



The Role of Muslim Youth in Promotion Education in Cambodia

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Abstract

The Muslim community in Cambodia, generally known as “Cham”, descended from refugees from the ancient Kingdom of Champa who fled central Vietnam 500 years ago. The community has faced two main dramatic periods of persecution. The first began with the end of the Champa kingdom in the 16th century and the Khmer Rouge period lives on in the collective memory of Cambodians from 1975 to 1979, up to 2 million Cambodians were killed, with many more displaced and separated from their families. This study is to describe the situational context of the Cham Muslim minority setting in Cambodia as well as specific problems in the formal education using literature review and data analysis. On the way towards universal primary education, Cambodia has made good progress over the past fifteen years. In 2014, the net enrolment rate in primary school was 98.4 per cent, the primary school completion rate was 89.9 per cent and the literacy rate of people aged 15-24 years was 91 per cent. In Islamic education, MoEYS allocated 1,500 teaching positions with civil service status to the Islamic education school system. Of those, currently, 1,391 Islamic school teachers hold that title and receive their salaries from the RGC. Recruitment of the 1,391 Islamic school teachers to become civil service teachers was done by MoEYS, in collaboration with the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in Cambodia (referred to as Mufti), which has a leadership team appointed by the RGC. The qualitative data confirms that Islamic schools are not a monolithic entity. There are a variety of ways Islamic schools are administered, offering different curricula and serving diverse Muslim communities across Cambodia.

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INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community in Cambodia, generally known as “Cham”, descended from refugees from the ancient Kingdom of Champa who fled central Vietnam 500 years ago. The community has faced two main dramatic periods of persecution (Islam Cambodia, 2014). The first began with the end of the Champa kingdom in the 16th century, when Cham, most of whom are Sunnis of Malay influence, were persecuted and murdered, thus having to migrate to Cambodia. The Cham community are descendants of the once-powerful Champa kingdom located in modern-day Vietnam, of Austronesian origin.

The Khmer Rouge period lives on in the collective memory of Cambodians. During the four years from 1975 to 1979, up to 2 million Cambodians were killed, with many more displaced and separated from their families. During the period, Chams are predominantly Muslim were targeted by Pol Pot’s regime with estimates stating that no fewer than 90,000 Islam followers died (Osborn., and Milton, 2004). The country suffered a deep trauma that continues to define the emotions and everyday lives of Cambodians from all generations. Such a traumatic experience has created an environment where trust is fragile and community participation in education is apprehensive.

Chams are predominantly Muslim (designation by the government as *Khmer Islam*), with a small percentage identifying as Buddhist and they speak their language and have a unique set of customs and religious practices (Hamid et al, 2006). Muslim students either attend both state and Islamic schools or choose one or the other (UNICEF 2018). This is true for rural and urban settings. Often, state schools and Islamic schools operating in Muslim majority communities negotiate half-day schedules to incentivize students to attend both types of schools. As opposed to state schools, Islamic schools operate privately and have a variety of fee structures that parents are aware of before registration. The Cambodian Islamic school curriculum is adapted from the Malaysian state curriculum, which allows many Islamic school graduates to pursue higher education or work opportunities in Malaysia or other Muslim-majority countries.

The social capital has emerged as one of the primary motivations behind Muslim families sending their children to Islamic schools. Islamic schools connect children to greater educational and economic opportunities abroad, such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Arab countries. Islamic schools often teach students Malay and/or Arabic languages to equip them with the cultural knowledge and skills that facilitate the transition to foreign universities and/or workplaces. The study is to describe the situational context of the Cham Muslim minority setting in Cambodia as well as specific problems informal education.

METHODS

This research study was divided into three phases: a desk review, analysis by using advance excel, and report drafting. The desk review included a literature review of existing academic and journalistic resources on Islamic schools, Cham Muslim students. Information sources comprised academic journal reports; journalistic articles; pamphlets, documents and reports from in-country organizations and partners; and

literature obtained from Highest council for Islamic religious affairs Cambodia (HICIRAC). Further information was collected through in-country consultations with partner organizations and local NGOs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Cambodia Education

On the way towards universal primary education, Cambodia has made good progress over the past fifteen years (OECD, 2018). In 2014, the net enrolment rate in primary school was 98.4 per cent, the primary school completion rate was 89.9 per cent and the literacy rate of people aged 15-24 years was 91 per cent. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), many young people drop out of school and access to secondary education shows high inequalities across gender, location and socio-economic groups, with a total secondary net enrolment rate of only 27.7 per cent in 2014 (OECD, 2020). The drop-out rate gets high when it comes to secondary education, reaching 21 per cent in lower secondary in 2014. Although rural and poorest youth had an improved opportunity to enter higher grades, their rate of school enrolment is still low compared with urban and richest youth (OECD, 2018). Even though higher education remains far beyond the reach of most rural and female youth (ASEAN post,2018), the gross enrolment rate in tertiary education among youth aged between 18 and 22 improved significantly over the last 10 years from 4.9 to 20 per cent, including for the poorest households from 0.2 to 2.6 per cent and women 3.3 to 17.4 per cent (OECD, 2018).

According to ASEAN post 2018, both access and quality of education pose crucial issues and indicate a need for more relevant school curricula, sufficiently trained teachers, and more resources for school improvements. Based on OECD 2018 survey, the Cambodian government established the Education Strategic Plan (2014-2018) to ensure equitable access for all to education services, enhance the quality and relevance of learning and ensure effective leadership and management of education staff at all levels. Increased focus on access to secondary schools, school retention, and vocational training can provide Cambodia's youth with a greater prospect for their future (OECD, 2018).

