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**SYSTEMATIZING THE ISLAMIC ELEMENTS IN THE
CHAMS BÀNI RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY OF NINH THUAN
AND BINH THUAN PROVINCES IN VIETNAM**

***Abstract:** Although most of the religious studies of the Chams Bàni religious community in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces have shown that their religious practices express beliefs associated with Islam, they also agreed that the worship of this community is variants of Islam. The reason is due to non-Islam rituals still exist in this community. In order to be aware of the conformity with the religious phenomenon of Bàni, it is necessary to systematize the typical characteristics that show the Chams Bàni community as an Islamic community at least in the form. This article systematizes the Islamic characteristics of the Chams Bàni community in accordance with three main dimensions of a religion: religious beliefs, religious practices (rituals and taboo express beliefs), and religious community (the main rituals of community cohesion).*

***Keywords:** The Chams Bàni; element; Islam; Vietnam.*

Introduction

The previous research on the Chams Bàni¹ religious community in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces has indicated different opinions of the religious form of this community; they also showed the Islamic elements in their religious activities and in their daily lives. Some opinions suggested that the Chams Bàni's religious practice is an indigenization of Islam in Cham people in Vietnam (Phan Xuân Biên, 1991; Phan Văn Dốp, 1993, 2002); It is a local religion expressed the profound indigenously of Cham people, but it

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is not Islam as a world religion (Lê Thị Tuyết Vân, 2001; Nguyễn Đức Toàn, 2002); It is a fusion of primitive Islam with many elements of folk beliefs (Lê Nhâm, 2003); It is a variant of Islam because it has no chance to contact with the Islamic community in the world (Phan Xuân Biên, 1991; Hoàng Minh Đô, 2006); It is a religion of Cham people, it has its own nuance, characteristics, it is different from Islam in Southeast Asia and the Arabic world (Bá Trung Phụ, 2007), etc.

These judgments have been largely derived from the comparison with the practice of Sunni Islam, the largest denomination of Islam, and have not fully explained why the indigenous religious elements maintained in a religious community “influenced by Islam”. Thus, most of the studies and articles stated that Bani was a variant of Islam and influenced by many indigenous religious elements and Hinduism. However, some research helped to define the denomination of the Chams Bani community, the most notable is the study of Đoàn Việt (2009) and Trương Văn Món (2015). It has indicated the reverence for two Islamic figures of initial period, Ali and Fatimah, the son-in-law and daughter of the Prophet (Muhammad).

In order to be aware accurately the phenomenon of the Bani religion, first, it is necessary to systemize the Islam’s elements of the Cham community. Then, it allows identify whether the Chams Bani community is a Muslim community. However, what factors are typical for the perception of a religious entity in general, Islam in particular? The author applies the systematic approach of religious entity by Nguyen Quoc Tuan². According to Nguyen Quoc Tuan, the science of religion needs to examine at least three dimensions such as *religious faith*, *religious practice* (the ritual system expresses faith) and *religious community* owns that religious faith. On the basis of generalizing and comparing the previous research on the Chams Bani community and the general knowledge of Islam, this paper systematizes the basic characteristics of Islam in the Chams Bani community according to the three dimensions mentioned above and shows comments.

Islamic Characteristics in the Chams Bani community

Faith and scriptures

According to Jamal J. Elias (1999), two basic criteria for identifying

a Muslim community are faith in Allah and the use of Arabic in praying. The previous studies have shown that the Chams Bani believe in Allah and his apostle Muhammad (Phan Xuân Biên, 1991; Phan Văn Dóp, 1993; Trương Nghiệp Vũ, 2000; Sakaya (Văn Món), 2003; Trần Tiến Thành, 2010), they strictly perform the regulations related to this faith such as fasting on pork meat, using the Qu'ran in rituals and instructions in daily life, performing the ritual of body cleaning before a ceremony, practicing Ramadan, without decoration, images at place of worship.

Some views showed that the content of the Qu'ran may be deviated from the current scriptures circulated in other Islamic countries in the world and it consists of excerpts and is not incomplete because it was a manuscript copy (this issue needs further research). In addition, the Bani cloisterers do not understand the Arabic so they do not understand the text. Therefore, each excerpt must be noted the content or instructions by ancient Cham characters in order to explain clearly the meaning of the scriptures. The preaching of the Qu'ran of the cloisterers mainly involves the correct pronunciation of the scriptures, the rituals, the actions that must be performed at certain ceremonies (Châu Văn Kên, 2000). However, according to the study Trương Văn Món (2015), the Qu'ran of the Chams Bani is a faithful manuscript from the Arabian Qu'ran. Based on the Arabic alphabet, the Chams invented their own characters to write the scriptures called Akhar Bani. Besides Akhar Bani characters, they also use the traditional Chams' characters (Akhar Thrah) to explain the content of the scriptures.

