Muslim Youth In Cambodia After World War Two: A Kaum Muda Case Study

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Introduction

The Muslims in Cambodia composed mainly of the Cham, Malays and a very small number of Arabs, Pakistanis and Kabul, the Afghans, as they are known locally. At present no one knows exactly how many of them, but according to estimates, their number ranges from some 500,000 to 1.5 millions. They are living all over the country in either small communities or big ones. Their big concentrations are mainly in the eastern part of Cambodia. But since the 1980’s, due mainly to economic reason, they opened up small hamlets all over Cambodia. Generally, they are known as Cham (one of the ethnicities of the old kingdom of Champa), Khmer Islam1, Cham-Chvea or simply Chvea (term referring to Jawa but meant the Malay) to the locals. Beside Cambodia, the Cham-Malay are also found in Vietnam and

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1 This term was coined after the Independence. Thee kram 913-NS of 30 novembre 1954 specified that “aucune distinction n’est faite en faveur ou au préjudice des Cambodgiens appartenant aux minorités ethniques habitant le territoire du Royaume, tels les Malais, Chams . . . ” (J. Pouvatchy, Les Vietnamiens au Cambodge, Thèse du IIle cycle, Paris, 1975, p. 10). Thus the Muslim Cham and the Malais were not designated under their ethnic denominations but under the name of Khmer, with the religious connotation, Islam. (See also Po Dharma 1981, p. 161 n. 1.)
Laos. Since the fall of Indochina to the communist regime in the mid-1970's, they found shelters in Malaysia and far away lands such as the USA, Canada, Europe, Japan as well as in Australia and New Zealand.

Until present day, no one knows exactly when the Cham became Muslim. However, it was known that Islam has arrived in Champa as early as the 9th century. Though from the 14 century Islam was part of the beliefs and religions of the Champa people. Since then the Muslim Cham and the Malay from, especially Kelantan and Pattani, established a very good religious relationship. This good relationship lead to the coming of a young Champa prince, later became king Po Rome (1627-1651), to Kelantan to learn Islamic teachings. The coming of young Cham to Kelantan to learn Islamic teachings continue until the present day. And one of them was Ly Mousa, who later became famous and known as Imam Musa.

Imam Musa

Imam Musa was born Ly Mousa or Musa Bin Ali, in the year of the Snake, 1916 in the Christian era. He was born in Phum Ampil, Khum Pœuh, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia to a farmer family. He was the eldest of seven siblings of three boys and four girls.

At the very young age he understood the living conditions of his family and the others in his village, almost all of them were farmers. He vowed to bring his family out of poverty. Then he left Ampil at the very tender age of twelve and headed to a town of Poi Pet, near the Cambodia-Thailand border. At Poi Pet, he helped town traders in their businesses.

After only six or seven months later, he caught the eyes of a Thai businessman, by the name of Hj Ismail, from Bangkok. Hj Ismail brought the young Musa to his house, adopted him as his child and sent him to a Thai school. We were not sure of how long he went to Thai school but we know that he was fluent in speaking, writing and reading Thai. His adopted father passed away in 1987.

From Bangkok he proceeded to Kelantan to learn Islamic teachings. Only at the age of 29 years, right at the end of the second world war, he returned home to the greatest joy of his family members. In Kelantan he met another village mate of his, Son Ahmad who like him became known as Imam Ahmad India. As Ly Mousa return home, Son Ahmad continued his studies in Kelantan and went to India to pursue his studies for his Masters degree. That was how Imam Ahmad India got his name. He returned home in 1956.

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2 See Mohamad Zain Bin Musa 1994.
4 Imam Ahmad was a pondok mate (schoolmate) of her father, Ustaz Che Azhari and Tuan Guru Dato’ Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, the present Chef Minister of Kelantan (Prof. Dr. Che Husna Azhari).
By the time he was studying in Kelantan, the *Islah* movement was very active, not only in the Malay Peninsula but also in the whole Malay Archipelago. In the Malay Peninsula, as a result of many young Malay who upon returning home from studying in the Middle East, set a new development in their mode of thinking. Basically, the *Islah* movement is a movement set up to restore the true teaching of Islam based on the Quran and *Hadith* (the practices and sayings of the prophet Muhammad). And those who spread the reform based on this teachings were called *Kaum Muda*.

