

Religion

The village that left Buddhism behind

Muslims make up only 2.3 per cent of Cambodia's population, but voices within the Islamic community insist that it is growing. And while most converts have been brought to Islam through marriage, there's at least one village where the religion has taken hold on its own merits



Abdul Amit serves as the religious leader for a village in which almost all of the families are converts to Islam, he says. SCOTT ROTZOLL



Khmer Muslim women pray in Kwan village. SCOTT ROTZOLL

AUDREY WILSON AND VANDY MUONG
Post Weekend

In Kwan village in Kampong Speu province, 65-year-old Abdul Amit leads a group of men and women down a dusty road to noon prayers.

Inside, the mosque is simple: four white walls, handwoven prayer rugs, and a makeshift curtain to separate the women from the men. With toddlers and reporters present, the mood is informal. The small group of villagers make their prayers, then return to the hubbub on the outside.

The small building with its gold dome is quite new, funded by money sent from a Saudi Arabian donor in 2014, Amit explained. The Saudi connection blossomed from a social-media video campaign overseen by the Cambodia Muslim Media Center (CMM), according to the villagers.

"They saw our village on social media," Amit said. "Since, many different countries have come to visit with support and donations: Indonesia, France, the United States..."

The video attracted this kind of attention because the mosque, and the village – neither of which are "Cham", to be clear – are unique: almost all of the 52 families living in the community are Khmer Buddhist converts to Islam, Amit claims.

Going with the wife

In Cambodia, there are 884 mosques and 314 Islamic schools, according to figures from the Ministry of Cults and Religion. The ministry registers numbers of buildings – and people (361,483). There are, however, no records on conversion.

Still, conversion "is much more common than people imagine, and much more common than people say", according to Emiko Stock, an anthropologist who has worked with Cambodia's Cham community since 2000.

But the mosque in Kwan village breaks with the usual mould.

That's because the most frequent reason for conversion is marriage, explained Farina So, a researcher at DC-Cam who manages the Cham oral history project. In order to marry a Muslim, you must become Muslim. Buddhism has no such restrictions.

"Chams are even more matrifocal than Cambodians, so that basically means when you marry, the man goes with the wife," Stock said. As a result, most new converts who enter mosques in Cambodia are men.

Sos Mossin, secretary of state at the Ministry of Cults and Religion and the head of the Cambodian Muslim Association, said that the number of Muslims in the Kingdom is growing village by village, and conceded that sometimes conversion through marriage is a factor.

But, he adds, mosques will be built wherever interested Muslims may go. "Since the Khmer Rouge regime, there have been 500 mosques built," he said. "Whenever we have Muslim people, we build for them because we want them to pray in a good place."

Some of these mosques are funded with money from abroad: Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, for example. But mosques funded by Cambodian Muslims who migrate abroad and send money back – from Thailand, South Korea or Malaysia – are much more common. "It's really a way of patronising people – there's no difference between that and the Western money," Stock said.

Its role in conversion, she said, was negligible.

The new Muslim in town

When Abdul Amit, who was born a Cham, moved to Kwan village in 2001 and took up farming, he was the only Muslim family. He became friendly with other villagers, who first joined in celebrations following the fast of Ramadan. His family built a small wooden mosque.

The Islamic community, Amit explained, does not directly proselytise. "We don't force them to believe," he said. But soon the conversions began.

The Kwan villagers came to Islam slowly and of their own accord, often bringing their entire families along.



A new mosque was constructed in Kwan village in 2014. SCOTT ROTZOLL



The village around Darusalam Mosque is predominantly Cham. SCOTT ROTZOLL



Loep Saleh, at Darusalam Mosque, teaches some of those who convert. SCOTT ROTZOLL

"For most of them, it had nothing to do with marriage," Amit said.

One family met Amit while tending the fields, and spoke with him about Islam. Favidas, 30, and her husband decided to become Muslims a few years later. Her older sister, Subiyas, and mother, Zariyas, converted soon afterward. Their children now study both Khmer and Arabic.

"Sometimes we understood only the words to pray," explained Subiyas. "But we learned the rules step by step. It is not hard to understand the principles."

Amit said that conversion was simple: to learn to pray five times a day and to acknowledge that Allah is the

one true God is to be a "true" Muslim. Converts also acquire a Muslim name.

But exchanging one set of beliefs for another is significant, and requires a change in practice at the very least: the prayer schedule; ritual purification; the forgoing of the idols so common in Buddhism.

One of the members of the Khmer-Muslim village is Amikulsumon, an 83-year-old former Buddhist nun who was introduced to Islam three years ago by her niece and grandchildren in the village.

"My whole family now believes in Allah," she said. "We get better blessings from him."

