

A Study of the *Hôi giáo* Religion in Vietnam: With a Reference to Islamic Religious Practices of Cham Bani

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This paper examines *Hôi giáo*, a state-recognized religion translated as “Islam” in Vietnam, and will focus on the Islamic religious practices of the Cham Bani, one of two groups of Muslims in Vietnam. While it is recognized that diverse Islamic religious practices have taken root in various areas, there is a tendency to view religious practices such as the Quran recital, Ramadan, Salat, and so on, with a sweeping uniformity. As such, regardless of how “unorthodox” they are, the people who engage in such practices within society are regarded, or classified, as Muslim. The Cham Bani have also been described as an unorthodox Muslim sect, on the basis of its syncretic religious practices. However, the Cham Bani practitioners see themselves as neither Muslim nor members of the Islam community, and consider that they have experienced a different evolution of Islamic religious elements.

Is it possible to equate *Hôi giáo* with Islam and its followers with Muslim? This paper examines these questions through observations of the self-recognition, as well as the actual conditions of Islamic practices among the Cham Bani, especially the rituals that are observed during Ramadan. It reveals the possibility that Vietnam’s state-recognized religious sect of “Islam” and its “Muslim” followers are polythetic in nature and differ from the conventional definitions of Islam and Muslim, based on a monothetic classification.

Keywords: Cham Bani, *Hôi giáo*, Islam, Vietnam, polythetic classes, religious practice

I Introduction

Since the Doi Moi policy, religion has been discussed actively in Vietnam so as to maintain national unification as well as to construct a national identity in the country’s new period. In 2007, the *White Paper on Religion and Policies* was released with a special reference to the six state-recognized religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism,

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Table 1 “Muslims” in Vietnam

	Islam (Cham Islam), New Islam	Bani (Cham Bani), Old Islam
Branch	Sunni	Bani
Place of living	An Giang province, Tay Ninh province, Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai province, Ninh Thuan province	Ninh Thuan province, Binh Thuan province (old territory of Panduranga-Champa)
Authorized organizations	Ho Chi Minh City Muslim Community Representative Committee (1992~) An Giang Muslim Community Representative Committee (2004~)	Bani Religious Leaders Council (2006~)
Population	25,000	41,000
Places of worship	41masjid, 19 <i>surao</i>	17 <i>thang mugik</i>
Religious clerics	288	407
Religious features	Islamic rules and rituals are fully observed; pilgrimages to Mecca; networks with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia	Strongly influenced by local, traditional customs and beliefs and incorporated elements of Brahmanism and matriarchy; no pilgrimages

Source: Vietnam, GCRA (2006)

Islam, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao (Vietnam, Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) 2006).¹⁾ In this paper, I examine the state-recognized Islam, *Hồi giáo*, in order to contribute to an understanding of a peripheral aspect of Muslim.

According to the official statistics in 2009, the number of “Muslims” in Vietnam is approximately 75,000, many of whom are part of the Cham ethnic group, believed to be the descendants of Champa.²⁾ They are divided into two main groups: one, the Muslims living in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces in south-central Vietnam, known as “the Old Islamic Group,” “Cham Bani,” or “Bani”; two, the Muslims living in An Giang, Tay Ninh, and Dong Nai provinces around the Mekong Delta, as well as in Ho Chi Minh City, known as “the New Islamic Group,” “Cham Islam,” or “Islam” (see Table 1). There are considerable differences between the two groups in terms of religious practices: the Cham Bani are strongly influenced by local and traditional customs and beliefs and have incorporated elements of Brahmanism and ancestor worship. They also have no contact with the wider Islamic world, while Cham Islam is Sunni Muslim and has maintained contact with the Islamic community through pilgrimages to Mecca or studies abroad in such countries as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia.³⁾

1) The first statistics in 1999 identified six state-recognized religions; by 2011 there were 12 state-recognized religions, including Baha’i, Buu Son Ky Huong, etc.

2) Champa is one of the oldest kingdoms in Southeast Asia, having been established around the second century in what is today’s central Vietnam.

3) The presence of two groups of Muslims is regarded as a result of differences in the process of Islamization. The Islamization of Champa is believed to have occurred through contact with Islamic ↗

Ever since the French colonial period, contemporary academia has researched the religious situation of Cham Bani. Records left by missionaries and colonial administrators indicate that the Cham Bani, or “les Chams musulmans du Sud-Annam,” recite the Quran and believe in Allah, yet do not strictly follow the Islamic faith. They do not recite prayers five times a day; they believe in gods other than Allah; and during Ramadan, only monks fast. For these reasons, the Cham Bani are described variously as “Shiites” (Catabon 1901, 4; Durand 1903, 54) or “. . . musulmans, d’ailleurs peu orthodox” (Ner 1942, 154). The descriptions of the Cham Bani, based on the Western Christian concept of religion, have not changed greatly till today (Phan *et al.* 1991; Phan 1993; Phú 2004).