The birth of *Kaum Muda* threatened the religious leadership of the old folks and some of the Malays Lords, who were practicing the Islamic teachings mixed with other believes such as ancestral customs which include animism. The *Kaum Muda* believed that due to these practices of the Islamic unorthodoxy, the Muslim communities were underdeveloped. Among the forerunners of the *Kaum Muda* were famous personalities such as Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Muhammad Yunus.

As time passed, many newspapers were published, the first one was *al-Imam*, a Malay news paper published in Singapore in 1906. This paper appealed to the Muslim community to follow the true path of Islamic teaching based on the Quran and *Hadith*. They urged the Muslim community to accept the Western knowledge which is considered beneficial. They also urged the community to allow women to have freedom in education and be active in community activities. Besides *al-Imam*, others newspapers such as *Neracha*, *Utusan Melayu* and *Lembaran Melayu* were also published in Singapore. The *Kaum Muda* also published a magazine *al-Ikhwan* in 1925 in Pulau Pinang under the leadership of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi.

The *Kaum Muda*'s struggles were not going on smoothly. Those who espoused the *Kaum Muda* idea were strongly opposed by a group called *Kaum Tua*. To respond to the many articles published by the *Kaum Muda*, the *Kaum Tua* also had their own voices heard through *Lidah Benar*, which was published in Klang. And to allow women to further their education, the first building was built to accommodate girls students and completed in 1936. This building was part of the Maahad II Ihya Assyarif, built by Ustaz Abu Bakar al-Bakir in Gunung Semanggol, Perak in 1934.

As it has been mentioned earlier, due to the lack of documentation on the activities and whom the young and energetic Imam Musa mixed around with, we shall now discuss the life and times of Imam Musa in his beloved homeland of Kompong Cham. This development in Cham villages along the bank of Mekong river from Kratie to Phnom Penh has brought about new development, which were very receptive to some older and young generation. The manners in which Imam Musa preached were similar to the approach and practice by none other than the *Kaum Muda* in other parts of Southeast Asia.

In 1947, at the age of 31, Imam Musa got married to a young and beautiful girl, Miss Fa Nab or Zainab Binti Mustafa. Fa Nab is from Phum Prek Krut, Khum

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5 Joroen Peeters 1997.
Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham. Prek Krut is a village about five kilometers away from Phum Pœuh, the famous Imam Musa’s village. Fa Nab was from an influential family. The bond between them gave birth to nine children, six boys and three girls. Now Fa Nab lives in the USA with two of her children, Kyusyatillah and Khidir. The other two living children, Khifatullah and Ihsan are in Cambodia.

**The Reform**

Upon arrival in his village, Ampil, Imam Musa’s manifest showing was in his dressing. Usually, a religious man, such as an imam, a khatib or religious teachers in the whole of Indochina, at that time, had their head shaved and wore turban and av jva (baju Melayu, a Malay long sleeves shirt) as village folks wore sarong, av jva with either kopiah (white cap) or black songkok.

His startled village folks who were initially welcomed him tried to turn away from him as his outlook did not show a learned religious person. He wore trousers, some times even shorts, shirts, kept hair and grew beard. They despised him to a point that when he felt insecured, kept a dog under his house, for his own protection. Here again, they even hated him more when seeing him keeping dog as dog is the dirtiest of all animals (najis mughallazah).

The breaking point of the relationship between him and the villagers was in their daily prayers. Two traditional practices in a prayer by the old folks were the wiping of their faces or foreheads after the 12th rukun that is after the Salam and the reading of the qunut as part of the subuh prayer. Both of these practices were not parts of Imam Musa prayers, though he sometimes read the qunut when and
only it was needed.

As if these are not enough, Imam Musa started teaching the translation and interpretation of the holy Quran to his wife’s village folks, old and young, men and women. These classes were conducted almost every evening between Maghrib and the Isha prayers. The hadith were also taught in these classes. In the meantime, he trained those who wanted to pursue their studies. The number of his students was growing as time passed. And only when he knew they were qualified, they were allowed to teach the translation and interpretation of the Quran. And through his diligence, up to 1970 when the Cambodian civil war started, he managed to train only a handful of them. Some of them obtained scholarship to pursue their religious education abroad.

His new method of teaching and the interpretation of the Quran, which prior to this was believed as the domain of special people, was well accepted by many people, from normal village folks to the educated and socially high-ranking personalities. To the normal folks, some of the topics they had learnt before were contradictory to what Imam Musa has brought or even never heard of before; this was because they were taught only the ritual parts of the five tenets of Islam. Besides, Imam Musa taught lessons on economics and politics. I remember vividly he taught children to read maps too. Thus to some, especially to the village heads who were known as hakim and imam, they felt that their position in the society were threatened.