It is possible that the copy of the Qur'an was no longer accurate (after three times copy) and that the Bani's cloisterers did not understand the meaning of the text, however, according to the traditional perspective, the translation of the Qur'an from the Arabic language to the other language was often deprecated. Currently, although the Qu'ran has been translated into other languages, the traditional regulation requires that every word in the Qur'an is immutable, and every word of Allah transmitted to Muhammad is a special word, a source of guidance for ritual purposes and actions.

Therefore, when the Qu'ran was not printed, learning by heart the entire Qur'an was important and person who learnt by heart the Qu'ran was respected, even that person was illiterate. His devotion, just moving his fingers follow the letters in the scripture, was also a way of expressing faith (Elias Jamal J., 1999: 20-21).

The Chams Bani were taught and understood the sacredness, meaning as well as the role of the Qur'an so they just pondered, copied the scriptures from the period of Muhammad received the word of Allah, then it became a month of the Islamic calendar- Ramadan. The Chams Bani have simultaneously reserved the custom of respecting the people who learned by heart the Qu'ran because during the month of Ramadan (according to the Chams' pronunciation, Ramadan is written in Roman alphabet "Ramurwan or Ramawan"), after the Muk Trun ritual (the end of the first 15 days of Ramadan), the cloisterer who wishes to be honored will perform the Akhar Muk ceremony, must recite a long paragraph of the prayer in Arabic, if the cloisterer learns by heart all the paragraph his reputation will be affirmed (Thập Liên Trường, 1994). It can be said that there is a similarity with the Qu'ran reciting contests in the Sunni Muslim communities. In addition to the Qu'ran, the Chams' manuscripts still contain the characters of Islam such as Po Kuk (Allahuh), Auluah (Allah), Mohamat/Mohamet (Muhammad), Po Ali (Ali) và Phua Timah (Fatimah) [Truong Văn Món, 2015].

Important rituals

The ritual system of Muslims consists of *the month of Ramadan*, *Eid ul-Fitr* and *Eid ul-Adha* that covers all other events in the Islamic calendar.

In the month of Ramadan, believers who are required to perform this duty will fast from dawn until dusk, or more precisely, from the time when they can distinguish between the white thread and the black thread to the time they can't distinguish them. Fasting does not mean not eating but it is not drinking water, smoking, not saying bad words or angry arguments.

During Ramadan, people do not only fast and to be earnest, but they also have time of celebration. Ramadan is the only month mentioned in the Qu'ran and is mentioned for two reasons: abstinence and the gift of the Qu'ran. It is probably because of the second reason, in the month of Ramadan, the Bani cloisterers copy, preserve the Qu'ran as a form of praise Allah. Although the Chams Bani do not have relation with the other Islamic communities, they still determine the annual Ramadan coincided with the Islamic calendar of the world. (Châu Văn Kên, 2000).

For the Chams Bani, Ramadan is the most important ritual season, although the content of the performance is different. In Ramadan, the Chams Bani strictly implement the duty of offering to the mosque and attend the ceremony at 21 o'clock. However, it is unlike almost Muslims who have to fast during Ramadan, the Chams Bani only apply this regulation to cloisterers, but it is quite strict, for example, from the opening night to the next three days, the cloisterer displayed the true spirit of fasting, in addition to the time of the five prayers, they lay in their place in the mosque, put some salt particles in their mouth- the act of repentance, sympathy towards the poor in the world (Thập Liên Trường, 1994: 7). The praying times of the Bani cloisterers are also practiced like other Muslim communities: 1) Just before dawn; 2) Noon (when the sun reaches its highest point); 3) Mid- afternoon; 4) After sunset and 5) When night falls (at any time in the evening, but preferably before midnight). Specific hours are 4 a.m, 12.00, 15 p.m, 17 p.m, and 21 p.m.

On the 27th night of Ramadan, at the mosque, there is a meeting of reputable people of the village to elect the most virtuous and capable cloisterer in the Char hierarchy to be the leadership. This position is called Murdin and an ordained ceremony for this cloisterer. At the midnight of 29th or 30th of Ramadan, at dawn of the first day of the next month, the cloisterers have the last meal to celebrate the end of Ramadan. Because only the cloisterers perform the Ramadan, the Chams Bani do not celebrate the *Eid ul-Fitr* holiday for the whole community when ending of Ramadan.

