

Conference on Champa 2007

This first-ever conference convened by the Champa peoples, of whom the Cham (both Muslim and non-Muslim) are an important component, focused on the “Sociocultural Issues of Champa 175 Years after Its Disappearance (1832-2007).” Held on 7-8 July 2007, in San Jose, CA, it was opened by Chuck Reed (mayor, San Jose), Musa Porome (chairman, Organizing Committee), Ahmad Yahya (Member of Parliament, Cambodia; founder, Radio SapCham [Voice of the Cham]), and R. Obleo (a representative of the Champa people of the Central Highlands, Vietnam, now living in America).

Session One, “Language and Culture,” moderated by Mohammad Zain Bin Musa (University Kebangsaan Malaysia), began with Marc Brunelle (University of Ottawa, Canada), who spoke on “Diglossia, Bilingualism, and Literacy: Can Eastern Cham Be Revitalized?” Brunelle, a fluent Cham and Vietnamese speaker, touched upon a core problem; the Cham language has not developed enough to accommodate modernity. Thus, the eastern Cham are generally bilingual, the formal language is limited to important events, the spoken language contains many Vietnamese words, regional pronunciations have appeared, Cham-language written literature is very rare, and the community (traditionally) has opposed the script’s romanization. He sees two choices to ensure its survival: romanize or simplify the script.

David G. Sox (United States Coast Guard Pacific Command, Oakland, CA) presented “Toward a Book/CD-ROM of the Culture and Customs of Ancient Champa and Modern Champa Peoples.” He is seeking the community’s active participation in documenting Champa’s geography, prehistory/

archaeology, history, social and economic organization, language and literature, art and architecture, and other aspects during its long history (late second century CE until 1832) as an independent entity until today.

Toshihiko Shine (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan), in his “Destruction Process of a Champa Divinity’s Memorial in Vietnam,” related how the Japan Bank for International Cooperation’s (JBIC) promotion of industrialization and modernization, despite its official “JBIC Guidelines for Confirmation of Environmental and Social Considerations” and proclaimed neutrality, led to the destruction of the historic Champa Po Dam shrine in Sop Rai over the protests of the local people and Communist party cadres.

Session Two, “Society and Economy,” moderated by Brunelle, opened with Mohammad Zain Bin Musa’s “The Socioeconomic Situation of the Cham Community in Malaysia since 1975.” Himself a Cham from Cambodia, Bin Musa related that many Cham refugees, who had been farmers, fishermen, or small businesspeople, wanted to go to Malaysia because of its similar socioeconomic, religious, and linguistic environment and their high regard for the Malay Muslim people. He stated that these Cham usually located their “village” in the center of a Malay village, and thus were not isolated from the larger society. Given the linguistic similarities, the children quickly learned Bahasa Melayu and, realizing the importance of receiving a modern education, pursued this goal. Interestingly, he stated that Malaysia does not consider the Cham an ethnic minority group.

In his “Highlanders of Central Vietnam and Cambodia: Economic and Sociocultural Changes between 1975 and 2007,” Mathieu Guerin (Cean University, France) spoke of how officially encouraged large-scale Vietnamese migration into the formerly autonomous Central Highlands has changed the native people’s lives. Forest clearing, intensive land development, land grabbing, and pressure to change their habits are coming from the Vietnamese, the NGOs, and representatives of the international business community, all of whom want to exploit this land. The indigenous peoples also face pressure to assimilate and abandon their traditional nomadism and cash-less economy. Cambodia seems poised to follow the same path, although very few Cambodians have moved into their portion of the Central Highlands.

Po Dharma (The French Research School of the Far East, France), in his “Notes on the Sociocultural and Economic Problems of the Cham in Central Vietnam,” mentioned other problems: traditional religious and cultural practices have been forbidden, many Cham cannot read the traditional script, Vietnamese law supplanted customary law in 1975, and their spiritual life has not been respected. The Champa people continue to lose their land, with

the result that poverty, misery, hunger, debt, and other problems have worsened. Cambodia's Cham are not facing such intense pressures; in addition, they have much better contacts with the government and are free to speak out. He called upon Vietnam to treat all of its citizens fairly.

Session Three, "Migration and Integration," moderated by Guerin, dealt with historic issues. Graham Thurgood (California State University, CA) spoke on "The History of the Dispersal of the Cham." Based on linguistic analysis, he stated that some Cham had moved to China's Hainan Island (where an estimated 6,000 still live) and that others had gone to Sumatra's northern tip. His claims that Acehnese is a Cham subdialect and that the first Acehnese dynasty's origin can be traced to these Cham proved to be rather controversial.

Emiko Stock (Paris X University, France), in "Inviting Champa, Welcoming Cambodia," analyzed two Cham rituals. The first one, held yearly in O'Russei village by descendants of the Cham royal family, celebrates the royal chronicles by reading them. During this event, the spirits of former Cham and Cambodian kings are invited to possess them. The second one, which resembles the *mawlid* of Prophet Muhammad, recognizes Imam San. Although he is not a "royal," the path he draws to mystical Islam and his privileged relation to the Cambodian king during his lifetime is honored.

In his "Migration, Resettlement, and Identity of the Cham Diaspora in Southeast Asia," Nicholas Weber (The Institut National des Langues and Civilisations Orientales, France) detailed how Cham communities have fared in the diaspora. Cambodia, with the exception of the Khmer Rouge, always allowed them to remain Cham, and so their culture and identity flourished. Vietnam has always tried to Vietnamize them; Thailand let them remain Cham until 1930, when it launched an aggressive assimilation policy. Malaysia welcomed them with open arms, and so many are assimilating willingly, even to the point of forgetting how to speak Cham.

The conference also featured two forums for young American and Cambodian Cham. Not surprisingly, they have the same issues as young Muslims the world over: generational problems and mutual disrespect, juggling opposing cultures, a lack of interest in modern secular education, poverty, an inability to see a positive future, pressure to get married early, the "individual" vs. the "community" ethos, and many others.

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