

PHNOM PENH'S FETHULLAH GÜLEN SCHOOL AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PREVALENT FORMS OF EDUCATION FOR CAMBODIA'S MUSLIM MINORITY

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Abstract

Following the end of Khmer Rouge rule (1975–79), the Cham Muslim minority of Cambodia began to rebuild community structures and religious infrastructure. It was only after 1993 that they became recipients of international Islamic aid, mostly for the establishment of mosques, schools and orphanages. Now Cambodia boasts several Muslim schools, financed and/or run by Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti NGOs as well as by private enterprise from the Gulf region, most of which rely on a purely religious curriculum. However, Cambodian Muslim leaders are urging attendance of public Khmer schools and seeking to establish alternatives in the form of Islamic secondary schools with a mixed curriculum, modelled after similar schools in Malaysia. The generally harmonious relations between Chams and Khmers have been affected by the importation of new interpretations of Islam through international Islamic welfare organisations, and the long arm of international terrorism.

The only Cambodian non-religious and non-discriminatory educational facility operated from a Muslim country is Phnom Penh's Zaman International School. It was founded in 1997 and is associated with the Fethullah Gülen movement. Classes are taught in both Khmer and English. Its kindergarten, primary and high schools are attended by Khmers, resident foreigners and a few Chams. For them, apart from the high standard provided by the school, its explicit agenda of instruction on an inter-racial and inter-religious basis, coupled with its prestige as an institution operated from Muslim lands, serves to make the school a valuable alternative to both secular private schools and Islamic schools.

This paper raises and discusses the interesting question of the applicability of Gülen's thought on education and inter-faith relations to the periphery of Southeast Asian Islam.

Introduction

Fethullah Gülen is a former Turkish state imam, who has risen to become Turkey's most famous Islamic intellectual. He is by now widely known as a elaborate supporter of inter-religious dialogue, pluralism, tolerance and democracy¹. Most important for the present study, the probably most striking aspect of his thought is the conviction, that acquiring and transmitting secular knowledge, as well as supplying people with the means to do so, is in perfect accordance with and in fact demanded by Islamic ideals². Gülen's thought has attracted a considerable following, which has grown into a whole Gülen-inspired movement with an education network as its basis (Yavuz & Esposito 2003; Agai 2004). Starting out by establishing schools and student hostels in Turkey, the movement has since the early 1990s founded Turkish secular schools in many countries in Europe, Asia, America, Africa and Australia³.

Religiously motivated educational efforts have been and are a outstanding feature of worldwide Islamic resurgence in the past decades. To this one has to add the unprecedented internationalization of these efforts on a global scale in a rapidly globalizing world, first through organizations like the Muslim World League and then through Islamic charities. The case of the Gülen movement is unique as it is an Islamically inspired international actor providing not religious but secular education. What is more, its activities fall into a time of major transitions and upheavals in the Muslim world. A development displaying common patterns like the growth of terrorism in the name of religion and the politicization of Islam from Trinidad to Maluku. Yet, instantly this transitional processes had very different outcomes. Whereas the Taliban regime was just firmly consolidating its rule over most of Afghanistan in 1998, the same year witnessed how Indonesia's long time ruler general Suharto had to give way to a pro-democracy movement largely carried by what was labelled as "civil Islam" (Hefner 2000). For the Chams of Cambodia the time since 1993 was also a major transitional experience, namely from long enduring isolation from the wider Muslim world to an unprecedented sudden onslaught of international Islamic endeavours in the Khmer kingdom.

So-called Gülen schools have been founded in a number of Southeast Asian states, namely in Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar and in the Philippines⁴. Contrary to the Muslim minorities of the Philippines and Thailand, the Khmer kingdom's Muslim minority is not confined to a specific geographic area. Consisting mostly of Chams interspersed with a much smaller number of Malays, it is dispersed over all 22 Cambodian provinces. Another major point of difference between the Cambodian Chams and other Southeast Asian Muslim minorities is their specific history in relation to the Khmer majority, as there is no long history of inter-religious strife as in southern Thailand, the South Philippines and the Arakan region of Myanmar. It is a major particularity of the Cambodian Chams' case, that they had not been conquered but had instead come to Cambodia as refugees.

While taking into account, that Phnom Penh is not a potential inter-religious powder keg as is Zamboanga on Mindanao, which houses the Gülen network's "Turkish-Philippine School of Tolerance" (Michel 2003, 70), it is important to view the movement's agenda of education and ethics across religious and ethnic boundaries in the contemporary Cambodian context, to assess its possible contribution to both the Khmers' and the Chams' plight in a country which

1 On Gülen and important aspects of his thought see Ünal & Williams 2000.

2 On Gülen's education discourse see Agai 2004, 191-260.

3 An incomplete list of schools is to be found in Ibid., 13-15.

4 References to these educational facilities are scattered throughout different sources. See Yılmaz (2003, 236); Agai (2004, 14-15); Michel (2003, 70-71).

still has to recover from the repercussions of Khmer Rouges rule from 1975-1979. This is even more so, if one considers, that a prime field of the movement's activities are countries under former communist rule like the Central Asian republics and Albania (Agai 2004, 272-280; Turam 2003, 184-207, Agai 2003, 66-68). Although, as far as Central Asia is concerned, common Turkic-ness plays a major role in describing the motivations of both Gülen himself and of his movement's activists there (Agai 2004, 224-229; Turam 2003, 188-202), it is nevertheless often stated, that "the moral vacuum left by communism" (Agai 2004, 344) is something to be confronted by the movement's efforts in the field of education. Moreover, Gülen's thought on living in non-Muslim lands (Yılmaz 2003, 234-237) should, in the face of worldwide Islamic resurgence, be valuable for all Muslim minorities and immigrant communities around the globe.

