Emerging Islamic Representations in the Cambodian Muslim Social Media Scene: Complex Divides and Muted Debates

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Abstract:

This article explores the characteristics and structure of the Cambodian Muslim social media scene and considers what they tell us about the sociopolitical setting of the country's Muslim minority. It focuses on how the relationship between Islamic actors of the Cambodian Muslim minority, that is, groups, movements and institutions, and their offline environment shape their online representations and proselytization activities. It particularly considers the observation that theological debate is almost absent in this Islamic social media scene compared to that of other Southeast Asian Muslim societies and attempts to find answers to the question of why this is the case. The article particularly examines the Facebook pages of various Islamic groups and explains the sociopolitical factors and language politics that inform the ways in which they formulate the contents and style of their posts. It shows how the close connections between the political and the religious fields in an authoritarian setting, where the state strongly discourages social discord, have the effect of largely muting debates on social media.

Keywords:
Cambodia, Islam, social media, divides

Introduction

The multiplicity of actors within Cambodia's Muslim minority has led to competing efforts to define what a good Muslim is – efforts that are now increasingly made on social media. In addition to the creation and maintenance

of web pages by many Islamic organizations, there is increased use of platforms such as Facebook which permit many more noninstitutional voices to be heard as they permit individuals who are not particularly tech-savvy to easily create a profile free of charge.* The formation and organization of this online Islamic public forum bear careful study, as it is a very recent phenomenon in Cambodia[1], and it affords researchers the opportunity to observe the processes by which religious life finds expression online.

Most scholarly attention has been paid to the emergence and role of social media in Southeast Asia's preaching economy (Hew 2015; Slama 2017; Nisa 2018b) and the manifestations of ideological and theological arguments and cleavages on these platforms (Nuraniyah 2017; Schmidt 2018; Nisa 2018a; Slama and Barendregt 2018; Husein and Slama 2018). Yet, most of the research is concerned with Indonesia and to a lesser extent Malaysia, while focus on Mainland Southeast Asia is missing. Therefore, our discussion on how the complex relationship between Islamic actors of the Cambodian Muslim minority and their offline environment shape their online proselytization activities intends to contribute to filling this lacuna.

This article also adds to the emerging scholarly literature on Islam in Cambodia. Scholars have focused on the history, socioreligious divisions, and Islamic movements in the community. There are a number of studies that have scrutinized the Islamic religious landscape, its cleavages and divides, and the dynamics and competition of Cambodian Islamic movements (Collins 1996; Blengsli 2009; Bruckmayr 2017; 2019; Pall and Pérez 2020). However, these studies comprise little consideration of *da'wa* (online proselytization).

Most of the scholars of Muslim social media activism in Southeast Asia explore lively scenes of debates between the various Muslim groups (especially Weng 2015; Nuraniyah 2017; Schmidt 2018; Slama 2020), while the Cambodian Muslim social media scene is rather silent in this respect. In this article, we raise the question of why the competition in the Islamic landscape offline is to a much lesser extent reflected in the emerging Muslim social media scene.

Mapping the Contemporary Cambodian Islamic Scene and its Complex Divides

Background and historical development

Muslims are a minority in Cambodia, representing approximately 400–800 thousand people in a nation of 16 million. Of these, roughly three-quarters are ethnic *Cham*, an Austronesian speaking ethnic group who migrated to Cambodia from the southern coasts of contemporary Vietnam. The rest are mostly descendants of Malay traders who settled in the country generations ago and adopted the Khmer language. These are commonly called *Chvea,*[2] and despite sharing a religion with the Cham, each ethnic group considers itself distinct from the other (Collins 1996).

There are Muslim communities throughout the country, with the Cham being more numerous in areas north and east of Phnom Penh and the Chvea being the dominant group south of the capital. The entire Cham population of Cambodia is Muslim with the vast majority being Sunni and largely following the *madhhab* (Shafi'i legal school). Approximately ten percent of Muslims belong to the *Krom Kan Imam San* (Community of Imam San) which follows a separate Islamic tradition that interprets the teachings of the religion in the context of their Cham heritage (Bruckmayr 2017). In addition to these groups, there are smaller numbers of Shi'i and Ahmadi Muslims in the country (Stock 2020).

The Islamic practices of most Cambodian Muslims greatly resemble those of Muslims in the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra. This is a result of a sweeping process of cultural change that Bruckmayr (2019) calls *Jawization*. Starting from the second half of the 19th century, most Cambodian Muslims adopted Malay as the language of religious instruction, the Shafi'i *madhhab* that is dominant in the Southeast Asian region and a body of Shafi'i religious literature written in Malay (Bruckmayr 2019, 86–89). A relatively minor segment of Cambodian Muslims was influenced by the Islamic reformism of Egypt in the early 20th century. The objective of the reformist Islamic movement was to enable the direct interpretation of scripture free from the bond of legal schools and the related scholarly traditions in order to match Islam with modernity (Bruckmayr 2019, 124–153).