Following this, the Muslim community was split into two groups known as Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda. Imam Musa was known to be the leader of the Kaum Muda. Because of the birth of both of these groups in the Cambodian Muslim community, the members of the community were literally broken up to the extent that some husbands and wives were separated, some members of the same family did not speak to one another. Imam Musa and his followers were accused of practicing deviant Islamic teaching and becoming kufur. All these could happen because everyone had the conviction that what they had learned before were correct, the right path that will take them to heaven after their death, thus they must practice what they know was right. This in fact was the result of their shallow knowledge of the Islamic teaching. At that time most of young Cham went to only a few madrasah or pondok (religious schools)6 one each in Choun Nik, Phum Trea, Speu and Moat Chrouk where Tuan Kechik, Toun Sles, Hj Ali and Hj Ali were teachers.7

Despite all these, religious schools were slowly set up by Imam Musa in villages where there were enough number of his followers. These schools were

6 These madrasah or pondok usually were at under the house of the teachers or in the musala or surau (small mosques).
7 During my interview with religious leaders in Phanrang and Phanrik in 1995, I asked them if they would allow their young to pursue religious education overseas, they flatly said no as they had a number of religious books that they haven’t had completed, thus it not necessary to send the young any where else.
nothing more than a few tables and long wooden benches set up under some houses, especially the imam’s. In some village where they had access to, classes were conducted in surau or masjid. Beside those so-called pondok, the first religious school was built in Phum Khnop, Khum Svay Khleang in 1968. The building of this religious school could not be completed as the Cambodian civil war, or the spill over of the second Vietnam War, started in 1970.

Some of the pondok teachers were those who were teachers before; but some others were given the task by Imam Musa after having attained a certain level of education with him. As for the religious books, they were brought from Malaysia, Penang or Kelantan. And as there were not enough copies, the lessons were hand copied and distributed to various villages.

Imam Musa’s teachings not only spread within the confines of Srok Krauch Chmar but also reverberated along the Mekong River, in eastern part of Cambodia and in the whole of Indochina, especially in the regions of Saigon and Chaudoc. As the crisis between the two groups, Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda grew, they decided to hold a major debate in 1955. Imam Musa headed the Kaum Muda, and Kaum Tua headed by Tuan Hj Ali from Moat Chrouk (Vietnam) assisted by a few Tuan. This debate was seen more as challenge to Kaum Muda who happen to choose the sources of knowledge based upon the holy Quran and hadith, where as the Kaum Tua depended mostly on secondary sources, books compiled/written by various authors.

The breaking up of families as mentioned earlier, actually happened after this debate where those who used secondary sources could not withstand the strength of the verses of the Quran and hadith, both being the primary sources of the teaching of Islam. The effects of this debate also brought about a series of accusations against Imam Musa. Some of the cases were police cases, that is criminal in nature, aimed at discrediting Imam Musa. One of the cases was meant to eliminate him, and Imam Ahmad India, permanently from the religious scene in Cambodia. This happened in 1966 where both of them were sent to a village at the Cambodian-Thai border in order to be expatriated. But some months later they both managed to find their way home and lived until their painful death at the brutal hands of the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

Imam Musa suffered all his life because he wanted to bring about the change and dynamism of the teachings of Islam to a community which did not seem to progress according to the teaching of Islam. But he was very lucky to have the youth in Svay Khleang, as a model to start applying his approach. They were all behind him as explained in the next following paragraphs.

**National Education**

There were two types of education for the Muslim community in Cambodia, the religious and national educations. For the religious education it is compulsory
for young Muslim children to begin their schooling by going to Quranic classes at the very tender age. Beside learning how to read Quran, they are also taught the five tenets of Islam and the six principles of a Muslim belief and conviction (Iman). The religious education, as it is described above, were given at a madrasah or pondok, usually the teachers’ house.

The education of the Muslim communities in Cambodia under the leadership of Imam Musa did not stop at the religious education alone. He was now convinced, of what he thought before he left his loving home in Phum Ampil, some forty years ago, that education can bring mobility to his community. But this education has to include national or modern education. And the young Muslim of both sexes have to have both of these educations, the modern and religious educations.