In this paper, I am arguing, that the thought of Fethullah Gülen is valuable for the Cambodian Chams in several aspects, including their coexistence with the Buddhist Khmer majority, intra-community harmony, and their quests for both empowerment and identity preservation through education. The latter factor is practically and exemplarily related to the Zaman International School in Phnom Penh.

As a background for the envisaged assessment of Phnom Penh's Gülen School's presumed character as a appropriate alternative to other forms of education for the Cham minority, especially likewise foreign patronized ones, it will be mandatory to present a concise overview of Cham history in Cambodia in relation to the Khmer majority and the field of education. This will be done in the first section of this study. For our purpose it is certainly most important to focus on the period since 1993, when Cambodia emerged from over 20 years of isolation to become a playground for numerous NGOs and private enterprise, often originating from Muslim states and investing into educational programs. Thus, the next section will present an assessment of the different forms of schooling as well as of differing views on education that have emerged among the Chams since then. Getting closer to our main topic, the third section then tries to find convergences between Gülen's thought on the one hand and the efforts and self-images of Cham NGOs in Cambodia on the other. The following two sections deal specifically with the relation of the Zaman International School to the Gülen movement, and secondly, to the Cham community. Finally, the concluding section will, apart from recapitulating prior findings, try to assess the relevance of Gülen's thought for the Cambodian Chams' case in the field of education and beyond.

The Chams in Cambodia and Education in Religious and Secular Spheres

Chams migrated to Cambodia in numerous waves between 1471 and the 1830s, as their homeland, the once powerful Champa, was gradually absorbed by the Vietnamese until its ultimate dissolution in 1832 (Phoeun 1987). Close contact with resident Malays as well as the advance of Islam in Champa in the 16th and 17th century, due to its close attachment to the Muslim dominated maritime trade of the Malay-Indonesian world, led to their Islamisation. In, for the Southeast Asian context, remarkably ethnically homogenous Cambodia, the Chams, with a population of between 400000 and 500000 people, are constituting the only numerically important ethnic and religious minority. The vast majority of Cambodian Chams are adherents of the Shafi'ite school of law, and have underwent a significant Malay cultural influence. Knowledge of the Malay language is wide spread, as most religious literature employed by the Chams is in Malay, and moreover intermarriage and close contacts to resident Malays

have been common currency for centuries. However, Cham language is still the native tongue of most Chams, and Khmer is also spoken by most.

A distinct minority within the Cambodian Cham community are the Cham Sot (“the pure Chams”), referred to as Jahed by the majority, which are displaying no traces of Malayisation and are professing a specific form of Cham Islam, characterized by a different conduct with regard to the basic obligations agreed upon by the Islamic mainstream (as to avoid the tendentious term “orthodoxy”) as well as by an incorporation of traditional pre-Islamic Cham practices (De Feo 2005a; Baccot 1968). Most notably, only this group has preserved traditional Sanskrit-derived Cham script and old manuscripts, whereas the rest has consequently given up Cham script in favour of an adapted version of Malay Jawi script.

For both Khmers and Chams education had for centuries a purely religious character, either provided in the Buddhist monasteries or in Muslim village schools or by itinerant Muslim teachers. However, in both the monasteries and the Muslim village schools, acquiring the ability to read and write was a prerequisite for further religious instruction. Apparently, the majority of Chams eventually came to rely on Malay teaching materials instead of Cham ones. This development was not only triggered by Malay teachers visiting Cambodia, but also by the fact, that the most revered Cham teachers were themselves educated in Malay centres of learning like Kelantan and Patani. That Islamic education was a major ingredient of Cham village life in the middle of the 19th century can be inferred from European travel reports. Thus, the German ethnographer Adolf Bastian, upon visiting Cambodia in 1864, notices that a recently established Cham-Malay village near Battambang, traditionally not a Cham stronghold, already housed a religious school (Bastian 2005, 100). Although education in spoken Arabic was certainly hardly ever available in such schools, the same author nevertheless remarks, that French soldiers from the Maghreb were able to communicate with certain Chams in the modern-day border region between Cambodia and Vietnam (Bastian 2005, 145).

From the early 20th century we are informed about textbooks used in Cham schools. Then, studies were confined to Qur’anic commentaries (tafsir)⁵ and Malay translations of catechisms, like those of Abu-l Layth al-Samarqandi (incidentally a Central Asian scholar of the Hanafite school) and Abu Abdullah al-Sanusi (Cabaton 1906, 43-44).

Both cited reports date from French colonial times (beginning in 1863), yet unlike one would suspect, French education initially had virtually no impact on the Chams, and was even in the 1930s still very limited. Generally education in Cambodia has been labelled as “an area of colonial neglect” (Vickery 1999, 19). While traditional pagoda schools declined under French rule, the authorities failed to fill the gap with a modern education system (Kiernan 1999, 6). Although Muslim schools were most probably not subject to such decline, modern education among the Chams was certainly not boosted by the French presence, with full secondary education only available in 1933 (Kiernan 1999, 6) and only 50000-60000 children enrolled in primary school in 1936 (Vickery 1999, 19). In this respect, the remarks of a French ethnographer are of interest. The author states, that Muslims were hardly frequenting

5 Unfortunately there is no mention of the authorships of the commentaries in question. However, by the time of Cabaton’s survey, there existed only two Malay commentaries on the entire Qur’an, namely the works by the Acehnese Abd al-Ra’uf al-Singkili (d. ca. 1700) and the Javanese Muhammad Nawawi Banten (d. 1897) (Feener 1998, 52-55; Riddell 2001, 195-197). Then and now the most widely distributed classical Arabic work of tafsir in Southeast Asia is the concise *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (“the commentary of the two Jalals”) by al-Mahalli (d. 1459) and al-Suyuti (d. 1505).