The Krom Kan Imam San remained outside these religious trends, however, resisting both Malay and Middle Eastern influences and continuing to follow a synthesis of Islamic and Cham traditions and practices which includes a different form of prayer performed by the religious elite on Fridays, healing rituals and the inclusion of spirit possession ceremonies in their religious practice (Pérez 2012, 121–188). Cham manuscripts written in both Arabic and Cham in the Indic Cham script are central for their ritual practice and religious instruction (Bruckmayr 2017, 214–217). This community takes its name from Imam San, a 19th-century religious leader who is venerated as a saint with his birthday commemorated at his grave on Oudong mountain, which is also the resting place of past Cambodian monarchs.

The evolution of Cambodian Muslim religious life was severely disrupted under the murderous *Khmer Rouge regime* (1975–79). Most religious leaders were killed and much of the religious infrastructure including mosques and Islamic schools were destroyed. Many of the villages were razed and the inhabitants displaced and resettled elsewhere in order to break up their communities (Osman 2012).

While some reconstruction already started almost immediately after the 1979 defeat of the Khmer Rouge by the invading Vietnamese, it accelerated after the withdrawal of the UN Transitional Authority in 1993. It was then that many NGOs became established in Cambodia, including several Islamic charities from Malaysia and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. These NGOs, besides providing humanitarian help and assisting Muslims in rebuilding their religious institutions, also carried out missionary work in connection to transnational Islamic movements. As a result of their activities, a religious scene of unprecedented variegation has developed in the past decades among the Cambodian Muslims.

Islamic actors in Hun Sen's regime

Islam in Cambodia is institutionalized and well-integrated into the structure of the state, which is dominated by the ruling *Cambodian People's Party*. Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in his position since

1984 when he became the leader of the Vietnam sponsored socialist regime, the *People's Republic of Kampuchea* (1979–89). Although during the UN Transitional Authority mandate a multiparty parliamentary system was created, since the second half of the 1990s the Cambodian People's Party has been dominating the Cambodian political scene (Strangio 2014 89–109).

The regime maintains a network of patron–client relationships that evolved from its dominance of the rural areas. Since the creation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea in 1979, the party (until 1991 under the name of *Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party*) has managed to keep its cadres in the rural communes who played key roles in creating a system of handouts and surveillance (Un 2005, 213–24). Starting from the 1990s, the Cambodian People's Party attracted most of the business community to its patronage networks. Today tycoons who have been granted favorable state contracts are expected to make large donations to the Cambodian People's Party. Public servants are required to make donations to Cambodian People's Party's Working Group which are then used to carry out development projects to win the sympathy of the rural population (Milne 2015).

Patronage and cooptation characterize the regime's relationship to religion as well. In the case of Buddhism for example, which is followed by the majority of the society, the leading figures of the main factions are patronized by the Cambodian People's Party. Temples receive generous donations from politicians and businessmen attached to the ruling party in exchange for political quietism and keeping monks critical to the regime in line (Guthrie 2002; Strangio 2014, 199–205; O'Lemmon 2014).

The situation for Muslim groups in the country is similar to them, getting access to state institutions and resources and foreign Islamic NGOs being able to launch projects in the country with the approval of national authorities. In exchange, Cambodian Muslim actors can be counted on to support the Cambodian People's Party during elections, refrain from oppositional activities and keep intracommunity frictions to a minimum. This latter is particularly important, as one of the bases of the regime's legitimacy is that it

is the key to stability and peaceful development in Cambodia (Strangio 2014, 84, 98, 114).

There is a single Mufti in the country who, in principle, represents the entire Sunni population. Oknha Kamaruddin bin Yusof was appointed to the position in 1996 by Prime Minister Hun Sen with whom he enjoys a good working relationship. The Imam San community is headed by the *Ong Gnur* Mat Sa and possesses separate religious and educational institutions from the majority Sunnis.

The main source of the Mufti's influence as the highest-ranking official in the state's Islamic bureaucracy among the Cambodian Muslims is his access to the Cambodian ruling elite. The latter ensures that projects initiated by the Mufti enjoy state support. The Mufti also oversees the Annikmah school network and has a good relationship with Malaysian benefactors, which considerably increases his standing among the Muslim community. The Annikmah network is made up of a number of madrasas that use Malay as a language of study and implement the curriculum of *Yayasan Islam Kelantan*, a school network maintained by the government of Kelantan, one of the member states of Malaysia (Blengsli 2009, 189–190). Being a large organization, Annikmah provides the Mufti with a pool of supporters and the resources to support and promote Muslim leaders who fill important positions as religious functionaries and bureaucrats in the country's Islamic institutional system. The Mufti also has strong ties to several Malaysian private donors and NGOs. Through these contacts, he is able to provide his clients with financial resources to carry out various charity and religious activities.

Since the 1990s, a vast number of foreign NGOs (mostly nonreligious) have become established in Cambodia. In fact, with around three thousand NGOs, the country has one of the highest numbers of NGOs per capita in the world (Domashneva 2013). Several of these are Islamic organizations based in the Gulf monarchies and Malaysia. These Muslim NGOs often serve as gateways for Cambodian Muslims to become acquainted with transnational Islamic movements. The *Muslim Brotherhood* established its presence when the Kuwaiti charity *Rahma International* started its activities in Cambodia in the

mid-2000s.[3] Rahma International has a multistory headquarters in Phnom Penh, which supervises 25 boarding schools that provide education to around five thousand students. It also maintains two dormitories in Phnom Penh where 140 male and female Muslim university students can live for free while pursuing their studies. Rahma International has also established several clinics in rural Muslim villages – these are also open to Khmer Buddhists.