Imam Musa and his closest followers included Maklong Sah (Aishah binti Wan Mohamad), Cei Phin @ Po Phin, Hj Sos (Hakim Yusoff), Vadeur Sa and Vangah Kechik from Phum Prek Krout and Pet Sa (Math Mousa or Musa Bin Ahmad), also from Prek Krout but worked in Phnom Penh, held a series of discussions including how to improve the living standard of the Muslim communities. But first they must form a well organised community which they gave the name of Sangkum Ly Mousa (I would translate it as Ly Mousa Solidarity) in 1953. This organisation of Sangkum Ly Mousa was created ahead of the formation of a national political movement known as Sangkum Reasr Niyum «usually translated as People’s Socialist Community» by Norodom Sihanouk in 1955.

The Sangkum Ly Mousa decided and built in 1955 the first primary school for the national education system, which is secular in nature, in the middle of Phum Prek Krout, where majority of its population are Muslims. The wooden school building, a block of three class-rooms was built with brute energy of the Muslim community, starting from cutting woods in the forest to make it into planks, sand and pebbles collected in the Mekong river, just opposite their houses, for its foundation and donations from the well-to-do individuals. The second block of another three class-rooms was built later. The Krauch Chmar district education officer, Mr. Uom Kek, who later became a well-loved headmaster and teacher of the Sangkum Ly Mousa Primary School, approved the application for the school. He was one of my beloved and best remembered teachers of mine.

The first Sangkum Ly Mousa Primary School teachers were Cham picked by Imam Musa himself. Only after a short time later, qualified teachers were sent to the school by the government, all of them native of the district of Krauch Chmar. Their salaries were paid by the government; and the school was administered under the education system of Cambodia. Following that success, a few more primary schools were built by the Sangkum Ly Mousa, one each in the Khum Kompong Ro, Prek Sandai in Srok Chhlong, Khet Kratie. Many young Cham children were sent to the schools without any more fear by the parents as it was believed before that

8 D. P. Chandler 1996, A History of Cambodia, p. 188.
sending Cham children (meaning Muslim) to national schools, the children would become Khmer (meaning not Muslim of *Kufar*).

By the years 1970 many have reached the university level. Some left the country for further education overseas. Some became teachers, governments officers, both civilian and military. Coupled with the support of Marshal Lon Nol leadership, some were appointed into diplomatic corps, dealing especially with the Muslim world. The Muslim youth followers of *Kaum Muda*, together with their families, were very proud of themselves. During the civil war of 1970-75, Imam Musa did not do much to further the cause, as the system has been set up and understood by the community, not only the *Kaum Muda* but the *Kaum Tua* as well. The legacy lives on.

**Economy**

As an individual, Imam Musa was a fisherman, like many others living along the ekong river. He used drifting net as a means to catch fish. He also had a medium size motor boat which he hired for transportation of goods. He did not own any piece of farm land like his father did.

For the community, his economic plan was about to become reality by the year 1970. But it was too late and just a dream for him and many others. By the late 1960s, the *Sangkum Ly Mousa* started to buy paddy fields in the village of Makh, Sré Véal in the district of Prèk Kák, village not far from Svay Kléang and on the opposite side of the Mekong river. In the late 1960s, the paddy fields could produce enough for the yearly need of some 10 teachers. The quantity of the paddy produced was about 200 thang\(^9\) per year. The teachers who benefited from the program were those in the Khum Svay Khleang (in the province of Kompong Cham), Phum Thmei and Kompong Ro (both in the province of Kratie). The operation managed by Sangkum Ly Mousa has created jobs for the young jobless Muslim of Svay Khleang and a few other villages along the Mekong river.

The money to buy those paddy fields came from contributions of his followers and donations by sympathisers. The question why he started the economic reform very much later? The answer was very simple. First the community was generally poor. And secondly he believed that if the people do not have the conviction, and do not understand the importance of collective work, it was futile to explain the idea to them. And these took so many years of his precious leadership life.

And to carry out the economic reform it must start from things that the participants (villagers) understand; as we knew that the people of the districts were individual farmers or fishermen and never worked collectively before. The process had to go through education first, as what was being done. And by education it meant that it has to combine religious education to the modern education which

\(^{9}\) 1 thang = 15kg of rice.
include mathematics, sciences, history, geography etc... That was the reason why the first national primary schools were built at the heart of the Muslim community villages of his followers to make it easier for the young to go to school, and the parents too felt secured in sending them there.

Legacy of Imam Musa in Indochina

As mentioned earlier, the Muslims in Indochina were mainly descendants of the kingdom of Champa. Due to so many reasons, mainly the long process of the nam-tien, the displaced Cham had founded their villages in the kingdom of Cambodia, including Rong Damrei and Moat Chrouk now known as Tayninh and Chaudoc\textsuperscript{10}. They are also found in Vientiane, Laos.