French schools in the late 1930s (Ner 1941, 188). Instead, he describes a lively religious education system, with informal education and the village schools as basis, and elevated and revered “secondary” schools in Chruy Changvar (Phnom Penh), and most notably Trea in Kampong Cham province⁶, as the highest level of education. For further studies the Chams still looked mostly to Kelantan and, by then, even to Mecca (Ner 1941, 189-190). Of major importance for our present discussion is the fact, that Trea in the 1930s already also housed a madrasa providing a mixed curriculum of both religious and secular subjects. Throughout Southeast Asia, the introduction of such balanced curricula was among the major demands of the Islamic modernist movement as well as a symbol of it (Giora 2004, 1-8). However, this innovative institution in Trea was neither destined to last nor to serve as a model for other religious schools in Cambodia at that date.

Naturally, neither the low enrolment of Chams in the French schools nor the failure to establish a network of modern institutions of religious education, as was done by Indonesia’s Muhammadiyah modernists in the same period, served to uplift the Chams in protectorate society, where upward mobility through education was even very hard to achieve for Khmers. Whereas Cham enrolment in official schools was even low in the urban milieu (62 students in Phnom Penh and neighbouring Kandal province) in the late 1930s, it was virtually non-existent in the rural Cham strongholds, which is most clearly exemplified by the tiny number of merely four Cham students for the whole of Kampong Cham province⁷, which had at least a 33000 strong Cham population by then (Ner 1941, 196). Accordingly, Chams were not to be found in any administrative positions, apart from that of district or village chief in Cham areas.

In independent Cambodia under king Sihanouk the overall educational situation changed dramatically with a rapid increase in availability and attendance up to tertiary level. Unfortunately in the long run, this otherwise laudable and surely well intended development, due to the employed ill-suited curricula and a simple absence of adequate governmental and administrative jobs coupled with a far too slow expansion in the commercial and industrial sectors to absorb the graduates, was to constitute a problem of its own, which contributed to the urban-rural antagonism playing a role in the ascension of the Khmer Rouges to power (Vickery 1999, 19-23). Yet, observers in the early 1960s still lament the Chams’ preference for religious schools despite the progress of the public system (Delvert 1961, 23). On the contrary, Chams reminiscing over the Sihanouk era, are criticizing the system’s partiality in terms of its availability for minorities and allocation of stipends (Le Front d’Union 1983, 50, 58)⁸.

When general Lon Nol deposed Sihanouk in 1970, the country was already a battlefield with both communist insurgency and US bombing in the countryside (Kiernan 1999, 18-19). As the war gradually intensified until the Khmer Rouges victory in 1975, Cambodians were generally occupied with more fundamental issues than educational reform. However,

6 On Trea’s history as a centre of Muslim learning in Cambodia see Bruckmayr (forthcoming).

7 It has to be kept in mind, that the Chams would have had very little opportunity for official schooling in rural areas like Trea, even if they had wanted to participate. In 1942 Kampong Cham city saw the inauguration of the comparably prestigious Collège Norodom Sihanouk. However students were selected from all over the country, surely to the exclusion of local Chams. Among those first chosen was a farmer’s son from Kampong Thom with palace connections named Saloth Sar (Chandler 2000, 17-18). He should gain notoriety three decades later as Pol Pot.

8 Although the source of this information is a publication of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government, which was certainly intended to present the conditions of the Chams under previous regimes as unfavourable, it would be misleading to regard the grievances described in the published interviews as mere inventions of the interviewees.

high school and university life continued to function at least in Phnom Penh, where only 24 Cham students were enrolled at the outset of Khmer Rouges rule (Front d'Union 1983, 52). Although the still repeatedly heard view, that education was subject to total destruction in Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea, has long been falsified, it is nevertheless firmly established that, due to "romantic peasantry" (Vickery 1999, 185), only the lowest level of primary schooling, providing basic literacy and numeracy, was maintained (Vickery 1999, 183-186). Apart from the general horrible death toll inflicted on the overall Cambodian population under Democratic Kampuchea, its rule proved especially disastrous for traditional religious learning among the Chams. Out of approximately 300 teachers at Muslim schools, only 38 survivors were counted in 1979 (Kiernan 1999, 271; Taouti 1982, 194-195). Even though it is most probable that certain teachers have successfully fled abroad, and might not have returned by then, the general pattern of extermination of generations of Cham teachers is obvious. In 1979 the Chams found themselves with hardly any teachers and almost all their mosques destroyed, not to mention the estimated deaths of 90000 to over 400000 Chams (Kiernan 1988, 30; Osman 2002, 1-3; Bruckmayr 2006, 4-7).

After the Vietnamese invasion, which brought Democratic Kampuchea to a close, the new People's Republic of Kampuchea started to rebuild the country, including its educational system, in the face of a prolonged war against the remnants of the Khmer Rouges and the anti-communist Khmer Serei ("free Khmers"). Its educational efforts are considered as "one of the regime's greatest achievements" (Gottesmann 2002, 74). Moreover participants emphasized its non-discriminatory treatment of the Chams. As far as the Chams are concerned, it has been argued, that they served as a showcase to demonstrate the new regime's tolerance (Hawk et. al. 1995, 11). However, in this respect support was a two-way road, and also important parts of the Chams came out as ostentatious supporters of the new regime, and were suddenly strongly represented in the government and its institutions (Kiernan 1989, 34). Similarly, Cham participation in public schooling was certainly the greatest ever.

These developments were paralleled by Cham efforts to re-establish their religious school system. This was initially only achieved at a minimal scale, due to absence of experienced teachers, and a lack of funds. The regime sought to bring the Chams' plight to international attention, most notably through the efforts of Mat Ly, Cambodia's highest ranking Cham, who just like former party secretary Heng Samrin (1981-1991) and current prime minister Hun Sen had been a second level Khmer Rouges cadre before fleeing to Vietnam, and was now a member of the ruling party's political bureau. Yet, the international rejection of the regime as a puppet of communist Vietnam served to prolong Cham isolation from the Muslim world and its charities in a time, which coincided with US and Saudi-Arab engagement in the anti-communist struggle in Afghanistan.