Unlike the Salafis (discussed later), the Muslim Brotherhood in Cambodia stays away from politics almost entirely. As Rahma International's director explained to the authors, the movement's priority is breeding a number of well-educated cadres who in time can be leading members of the Muslim community. Involvement in politics will be more feasible once there is a strong organization available with solid human resources.[4] That said, Rahma International has a good relationship with the authorities. For example, if the charity opens a clinic, school or housing area for poor people Cambodian officials appear to give their seal of approval as well as to receive thanks for their facilitation of the project[5] (Fresh News 2018).

Jamaʿat al-Tabligh (or *Tabligh* as it is commonly called) is perhaps the most popular Islamic movement in Cambodia. Its origins go back to 1920s British India but they have since spread worldwide. The Tabligh movement is hierarchically organized, and each member has to spend three days of the month on a *khuruj* (proselytizing tour). The movement's goal is to re-Islamize society by urging Muslims to pay more attention to the example of the Prophet and make more earnest efforts in the maintenance of ritual practices (Noor 2012).

The Tabligh appeared in Cambodia in 1989, after the departure of the Vietnamese troops, when Sulaiman Ibrahim, a Cham who joined the movement in Malaysia in the 1980s returned and began proselytizing. His efforts were financially supported by Malaysian donors, and also Cambodians who resided in the United States (Collins 1995, 94–95). This material support enabled the Cambodian Tabligh to establish a major center in Phum Trea in Tbung Khmum province. The movement quickly grew and today it dominates the Muslim religious landscape of several provinces.

Tabligh communities in Cambodia are closely connected to Malaysia and the Malay speaking parts of South Thailand, with Tabligh members from these areas frequently perform *khuruj* in Cambodia, and many Cambodian Tabligh travelling to Southern Thailand and Malaysia for religious studies in Yala, Kelantan, and Terengganu.[6] Since the movement avoids any kind of interference in Cambodian politics the government also grants freedom for its networking activities in the country.

Despite being known as a puritan and reformist movement, Tabligh Jama'at's pool of supporters mainly come from the conservative, Shafi'i *madhhab*. The reason for Tabligh's appeal in this community goes back to both the movement's emphasis on global Islamic brotherhood and the acceptance of certain popular religious practices among Cambodian Muslims, such as celebrating the *mawlid* (Prophet's birthday).

Salafism is the second largest Islamic movement after Tabligh. It appeared in Cambodia in the early 1990s when a number of Gulf-based Islamic NGOs set up educational and proselytizing networks in the country (Pall and Pérez 2020). Salafis advocate a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the *Sunna* (prophetic tradition), and they privilege direct interpretation of canonical hadith without subordinating their judgments to any particular juridical tradition (Gauvain 2012; Pall 2018). Therefore, Salafis generally regard rituals and religious practices which are not explicitly mentioned in the scripture as illegitimate innovations. They insist that Muslims need to break with the customs and rituals they consider their ancestors to have added to the religion. While Salafism may appear ideologically rigid in principle, they have demonstrated a willingness to be pragmatic in the face of the exigencies of the social and political context. Although Salafis often discourage political participation, in Cambodia, in order to secure political favor and autonomy for their institutions, they mobilize voters for the Cambodian People's Party during elections (Pall and Pérez 2020, 261).

Currently, the backbone of the Salafi movement is the network of 33 religious schools throughout the country maintained by the Kuwaiti *Jamai'yyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami* (Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage). These

schools provide both religious instruction and the Cambodian national curriculum and are popular because the instruction is considered to be of good quality (Pall and Pérez 2020, 249–254). Due to the numerous graduates of these school networks and the proselytization activities of the Salafi religious specialists, there is an emerging community of Cambodian Muslims, who might not subscribe completely to all the rulings (such as the prohibition of listening to music, prohibition of smoking), nevertheless, they sympathize with its literalist approach and the rejection of following a *madhhab*, read Salafi religious literature and prefer to learn Arabic and English rather than Malay (Pall and Pérez 2020, 258). This essentially divided Cambodian Sunnis into two major categories: traditionalists, or those who follow a *madhhab* (overwhelmingly the Shafi'i)[7], and the sympathizers of the Salafis.

Most of the religious specialists or *ustaz* who do not identify with either the Tabligh or Salafi movements are products of either Malaysian or local educational institutions which follow the Shafi'i *madhhab*. The former are usually traditional *pondoks* (madrasas that only teach a religious curriculum based on Shafi'i books), state colleges or Islamic private schools. The latter are typically schools of the Annikmah network. Some *ustaz* have received university degrees in Malaysia, or from al-Azhar in Egypt with scholarships mediated by the Mufti.