The *Eid ul-Fitr* (also known as the “Pure ritual” or “Small ritual”) marks the end of Ramadan, held at the time of seeing the Moon, signaling the beginning of the Shawwal month (10th month). Before the month of Ramadan ends, believers must do their duty to contribute to take care of the poor, called *Zakat ul-Fitr* means “charity for the end of fasting month”. The purpose of this work is to ensure that no Muslim has to interrupt abstinence.

The way of expressing Zakat duty is also varied. It may be possible to contribute a certain percentage of the annual income to the charity, from 2,5% of Sunni to 10% of some Shiah groups. In some modern Islamic societies, Zakat is collected by the government as taxes. The Zakat revenue is used for religious or social welfare purposes, such as the construction of medical facilities or schools. Alternatively, believers can send zakat contributions to the mosque where they live or to a respectful dignitary who uses it effectively. Some believers divide the amount into two parts, one for the charity, the other for the poor. Previously, the rich believers used Zakat to help poor families or provide for orphaned children, etc. Such uses of Zakat are not common in modern times but they are not lost (Jamal J. Elias, 1999: 70 - 71).

The Chams Bàni also perform this duty after the 20th day of Ramadan, believers offer rice to the mosque with the meaning of sharing suffering with their ancestors. They believe that they will be treated like that when they will be ancient people. By the 27th day of Ramurwan, the followers offer rice again; this gift of rice, in addition to the meaning mentioned above, it also has the following meaning: to help the cloisterers go on pilgrimage (symbolic meaning), to give to the poor in the sanctuary, to sent to relatives in the afterlife. In the 30th evening, the family members of the cloisterers bring rice to cook, in the next morning, they take a part of rice for the mosque, the rest for relatives, neighbors, exception of people who violated the canon law (Thập Liên Trường, 1994: 13, 14).

Some research associated the rice offering ceremony with the rice offering ceremony of the Chams’ Brahmanism and it was derived from the wet rice civilization with the Chams’ ethnic identity, then it became

a ritual in Ramadan of the Chams Bàni. Consequently, the Chams Bàni do not perform their duty of distributing alms. In comparison with the variety of ways, time and meaning to implement Zakat, the “rice offering” ritual is considered as an expression of Zakat.

After *Eid ul-Fitr*, Muslims also have *Eid ul-Adha* holiday (“Feast of the Sacrifice” called the “Festival of Sacrifice”). The *Eid ul-Adha* is the holiest rite of Islam and marks the end of the pilgrimage season for those who can fulfill the pilgrimage obligation (Hajj), and it is also celebrated throughout the Islamic world. This holiday is celebrated on the 10th day of the last month of the Islamic calendar.

The main feature of *Eid ul-Adha* is the sacrifice of animals, commemorating the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son for the sake of God. On the morning of the 10th day of the month of Pilgrimage, each family or some families sacrifice a male, mature and healthy animal such as a sheep, a goat, a horse, a camel or an animal that depends on the culture. The Chams Bàni also performed *Eid ul-Adha* on this day (Nguyễn Hồng Dương, 2007: 133), the name is different: Waha - it is probably the pronunciation of “Adha”, it is similar to the case of “Ramadan” = “Ramurwan”. And the sacrifice is performed by a Bàni cloisterer, before sacrificing the animal, the animal is placed facing Mecca and the cloisterer recites the Islamic sutras (Trương Văn Món, 2015: 77).

Places of worship

Muslim place of worship called Mosque (the Vietnamese often call it “sanctuary”). The origin of this word is “Masjid” in Arabic, which means “prostrate”. The mosque is a place where Muslims perform prayers that affirm their obedience to God. In general, the shape of a current mosque is rectangular. The prayer area of a mosque is a sacred place. A mosque is not necessarily a building enveloped in all directions. Around a mosque in the tropical countries is rectangular walls. However, there is a wall different from the three others. This wall is called *Qibla*, which means “direction”. *Qibla* helps believers to know the direction of Mecca to face at every prayer. On the *Qibla*, there is a point formed a cavity called *Mihrab*. *Mihrab* aims to

accurate the Mecca's direction and the prayer instructor will stand in front of this cavity when instructing people worship. In Mecca, Mihrab of the Ka'bah mosque is located in the right direction. There is a pulpit in the mosque. Muslims call it *Minbar*. Minbar is usually located in front of the Qibla wall and next to the Mihrab. Minbar is sometimes made as a stairs, but it is usually a little higher than the floor for people attend prayer can see the instructor. Outside a Islamic mosque, there is usually at least one high tower known as *Minaret*, from which one person of the community informs believers the time of praying ceremony; the messenger is called *Muezzin*.