The first arrival of international Islamic aid used for education, occurred in the early 1980s, when the Islamic Development Bank provided funds for the reconstruction of mosques with annexed class rooms, and school materials including scientific and religious books in Arabic and Malay (Taouti 1982, 200 n.10). After the 1993 elections, which marked a late return to a certain degree of stability not experienced for more than two decades in Cambodia, a great number of Muslim charities started to operate in Cambodia, mainly financing mosques and religious schools, which led to an unprecedented increase of both (Bruckmayr 2006, 10-13; De Feo 2005b, 107-110). Whereas rapid madrasa growth as an indicator of Islamic resurgence was a development starting already in the 1970s in the South Philippines (Milligan 2005, 122), Indonesia and other Southeast Asian states, the Cambodian Chams took no part in this process. However, since 1993 with a variety of Islamic organizations working directly

or indirectly in the country, and a renewed attachment to Malaysia, Cambodian Chams quickly caught up with their Southeast Asian peers.

Consequently, the number of Chams having access to religious education has risen dramatically. Yet, a number of Cham leaders are arguing, that more is needed to uplift the still mostly rural, poor and uneducated Chams, whose general situation was apparently little affected by the promising restart of public education in the early 1980s, notwithstanding the obvious success of a number of Cham politicians. Moreover, Islamic resurgence and its side effects have also affected otherwise traditionally harmonious Khmer-Cham relations, and have, in some circles, brought forward the view, that too intimate relations with the Khmers are undesirable.

The Religious, the Secular, the Paralleled and the Combined: Schooling the Chams

Recent research among the Chams has shown, that in the rural villages illiteracy in Khmer, Cambodia's official language, is still a major problem. As the religious school are naturally not concerned with the instruction in Khmer alphabet and language, the over-concern of many Chams and Islamic charities with religious education does nothing to confront this deficiency (So 2005, 5). Moreover, it is obvious, that the public school system has failed even in this basic aspect.

By now, Cambodia boast around 300 Islamic schools. My own fieldwork served to testify to the purely religious curricula relied on in most of these schools. However, independent initiatives are also undertaken to provide useful extra classes to the pupils in several of these schools. Thus, in a school in a Cham village in Siam Reap, which with the ruins of Angkor Wat in its vicinity, is apart from Phnom Penh the tourist centre of Cambodia, English, no doubt of major importance in such an area, is also taught apart from usual classes in Malay⁹. Awareness for the usefulness of English in Cambodia in urban Cham circles, dates back to the UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority) era (1992-1993) as is preserved in the report of Strubbe (1993, 15), yet among rural Chams, Malay¹⁰ and even Arabic speakers are still easier to encounter than people fluent in English. Consequently, it is naturally almost impossible to find anybody with sufficient English skills to teach Cham students in the countryside.

Among many Chams former rejection of public schools has given way to an embracement of secular education, however a fear of assimilation to the Khmer majority through education remains. Therefore pupils are often pursuing parallel schooling. Enrolled in both public and religious schools, even children attending primary school are spending a considerable amount of time at school, "in a desperate attempt to ensure a better future [...] while retaining their identity as Muslims", as Milligan has put it, as he observed a similar situation among the Maranao of the southern Philippines (2005, 139-140). Naturally, in rural Cambodia, where children are often needed by the family to participate in fishing, rice farming and the like, this educational double load is often not endurable for long. As the religious village schools are closer to home than the public ones, usually located in Khmer villages, the choice is often made in favour of the former, when the attendance of both proves to be too exhausting or too

9 Interview with the province imam of Siam Reap, Musa Soleh, in Stung Thmey (15-7, 16-7-05).

10 Adding to its importance as language of religious instruction, it has to be noted that, in contrast to Khmer language, Malay, as an Austronesian language and thus related to Cham, is comparably easy to learn for Cham speakers. On Cham language see Thurgood 1999.

time-consuming.

A possible solution to the problems posed by parallel schooling is the establishment of religious schools with a mixed curriculum including core subjects of the public syllabus. Thus, while explicitly Islamic in orientation, its students still have the opportunity to switch to, or to engage in further studies in the public system. Strikingly, whereas rapid madrasa growth in the southern Philippines started two decades before the beginning of a similar process in Cambodia, the introduction of schools with such combined curricula dates to the late 1990s in both countries¹¹.

A notable advocate of schools with a combined curriculum is the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation (CMDf), a Cambodian NGO patronized by the grand mufti Kamaruddin Yusof, and headed by the currently most influential Cham in politics, secretary of state (ministry of labour and training) Othman Hassan. Starting in 1999, the CMDf has embarked on building a network of secondary schools for boys and girls, which rely on the same mixed syllabus employed at similar schools in Malaysia (CMDf 2004, 8-11)¹². Their goal is to provide, otherwise in Cambodia unavailable, standardized Islamic education, without barring its students' way as far as success through secular education is concerned. However, their religious character is emphasized by stressing, that their graduation certificates are accepted by renowned Muslim centres of learning like Cairo's Al-Azhar University and Kelantan's Islamic College. Nevertheless, among the Chams studying at Malaysian universities, many have chosen to study modern sciences rather than in religious fields¹³.