Indeed, not all of the people who are officially classified as “Islam” or *Hồi giáo* in Vietnam identify themselves as Muslim; the Cham Bani people especially do not have such self-identification. They usually say that they are the followers of *Hồi giáo* but not Islam; more specifically they identify themselves as *Hồi giáo* or Bani, but not as Muslims. This raises the question whether *Hồi giáo* can be translated as Muslim. Some of the Cham Bani villagers and intellectuals whom I approached claim that it is a mistake to view them as Muslims. As I will explore further below, they view Cham Bani as one branch of the “Cham religion,” rather than of Islam. While Cham Islam and Cham Bani are both ethnic Cham, the former tends to regard the latter as non-Muslims, and many Cham Bani intellectuals think of themselves as non-Muslims as well.

How did such a gap between the official/scholarly discourse and the practitioners’ perception emerge? Is *Hồi giáo*, a state-recognized religion translated as “Islam” in Vietnam, axiomatically the same as Islam, and are its followers Muslim? It should be noted that because of this gap, I differentiate between the Vietnamese state-recognized category of “Muslim” in this paper and Muslim as generally defined.

Perhaps this difference is caused by the method of classification of Islam or Muslim. In general, Islam and Muslim are defined in an essentialist way; indeed, faced with “the diversity of Islam,” there is a tendency, as numerous previous ethnographic descriptions have made clear, to view such practices as the recitation of the Quran, the Islamic prayer (salat), or fasting of Ramadan as having uniform meanings for Muslims worldwide. In addition, there is a tendency to view the various religious practices of Muslims in local societies as “a variation of Islam,” or else to categorically divide the local religious

↘ Arab merchants and the Persians, from the ninth to eleventh century, and through the Malays, from the sixteenth to seventeenth century. The Cham Bani could have been a group of people who stayed behind even after the country was deprived of maritime trade with Islam. The Cham Islam might be a group of people who moved to Cambodia and then the Mekong Delta whose practice of Islam was intensified through contact with the Malays (Nakamura 2000).

elements into “Islamic” or “non-Islamic.”⁴⁾ The Cham Bani have been classified as Islam because of the presence of Islamic elements such as prayers to Allah or recitations of the Quran.

Meanwhile, the practitioners themselves do not necessarily subscribe to such categorizations. Most of the villagers in Cham Bani society do not distinguish between the “Islamic” and “non-Islamic” elements of their religion. In other words, the villagers’ Islamic religious practices are more similar to those of practical religion.⁵⁾ Moreover, in Cham Bani society, Islamic religious practices vary depending on gender or social stratum. In fact, most of the villagers do not recite the Quran, and they even eat pork outside the village. Despite these “ambiguous” practices, the religion has been described as “Muslim,” and the religious elements have been described separately as Islamic/non-Islamic, or orthodox/non-orthodox in ethnographic writing or religious documents.

The conventional definition of Islam, or Muslim, is usually made on the assumption that the followers share certain practices or belief systems. However, among the Cham Bani, the Vietnamese “Muslim,” it is unclear whether its followers have common Islamic practices or belief systems.

Wittgenstein has shown that such a definition based on the idea that a concept has one essential common feature is unrealistic and advocates instead the concept of “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein 1967). The anthropologist Rodney Needham has incorporated his concept into anthropology and insists that such anthropological concepts of “family” and “marriage” cannot apply to the whole society. Additionally, he borrowed two classifications from natural sciences: monothetic and polythetic. The monothetic classification is one in which an individual of a certain class possesses at least one common feature. In the polythetic classification, an individual of a class does not share even one feature as a whole (Needham 1975).

Shirakawa applied this polythetic classification to the study of religion. Mentioning the policy of separation of Shintoism and Buddhism implemented by the Meiji government, he focused on the historical regional expansion of *Jisha* and *Kenmitsu* as ambiguous classes and reconsidered the syncretic fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism in Japan from the perspective of polythetic class (Shirakawa 2007). Examining the religious discourse in modern Japan, he points out the importance of describing a religious situation that is “natural” for the people who live inside of it, not as a variation of religious syncretism.

Using Needham’s polythetic classification and referring to Shirakawa’s work, this

4) Other labels like “folk Islam” or “islam” in lowercase letters (Eickelman 1982; El-Zein 1977) have also emerged.

5) The meaning of practical religion here is that found in *Dialectic in Practical Religion* (1968) by Edmond Leach.

paper focuses on the dynamic evolution of Islamic religious practices that differ depending on gender or social strata among the Cham Bani. The paper then considers the possibility of understanding *Hồi giáo* or “Muslim” in Vietnam as a polythetic class.