The Cambodian Muslim Social Media Scene

Among Cambodians in general, Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform with a more limited Instagram and Twitter presence.[8] The Cambodian government practices surveillance of social media. Reportedly, Facebook posts critical of the government have led to arrests (Cambodian Center for Independent Media 2017, 10). Local leaders such as village chiefs in the rural areas also survey the social media activities of the inhabitants of their settlement in order to prevent oppositional activities and social discord (Jack et al. 2021, 15–16). Cambodian Muslim groups and institutions also primarily use Facebook to disseminate their information and organize events online.

Interestingly, the divisions of the online sphere among the Muslim minority do not map onto the disposition of religious communities on the ground. Salafis are by far the most active on social media followed by the numerically much smaller Imam San. The Tablighi Jama'at, by contrast, have only a minimal online footprint (for reasons that are discussed in more detail below). Our research uncovered one explicitly Tabligh related Cambodian Facebook page which was a travelogue of proselytizing trips, and which has not been updated since 2017. This does not mean though that Tabligh members do not observe the social media scene. They often have private Facebook accounts and some of them regularly follow the online activities of their main opponents, the Salafis.[9]

Government institutions, such as the office of the Mufti operate numerous Facebook sites. Yet, these sites are rarely concerned with issues related to belief and religious practices. Rather, they update the community with the most recent sociopolitical developments concerning Cambodian Muslims and announce their successes in attracting foreign aid and realizing development projects in their community. These include schools and wells built, medical services offered in the countryside and disaster relief for villages stricken by floods.

One obvious feature of the Facebook activities of Cambodian Muslim groups is that communication is largely unidirectional. Active Facebook discussions and debates occur rarely, and if they do, the postings touch issues of ritual worship such as the *mawlid* (celebration of the birthday of the Prophet). In the following sections, we will examine some popular Salafi and Imam San Facebook sites, and the ongoing online debates on the *mawlid*, as well as the online absence of the Tabligh.

Salafis on social media

According to Salafis, the Muslim population of Cambodia is deficient in its practice of religion. While most in the community know how to pray and fast, they carry out their religious obligations incorrectly. This includes basic aspects of the religion, such as conducting prayer in the way prescribed by the

Shafi'i *madhab*, and not the way which Salafis regard correct.[10] Other examples of "deviation" that Salafis identify are *ziyarah* (pilgrimage to the graves of saints) and the celebration of the *mawlid* (Prophet Muhammad's birthday). As the majority of Muslims belong to the Cham ethnic group, Cham traditions, such as spirit possession rituals, are also a target of the Salafis.

As several Salafi *ustaz* expressed, outright and direct criticism of the abovementioned practices would be counterproductive and would only lead to violent confrontations like the Tabligh–Salafi clashes of the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, groups of Salafis and Tabligh followers were competing for influence in the Muslim majority areas. In many cases, they attempted to take over mosques from each other in violent means and expel each other from villages and urban districts. The violence severely tarnished the image of Muslims in front of the Khmer Buddhist majority, and it took a long time and serious effort from the Mufti to reconcile the parties.[11]

Understandably, most Muslims want to prevent confrontations from erupting in the future. Furthermore, the ruling Cambodian People's Party, which heavily disapproves of intra-Muslim confrontations[12], is an important source of patronage for Salafis. Although many Muslim leaders themselves might not be active users of social media, they can be expected to be kept abreast of events in the online sphere by their more tech-engaged assistants or family members.

As Ustaz Ahmad, a young Salafi preacher, has explained in an interview, directly debating with the older generations is counterproductive. Salafis are better off spending their energy and resources by reaching out to the young and more educated generations who use smartphones and social media.[13] According to him, young people should be educated on how to live an Islamic lifestyle and their "incorrect" practices should be replaced by the ones described in the scripture. The Salafi Facebook groups reflect these attempts. Instead of explicitly voicing political or critical statements towards other Muslim groups their focus is directing Cambodian Muslims to transform their lifestyles and daily religious practices. These Facebook groups are usually

run by an NGO or an individual who can be linked to an NGO. The postings are overwhelmingly focusing on matters of faith, correct religious practice, food, and social life.

The Facebook group run by a Saudi funded NGO, the *Islamic Educational Forum*, is a good example here. Islamic Educational Forum was established by Ustaz Muhammad bin Abu Bakar, based in Siem Reap, a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina. He receives funding directly from the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs from which he is able to pay the salaries of nine other preachers who live in different regions of the country and carry out various preaching activities.[14] When they give a lecture somewhere in Cambodia, it is often posted on Islamic Educational Forum's Facebook page. The topics reflect debates and discussions that are current in the Muslim community or addressed by the preachers of Islamic Educational Forum in their offline religious lessons.

As an example, Islamic Educational Forum published the hadith (Figure 1):

Figure 1: "Satan flees the house where Surat al-Baqara is read"
(Islamic Educational Forum 2020a).

A Khmer langue explanation is provided to the Arabic text that makes people aware that Satan is indeed real and can cause "weird things to happen in people's houses."[15] Muslims can prevent him from entering their homes by frequently reciting verses from Surat al-Baqara. Two other posts teach Muslims what kind of *du'a* (prayer) and *hadith* to recite before sleeping, arguing that they receive merit for doing this. Citing a hadith, another post urges parents to frequently say "*barak Allah fik* (God bless you)" to their children in order to speed their recovery when they are sick.

