official in the Malaysian Home Office and also a native of Kelantan. Incidentally, all three acknowledged their family ties with the Chams from southern Vietnam or Cambodia.

This emergence of Malay and Malaysian initiatives in the study of Cham-Malay relations during the 1990s was a culmination of several factors. The first was the rising consciousness among the Malays of the existence of such links, especially after the mass arrivals of several thousand ethnic Chams from Cambodia and Vietnam after the fall of Indochina to the Communists. Second, closely linked to this was the Malaysian government's cultural program, which actively championed a Malay world (*Dunia Melayu*) that would embrace all ethnic groups that practiced Malay culture. The Chams fit well into this mold, and hence, the notion of the "Malayness" of the Chams emerged. In Malaysia, the term "Melayu Champa" or "Muslim Kemboja"<sup>1</sup> is commonly used to refer to the Chams. Third, as part of this initiative and the French connections, especially through the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) in Kuala Lumpur, various studies related to this link were conducted.

More recently, the present writer also began exploring similar topics by first contemplating the links between Indochina and the Malay world. This later developed into an investigation of the relations between the Chams and the Malays [Wong 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b].

## RESOURCES AND FUTURE TRENDS

In Malaysia, the development of research into Cham-Malay relations is closely connected with the influx of Cham refugees from post-1975



Indochina. Between 1975 and 1985, approximately 7,000 Cham refugees arrived in Malaysia. While the majority originated from Cambodia, some hailed from Vietnam, but had left for Cambodia via the Chau Doc region. While the Malaysian government was generally wary of the presence of a large number of ethnic Vietnamese refugees, it was sympathetic to the plight of the Chams, who were mainly Muslim. Thus, the Chams were permitted to remain in Malaysia, even after all the refugee camps were closed [Intan Syafnaz binti Ahmad 1999–2000].

The presence of these Chams inevitably reignited the Malays' long-forgotten memories of their ties with them. Prior to this period, several local scholars had devoted their attention to this subject. One such scholar was Abdullah Mohamed (Nakula), who had been writing small pieces of research work dealing with Cham-Malay ties since the 1960s. Nakula also wrote a piece on the possible links between the Malays and the Chams and Malays in Cambodia [Abdullah Mohamed (Nakula) 1963, 1989].

The focus of Nakula and another scholar, Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi, also dwelled on the terms, "Kambayat" and "Chempaka," found in classical Malay texts as evidence of the lasting relations between the Chams and Malays. Abdul Rahman also devoted attention to the place of Champa and Chams in various Malay literary works [Abdul Rahman al-Ahmadi 1988a-c, 1995]. Apart from culture, another aspect that has received some attention from local scholars is the connection between the royal court of Champa and its Malay counterparts, particularly with the northern Malay state of Kelantan [Abdullah Mohamed (Nakula) 1980, 1981, 1989].

In 1988, the study of Cham-Malay relations in the wider context of Vietnam's ties to the Malay world received a boost in Malaysia from the establishment of l'École Française d'Extreme-Orient center in Kuala Lumpur; it is the body that pioneered Cham studies at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The centre undertook the study of Cham-Malay relations through an analysis and publication of several Cham historical and literary texts [Po Dharma 1989; Po Dharma, Moussay, and Abdul Karim 1997, 2000].

Through the efforts of both French revisionist historians and local scholars over the past 20 years, the Cham-Malay dimension in Vietnam's relations with the Malay world has become clearer. The findings of these research studies have legitimated further reconsideration of the dynamics of intra-regional ties during the classical and early modern periods.

The next step in the continued investigation into the Cham-Malay dimension in the relations of the Vietnam-Malay world hinges on the

need to raise several questions pertaining to the effect of Cham-Malay relations on the historical events in mainland Southeast Asia—in this case, Indochina. Likewise, similar questions could be posed about the effect of Cham-Malay relations upon the historical processes in the Malay states. Other dimensions of study that must be undertaken concern culture and religion.