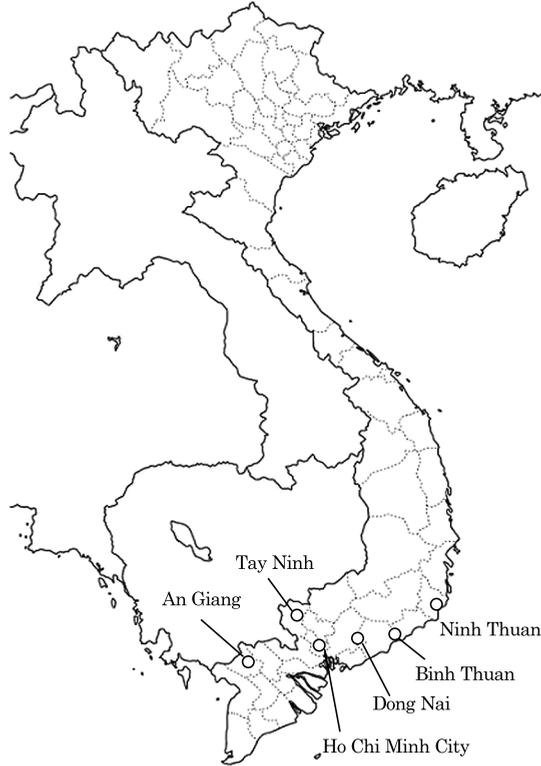
II The Religious Situation in a Cham Bani Village

The Cham Bani live mainly in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces, in south-central Vietnam. These provinces are where Panduranga, part of the kingdom of Champa, was found. Another religious group of the Cham exists here, usually referred to by Vietnamese scholars and officials as Cham Balamon, the followers of *Bà la môn giáo*.⁶⁾ These two religious groups inhabit separate villages; intermarriage, although not explicitly forbidden, is rare and is, in fact, said to have been formerly taboo. The people of both groups are matrilineal and conform to the practice of matrilocal residence, with houses of the same descent group usually neighboring one another. The sphere dominated by members of the same descent group is called *laga*, and its members constitute fluid units on occasions of rituals, such as ancestor worshipping, while a unit of expenditure or the production of daily life is basically one household, which is composed of a husband, wife, and their children. Members of the same descent group recognize each other through the cemetery or gravesite of the group, and also through a lineage deity called *achiet atau*, who is worshipped in a basket and maintained by a woman called *po atau* (landlord of *atau*), of the descent group.

In the past, the Cham people of the region belonged to one of the two religious groups mentioned above; however, since the emergence of converts to Sunni Islam in the 1960s, another religious group has developed: Cham Islam. Cham Islam is usually described as followers of *Hồi giáo mới* in Vietnamese, which means “new Islam,” or *Cham biraw* in Cham, which means “New Cham.” According to previous studies, “New Islam” began to emerge in the 1960s, when some of the Cham Bani were exposed to the practice of Sunni Muslims in places such as Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). Realizing that their own religious practices were not authentic, they began to aim for purer Islamic practices (Nguyễn 1974, 272; Nakamura 1999, 104). After their conversion, the converts abandoned ancestor worship and, with the aid of the Islam Community, built mosques in their villages (Dohamide 1965, 56; Yoshimoto 2010, 243).⁷⁾

6) *Bà la môn giáo* has been described as indigenized Hinduism. For example, see Phan *et al.* (1991).

7) This caused clashes with other Cham Bani, who saw no contradictions with their traditional religious practices.



Map 1 “Muslim (*Hồi giáo*)” Residential Provinces and City in Vietnam

Today, there are approximately 100,000 Cham living in this region (see Table 2). As the table shows, the total population of the *Bà la môn giáo* is greater than that of the *Hồi giáo* (“Muslim”). The total “Muslim” population in both provinces is approximately 44,000. This number includes both the Cham Bani and Cham Islam; there are no statistics revealing the breakdown for each group. However, according to an official report in 2001, the population of the Cham Islam in Ninh Thuan province was 1,791, which counted four masjid. Thus the majority of the “Muslim” population in this region consists of the Cham Bani. The more than 40,000 Cham Bani of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces are scattered over 20 villages. Each village of Cham Bani usually has one masjid called *thang magik*.

This paper focuses on the Cham Bani religious situation and practices in Y Village, Bac Binh district, Binh Thuan province.⁸⁾ The village has approximately 3,800 inhabitants

8) My fieldwork was carried out mainly among the Cham communities in Bac Binh district, Binh Thuan province in 2001, 2002, and 2011.