Similarly, a number of schools founded and funded by Arab NGOs employ a mixed syllabus. Examples include the school at Choum Chao in Phnom Penh, run by the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, which serves for the education of the Chams residing in the annexed largest orphanage for Muslim children in Cambodia (De Feo 2004, 91). Here religious subjects are taught in the morning and secular ones in the afternoon¹⁴. Generally, such Arab financed schools are credited with providing classical Islamic education as well as general subjects on a high level (De Feo 2004, 92). However, their funding is regarded as controversial as several of the operating NGOs feature on the blacklists of the Bush administration for suspected links to terrorism. Given the intricacies of the situation, a crackdown on and subsequent shutdown of a school of the Saudi Umm al-Qura International Organization in Kendal province caused fierce disputes, as the school was regarded as the only high level institution affordable for Chams in its rural surroundings (Osman 2006). On the other hand it is doubtful whether mixed curriculum schools are having a positive impact on national integration. Thus, it has been argued in the Philippine context, that such schools are implicit symbols of "dissatisfaction, if not outright rejection, [...] of educational alternatives offered [...] by mainstream society" (Milligan 2005, 124).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned efforts to either study at public and religious schools in a parallel mode, and the quest to establish satisfying mixed educational alternatives, there are also currents within the Cham community, which are deliberately rejecting schooling at public schools above the primary level to avoid Khmerization, while strongly opting for purely religious studies. This view is specifically expounded by members of the Cambodian branch

11 For the Philippines see Milligan (2005, 107).

12 In 2004 the network had already 14 schools in 8 provinces.

13 Interview with CMDf member and Cambodian Student Association (CAMSA) secretary-general Sos Mousine (14-7-05).

14 Interview with CAMSA vice secretary-general Set Muhammadsis (13-7-05).

of the Tablighi Jamaat¹⁵, an Indian “evangelical” movement and offshoot of the Deobandi school (Metcalf 2002), which lays particular stress on individual conduct with regard to the prophet’s example (Masud 2000; Sikand 2002). Arriving in the southern Philippines already in the early 1970s (Milligan 2005, 121), it made its first appearance in the Khmer kingdom only at the end of the 1980s, but has since then become a mass movement, especially among the rural Chams (De Feo 2005b, 110-112; Bruckmayr 2006, 13-14). Schools associated with the movement are particularly concerned with memorization of the Qur’an (De Feo 2005b, 111). The centre of its activities is Trea in Kampong Cham province, which houses a big Tablighi boarding school attached to Cambodia’s largest mosque (Bruckmayr forthcoming).

A major problem of exclusively religious studies is, that many religious specialists, which have moreover completed their education in Saudi-Arabia, southern Thailand or Malaysia, now cannot even find a job as a teacher as there are hardly any vacant positions in this field anymore, due to the rapid increase in graduates in the last decade. It is most probable, that the considerable number of foreign religious teachers in the country will be reduced in the future, as their presence is a cause for growing uneasiness among the authorities. Yet, it remains questionable, whether future demand will keep up with graduation rates.

Common Agendas of Gülen and Cham NGOs

Greg Barton has recently shed light on the similarities of the Gülen movement in Turkey and the neo-modernist currents in Indonesia as so-called post-Islamist civil society forces outstanding in the Muslim world (Barton 2005, 43). As such they might be rightfully regarded as illustrative, yet rarely recognized examples for the assumption that Islam, civil society and democracy are indeed compatible. Interestingly, although taking Turam’s reservations against applying the label “civil society organization” to freely on everything non-governmental and independent (2003, 186-187) into account, I am suggesting, that also Cambodian Muslim NGOs should be regarded as such, as their agendas have many convergences with those of the two aforementioned movements. Organizations like the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation and the Cambodian Islamic Development Association are indeed supporting democracy, participation and interaction of Chams with the Khmer majority, as well as secular education as a means of community empowerment without necessarily losing one’s Islamic identity. More specifically their leaders are mostly politically active¹⁶, which brings them closer to the Indonesian examples of Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais, both formerly leaders of multi-million religious organizations before becoming influential politicians, than to Gülen and Nurcholish Madjid¹⁷, who stayed clear of party politics, while still wielding political influence as the respective states’ most prominent religious thinkers and intellectuals.

Although Gülen’s ethos of education, with its outstanding element, namely the acquirement of secular knowledge as an Islamic value per se (Agai 2004, 195-196), has so far found no effective counterpart or followers in Cambodia so far, the agenda and activities of an organization like the Cambodian Muslim Student Association (CAMSA) bear many resemblances to Gülen’s discourse on education (Michel 2003; Agai 2003). Indeed, according to its own

15 Naturally not all of the movement’s members are sharing this view.

16 The high ranking members of CMDF are in their majority members of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), whereas another important NGO, the Cambodian Islamic Development Association, is headed by a parliamentarian of the oppositional Sam Rainsy Party (Bruckmayr 2006, 10-11).

17 On Madjid and his thought see Saleh 2001, 240-292.

presentation¹⁸, CAMSA offers its services to make sure that Cham youths complete their secular education. Moreover, it is providing adult education classes for those, who have been unable to graduate from high school. Another activity is the founding of Muslim hostels to accommodate students from countryside at a low cost or for free, in exchange for community work. Even though such hostels certainly have an exclusive character, it has to be remembered that similar institutions are among the core elements of the Gülen movement in Turkey (Agai 2004, 301-309). Due to the fact, that businessmen sympathetic to its cause are instrumental in funding the Gülen movement's activities, it is also of interest, that CAMSA organizes classes in business administration to foster entrepreneurial activities. Likewise other Cham NGOs openly support secular education. Thus, the Cambodian Islamic Development Association gives financial support to Cham students attending private Norton University in Phnom Penh (De Feo 2005b, 108). Furthermore, its leader Ahmad Yahya had already sent Chams to Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia to acquire university education in fields like law and economics in the 1990s (Collins 1996, 61).