As research on the Chams is still relatively new in Malaysia, library resources are limited. The libraries of both the University of Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia possess collections of books on Vietnam and Indochina; however, most of these books focus on the Vietnam War and strategic and defense concerns. Research works and literature on the Chams and Champa are sadly lacking.

Sources on the history of Champa-Malay relations and the existence of Cham communities in Malaysia can be divided into two groups. The first consists of the Malay historical texts that refer to the ties between the Malays and Chams. These are mainly Malay manuscripts, including the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), *Sejarah Johor* (Johor Annals), *Syair Siti Zubaidah* (Songs of Siti Zubaidah), *Hikayat Kelantan* (Kelantan Annals). From these works, instances of post-1471 Cham linkages with the Malay world can be drawn; these include the Cham diaspora and the connections between the Malay ruling houses and the remnants of the Cham nobility.

The Cham sources include some that describe the links between the Chams and the Malay world, in particular during the period of 1693–1835. The first is *Nai Mai Nang Makah* (Princess from Mecca), which describes the efforts by a Malay princess from Kelantan (Mecca) to convert the King of Champa around 1692, during the time when Champa was under attack by Vietnam [Po Dharma, Moussay, and Abdul Karim 2000]. Several other Cham documents that may not directly portray Cham-Malay relations, but which are equally important in demonstrating the commonalities between Cham and Malay culture, are a series of literary works common to both. Chief among these are *Hikayat Dewa Mano* [Po Dharma 1989] and *Hikayat Inra Patra* [Po Dharma, Moussay, and Abdul Karim 1997], two Cham folktales that are also very familiar to the Malays.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most important sources concerning Cham-Malay relations from the Cham archives are several historical tales portraying attempts by Malays and Chams from the Malay Peninsula and Cambodia to assist the Chams in freeing their homeland from the Vietnamese in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among these are the *syair* on Tuan Phaow, a Kelantanese who led a Malay-Cham military delegation to

Champa in 1795.<sup>3</sup> Another is the story of Katip Sumat,<sup>4</sup> a Malay from Cambodia who went to Champa in 1833 to lead a Cham force against the Vietnamese during the final stage of the Cham struggle for survival. However, consultation of these sources is only possible with knowledge of the Cham language.

The second group of sources centers on the long-term memories of the Cham and Malay people concerning their historical, ethnic, and religious links. These sources help to explore the extent to which these long-term memories determined the way the Chams were accepted by the Malays during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly after 1975. In the same way, they examine how the Chams underwent a process of rediscovery regarding their Malayness by embracing Islam before and after their arrival in Malaysia. These are mainly in the form of interviews, government gazettes, and news reports. In relation to the Chams in Malaysia, further studies should focus on how this community, which only emerged in Malaysia after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, are adapting to life in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION

From its origins as a by-product of the research on Vietnamese history, research on Champa and the Chams has adopted a new form in Malaysia, particularly through the focus on Cham-Malay relations. The subject has emerged as an important component of academic investigation that can contribute to an understanding of the historical relationship between Indochina and the Malay world. The development of this area of research has evolved from efforts to analyze a kingdom (Champa) in decline to attempts to reposition the important role that the Chams played in the history of insular Southeast Asia, even after 1471. In Malaysia, emphasis should be placed on the immigration process and the settling in the country of ethnic Chams from Indochina. This should include an examination of issues that pertain to family ties, religious affinity, and assimilation into the Malay community and the subsequent reactions of the local communities.

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## NOTES

- 1 "Muslim Kemboja" refers to the Chams who came from Cambodia after 1975; they comprised a large number of the Cham refugees who arrived in Malaysia. Many of the Vietnamese Chams also passed through Cambodia *en route* to Malaysia.
- 2 The Malay version of this *hikayat* is *Hikayat Indra Putra*.
- 3 Manuscript Cam 58 (3) in the Collections of the École Française d'Extrême Orient and also MEP Vols. 1189/4 and 1190/1 in the *Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris*.
- 4 Manuscript CM32:6 and CM24:5 in the École Française d'Extrême-Orient Collections.

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