Table 2 “Muslim” and *Bà la môn* Population in Vietnam

Province	Religion	Population		
		Both Sexes	Male	Female
Ninh Thuan	<i>Hồi giáo</i> “Muslim”	25,512	12,659	12,853
	<i>Bà la môn</i>	40,695	20,057	20,638
Binh Thuan	<i>Hồi giáo</i> “Muslim”	18,779	9,454	9,325
	<i>Bà la môn</i>	15,094	7,413	7,681

Source: Vietnam, Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee (CPHCSC) (2010)

and most are of Cham Bani origin. The majority of the villagers earn their living by growing paddy rice; however, since harvests are irregular because of the dry climate and poor soil, many villagers work on the side—making charcoal, collecting firewood, weaving, working as a housemaid in town, etc.—in order to supplement their income.

Certain religious practices prevail in the village, such as worship of the village god called *po yang* or *po palei* at a place of worship called *bimon*; worship of *po Auluah* (Allah), which has roots in Islam, at the *thang magik* (masjid); worship of the dead such as ancestor worship, and worship of the lineage deity *achiet atau* as mentioned previously.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, villagers used to live on a hill at the foot of a mountain, but today they live on some flat land close to National Highway 1.⁹⁾ Although the hill area is no longer the site of daily activities, there remain graves, fields, and a religious building for *bimon* worshipping, the mausoleum of a Champa king or his servant, *Po Klong Sak*. On the flat land can be found paddy fields and buildings, including the village office, a clinic, a post office, an elementary school, and a *thang magik* for worshipping *po Auluah*.

Structurally, the Cham society in this region is made up of two categories: *hala Janan* (religious priests) and *ghiheh* (laity). I will set out the religious elements by focusing first on the types of religious priests. As shown in Table 3, there are different types of religious priests, who are, in turn, served by priests known as *acar* and *po acar*, and an elderly woman known as *muk buh*, who makes offerings in dishes for *acar* during the rituals. The main role of the *acar* is to oversee the worship of *po Auluah* and *muk kei* (ancestors), drawing on his knowledge of manuscripts, generically called *kura'an* (Quran), which are written in transformed Arabic letters called *akhar bini*.¹⁰⁾ Rituals in *thang magik*

9) According to the elders in the village, the villagers were forced to move under the Strategic Hamlet Program in 1959.

10) There are several types of *kura'an* in Cham Bani: *patar*, *murat*, *janreng*, *gar*, etc. In any of these *kura'an*, phonetic transcriptions and explanations, written using the traditional writing system called *akhar thrah*, are inserted.

Table 3 *Halau Janan* (Religious Priests) in the Cham Bani Village

Name	Sex	Main Roles	Induction Pattern of Knowledge	Number
<i>Acar</i>	Male	Prayers at <i>thang magik</i> (<i>vat</i>), recitation of <i>kura'an</i> for <i>po Auluah</i> and ancestors	<i>Akhar Bini</i> , <i>Akhar Thrah</i>	46
<i>Muk buh</i>	Female	Offerings for <i>acar</i> , <i>po Auluah</i>		1
<i>On muduon</i>	Male	Execution of <i>rija</i> and ritual worship of <i>po yang</i>	<i>Akhar Thrah</i>	3
<i>On kaing</i>	Male	Dance for <i>rija</i>	<i>Akhar Thrah</i>	1
<i>Muk pajau</i>	Female	Dance for <i>rija</i>		1
<i>Muk rija</i>	Female	Dance for <i>rija</i> , safeguarding of <i>achiet atau</i>		2

Source: Author's research at Y Village in 2003.

Table 4 Main Annual Rituals Held in the *Thang Magik*

Days (Lunar Calendar)	Event
1 st Friday of the 1 st month	<i>Suk Amuwan</i>
Every Friday for six weeks during the 6 th –7 th month (with each of the six <i>thang magik</i> taking turns)	<i>Suk Dang</i>
9 th month	<i>Ramuwan</i>
10 th day of the 12 th month	<i>Waha</i>

Source: Author's research at Y Village in 2003.

are organized on set days according to the lunar calendar and seem to be the principal religious events for the villagers (see Table 4). The *acar* also leads rites of passage such as marriages, funerals, and so forth. In fact, the people do not consider the *acar* merely as the community's priest but also as a representative of each descent group, as I describe in the next section. *Bimon* and *achiet atau* rituals are led by a priest called *on muduon*, guided by manuscripts written in *akhar thrah*, the traditional writing system of the Cham. These rituals, called *rija*, are meant to serve deities or *po yang*. They are not conducted in *thang magik* and are held according to the traditional *sakawi* calendar.¹¹⁾

In short, religious affairs are divided into two categories in the village. Rituals related to *po Auluah*, *thang magik*, as well as the rites of passage, are served by *acar* who have knowledge of *kura'an*; rituals for *po yang*, the village god, and lineage deities are led by *on muduon*. *Po Auluah* (Allah), *thang magik* (masjid), and *kura'an* are regarded as Islamic elements, having originated from Islam; however, they have been co-opted and

11) Villagers use the Western calendar and the Vietnamese lunisolar calendar on a daily basis while the traditional calendar, *sakawi*, is used for customary rituals. The *sakawi* plays no role in most people's lives; only religious priests and intellectuals consult it for information and guidance in organizing rituals and annual events (Yoshimoto 2011).

practiced quite differently in the Cham Bani society such that describing them simply as examples of “the diversity among commodities of Islam” is limiting and possibly inaccurate. In the next section, I describe how these elements are practiced in the region.