Every Chams Bani village has built a mosque (the Chams Bani call it as "Thang mugik"). These mosques are generally simple but durable, spacious and they are similar but without the Minaret tower, the spire in the usual architecture of Islamic mosques in the world. However, according to Châu Văn Kên (2000) and Trần Tiến Thành (2010), the architecture and the direction of the mosque was calculated precisely with the direction of Kiblad (Qibla) towards Mecca like the other mosques all over the world.

In Vietnam, the mosques have the East-West direction with the entrance in the East, the Qibla wall in the West. There is not a Mihrab on the Qibla wall, there is a wooden frame about 2 meters high, 1-1,2 meters long, where the cloisterers pray and guide believers ceremony. The Bani mosques do not have a Minbar pulpit, however, there is a higher part of the floor in front of the Qibla Wall. The lecture of the Qu'ran is replaced by prayer. Every mosque has a well or a cistern where the cloisterers perform the body cleansing ritual before the service.

As mentioned above, the person who informs believers the time of praying ceremony is called *Muezzin*, but the Chams Bani call him *Bilan* (Nguyễn Hồng Dương, 2007: 140).

The way of calling indicates that the Chams Bani have been imbued with the Islamic history because Muezzin was firstly a black slave named *Bilal*; he was repurchased and liberated by Abu Bakr (one of the earliest companions of the Prophet Muhammad, then he became the first Caliph who led Muslim community after

Muhammad's death). According to legend, the Prophet Muhammad's companions asked: "The Jews announce the time of prayer to everyone by blowing a horn (tù vậ), and the Christians ring the bell. So what should we do? The Prophet Muhammad appointed Bilal (because he had a strong and resonant voice) and instructed him to make a megaphone by hands to announce the hour of prayer (Cole Owen W., Peggy Morgan, 2000: 171; Cole Gordon D., 2002: 152). Currently, the word *Bilan* has been not common in the Chams Bani community, but the Bani cloisterers call the person who play drum to announce the time of ceremony is *Mudin*. "Murdin" may be pronounced "Muezzin".

Lifecycle rituals

In a religious community, life-cycle rituals becomes an important link, showing its attachment to faith and sacredness of religion towards believers, the cohesive bond of the community, as well as, it shows the difference between one religion and another in a society where many religions coexist. The typical life cycle rituals of a religious community consist of maturity, marriage, and funeral.

Maturity ceremony

The Chams Bani and the Chams Islam have maturity ritual for adolescents, the Chams Bani perform it for both boys and girls (ritual for males called Katat, for females called Karoeh), while the Chams Islam only perform this ceremony for boys (called Khotan). Compared to the Chams Islam, the Chams Bani greatly appreciate Karoeh ceremony for girls (Bá Trung Phụ, 2001). Although the ritual for boys is simpler than the ritual for girls, it is an indispensable life-cycle ritual for the Muslims as well as proselytized ritual for adolescent boys of the Chams Bani (Đoàn Việt, 2001). The age for performing this ritual is 15 year-olds and it is held in the same batch with the girl that her family organizes Karoeh.

Marriage ceremony

Marriage of the Chams Bani is organized in two forms: a traditional form; a religious form. On the religious aspect, a marriage ceremony is accepted that the couple must swear in front of Allah,

witness of the “two angels” Hô Thanh and Hô Thai (Đoàn Việt, 2009). Hô Thanh and Hô Thai can be transcribed of Hasan and Husayn - children of Fatimah and Ali (daughter and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad). The obligatory presence of two boys at each wedding symbolized children of Fatimah and Ali shows that the Chams Bàni community complies with Islamic norms, and this community was influenced by Shiah Islam (the denomination worships the descendants of Ali and Fatimah as leaders of the Islamic community after the death of Muhammad).

Funeral ceremony

Compared to the Chams Islam community, the Chams Bàni community also performs a popular Islamic practice such as burial and duration of the procedure from the moment of last breath to the burial within 24 hours (death in the morning, buried in the afternoon; death in the afternoon, buried in the next morning); The corpse is washed and covered with white shroud sheet according to regulations: 3 layers for male, 5 layers for females. The Chams Bàni do not shroud by winding-sheet, they use shroud sheets to make clothes but they also obey the rules of the number: 3 sheets for male, 5 sheets for females; the corpse is placed on a truss without coffins; the pit is dug from 1,5 to 2 meters depending on the soil, the western wall of the pit is pierced to make a concave (where the corpse is located). The head of the corpse is placed towards the North, the legs are placed to the South, body lies on the side facing the West- direction of Mecca (Nguyễn Bình, 2012); the graves of the Chams Bàni as well as the Chams Islam are not tall and built, they just use an object to mark. It is similar to the burial of most other Muslim communities in the world.