Another important feature of Gülen's thought, is his call for inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding by emphasizing common values rather than differences (Agai 2004, 256), the basis of which has to be knowledge of the other. In this respect, CAMSA pursues the translation of seminal works on Islam into Khmer and English for distribution to Islamic and public schools to be available to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding is explicitly described as the way to mutual respect and harmonious coexistence. Whereas Gülen is mostly associated with dialogue among Muslims, Jews and Christians (Ünal & Williams 2000, 241-296), members of the Gülen movement are indeed cooperating and interacting freely with Buddhists in Buddhist countries such as Korea or Thailand (Yılmaz 2003, 236) and also in Cambodia. In general, the number of books dealing with Muslim-Buddhist relations from a Muslim perspective, or from a Buddhist perspective for that matter, is certainly very small. However, in CAMSA's library one finds the works of the Trinidadian Maulana Imran Hossein, who addresses this topic in a conciliatory manner. This selection of books seems to suggest, that CAMSA is looking to provide knowledge legitimizing the traditional relation to the Buddhist majority, in times in which it is challenged by certain currents within the Cham community.

The Zaman International School of Phnom Penh and the Gülen Network

The private Zaman International School was founded in 1997 by the Turkish journalist Attila Yusuf Guleker. With over 700 hundred students enrolled, it is educating more boys and girls than similar Phnom Penh private schools like the International School of Phnom Penh or Northbridge International School.

It has already been stressed that, due to the instrumental role played by followers of Fethullah Gülen in the recent spread of Turkish private schools around the globe¹⁹, such institutions are, albeit officially classified merely as "private institutions", automatically associated with the Gülen network by the Turkish state and public, and especially by the network's activists (Agai 2004, 13 n.8). As elsewhere (Agai, 2004, 17), most students of the Zaman school have

18 The following information about CAMSA's agenda is derived from an unpublished document of the organization dating to the year 2005, and obtained thanks to Sos Mousine.

19 For Gülen's own reflections about this development and his contribution to it, see Ünal & Williams 2000, 320-322.

certainly never even heard the name of Fethullah Gülen. However, linkages between the Gülen network and the school are easily detected. Founder Yusuf Guleker came to Cambodia as correspondent for the daily Zaman²⁰, which is closely associated with the Gülen movement at least since 1988 (Agai 2004, 168). Naturally, Guleker is also a member of the Journalists and Writers Foundation (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), which is, notwithstanding the great number of organizations associated with Gülen, the only organization connected to Gülen on a institutionalized level, as he is acting as its patron (Agai 2004, 172).

Apart from education and media, business and finance networks are considered to be the third important sphere of the Gülen movement's activities as exemplified by the business support agency PASIAD (Society for Social and Economic Solidarity with Pacific Countries), which serves to facilitate trade contacts between Turkish and Asian businessmen. In return, those who profit from its activities are often benefactors of the movement's educational institutions (Barton 2005, 29-30). Similarly, the Kazak-Turk Education Foundation in Kazakhstan serves as central node not only for educational but also for economic endeavours in the area (Turam 2003, 189). In line with this approach, the former director of the Zaman school, Ali Kökten, was involved in PASIAD activities in Cambodia²¹. The same goes for both Kökten and his successor Osman Karaca, in relation to a similar organization named TUSKON²².

Apart from these typical intra-network relations the connection between the Gülen network and the Zaman school can also be inferred from references to it within the network. Thus, Agai was informed about the existence of a school run by followers of Gülen in Cambodia during his research on the network (Agai 2004, 15). Furthermore, reports about the Zaman school appear in Gülen-related forums and websites²³, and it has also been accorded a standard place in lists of schools of the Gülen movement's world-wide activities in recent scholarly works. However, the school's principal declined discussing idealistic or organizational relations to Gülen²⁴. Similarly, Agai reports, that, whereas it was common for teachers and administrators of similar schools in Albania to talk freely about their association with the movement grounded in Gülen's thought, new staff in the following year avoided the issue of Gülen (Agai 2004, 279). Although the efforts of the Gülen movement are widely appreciated (even in the West), negative press and conspiracy theories surrounding Gülen's figure since 1999 (Agai 2004, 162-164) might have contributed their part to the silence about Gülen in communication with outsiders. Moreover, younger members of the educational network might even be unaware, that they are part of a process, which owes so much to the thought of Fethullah Gülen. This especially goes for the great number of non-Muslim native teachers in the schools' staff.

The Zaman School and the Chams

It is obvious, that the Zaman school was not founded with the purpose to provide high level education specifically for the Muslim Chams, but rather for the whole Cambodian public. In line with Gülen's thought, activists in the network emphasize, that good works cannot be limited to Islamic countries (Agai 2004, 335-336) or to Muslims for that matter. Thus,

20 For examples of Guleker's work as Phnom Penh correspondent see his contributions in *Zaman* 18-Temmuz-98 and 1-8-98.

21 See www.pasiad.org/haber.php?id=2269

22 See *Zaman International School Newspaper*, IV, no. 46 (5.3.07), p. 1.

23 See for example <http://en.fGülen.com/content/view/2171/20/>. The same text also appeared in the *E-Gazette Today's Zaman* (19-1-06).

24 Personal communication with Osman Karaca (13-8-07).

the schools of the network are open to everybody, and although its members often have a specific Islamic agenda motivated by Gülen behind their efforts (Agai 2003), this does not include a distinct agenda towards Muslims in comparison to followers of other religions in multi-religious societies like Kazakhstan, Albania or Cambodia. This equal treatment sets the Gülen network apart from the Islamic charities in Cambodia, which are solely concerned with Muslim affairs. Moreover, Gülen himself stresses the importance of providing adequate education in accordance with local contexts and value systems by saying, that “[A]lthough education is undeniably important for a country’s development, the expected results will never be achieved if the young people are not educated according to the country’s traditional values”, yet with each generation learning from its predecessors’ experiences and following its own way (Gülen 2005, 54).