III Islamic Religious Practices in the Village

In this section, I will focus on three Islamic elements of the Cham Bani village: the *thang magik*, the recitation of the *kura'an*, and rituals conducted during Ramadan, called *Ramuwan*.

In both official and scholarly literature, *thang magik* has been translated as “mosque” and is considered to be one element that demonstrates the “Islam-ness” of Cham Bani because it is where people offer their prayers to Allah. Observations in situ reveal the interesting process of local acceptance of Islam, which might not be entirely captured in the translation.¹²⁾

Photo 1 shows the exterior of a *thang magik*. Its front wall is encased in concrete, it lacks towers like minarets, and it is painted with a variety of decorations and words. In the middle, towards the top of the front pillars, the number “1993” is written in Cham traditional letters, flanked on both sides by yin-yang figures. On the front side of the roof is a *honkan*, a symbolic figure of dualism in Cham society (see details in Section IV). Inside, one finds a wooden box-like pulpit called *minbar*, from which the *acar* recites the *kura'an* during the Friday prayer ritual (Photo 2). For the villagers, this pulpit should be placed to the west—“the direction of the *Maka* (Makkah).” The frame of the pulpit is painted red, with pictures of dragons that resemble the holy snake, *Naga*, as well as a *gai bhong*, a red rod wrapped in a white cloth. The red rod is considered to be a symbol of *po Mohamat*, Muhammad.

The *thang magik* is unlike the Islamic mosque—it is closed most of the time and people do not enter for prayers five times a day—but like other Islamic religious centers, it is regarded as the main communal setting for rituals, which are administered on Fridays of certain months of the lunar calendar (Table 4).

As mentioned above, the Cham society in this region is composed of two categories—religious priests and the laity—so participants and practices at *thang magik* are notably different. The villagers use different words for “pray”: for example, the prayer

12) According to Aymonier’s Cham-French dictionary, *magik* means “masjid” and *thang* means “house” (Aymonier 1906, 367).



Photo 1 Exterior of a *Thang Magik*



Photo 2 A *Minbar* inside a *Thang Magik*

by the *acar* for *po Auluah*, with recitations from the *kura'an* and accompanied by special body movements, is called *vat*. On the other hand, the laity's prayer, without any recitation, is described as *lancan* and *tampah*. These are dedicated to *po Auluah*, the



Photo 3 Textbook for Laypersons (Edited by Phuoc Nhon Village Doctrine Committee 1971)

village god and lineage deities. The laity can only connect to *po Auluah* or the deities through priests as their medium.¹³⁾

The *acar* carry out Islamic religious practices on behalf of the villagers, such as recitation of the *kura'an*, but they do not follow Muslim duties strictly, not even the requisite prayers five times a day. In fact, they are not considered by the villagers as simply priests but also as representatives of each descent group because of the important role they play, particularly in funeral rituals and ancestor worship. Therefore the motivation to become an *acar* is usually explained by a desire to serve the descendant group.

In the Cham Bani society, studying the *kura'an* is the right—and obligation—of male members, and is not reserved solely for the *acar*. Boys who reach the age of 12–13 years old must study Arabic text in the *kura'an* at the *thang magik*. When they are able to recite some phrases and pass an exam, they celebrate this rite of passage called *talaik kalem*,¹⁴⁾ after which they are given the right to study the *kura'an*. Photo 3 shows a textbook for the laity that was edited by an *acar* living in Ninh Thuan province in 1971. Written in Vietnamese on the cover are the words: “the sacred phrases to serve your ancestors,” and in the preface the sentence: “*akhar rah, akhar mukey, akhar ta-a*” (phrases

13) There are no differences in the laity's prayers no matter what rank. Laymen's prayers for *po Auluah* are also no different from that for *po yang*; *po Auluah* is positioned as one of the deities. In this respect, *po Auluah* is manifestly not the same as the Islamic god Allah.

14) *Talaik* (open) *kalem* (a brush) means “begin writing.” This ritual consists mainly of boys reading aloud the Arabic alphabet called *akhar Bini* and *bismillah* (the phrase uttered before reciting each chapter of the Quran), following the *acar*'s direction.