Another Facebook group is *Muslim Stung Treng* (a reference to a province in the north of Cambodia). The site is run by Salafi *ustaz* who, like Islamic Educational Forum, frequently posts hadith quotations with Khmer translations. He also posts videos where he speaks about issues such as Muslim parenting practices. The images of this page are rather interesting as the posts often include photos that obviously have been taken in Gulf countries (Figure 2). As Pall and Pérez (2020, 258) show, in the Cambodian Salafi discourse, visitors from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are often presented as exemplary Muslims due to their dress, public behavior, and use of the Arabic language.

Figure 2: Praying Muslims in the Gulf (Muslim Stung Treng 2020a).

The Salafi sites also offer advice regarding the proper Muslim diet; what to eat and how to consume the meal in an Islamic way. For example, both Islamic Educational Forum and Muslim Stung Treng publish video lectures on what is haram and what is halal to consume (Islamic Educational Forum 2020b). They also publish numerous *hadith* quotations regarding what to do before, during, and after consuming the meals (Muslim Stung Treng 2020b).

In short, Salafis mostly focus on religious conduct in their social media discourse and employ an excavation of the prophetic tradition to define what the ideal Homo Islamicus should look like and urge the believers to fully embrace the scripture in order to achieve this ideal.

Proponents of Cham tradition

Many Muslims who participate in transnational Islamic movements tend to distance themselves from Cham traditions and customs and replace them with "proper" Islamic teachings. Yet others, primarily the members of the Imam San community, argue for the retention and cultivation of Cham language and culture. While identifying as Muslims, they often voice that they do not consider "the religion as practiced by Arabs and other foreigners" to be more correct than their own[16] but hold that their own particular, and in many cases unique, Islamic practices are also legitimate.

In fact, this community has been shaped by engagement and debates with Sunni Muslims. The establishment of the institutional framework and the striving for state recognition is a result of the fear of the members of the community that the expansion of Islamic movements and schools of thought will result in the disappearance of the Islamic tradition of the Imam San.

In the past three decades, an educated class has begun to emerge among the Imam San, much as it has in other Muslim communities. Some of these young university students and graduates became concerned about the consequences of Islamic preaching on not only their religious but cultural identity as well. As we have described in the previous section, both the Tabligh and the Salafis urge the Cham to get rid of most of their

cultural artifacts in order to join the *umma* in a pure state. Some of these Imam San youth began organizing for the protection of their identity about two decades ago (Pérez 2012, 72–79).[17] Their activities included organizing museum visits, discussion groups, and promoting religious and cultural events. They soon became active on social media as well.

The Facebook pages launched by this movement regularly post images of traditional Cham celebrations and rituals, and also present the translations and explain the meaning of old manuscripts. Interestingly, the text of the posts is almost exclusively in Khmer. This is because the Imam San do not study Arabic or Malay in the same way as other Muslims in the country, and while they mostly speak the Cham language among themselves, they tend to use the Khmer language in written communication. They learn Khmer at school and not Cham, which is not yet even properly standardized, therefore, they are in most cases literate only in Khmer, and in some cases English (which is obligatory to learn at school).

Several posts published recitations of ancient Cham poems which are basically codes of conduct for men and women. The *Kaboun Ong Chen* (The Law of Men) and other similar poems teach the Cham how to live a virtuous life. Popularizing these poems aims to take out the wind from the sails of Sunni Muslims in their quest to convert the Imam San and inform the latter that the Imam San tradition also provides elaborate instructions regarding an ethical conduct of life. Other posts include images about rituals such as the *mawlid* (see Figure 3) or *mawlid phnom*, the commemoration of the founder

Figure 3: Imam San *mawlid* procession (Cham Kan Imam San of Cambodia 2020).

of their community, Imam San. The explanations are exclusively in Khmer, and they always call for the Imam San followers not to forget their heritage. (Cham Kan Imam San of Cambodia 2018–20).[18]

Some of the Cham who are not Imam San followers but Sunni Muslims also strive to promote the use of the Cham language and some of the Cham traditions, but these activities are strongly connected to religious communication and education. The main online forum for this is *Cham's Language and Communication* (2013). It is unclear who are the administrators of the site, but seemingly Cambodian and Vietnamese Cham Sunnis, and those who live in Malaysia, North America, and western Europe are active in posting on it. The cover photo of the page suggests this attempt to include the Sunni Cham living in multiple nations. Five abstract human figures stand next to each other and above them, in speech bubbles, it is written in five different languages that "I like to speak Cham language [*sic*]" (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The cover photo of Cham's Language and Communication Facebook page
(Cham's Language and Communication 2018).

The page overwhelmingly appears to be a forum of traditionalist Muslims without the involvement of either Salafis or Imam San. Many of the posts are translations of Qur'an verses and religious texts into the Cham language written in Jawi, a version of the Arabic script modified to accommodate the Cham language, very similar but not identical to the Jawi script used to write Malay. Not all of the posts are religious. Some are related to Cham grammar, culture, and food. The Islam related topics

include religious lectures of traditionalist Sunni Cham scholars from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and Qur'an commentaries in Cham.