The recently converted

Nazy Saleh, the president of CAMM, attributed the growth of the Cambodian Muslim community not to villages like the one in Kampong Speu, but rather to the younger generation. CAMM, which is headquartered in Phnom Penh, offers a training program for new Muslims and provides online Khmer-language materials for those who want to learn more about Islam.

Those that *Post Weekend* spoke with in and around the city had varied experiences, often associated with marriage or social institutions.

Saryfine married a Muslim woman when he was 19 years old, and he converted from Buddhism in order to become part of her family. He also

changed his name. He says that, while he doesn't read Arabic, the mosque he attends on National Road 5 provides translation on each principle. It only took him about 30 or 40 days to learn those, he said.

"I cannot be half-Buddhist and half-Muslim," Saryfine said.

But Rohany, a 21-year-old student and a volunteer at CAMM, encountered Islam through friends after growing up in a Buddhist household. She now lives in a female Muslim dormitory and will finish her bachelor's degree in March.

"I moved when I converted. I changed. I now live in a Muslim community, doing good things," she explained.

Across the Japanese Bridge, at Darusalam Mosque on the Chroy Changvar peninsula, a community of Cham Muslims has lived there since the early 20th century. The surrounding village can be transient.

About 10 converts live in the village, said Loep Saleh, one of Darusalam's religious leaders. Most of them are men who converted in order to marry. They often travel for business – not a single one was around on an afternoon last week.

But sometimes, Loep Saleh said, he sees others, like "a guy who came to the mosque and didn't know how to pray like us" or another man who came sporadically but had studied Islam intensely, he said. A pair of Buddhists

converted last year, and Loep Saleh served as their teacher.

As is custom, they must learn "the rules" – how to pray in Arabic – as well as possess a letter of agreement from a family member that they want to convert of their own accord.

"Some people are easy to teach and some people are hard to teach," Loep Saleh said with a laugh. "Sometimes it takes a day, sometimes a month."

Living in relative harmony

Each of the members of the Islamic community *Post Weekend* spoke with emphasised the remarkable religious pluralism that exists in the Kingdom – a model for other countries, Nazy Saleh said with a laugh.

But the most prominent misconception in Cambodia, he said, is a conflation of the Cham ethnicity with Islam. "There is a strong misunderstanding about race and religion here," he said.

It's a misconception that is rooted linguistically in the centuries: in the late 15th century, Khmers used the generic term "*Cam Jiva*" (a reference to Java) to refer to both Chams and Malays collectively, or anyone practising Islam in the Kingdom, according to Kersten, the historian.

It's a conflation that the Kwan village is defying.

Saleh added that any outside fear of terrorism – however ill-founded – is minimal in the Kingdom, citing Prime

Minister Hun Sen's 2014 comment that no terrorism would be tolerated in Cambodia.

Some charges of interreligious enmity here arose in November when 24 Muslim schoolgirls were hospitalised after unknown men were said to have sprayed a poisonous substance into the house where they were staying in Thong Khnum province.

The community, Trea village, has a history of Islamic boarding schools – many Kuwaiti, and welcoming of religious outsiders – dating to the early 19th century, according to Stock, the anthropologist.

Mossin, secretary of state for the Ministry of Cults and Religion, confirmed that the case in Trea village was still ongoing – with no perpetrators yet identified. "Whether they are the same religion or not, there are always cheating people who want to make problems," Mossin added.

On an individual level, Stock said, there may be a small stigma attached to those who "fully" convert, but it depended on the reception of the family and peers. But the converts that spoke with *Post Weekend* – in Kwan village and beyond – had few qualms.

Rohany, the student in Phnom Penh, smiled as she explained how her Buddhist family had approved of her decision.

"As long as I understand that Islam is a good religion, it's OK," she said. ■

Sometimes we understood only the words to pray. But we learned the rules step by step. It is not hard to understand the principles

SUBIYAS / MUSLIM CONVERT

A brief history of conversion

Conversion to Islam in Cambodia has been occurring for centuries – likely beginning with the upriver migration of the Chams from Champa in search of trade and security.

The most high-profile Khmer convert to Islam was a king, Reameathipadei I, who ruled Cambodia during the 17th century, when the court was at Oudong.

While his motivations vary by source – the king either converted for political alliances with local Muslim expatriates or for a marriage to a Muslim girl – Reameathipadei became Ibrahim, and the court took on Malay influences, writes Dutch historian Carool Kersten.

According to Khmer and Dutch sources, the king demanded that his ministers, officials and royal servants also convert to Islam. There have been no Muslim kings in Cambodia since.

Anthropologist Emiko Stock has noted another interesting pattern in her research: conversion by those who were displaced under the Khmer Rouge regime and ended up residing in or near a Cham village.

"I met a very old woman once in Siem Reap. She would have been an adult during the war. She didn't have anybody left, so she just stayed in the village," Stock told *Post Weekend*. "There was no difference between her and the other Chams." ■