2. Islamic Schools

Islamic education was devastated during the Khmer Rouge period, with nearly every school ceasing operations and Islamic intellectuals, including Cham, being executed (UNICEF, 2018). After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, the remaining few Islam-educated individuals felt the weight of responsibility and conviction to rebuild Islamic education in Cambodia. According to UNICEF survey 2018, in 1998, efforts to rebuild Islamic education began in earnest. Despite relatively slow growth, there are more than 713 learning centres across Cambodia today. Unlike traditional schools, the physical structures of Islamic schools vary widely, ranging from one classroom in a small home to a classroom constructed next to a mosque, to a formal school compound.

Islamic schools represent one school system in which the lines between public and private education are blurred. Islamic schools are primarily financed by private sources, such as the Saudi Arabian government, the Malaysian

government, private family foundations and the local community. As a result, funding can be completely unreliable and irregular (UNICEF, 2018). However, in 2015, MoEYS allocated 1,500 teaching positions with civil service status to the Islamic education school system. Of those, currently, 1,391 Islamic school teachers hold that title and receive their salaries from the RGC. Recruitment of the 1,391 Islamic school teachers to become civil service teachers was done by MoEYS, in collaboration with the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in Cambodia (referred to as Mufti), which has a leadership team appointed by the RGC.



Fig. 1. An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh

Islamic schools are not overseen or monitored by one centralized management system (UNICEF, 2018). Some schools fall under the jurisdiction of Mufti. These schools are more unified and therefore easier to describe, as they employ the same curriculum and are overseen by the same institution. To better administer the school within the system, Mufti appointed provincial and district imams to supervise education affairs. This is similar to the MoEYS system of provincial and district offices of education. Other more informal Islamic schools, such as those operating out of community homes, employ either contract teachers or community/volunteer teachers who receive their salaries through private donations (UNICEF, 2018). These schools are more difficult to describe, as they are context-specific and operate entirely at the discretion of the community member(s) leading them.

In terms of curriculum, the schools that fall under Mufti's jurisdiction employ a curriculum imported from Malaysia. Before disseminating the curriculum, Mufti contextualizes the content to better match local need. Schools that operate independently offer subjects ranging from teaching directly from the Quran to curricula imported from Egypt, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia or other Islamic countries. Cambodian Islamic education centres around religious-based studies. Typically, subjects include Quranic teachings, Aqidah (morality), Fiqh (prayer preparation), Islamic history and Arabic. Some schools also include English and Malay language courses (UNICEF, 2018). The language of instruction can range from Khmer to Cham, Arabic and Malay, depending on the student body and subject matter.

Most Islamic schools work in tandem with the public-school system by offering morning or afternoon sessions, which enables students to attend both types of schools. Despite the heavy workload, many students do manage to attend both. The qualitative data confirms that Islamic schools are not a monolithic entity. There are a variety of ways Islamic schools are administered, offering different curricula and serving diverse Muslim communities across Cambodia. Except for the Cham-majority state school included in the sample, each of the schools is overseen by Mufti and use an adapted version of the Malaysian curriculum. Many other Islamic community schools or schools within mosques exist in Cambodia. This is because individuals can and do establish Islamic education classes and/or schools within mosques, allowing full discretion to dictate teaching and operations.

3. **Role of Muslim Youth in Education**

History records that since pre-independence, young people have been active in educational activities. The establishment of the group and the Association, for example, is proof that from the very beginning youth have been involved in the education sector. In a situation where education is still facing such big problems, as well as the challenges of the era of globalization that are so strong, the role of youth in the present time, although the spirit is the same, the form and program can be different from the previous situation. This role can be stated as follows.

First, apart from being good educators, young people can become volunteers who strive to educate the nation's life. In the past, some students were mobilized to become educators voluntarily, especially for people in rural areas. The nature and character of youth as mentioned above, enable the youth to carry out this task.

Second, youths can build alternative non-formal schools to help children who drop out of school due to problems with the cost of education. Until now, there are still many school-age children who cannot continue their education due to lack of funds.

Third, youth can carry out alternative education through the package A program (equivalent to Ibtidaiyah), the package B program (equivalent to Tsanawiyah, the package C program (equivalent to Aliyah for social groups that do not have the requirements to attend formal education). For example, children of beggars, prostitutes, street singers, scavengers, etc. The implementation of this education can take advantage of various existing facilities in the community, such as village hall, abandoned houses, abandoned buildings, parking lots, unused stalls, and even open spaces, masjid etc.

Fourth, youths can carry out education by utilizing information and communication media by disseminating writings on educational problems that occur which are made by youth. With the spread of writings through the media, this can make people aware of the current condition of Cambodian education. Or the youth can directly enter the community to promote the importance of education for the life of the nation.

CONCLUSION

While the research findings presented in this report provide some insights into Islamic schools and the communities they serve. The research achieved the goal of developing a foundational understanding of these communities as well as Cambodia education. This study highlights the necessity for even more research. The research team urges HICIRAC and other development partners to build on the knowledge gathered thus far. By highlighting these marginalized and vulnerable communities, future programming efforts will be better informed and Cambodia's education system as a whole will be strengthened.

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