Table 5 Main Events of *Ramuwan* in Y Village

Day (Date)	Events	
Shaban 25	July 27	The <i>acar</i> organize <i>thao bah</i> and <i>thao het</i> for purification before <i>Ramuwan</i> .
26–28	July 28–30	<i>Nao ghur</i> : The <i>acar</i> lead villagers to graveyards for recitations from the <i>kura'an</i> to invite their ancestors home.
28–29	July 30–31	Members of the descent groups organize <i>mbeng muk kei</i> , where they make offerings to ancestral spirits. The <i>acar</i> of each descent group visits members' places of worship and recites the <i>kura'an</i> .
29	July 31	The <i>acar</i> shave their heads before leaving for the <i>thang magik</i> . <i>Peh thang magik</i> : opening the door of the <i>thang magik</i> . The <i>acar</i> enter with their baggage before the evening rituals. They change their clothes for the ritual <i>ricaow</i> , and the purification is carried out.
Ramadan 1–3	Aug 1	The <i>acar</i> stay at the <i>thang magik</i> and do not leave. The <i>acar</i> and the villagers adhere to a vegetarian diet.
5	Aug 5	<i>Patrun gai bhong</i> : the depositing of the “red rod” is carried out in the morning. After this ceremony, the villagers can once again eat meat.
15	Aug 15	<i>Muk trun</i> : the advent of female deities and ancestors.
20	Aug 20	<i>On trun</i> : the advent of male deities and ancestors.
27	Aug 27	<i>Tuh barah</i> : offering of rice to elders and ancestors.
28	Aug 28	<i>Malau on</i> : seeing the deities and ancestors off.
30	Aug 30	<i>Parabha brah</i> : distribution of rice for the offering. <i>Trun gai bhong</i> : the depositing of “the red rod” for the ritual advancement of the <i>acar</i> on the following day.
Syawwal 1	Aug 31	<i>Talaihwak edao</i> : closing ceremony for <i>Ramuwan</i> . <i>Tagok madin</i> : ceremony of <i>acar</i> advancement.

Source: Author's research in July and August 2011.

of *rah*, phrases for ancestors, phrases for praying). These three phrases are effective in ancestor worship and must be studied by Bani males. The textbook also quotes four passages from the *kura'an* that the Cham Bani recite for ancestral service, when visiting a graveyard, and during a funeral. Thus it can be seen that in Cham Bani society, reciting from the *kura'an* serves as an offering to ancestral spirits and not as a Muslim duty.

Next I will describe the ritual process in Ramadan. For the villagers, Ramadan, which they call *Ramuwan*, is the most important season in their religious life. It is a sacred month because it is the time when ancestors return home, and the *acar* stay at the *thang magik* for one month and adhere to a vegetarian diet. Although *Ramuwan* has been described as a distorted version of the Muslim fasting month, the people do not actually fast.

Table 5 shows the main ritual processes of *Ramuwan*. As we can see, many of the rites are similar to a memorial service. Three days before the first day of the month of *Ramuwan*, people visit the graveyards of their matrilineal lineage and invite their ancestral spirits back to their houses. After the three-day graveyard visits, people make offerings to the ancestral spirits residing in their homes. First, they prepare a meal offering to every ancestral spirit, then they make individual offerings to descendant members

Table 6 Prayers during *Ramuwan* in Y Village

Time	Events
19:30	<i>Esa</i> : the main <i>vat</i> ; laywomen bring offerings.
21:00	<i>Acar</i> have their evening meal.
07:30	<i>Sub hik</i>
10:30	<i>Wah rik</i> : after the <i>vat</i> , the <i>acar</i> eat a light meal and confectioneries.
14:00	<i>Essak rik</i>
15:00	<i>Grip bak</i> : after this <i>vat</i> , <i>acar</i> eat their daytime meal.

Source: Author's research in July and August 2011.

who have passed away. These offerings are made by male members who recite the *kura'an*, and who are usually *acar*; however, the oldest woman of the household usually has the responsibility of remembering the names of the deceased over a span of approximately seven generations.¹⁵⁾ After the offerings, a place for the ancestral spirits is set up in the house, and an individual is responsible for keeping this place clean at all times.

On the first day of Ramadan, after sunset, the *acar* enter the *thang magik*. This marks the beginning of the holy month of *Ramuwan*. During this month, they stay in the *thang magik*, away from their families to serve Allah five times a day; however, as Table 6 shows, the names and times of prayers are different from Muslim prayers. Laywomen and elderly men, all dressed in white, watch and participate in these prayers, but they do not recite the *kura'an*. The main function of the females is to bring sets of betel nuts for the ancestral spirits and to pray for blessings.