While the schools of the Gülen network are not relying on any confessional instruction, they are instead seeking to transport and expound ethical Islamic values like honesty, hard work, generosity and the like (Michel 2003, 71; Aslandoğan & Çetin 2006, 41) by exemplary conduct. This practice is denoted by Gülen and his followers with the term *temsil* (propagation of Islamic values by way of individual example) as opposed to common notions of *tebliğ*²⁵ (usually meaning propagation of Islam as such, or in the understanding of the Tablighi Jamaat, propagation of proper conduct among Muslims). Interestingly, Gülen uses these two terms interchangeably in his religious works (Agai 2004, 235), which gives *tebliğ* a considerably broader meaning within the Gülen discourse than in common usage²⁶. Obviously the aforementioned values are far from being exclusively Islamic ones, but rather part of a universal ethical system and communicated to people through different cultural and religious traditions, which is also considered by Gülen (Michel 2003, 82).

In fact, currently there are only one or two Chams enrolled at Zaman school according to its principal²⁷. Apparently, the staff of the school is not particularly concerned with the Chams. Principal Karaca explains, that he knows only little about them²⁸, and references to the Chams are neither to be found in Yusuf Guleker’s articles in Zaman, nor in the school’s newspaper²⁹. I am considering the latter instance as a deficiency as the school’s newspaper is otherwise presenting a wide range of cultural and historical information on Cambodia, including such about Buddhist and Khmer festivities as well as about those of the Chinese minority.

However, as the school is open to everyone given successful passage of the entrance exams and parents’ ability to provide the rather expansive entrance and tuition fees³⁰, it is not surprising, that a mostly poor minority like the Chams is not well represented in its ranks. To this one has to add the rejection of secular, or at least of purely secular education by parts of the Cham community. Naturally, for the limited number of Chams both desiring private secular education for their children and having the necessary financial means to do so, the Zaman school has to be the prime option, as they will surely find it desirable to have at least some coreligionists charged with the secular education of their children. Furthermore, as Turkish language is also studied at school, it should be remembered that Turkish, like Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Malay and others, is rightfully regarded as an Islamic language.

25 Derived from the Arabic verb *ballagha* (to relate, inform).

26 On the usage and relevance of these terms in the Gülen discourse see Agai 2004, 235-243.

27 See n. 21.

28 See n. 21.

29 An article about the ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asia contains two references to Champa, without mentioning its descendants on Cambodian soil. See *Zaman International School Newspaper*, IV, no. 41 (22-11-06), p. 4.

30 Full scholarships are accorded every year to the five most outstanding students.

Whereas the school's presentation is explicitly secular, and also its newspaper is not concerned with Islamic religion at all, contrary to its frequent treatment of Cambodian Buddhism, common religious values are emphasized by the school, as is common currency in the institutions of the Gülen network. The Islamic background of parts of the staff at times reveals itself in the school's English newspaper. Thus, in an article about the relevance of reading for children, a story about Muhammad appears, in which the prophet's name is followed by the common abbreviation of "peace be upon him" (pbuH) without further explanation. For the Khmer reader this practice must be completely unknown, contrary to a Cham reader. Moreover, the judgement attributed to the prophet in this story is presented as having been in the meantime confirmed by modern science³¹. With regard to the Muslim taboo concerning alcohol, it has to be noted, that the dangers of alcohol are discussed at several times³². Furthermore, sections about Turkish culture are naturally at times containing information about Islamic culture, such as the history of calligraphy³³.

Moreover, the fact, that the Turkish staff at the school is not displaying a specific interest in the Chams, does not imply, that the latter should not be able to appreciate the advantages of the school with regard to their special situation as a Muslim minority in the country, especially once they have been exposed to Gülen's thought themselves. Thus, in our final section, we will dwell on the presumed relevance Gülen's ideas could have in Cambodia, and their applicability among the Chams.

Gülen's Thought and the Plight of the Chams

For this concluding assessment I intend to focus not only on our main topic education, but also on two more relevant issues in Cham discourse, for which Gülen's approaches seem to be useful. As far as Gülen's thought on secular education is concerned, it is obvious, that the opposition between the secular and the religious is perceived in different terms by Gülen than by those Chams rejecting secular education. Rather than seeing it as a threat to the believer, Gülen regards secular knowledge as prerequisite for better religious understanding and for the ability to falsify those, who claim revelation and reason to be irreconcilable (Agai 2004, 196). That Gülen is not an advocate of purely religious studies at all, is evident in his view, that the closing of Islamic education institutions to positive sciences was a catastrophe for Islamic thought (Ünal and Williams 2000, 324-325). Moreover he stresses, that "avoiding the positive sciences fearing that they will lead to atheism is naivety (sic), and seeing them as contradictory to religion and faith and as vehicles for the rejection of religion is prejudice and ignorance" (Gülen 2005, 49), as the constructed conflict of religion and science is "a bitter struggle that should have never taken place" (quoted in Michel 2003, 75).

Another distinct problem, albeit also belonging to the education debate, is the situation of Cham women, among whom illiteracy and drop-outs after primary schools are even much more virulent than among male Chams (So 2005). At the root of this present problem lies not only the traditional role of women in Cham households, but also the recent spread of the hijab among the Chams. As the headscarf is forbidden in most secondary schools, many Cham females of conservative villages drop out of public schools to continue at purely religious schools (So 2005, 6). Especially in Turkey, but also in many European countries, the Islamic headscarf has proven to be a bone of contention. Gülen's view on the topic is strikingly

31 Zaman International School Newspaper, III, no. 31, p. 5.

32 See issues III, no. 27 and IV, no. 43, p. 6-7.

33 See issues III, no. 27. and I, no. 3.

simple and pragmatic. According to him, the Islamic headscarf belongs to the realm of details and not to the essentials of the faith. Therefore treating it as an essential part of Muslim identity would amount to “sacrificing the important for the trivial” (Ünal & Williams 2000, 63). Moreover, the sharp increase in secondary and university education of girls out of religious families in Turkey during the last decade, has also been partly contributed to Gülen’s tireless efforts of rallying for equal education for both boys and girls in Turkey among the religiously minded (Yavuz 2003, 30).

