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**Cham Language Literacy in Cambodia: From the  
Margins towards the Mainstream**

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# Cham Language Literacy in Cambodia: From the Margins Towards the Mainstream

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## Abstract

The Cham language has been written since at least the 4th Century. As such it is the oldest attested language of all of the Austronesian languages. This literary heritage was transmitted using locally modified forms of Indian scripts which were also used to write Sanskrit. With the loss of Cham territories to the Vietnamese, many Cham became displaced and the literary culture was disrupted. In addition, the adoption of Islam by the majority of Cham led many of those who continued to write to do so in variations of the Arabic script. However, the literary potential of the language in Cambodia has not been fully realized in either script – with village scholars using it almost exclusively for religious tracts and for very limited local audiences.

In 2011, the United States Embassy initiated a program to encourage the protection of Cham culture and heritage. This Cham Heritage Expansion Program ran from 2011 to 2017 and resulted in the operation of 13 schools in which over 2,500 students of different ages were taught the traditional Cham script. This effort was accompanied by the development of a now significant number of local Cham intellectuals throughout the country who are dedicating themselves to the expansion of the use of Cham as a written language in all aspects of daily life.

This presentation documents the way in which interest in this long-neglected writing system was rekindled, and the new avenues for personal and communitarian expression that are being opened by the propagation of Cham literacy. It also presents current developments in the formalization of Cham language education in the country, including the possibilities of bringing the language into the school system.

*Keywords:* Cham language, Vietnam, culture and heritage

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## Introduction

The Cham of Cambodia are the descendants of people who migrated from Champa in what is now the central coast of Vietnam in a series of migrations caused by the expansion of the Vietnamese state southward starting in the 10th century. These Cham settled in their own Muslim communities – primarily along the Mekong river – and while they became well integrated into the political and economic life of the country, they nevertheless maintained a distinct identity in a mostly Buddhist and Khmer-speaking kingdom.

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Austronesian language. This literary heritage was transmitted using locally modified forms of Indian scripts which were also used to write Sanskrit. With the loss of Cham territories to the Vietnamese and the displacement of Cham people to Cambodia, the literary culture was disrupted. A further blow to this tradition came in the form of the Khmer Rouge regime, which banned the use of the Cham language and the practice of Islam. Many Cham speakers died during this period and the survivors struggled for decades to recover the integrity of their culture and their sense of community.

Although the spoken Cham language has survived, the language is now mostly unwritten. Even today, the majority of Cham speakers are literate only in Khmer and are more likely to be readers of Malay, Arabic or English than their mother tongue. The fact that the vast majority of Cham in Cambodia are Muslim has meant that those Cham who continue to write do so in variations of the Arabic script rather than the older Indic characters. The exception to this is the Imam San community which, while Muslim, also conserve the memory of their political independence in Champa, and continue to use the older writing system. However, despite this continued use of the written language – almost exclusively for religious tracts – the literary potential of the language in Cambodia has yet to be fully realized in either script.

### **The Cham Heritage Expansion Program**

In 2011, the United States Embassy in Phnom Penh initiated a program to encourage the protection of Cham culture and heritage. The program was developed to revive the tradition of writing Cham in the original Indic script in both the Imam San community, where the script was already familiar, and in other Muslim communities where the script had fallen out of use for generations. This educational effort was confronted by a number of obstacles – among them, the complete lack of textbooks and educational materials, the very small number of individuals with any experience in teaching the script, and the considerable variation in orthography from community to community.

In order to address these issues, a three-pronged approach was taken to the program. The first of these was the creation and dissemination of pedagogical and reference materials for the study of the Cham script and the training of Cham language teachers. The second was the establishment of institutions that would permit members of the Cham community to share their ideas and experiences, and who would work together toward the recognition of a common orthography that could be used across communities. Finally, the program sought to generate opportunities for the use of the script that would be meaningful to learners so that the study of the script would not be an end in itself but rather a stepping stone to participating in an emerging community of Cham language literacy.

### **Pedagogical Materials and Teacher Training**

The creation and printing of Cham script textbooks and materials was a priority of the program. In addition to the obvious necessity of these books for the teaching of the language, it was important for community members to see their own language printed in a way that they had never seen before. Prior to the program, all Cham books were written by hand and then photocopied if more books were necessary. The appearance of printed and bound Cham books was meaningful for people who had never seen books in their own language, but who were

accustomed to seeing such books in other, more ‘modern’ languages, such as Khmer or English. The very fact that such books could even exist went a long way in convincing committee members that the program's aim to teach the Cham script was feasible.

Two textbooks were produced initially. The first was a 10-lesson introductory textbook that familiarized the student with the Cham script and all of the orthographic combinations needed to represent the language. As all students were already enrolled in or had graduated from the national school system, they were already literate in Khmer. This made possible the rapid learning of the script in relatively few lessons, and, because the students were all native speakers of Cham, they quickly learned to associate the characters with the sounds of their language.

The second textbook was designed as a reader based on the social studies curriculum of the national school system. It was used by students after achieving competence in the script to increase their reading speed and to provide a number of topics about which students could compose meaningful essays. These readings and writing assignments tie the students' academic knowledge to their newly acquired ability to read and write their mother tongue, thereby demonstrating the potential of the written Cham language for secular education.