Women's participation in the religious ceremony is crucial and they play a significant role. The wife, or other female members of the descendant group, prepares special meals for the priests twice a day—before sunrise and after sunset. According to a woman of a house that I observed, the rice prepared by the women is eaten in the morning by the priests for ancestors, and in the evening, it is eaten for *po Auluah*.

While the priests fast for the first three days, laypeople do not observe the ritual of fasting at all; nevertheless, they are forbidden from eating meat for the first three days of the month, until the “red rod” is deposited.¹⁶⁾ Women make special offerings for female spirits on the 15th, and for male spirits on the 20th. Offerings continue to be made for ancestral spirits at the mosque until the 27th, when they return to their world.

15) In a house that I observed in 2010, in Ninh Thuan province, a woman around 52 years old said she invited about 50 spirits and members, both of matrilineal and patrilineal lineages. She said her deceased mother used to invite about 80 spirits and members, but she could not remember all of them so the number was reduced.

16) The length of abstention from meat depends on the area: for example, the Cham Bani in Ninh Thuan province are forbidden to eat meat for 15 days.



Photo 4 Offerings for Male Spirits in the *Thang Magik*

As I mentioned earlier, the *acar* and laypeople have different prayers. The prayers of the *acar* begin with a part called *vat* and finish with a section called *mroi*. *Vat* starts with ablutions, followed by a fixed sequence of movements: standing, prostrating, kneeling, and sitting, each conducted with a set reading from the *kura'an*, with the *acar* facing west all the time. After the *vat*, the *acar* sit up facing east and eat an offering for *po Auluah* or ancestors, then transition into the *mroi*, the closing ceremony that includes burning a piece of eagle wood.

The laity's prayers, called *lančan* and *tampah*, do not include reading from the *kura'an*; instead the people make individual wishes for health and prosperity—in short, worldly interests. They do not consume food offerings but bring some home as a food of grace.

As we have observed, people visit graveyards to bring ancestral spirits back home, make offerings to these spirits, and visit the *thang magik* with betel nuts offerings. They pray to *po Auluah*, but as we have seen, *Ramuwan* is mostly a month for memorial services and prayers for benefits.

IV The Cham Bani Discourse on Religion

As mentioned earlier, some argue that Cham Bani should not be considered as a form of Islam but as a branch or sect of a religious system. The ethnologist, Thanh Phan, who is of Cham Bani origin, explains Cham Bani as follows:

Chams used to have two religious sects *Awal* and *Ahier*. . . . In colloquial language *Awal* is called Bani. Chams see *Awal* as symbolizing women and *Ahier* as symbolizing men. These two are diametrically opposed to each other in a sense, yet also cannot exist one without the other. . . . People of the Bani sect adopted Islamic thoughts and culture but they did not accept them passively or

Table 7 Examples of *Awal-Ahier* Attributions

<i>Ahier</i> (yang)	<i>Awal</i> (ying)
Balamon	Bani
Male	Female
1 st –15 th of the month Morning	16 th –30 th of the month Afternoon
<i>On maduon</i>	<i>Acar</i>
<i>On Kaing</i>	<i>Po Aulouah</i>
<i>Muk rija</i>	<i>Thang magik</i>
<i>Po yang, Muk kei</i>	
East	West

Source: Nakamura (1999) and author's research.

mechanically; instead, by creatively and selectively adopting them, they assimilated the new religion into their own economic and cultural practices. This is why even today they do not worship only Allah but also other gods. (Thành 1996, 166)

According to this explanation, Bani is one sect of a people divided into *Awal* and *Ahier*. These words can be traced to the Arabic words meaning “last” and “first” respectively, and supplemented with a religious connotation of “woman” and “man.”

Nakamura, based on her lengthy fieldwork, also traced the Cham religion from the perspective of *Awal-Ahier* (Nakamura 1999). According to Nakamura, all the phenomena of Cham society are constituted in the form of binary oppositions: for example, the relationship between Cham Balamon and Cham Bani achieves a harmony with the former belonging to *Awal* and the latter to *Ahier* sects. The religious elements in the Cham Bani village are drawn from a combination of *Awal* and *Ahier* elements (see Table 7).

Photo 5 is a *honcan*, a figure that illustrates the concept of *Awal-Ahier* dualism. As mentioned earlier, this figure, which resembles the Onkara of Balinese Hinduism, is painted on the roof of the *thang magik* in the village. Cham Bani is symbolized by the figure of the moon and the number 6 in traditional Cham letters, while Cham Balamon by the sun and the number 3. Together it demonstrates the fusion of the two.