These abovementioned Facebook pages also do not contain much criticism against other Islamic groups and those who consider the Cham traditions un-Islamic also rarely make a comment voicing their opinion. This has the same reason why the Salafis do not debate the traditionalists and the Tabligh openly: the attempt to avoid confrontation and the losing of state patronage. Salafis and Tabligh members for example often live side by side with the Imam San or Sunnis who are proponents of the Cham traditions. They might recognize each other from Facebook comments, which could lead to discord.

Contentious issues

Debates on social media are relatively few but do occur from time to time, mostly around the issue of the *mawlid* (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad). *Mawlid* is highly contested in the contemporary Muslim world. In the premodern era, the majority of Muslim scholars regarded it as *bid'a hasana* (praiseworthy innovation) and they only criticized certain elements of the festivities such as drinking wine or prostitution (Schielke 2007, 326). Mawlid became a contentious issue in the 19th century, especially in Egypt, during the struggles for creating modern nation-states. Intellectuals at that time argued that a modern nation needs a rationalized system of belief and worship and for them, *mawlid* represented backwardness (Schielke 2007, 328–339).

Islamic reformists, as outlined above, recommended restrictions of the way *mawlid* could be celebrated (Schussman 1998, 229–230). However, Salafis today entirely forbid the celebration arguing that the Prophet himself did not celebrate his own birthday. Their position is that *bid'a hasana* does not apply in matters of worship, therefore there is no legitimate foundation for this event (Lauzière 2015, 6, 10). Unlike Salafis, *madhhab*-based Muslims mostly regard *mawlid* as permissible, although scholars do not necessarily agree on the way celebrations should be performed (Schussman 1998).

In contemporary Cambodia, *mawlid* is in the center of intra-Muslim cleavages. For the Imam San community, the Prophet's birthday is one of the most important yearly religious events (Pérez 2012, 128–132). The *mawlid* remains important to traditionalist Sunni Muslims although their mode of celebration now more closely resembles what is typical in the Malay world, that is, a communal meal accompanied by prayers and in some cases a religious procession. Today, whether or not a Muslim celebrates *mawlid* is a common litmus test for distinguishing Salafis from the rest (Stock 2016, 791; Bruckmayr 2019, 190–191, 330).

Unlike in the case of other issues where the opinions of the Islamic groups differ, in the case of the *mawlid,* Cambodian Muslims do not entirely keep silent on Facebook. It is the most visible religious event for the Cambodian Muslim public. As several reformist minded Cambodian Muslims expressed, not raising their voice to the *mawlid* would be something like denying their religion and identity, even if they can look over other issues.[19]

The most spectacular among the Cambodian *mawlid* celebrations is held by the Imam San community, which involves a procession to the mosque rather than the simple communal meals common in traditionalist Muslim communities that observe *mawlid*. *The Cambodian Muslim Media Center*, an NGO focusing on publishing the current social and cultural developments of Muslims in the country,[20] posts every year on *mawlid* celebrations on its Facebook page. An especially interesting set of photos was posted during *mawlid* in 2015 on the Imam San celebrations (Figure 5). In one of the photos, a number of men are

Figure 5: Carrying traditional Cham cake during a 2015 Imam San mawlid celebration (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015).

carrying the traditional Cham *mawlid* cakes. Beside them, an apparently Sunni Muslim woman is walking with a headscarf resembling the ones used in Malaysia or the Middle East and not what Imam San women usually wear.

The appearance of a Sunni Muslim in a photo of an Imam San *mawlid* or other rituals is not necessarily unique. While the main Sunni movements and schools of thought intend to get rid of Cham traditions, many Sunni Cham are actually reluctant to give up their traditions. Nevertheless, the posting of the photo sparked a debate especially between Sunnis who are proponents of celebrating the *mawlid*, and those who are against it. (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015)

Interestingly, several apparently Sunni Muslims left encouraging comments such as "ancient traditions well preserved" while others called the celebration deviant or entirely not part of Islam. While some argued that the *mawlid* is not mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunna, others answered that Muslims around the world "follow the scripture but also have their culture," therefore, there is nothing wrong with the Imam San *mawlid* celebrations. Another commenter wrote that what the Imam San followers are doing in the picture is making a sacrifice, which is only permissible in Islam during *'aid al-adha*. Someone replied that in fact what is happening in the picture is not sacrifice and asked: "Is sharing cakes and having fun a sacrifice to you?" (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015)

A Cham Muslim woman accused the Imam San that they are just following blindly whatever tradition they inherited. An apparent Imam San follower urged the woman to study Cham scripts, as "religious matters are elaborated in Cham manuscripts. No blind following is going on there." (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2015).

A similar debate happened on another *mawlid* post published by the Cambodian Muslim Media Center in 2020. In Raka, an overwhelmingly Shafi'i village in Kampong Cham province, young educated Malaysian *hakim* (Muslim village chief in Cambodia) introduced a style of *mawlid* celebration that resembles the way the Prophet's birth is commemorated in Malaysia.