It has already been stated above, that Gülen’s ideas about Muslims living in non-Muslim lands bear relevance for all Muslim minorities and immigrant communities outside of the Muslim world. Given the Chams history as descendents of refugees, and the long history of peaceful coexistence with their Khmer hosts, the term *dar al-harb* (country of war) seems to be very inappropriate for their place of residence, rather justifying the refined Islamic law term of *dar al-aman* (country of security)³⁴. Similarly Gülen stresses, that local laws are to be obeyed by Muslim residents in non-Muslim (as well as in secular) states (Yılmaz 2003, 234). Thus, Muslim minorities like the Chams should rather contribute their part to peace within the country, than jeopardizing it by pressing for a special legal or political status.

The last feature of Gülen’s thought to be discussed here in relation to the Chams of Cambodia is of special interest, as it appears to be both rather unique and fitting perfectly into the Cham context. This concerns the relation between the Sunnite Cham majority and the Cham Sot. Albeit generally respected by the other Chams, this minority with its specific traditional practices, at times in outright discord with standard Islamic observance, is not accepted as truly Muslim. Therefore it is excluded from the benefits of international Islamic charities, which are tying aid to proper conduct, and have therefore refused to provide funds to Cham Sot villages (Collins 1996, 50-51; De Feo 2005a, 227). Local NGOs like CAMSA are not closing their doors to them, yet are allegedly also seeking to purify the practices of the so-called Jahed (De Feo 2005a, 235).

The antagonism between the two Cambodian Muslim groups is of course reminiscent of Sunnite-Alevi opposition in Turkey or Sunnite-Bektashi opposition in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia³⁵. The issue of similar Muslim minorities, often regarded as divergent sects, has not been addressed by many Muslim writers so far, especially when compared to treatment of dialogue with other book religions. Given the similarity of the respective cases, what Gülen has to say about Sunnite-Alevi relations appears to be very useful for the Cambodian case. Gülen notes, that the Alevis are in fact enriching Turkish culture, and that the two groups should open up to each other “for the sake of unity and enrichment”. Moreover, he argues that “Alevi (sic)³⁶ prayer houses should be supported” to reflect Islam’s inclusiveness (Ünal and Williams 2000, 68-69). With regard to the two specific groups of Chams in Cambodia, Gülen’s references to inclusiveness and cultural diversity are particularly important, if one considers, that the Cham Sot are indeed representing traditional Cham culture in Cambodia, and that the eventual consolidation of the two factions as two distinct religious groups is of very recent date, as this process only took place during the 20th century (Bruckmayr 2007, 103-107).

In retrospect it appears that Gülen’s thought could provide useful approaches for various current problematic issues among the Cambodian Cham community in this period of transition.

34 On this terminology see Yılmaz 2003, 234.

35 On these two groups see Yaman & Erdemir 2006.

36 This spelling invites confounding with the *Alawiyya* of Syria.

Whereas acquaintance with Gülen's ideas is still lacking in Cambodia now, the acknowledgement of the thought of Indonesian Neo-Modernists like Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid, and its convergences with Gülen's positions might pave the way for the recognition of his efforts as universal and locally applicable instead of being specifically Turkish. As far as the Zaman International School is concerned, it is evident that it remains, at least for the time being, rather a theoretical than an actual option for the education of Cham students. Yet, what is more, certain segments of the Cham community have similar agendas as Gülen and his followers in the field of education, and home grown efforts along similar lines would certainly have a much bigger impact on the community than a single foreign run school.

We have discussed the history of Cham education as well as contemporary positions in the educational debate among the Chams. Evidently, the idea of secular educational endeavours not merely for upward mobility, but also as pursuance of an Islamic ideal, as expounded by Gülen and exemplified by the existence of the Zaman International School, is an entirely new impetus for this debate. Although still widely unknown and of vanishing relevance in Cham discourse in comparison to the agendas of Arab, Malaysian and Tablighi institutions propagating their respective views and ideals, it is indeed important to note, that the Gülen movement has obviously arrived in Cambodia as a completely different type of Islamic internationalism. Its inclusive character is well-suited for the plight of a Muslim minority people with intra-community diversity, and makes it easier to deal with the Cambodian government. On the contrary, the activities of other foreign Islamic groups at times rather serve to provoke intra-community strife between Sunnites and Cham Sot as well as between modern-oriented Muslims and Tablighi Traditionalists, and are moreover in certain instances at odds with governmental demands, when the principled is preferred to the pragmatic³⁷.

Finally, as an afterthought, I want to put Gülen into a new perspective provided by Milligan's discussion of Islamic identity and education in the Philippines. In an attempt to detect possible solutions to the educational dilemma in the South Philippines, Milligan calls for "prophetic pragmatism"³⁸. With the latter he has in mind a creative combination of post colonialism and the pragmatism of a John Dewey (Milligan 2005, 162), yet without eschewing the religious component so decisive in the life and works of social reformers and peace activists like Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King (Milligan 2005, 173-175). Although seemingly unaware of Gülen and the network's schools in the South Philippines, the question has to be raised, whether Gülen could not be rightfully regarded as such a prophetic pragmatist, as both the religious and the pragmatic seem to be the major components in Gülen's thought, and as the reconciliation of progressive energies and religious channels lies at the root of prophetic pragmatism.

37 For example, a teacher at RIHS school was reprimanded by his superiors for attending a government AIDS prevention workshop for teachers (personal conversation, Kampong Cham, 1-8-2005).

38 A term coined by the American philosopher Cornel West (1989).