**Photo 5** A *Honcan*

This concept of *Awal-Ahier* is emphasized by Cham Bani intellectuals and ordained priests in discussions about Islam in Cham society, possibly as a means to validate the “authenticity” of the Cham Bani religion in the face of criticism by “orthodox” Islam and rejection of the indigenous elements within the Cham Bani religion. *Awal-Ahier* is understood as the syncretism that affirms the tolerance of Cham society. For these intellectuals, the Islamic religious practices of Cham Bani should be viewed through the *Awal-Ahier* perspective, rather than categorized as Islamic or non-Islamic. In my opinion, however, ordinary people are unfamiliar with these concepts and only understand that they are practicing their religion in the age-old, long-established manner.

V Conclusion

As mentioned in the first section, the Cham Bani have been considered as unorthodox Muslims because they recite the Quran and believe in Allah, yet do not strictly follow the Islamic faith. This perception is based on the idea that those who recite the Quran and fast during Ramadan are performing their Muslim duty and partake in the “commonality of Islam.” This is a perception based on essentialism.

Such classification is unrealistic. As we have seen, Islamic religious practices among the Cham Bani differ widely depending on gender or social strata. Members of the Cham Bani do not have a single feature in common across the board. In other words, it can be said that the Cham Bani is a polythetic class.

Hôi giáo in Vietnam, regardless of the criteria used in the classification, is indeed a polythetic class, as opposed to the conventional classification of Muslim. On the question of self-recognition, not all of those officially classified as “Muslim” or *Hôi giáo* identify themselves as Muslim. Cham Bani people actually identify themselves as followers of *Hôi giáo*, calling themselves *tín đồ Hôi giáo* or *tín đồ đạo Hôi*. This does not, however, mean that they accept to be identified with Islam. They describe themselves as not of the Islam sect but Bani. In other words, they subscribe to a Vietnamese religious category that includes Cham Islam and Cham Bani, but not one where Islam is connected with the wider Islam community. To put it another way, the word “Islam” has two meanings in Vietnam: the first is Islam in a broad sense as the English translation of *Hôi giáo*; the second is Islam in a narrower sense as one of the groups of *Hôi giáo*—Cham Islam or Sunni Muslim.

This reality is not taken into account by the state and official classification is monothetic. Here I will discuss the state’s stance towards syncretic religions such as Cham Bani. Since the beginning of the Doi Moi period, there has been much debate on religions

in Vietnam. The state has tended to consider cases such as Cham Bani, where foreign religion became “indigenized” (*dân tộc hóa*) as something positive.¹⁷ We can see this quite clearly in an excerpt from a government white paper of 2006:

Exogenous religions entering Vietnam have adapted to the cultural and religious complexions of the Vietnamese people. As a result, they have transformed from their original form; in other words, once these exogenous religions entered Vietnam, they were assimilated by Vietnamese culture. . . . Whether following exogenous or native religions, Vietnamese believers in general are influenced by polytheism, by a spirit of religious tolerance and of nationalism. (Vietnam, GCRA 2006, 9)

Incidentally, it has long used the term “religious syncretism” by anthropologists to explain the phenomenon in which a new or an exogenous religion, introduced to a specific society, either mixes or coexists with local religions as it is adopted. Within this framework, the debate was centered upon the question of whether the exogenous and local religions coexist without eliminating the border between them, or whether they blend together in a seamless form to create a new and coherent religious system. This idea, however, has been criticized from many directions (Leopold and Jensen 2004). For instance, some argued that all religions currently practiced are the products of syncretism, having incorporated elements from many different religious traditions. Others were concerned that because the idea of “authentic religion” is inherent in the idea of syncretism, it has imputed negative connotations such as “impure” and “inauthentic” to the real religious phenomena.

Anthropologists have focused on the discourses on syncretism or the processes through which different religions merge, examining how power is exercised in the process of legitimization or de-legitimization of certain religious practices (for example, Stewart and Shaw 1994). While some cultures embrace syncretism as evidence of their tolerance toward different cultures, others hold an “anti-syncretic” attitude, asserting their cultural “authenticity” by rejecting or erasing the “impure” cultural elements from their practices.

How then does religious assimilation occur in Vietnam? How does the foreign religion become “indigenized” (*dân tộc hóa*)? In the case of Cham Bani, this occurs by sustaining the worship of ancestors (*muk kei*) and deities (*yang*), including spirits of the members of each descendant group, village gods, and spirits of Champa kings or those who have served the kingdom. These are the local religious elements shared with the Cham Balamon, another religious group among the Cham. It is precisely in this way that Cham Bani differentiate themselves from Cham Islam by sustaining these elements.

17) For example, Đặng (2004).

From this perspective, it could be said that the Cham Bani might exist as Muslim only as recognized by the state. Perhaps, in a nation like Vietnam where a single religion does not constitute the glue of national unity, religious syncretism is linked to the idea of unique indigenous cultures that buttresses the image of a multi-ethnic Vietnam. It is precisely this religious syncretism that is held up as being “authentic.”

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