There are similarities between the Chams Bàni and the Chams Islam in the rite after the burial such as praise for the deceased. The Chams Bàni and the Chams Islam perform the prayers for the dead three times after the burial (the Chams Bàni’s ceremony has its name and content of the prayer). The days of prayer are repeated: the 10th, the 40th and the full year (Nguyễn Bình, 2013).

Conclusion and discussion

As mentioned above, there are many opinions about determination of religious form of the Cham Bàni community. These views are not satisfactory because according to Jamal J. Elias (who had many years of teaching *Introduction to the study of Islam* at Amherst College, in the United State of America and field research on the Islamic world) there are numerous Islamic expressions, however, people can distinguish between the Muslim community and other communities. The differences of the Islamic world are related to language, race, ethnicity, periodic experience, economy, social status, characteristics of denomination, etc. It is not possible to make a universal statement about the Muslim faith. The characteristic of recognizing a Muslim community is the similarity in ritual practice. The use of Arabic in prayers and rituals is popular; the faith in Allah, who transmits the divine revelation by words, called the Qu'ran, through a messenger named Muhammad (Jamal J. Elias, 1999: 15).

Based on the results of previous studies combined with the author views mentioned above, it can be said that the Chams Bàni community is undoubtedly an Islamic community. The main characteristics of a Muslim community are almost present in the Chams community. There is a belief in Allah, the Qu'ran (using the Arabic alphabet to copy as well as promoting people who learn by heart the Qu'ran); taboo expresses beliefs (do not eat pork meat and products made of pork meat); a system of important rituals, life-cycle rituals. In addition, there is information on important figures of Islam such as Allah, Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet's daughter, son-in-law, and grandsons (Fatimahh, Ali, Hasan, Husayn).

There is a question that the indigenous elements, especially folk-belief and conception of supernatural forces, ancestors has been mixed, existed in the lives of the Cham Bàni while this community has been an Islamic community. The explanation may be noticed through the comments on Islam in Southeast Asia as follows:

The pre-Islamic customs in Southeast Asia still play an crucial role in regulating social relationships while Islamic canon law is limited to

specific agreements and exchanges. Females have more important status in family and society than those in the Middle East and in India. In some areas, for example, in the West of Sumatra (Indonesia), descent and inheritance has continued to be transmitted according to matriarchy after Islam was propagated despite the tendency to favor male and paternity. In particular, the pre-Islamic rituals and beliefs are combined with the Islamic rituals (<http://history-world.org/islam7.htm>). This feature is similar to the Chams Bàni community in Vietnam.

Conversion to Islam and indigenous beliefs practices of the inhabitants in the West of Sumatra and the Chams in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan could be easily understood through the American historian's comment on the process of conversion to Islam, Ira Lapidus stated that "Conversion to Islam does not necessarily imply complete transformation from old life to new life. While forced to accept the new faith and members of the new religious community, most of the converts closely remained association with their original community and culture. The result of this process can be seen in the diversity of the contemporary Islamic societies, with the richness of Islamic expressions and practices".

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spread_of_Islam).

The information of Ali and Fatimah (son-in-law and daughter of Prophet Muhammad), Hassan and Husayin (Ho Thanh, Ho Thai - sons of Ali and Fatimah) has always been appeared in ceremonies of the Chams Bàni, the author supports the view that the Chams Bàni community is an Islamic community belonged to the Shiah Islam denomination. However, it should be identified what group of Shiah that Bàni belongs to because the Shiahs has three groups: the Zaydi (Five Imams), the Ismailis (Seven Imams), the Twelver (Twelve Imams - the majority of Islam Shiah and its center in Iran). There is an idea that the Bàni cloisterers' costumes are similar to those in Iran, so it can be inferred that Bàni belongs to the Shiah of 12 Imams. However, it needs to have more research instead of being based on a factor. /.

NOTES:

- 1 Some current studies of the Cham Bàni tend to use phrases “Chăm Awal”. Meaning of the word “Awal”, see more details: Đông Thành Danh (2016), “Discussion on the introduction of Islam in Champa” (Vietnamese), *Religious Studies*, N^o. 3. In my article, the word “Bàni” was used.
- 2 Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn (2014), “Systematic Approach on Religious Entity: Another Looking at Religion” (Vietnamese), *Religious Studies*, N^o. 3, and “Deployment of the Theory of Religious Entity” (Vietnamese), *Religious Studies*, N^o. 10.

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