During the event, a procession occurs where the believers dress in traditional Cham dress and go around the village chanting and playing music. After prayer and a *ceramah* (sermon) in the mosque, the consumption of lavish meals follows in one of the community spaces of the village (Cambodian Muslim Media Center 2020). This style of *mawlid* celebration is very different from the usual ones in Cham Sunni villages and urban districts since the latter is rather modest with the members of the community coming together in the mosque and then in the house of each other for consumption of food.

Over two hundred comments appeared in just a few hours under the post that consisted of a photo report on the Raka *mawlid* event. There were a number of Salafi arguments presented against the *mawlid*, and those who defend this kind of celebration responded. Others, however, while they saw celebrating the *mawlid* acceptable, criticized the way it was celebrated. They argued that there are indigenous Cham ways to celebrate and there is no need to import something like this from Malaysia.

Staying offline: the Tabligh

A cursory comparison of the presence of Islamic institutions and organizations in Cambodia on the one hand, and their levels of activity in the online world on the other, quickly reveals the glaring near-absence of the Tabligh in the latter. Although the Tabligh are the most influential Islamic movement in the Cambodian countryside, they have made few attempts to take advantage of online platforms to promote their message. This can be explained by the characteristics of their priorities and preoccupations.

For Tabligh, face-to-face preaching is of central importance. In fact, having a physical presence in the Muslim communities where they are preaching and sharing their daily lives provides the raison d'être of the movement. As Arsalan Khan (2018, 57) puts it, "in order to be efficacious, however, dawat[21] must be conducted in precisely the form that it was conducted by the Prophet and his Companions. In other words, the method (*tariqa*) or form of dawat is itself sacred."

In Cambodia, participants of Tabligh arrive from a range of countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to carry out *khuruj* in Muslim communities. Usually, they fly into Phnom Phenh and then either take the southwest route towards Kep, Kampot, and Koh Kong before crossing to Thailand or go northwards to Kampong Cham, Tbung Khmum, Pursat, and Battambang.[22] Wherever they stop, the men collectively stay in the local *markaz* (center) or a mosque while the women stay in someone's house.

Besides providing religious instruction and reminders to observe one's religious obligations, the Tabligh preachers immerse themselves in the more mundane aspects of local life – preparing food with locals, visiting homes, and counselling people on worldly matters, just as, according to them, the Prophet did (Khan 2018, 57). This type of proselytization is hardly replaceable with social media activities, and this might explain why Cambodian Tablighis have a scarce Facebook presence as participants of the movement, even as many of them maintain personal pages (see also the article of Kuncoro about the social media uses of Indonesian Tabligh in this special issue; 2021). Because of this, Tabligh does not have a significant role in the complex politics of Cambodia's Muslim social media scene.

Discussion and Conclusion: Debates and their Absence

Unlike the Tabligh, Salafis are exceptionally active online worldwide. In fact, they were the pioneers of carrying out *da'wa* online well ahead of other, even larger Muslim groups (Iqbal 2014). For Salafis *da'wa* means chiefly transmitting uncorrupted knowledge; the way the *salaf* (pious ancestors, the first three generations of Islam) believed and practiced Islam. To do this any vehicle is acceptable including online tools.

The use of social media to disseminate information about religious belief and practice by the Salafis contrasts sharply with what one encounters on the Facebook pages of traditionalist Muslims. Traditionalist Facebook pages like those pages associated with national-level Muslim intuitions, such as the Office of the Mufti, are more likely to present recent challenges and achievements in economic and social development in Muslim communities.

This is no wonder since the Mufti's power lies in his connections to the prime minister of Cambodia and his dense social networks in Malaysia which enables him to implement development and educational projects.

Furthermore, the Mufti has also positioned himself as a person who unites the Cambodian Muslim community and has made efforts to bring the Salafis and the Tabligh under the umbrella of the establishment (Mohan and Sonyka 2014). This may make it counterproductive to publish theological positions on social media that might alienate some segments of the Muslim community (perhaps the Salafis, as the Mufti himself is Shafi'i and known to be close to the Tabligh).

The Muslim Brotherhood also has not set up any Cambodian *da'wa* oriented websites. Only Rahma International has a site that consists of sporadic posts about news related to their humanitarian activities in the country. These usually include photos and short commentaries about opening a school, distribution of food – the kinds of development-focused presentation of the organization common among traditionalist Muslims. The reason is that the Brotherhood has not announced its presence as a movement in Cambodia since they are still in the early phases of building up their network in the country.[23]As observers of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere explain, the movement puts its main emphasis on having a robust organization. Proselytization among the larger population only starts when a solid nucleus of this organizational structure has been established (al-Anani 2016, 99–117).

Cambodia's Islamic social media scene, which has only recently become a significant phenomenon, shows different dynamics from its counterparts in Indonesia and Malaysia. The most striking difference lies in the fact that theological debates are almost missing. This invites us to consider why this should be the case despite the existence of a diverse and fragmented Islamic scene in the country. The answer goes back to the interpenetration of Cambodia's religious field by the state and the ruling party and the latter's treatment of a minority religion.