These textbooks were accompanied by two other volumes. The first of these was a Cham orthographic guide. This book was written in Khmer as a reference manual for students and teachers with explanations on the Cham orthography used in the textbooks. This orthography guide includes commentary on the lessons of the first textbook to aid teachers in explaining the lessons to students. The second book was a script primer meant for independent study. This book was distributed to communities where there was interest in the program but in which it was not yet possible to begin instruction. These script primers helped introduce communities to the script and to increase further the interest in its adoption.

Each of these books was also an important element in the program's training for new teachers. Although some communities did have teachers of the script, they depended largely on rote lessons that did not enable students to develop their expressive abilities in the language, or teachers to evaluate the progress of their students and to adjust lesson plans accordingly. The majority of students were in their mid-teens, but some were as young as 12 and others as old as 56, and thus teachers needed to be able to adapt the basic lessons from the textbook to the different needs and abilities of their students. In addition to pre-program training, teachers held regular meetings in which they discussed their experiences, shared lesson plans and activities, and proposed corrections and changes to future editions of the textbooks. This training prepared them not only to be teachers, but also public intellectuals in their communities – able to address students and other stakeholders in matters of Cham language education.

## **Community Consultation**

Even before the program began producing any educational materials, it initiated the process of gathering Cham speakers and educators to form a consultative body to both inform material design and to liaise with the broader public. To this end, the Cham Language Advisory Committee (CLAC) was formed. It was made up of Cham-speaking representatives from each of the provinces with large Cham communities. These men and women represented the main dialect groups in the country as well as the different religious divisions of the Muslim community.

As its name suggests, the CLAC has an advisory function for the community of people

interested in reviving the written Cham language. It does not impose rules of orthography on different writers, but provides a forum for discussion among speakers of different dialects in order to recommend orthographic conventions that could be easily legible to the greatest number of speakers. CLAC members considered the use of Cham characters in extant manuscripts, the variations in pronunciation among speakers, and the need to be able to write loanwords from Khmer, Malay and Arabic that are now an integral part of the language.

CLAC meetings also provided a venue for interested stakeholders, including people in government, and representatives of educational and religious institutions, to visit, observe and speak with CLAC members as well as program staff. This interaction has served to provide the public with information about the scope of the program and to answer questions that people may have about the future of Cham writing and the opportunities for local participation. This is particularly important because, in the majority of cases, the parents of students enrolled in the program were themselves illiterate in Cham, and often wanted more information about the curriculum and how it was being formulated. By engaging the public, the government and the religious establishment, the CLAC was successful in putting stakeholders at ease about the workings of the program.

### **The Broader Use of Written Cham**

Since the aim of the program is not limited to teaching Cham people to read and write their language, but rather to make room for written Cham in the public and private lives of its speakers, it has been imperative that the program include efforts to expand the domains of its use. Program participants represent the first cohort of Cham people literate in their language in at least several generations. In order to broaden the use of the Cham written language, these students must find meaningful outlets for their newly-acquired skills. This has meant the promotion of Cham as a language for the recording of oral literature and histories, the dissemination of information of interest to the community, and the study of academic subjects.

During the course of the program, teachers guided their students in the collection of the folk tales and other stories told in their villages. Students of different ages and levels of writing ability were encouraged to work together to gather these stories and to put them into writing. The result so far has been two volumes of Cham folktales. With these books, young Cham proved that they are passionate about conserving their community's heritage, and that, thanks to their ability to read and write, they are now capable of becoming stewards of their culture. Although still in their teens, these students have come to see themselves as empowered to participate in the intellectual development of their community.

In addition to providing an avenue for the publication of existing stories, the program included the publication and distribution of a monthly periodical focusing on issues of special interest to the Cham community, which may not always be discussed in the mainstream Khmer language press. The publication 'Mukva,' named after a monitor lizard considered to be clever and lucky, has published articles on Cham history in Cambodia and some of the historic sites of the Cham people such as stone inscriptions and pre-civil war mosques. When the latest civil war in Yemen began in 2015, Mukva was the only Cambodian publication that reported on the evacuation of Cambodian Muslims that were studying in the country at the time. The work of this publication is carried out by a team of native Cham speakers who serve as translators,

writers, editors, reporters and designers. This is a first step toward creating academic, commercial and artistic functions that will need to be fulfilled by educated and literate Cham speakers.

This engagement with the professional and academic interests of the overwhelmingly young participants in the program also led to the development of the Cham script in computing and information technology. In this day and age, language cannot be considered useful in all the domains of everyday life if it cannot be used on a computer or a phone. From the beginning, all program books and publications were typeset and printed using custom-created Cham fonts. Unicode fonts were developed by program staff in collaboration with the Open Institute, and distributed free of charge for use in publication, web sites and social media. These fonts and their compatibility with computer applications most popular with learners have helped establish the Cham language not only as a part of the Cham heritage, but also as a vehicle for the community's future aspirations.

## Conclusion

This Cham Heritage Expansion Program ran from 2011 to 2017 and resulted in the operation of 13 schools in which over 2,500 students of different ages were taught the Indic Cham script. The monthly publication *Mukva* has enjoyed a circulation of 1,000 copies per month and a distribution to 41 different communities. This effort was accompanied by the development of a now significant number of local Cham intellectuals throughout the country who are dedicating themselves to the expansion of the use of Cham as a written language in all aspects of daily life. While more work remains to be done in order to make the written Cham language as commonplace as the spoken language in ethnic Cham communities, the Cham Heritage Expansion Program represents a crucial first step in the development of the educational infrastructure and human capital needed to meet that goal.

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