After 1993, in Cambodia, the Muslims started to build new villages in almost every part of Cambodia in search of better living. The migration from their home villages to new found lands in other parts of Cambodia is mainly due to economic reason. This movement of the Cham Muslim communities within Cambodia can be easily done as they are part and parcel of the whole Cambodian community.

After the fall of Khmer Rouge, every Cambodians, including the Cham, started to find their way back to their villages. Upon reaching their villages they started to rebuild their lives together by picking up bits and pieces which were left off. Besides rebuilding their own family, they concentrated in renovating, and later in some villages, building new mosques or \textit{musallah}. Soon they look for someone who could teach Quran to their young offspring, as well as copies of the holy book\textsuperscript{11}. Donations were pouring in. Islam is so important to them as it is believed and history has told us so, that the identity of the community survives times and again because of Islam. Their religious identity would differentiate them from the majority of the population who are mainly Buddhist. Islam is the core of their unity and identity. For the Muslims in Indochina, every thing evolves around the teaching and their practice of Islam. They have started once again from Zero\textsuperscript{12}.

Even though \textit{Kaum Muda} and \textit{Kaum Tua} could no longer be identified, especially in Cambodia, Imam Musa’s students and followers who survived the Pol Pot regime, still practiced the dynamics of faith propagated by Imam Musa’s \textit{Kaum Muda}. Children, whenever and wherever possible, were immediately sent to schools. And a new breed of young graduates from the Middle East, once again, brought in the new dynamism in the interpretation and application of the Islamic faith, a trend which has seen the refusal of some parents to send their children to some Islamic schools.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} See Mohamad Zain Bin Musa 1990 and Mak Phceu 2003.
\textsuperscript{11} See Mohamad Zain Bin Musa and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abd. Rahman 2003, chapter 7: The cham in Cambodia after the Pol Pot regime.
Conclusion

Imam Musa was a man of vision. With all his sincerity, he sacrificed his entire life working for Islamic causes by first improving their education, religious and modern education of the Muslim youth. He brought many changes to the Muslim society in Cambodia, in terms of understanding of Islam, the teachings and the practices of Islam, and most importantly the application of the Islamic faith. The teaching of Islam is not about rituals and blind belief but it teaches us to think and understand things around us and the universe as a whole. We all know that there were so many verses in the holy Quran, which put forward things, ideas, concept of living in the form of questions. This world is the bridge to the future. And as a person, he was a caring person. This care, especially for the youth, has brought about unity and solidarity within the community. As a father and an Imam, he was very honest and truthful. He strongly believed in himself. He was a role model for so many younger generations who want to emulate him. The youth has benefited a great deal from his teaching which was the starting point of so many things that happened to the community. He has set the ball rolling and it is rolling; and the dynamism has set in.

*Imam Musa and his family (early 1970s)*.

12 See François Ponchaud 1977.
13 See chapter 8 of Mohamad Zain Bin Musa and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abd. Rahman 2006.
Reference

Books and articles:


Interviewees:

Fa Nab (Zainab Binti Mustafa)
Imam Musa’s wife.
Born in 1929 (78 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.
Now living with her daughter, Khusyatillah, in the USA

Keo Ibrohim
Advisor to General Les Kosem.
A follower of Imam Musa
Born in 1930, in Svay Khleang, Krauch chmar, Kompong cham
Now living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.

Khusyatillah Binti Musa
Imam Musa’s daughter.
Born in 1959 (48 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.
Now living in Seatle, Washington, USA.

Ly Imweur
Born in 1953, in Phum Ambil, Khum Poeuh, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham.
Imam Musa’s student.
Survived the Khmer Rouge regime.
Now, Entrepreneur, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Nasrullah Bin Ahmad
Born in 1971
Son of Imam Ahmad India
Graduate in Usuluddin, Egypt

Hj Nik Sulaiman Hj Wan Nor
A follower and student of Imam Musa
Born in 1947 (60 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.
Now living in Nibong Tebal, Pulau Penang, Malaysia.
Hjh Rafeah Hj Osman
A follower of Imam Musa and a contemporary of FA Nab.
Born in 1933 (74 yrs old), in Phum Prek Krut, Khum Svay Khleang, Srok Krauch Chmar, Khet Kompong Cham, Cambodia.
Now living in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia.

Zakaryya Adam

Imam Musa’s student.
Now, politician, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.