The Muslim minority in Cambodia has to deal with an authoritarian setting in a country with a violent history where Muslims were particularly affected. The political and the Islamic fields are closely connected; Islam is institutionalized, and the Islamic establishment and the different groups depend on the patronage of the ruling elite. The latter legitimizes its rule by the claim that it assures social harmony in a country with a recent history of extreme violence. Intra-Muslim dissent or clashes would weaken this narrative, keeping social harmony in the interest of all Islamic actors in order to avoid coming under suspicion or investigation, and stay in the good graces of the Cambodian People's Party. This complexity is made manifest in the online realm because of the surveillance of social media posts by the state and religious authorities as part of these broader efforts to maintain the state narrative of order and social harmony.

Those who proselytize online tend to limit themselves to general issues without reference to the other Islamic groups in the country with which they disagree. Salafis concern themselves with how Muslims should conduct their lives in accordance with their understanding of the scripture. The Imam San focus on preserving and reviving their religious traditions on social media, while some Cham Sunnis strive to preserve the Cham language written in Arabic characters. All of this occurs without the direct criticism of one group by another with the notable exception of *mawlid* which does inspire serious and at times heated debate with Salafis and their sympathizers post critical comments and traditionalist Muslim respond in kind. These debates neither resulted in offline clashes nor prolonged online war of words and thus seem to be tolerated by the regime.

Not all Islamic groups have a significant online presence. The Tabligh privilege the face-to-face method of proselytization as conducted by the Prophet, and for this reason have shown little interest in expanding their *da'wa* online. This may change however as COVID-19 travel restrictions make this type of interaction impractical or impossible. As for the Muslim Brotherhood, it sees its activities in Cambodia as being in a building phase with a focus on the implementation of humanitarian projects rather than online *da'wa*.

We can conclude that for now, debates on Cambodia's social media scene remain largely muted and are superseded by unidirectional forms of communication. Nevertheless, the theological divides in the community that potentially could become reflected in the online sphere clearly do exist, as they do in other Southeast Asian countries with a sizable Muslim population, but for the moment the close connection between the political and the religious fields decreases the expression of diverse opinions on social media.

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Notes

[1] For example, Cambodia's Facebook usage exploded only recently. In 2013, only one million Facebook accounts existed and most of them were owned by urban users. With the recent expansion of mobile data networks this number increased seven times by 2018 (Vong and Hok 2018; Chunly 2019).

[2] It derives from the Malay term *jawi* which means Malay.

[3] Rahma International carries out the overseas charity activities of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, which is centered around the *Islamic Reform Society* (Freer 2018, 7–9, 46, 52–53). The authors conducted several interviews which proved Rahma International's affiliation to Islamic Reform Society. For example, the latter's headquarters host the offices of Rahma International whose members and employees are also affiliated to Islamic Reform Society. Series of interviews and observations with authors, 2010–18, Kuwait.

[4] Interview with authors, May 5, 2017, Phnom Penh.

[5] Interview with authors, May 5, 2017, Phnom Penh.

[6] Series of interviews with authors, May and July 2017, Kampot, Phnom Penh, and Battambang.

[7] We use the term *traditionalist* following the self-definition of *madhhab*-based Muslims (Sedgewick 2020, 121).

[8] In 2020, there were 9.2 million Facebook accounts in Cambodia compared to 600 thousand Instagram and 271 thousand Twitter accounts (Kemp 2020).

[9] Group of Tabligh members, 2019, interview with authors, December 3, Kampong Chhnang.

[10] The most referred source in this respect by the Salafis is Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (2004).

[11] Series of interviews with authors, May 2017 – November 2019, Cambodia.

[12] One of the sources of Cambodian People's Party's legitimacy to rule is keeping the peace and

social harmony in Cambodia after a violent 20th century.

[13] Online interview with authors, October 25, 2020.

[14] Former student of Ustaz Muhammad bin Abubakar, 2020, online interview with authors, October 24. This is also common knowledge among Salafis in Cambodia whom the authors extensively interviewed between 2017 and 2019.

[15] This might be a reflection to the traditional Cham concept of Satan, which is frequently metaphorical, especially among the Krom Kan Imam San. Imam San follower, 2020, online interview with authors, November 23.

[16] Group of Imam San followers, 2019, interview with authors, December 3, Ou Ruessei.

[17] One of the leading figures of the movement, 2020, online interviews with authors, October 15 and November 17.

[18] The English texts on the Cham Kan Imam San of Cambodia's Facebook page are automatic, often unintelligible translations from Facebook.

[19] Series of interviews with authors, November–December, 2020.

[20] *The Cambodian Muslim Media Center* is an NGO which does not represent a specific school of thought. We encountered Salafis, Tabligh members, and traditionalists among its employees. Its director, Sles Nazy, is an integrative figure who regards providing news on Islam in Cambodia and connecting Cambodian Muslims to overseas charity organizations (regardless of ideological background) as his main mission. Sles Nazy, 2017, interview with authors, May 4, Phnom Penh.

[21] This is the term used in Pakistan for *da'wa*.

[22] Series of observations and interviews with authors, 2017–19, Cambodia.

[23] Officials of Islamic Reform Society and Rahma International, 2018, interview with authors, January 15, Kuwait.