

## Chapter 2

# Weaving Life Across Borders: The Cham Muslim Migrants Traversing Vietnam and Malaysia

Angie Ngoc Tran

**Abstract** Focusing on the understudied Cham (Sunni) Muslims who live in the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam, decades after Vietnam joined the market system, I found that they have sustained their century-old mobile ways of life—including retailing, fishing, and sewing—in close connection with the global Islamic community to make a living and to continue their religious studies. But a mixed picture emerges in their response to Vietnam’s labor export policy since 2002: practicing *geographical agency* with short-term successes but facing more risks as both men and women engage in *extra local* journeys, crossing borders into Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

**Keywords** Vietnam • Cham Muslims • Mekong delta • Labor export • Malaysia • Migration • Migrant labour

This paper contributes to the topic of Vietnamese migration to Peninsular Malaysia with a focus on the Cham Muslims, a small ethnic minority in the Mekong Delta in the south of Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Nationwide, the Cham ethnic group accounts for about one-thousandth of the whole Vietnamese population—over 100,000.<sup>2</sup> Historically, there is an evidence of vibrant political, religious, and trade activities among the

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<sup>1</sup>The Kinh accounts for about 85 % of the Vietnamese population (2013 estimates). <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Yoshimoto (2012) argued that there were already 100,000 Cham in two central coastal regions (Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan), of which there were 44,000 (of both Cham Bani and Cham Islam) based on 2010 official statistics, (pp. 492–493). Taylor (2007) gave a much lower statistic: 100,000 in the whole Vietnam, using 1989 census (p. 59).

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A.N. Tran (✉)  
California State University, Monterey Bay, USA  
e-mail: atran@csumb.edu

Muslim traders, Islamic Arab merchants, and the Cham from the Kingdom of Champa on the central Vietnamese coast, dating back to the thirteenth century (Li 2006).<sup>3</sup> This process gave rise to two major groups of Cham who practice a variety of Islam. The first group of Cham (90 % of all the Cham in Vietnam) consists of the Cham Bani who live in the central of Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> About less than half of the Cham Bani practice a Vietnamese religious category that includes Islam but not one that is connected to the wider Islamic community; more than half practice Hindu or animist (Yoshimoto 2012, p. 502). The second group of Cham consists of the remaining 10 % of the Cham in Vietnam who practice Sunni Islamic faith with contacts and connections with the Islamic community through pilgrimages to Mecca, or studies abroad in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia (Yoshimoto 2012, p. 488) These Cham (Sunni) Muslims concentrate in the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam (including An Giang, Tay Ninh, Dong Nai provinces and Ho Chi Minh City) with a population of 13,000 Cham (Taylor 2006, p. 238).

This paper focuses on the second group of Cham Muslims and their connections with the global Islamic community to make a living and to keep up with their religious studies. It examines understudied themes: gendered patterns and practices *within* the Cham Muslims and relations *with* other ethnic groups (such as the Kinh and Hoa) while working in peninsular Malaysia and upon returning to Vietnam. While this Cham Muslim community is small, it exhibits some key concerns in migration studies; migration strategies in a predominantly agrarian society, network and trust in migration, and the role of family and local villagers.

What attracted me at the beginning of my fieldwork was to provide a critical assessment of the Prime Minister labor export policy (PM Decision 71/CP, 2009–2020), and how it attracts and impacts the Kinh and other ethnic minorities who pay to work in Malaysia. But as I interviewed different ethnic migrant workers, the Cham Muslims stood out with their rich migration connections, beyond the official

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<sup>3</sup>Another source argues that in the first millennium B.C.E., the Cham had sailed from the west coast of Borneo across the East Sea (or South China Sea) and settled in what is now central and south-central Vietnam. According to Nakamura (2000), there are two waves of Muslim arrivals in Champa. Persians, Arabs, Indians, and Chinese Muslims were the first Muslims who came to Champa in the ninth century and established a presence there by the eleventh century. At that time, conversion to Islam was limited to people who enjoyed special relationships with the foreign communities. The second wave comprised Malay Muslims who had contacts with the Cham during the peak of Southeast Asian maritime trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was the time when a significant number of the local population converted to Islam. The contemporary Sunni Muslim Cham in a Giang province in Vietnam, a border province with Cambodia, has close associations with Cham Muslims in Cambodia. They speak the same dialect and some have kinship ties. Moreover, the Malays were responsible for converting the Cham refugees to Sunni Islam; both the Cham Muslim and Malay Muslim follow the same school of Islam (Shafi'i) and share similar religious customs (pp. 63–64).

<sup>4</sup>Some key central and south-central coast provinces include Ninh Thuan, Phan Rang, Phan Ri, Phan Thiet, Khanh Hoa.

channels of the labor export policy.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this analysis sheds light on historical networking among the Cham Muslims, Malaysia, and Cambodia.

Why the focus on An Giang (a province in the Mekong delta)? It is not only because most Cham Muslims concentrate there, but also because of its connection to Cambodia. Historically, the Cham Muslims migrated to Cambodia and then to the Mekong Delta, practicing a more intensified form of Islam through contacts with the Malays (Nakamura 2000).<sup>6</sup> Sharing a long border with Cambodia, separated both by land and by river, An Giang province is a convenient launching pad for the Cham to cross into Cambodia to reach Thailand and continue on to Malaysia by plane, by car, and by foot. So, tracing labor mobility from An Giang reveals fascinating migration patterns—formal and informal—of the Cham Muslims traversing four countries: Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia, and then returning to Vietnam.

Focusing on districts with high concentrations of the Cham, my assistants and I conducted our interviews in An Phú District, one of the three poorest districts in An Giang province, with about 5900 Cham Muslims living in five communes (xã): Đa Phước, Nhơn Hội, Quốc Thái, Khánh Bình, and Vĩnh Trường (An Phu District labor official, interview, August, 2012).<sup>7</sup> Interviews were conducted in three communes out of five Cham-concentrated areas in An Phu District: Đa Phước (total population: 21,123), Quốc Thái (14,774), Vĩnh Trường (15,560). I did not have a chance to visit Nhơn Hội (13,539), and Khánh Bình (11,704).

Organizationally, the first section (*Labor Brokerage State*) explains the significance of global labor migration to a socialist economy, and how a socialist government has organized migrant labor recruitment and sent them to work in the global capitalist system since the early 2000s; second, *Sustaining Life in Motion* examines the diverse forms of migration, beyond the PM labor export policy. This analysis extends beyond Taylor's analysis of the impact of market-based policy up to 2005; the third section (*Risks in the Twenty-first Century Migration*) sheds light on the Cham Muslims' migration trajectories, strategies, network, and trust; and finally, *Forms of Agency and Empowerment* presents the complex realities and offers interesting insights into how this small group of Muslims in Vietnam not only copes with the challenges of labor migration, but also keeps up with their mobile livelihoods and religious and cultural practices.

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<sup>5</sup>A broader-in-scope manuscript (Tran 2015) which examines the Kinh, the Hoa, the Khmer, and the H-Re migrant workers in manufacturing industries in Malaysia is work-in-progress.

<sup>6</sup>Taylor (2007) made the same argument: the Chams are concentrated in Cambodia and Vietnam (pp. 2, 67–81, 20, 112, 140–141), cited by Kiernan (2014).

<sup>7</sup>He was very proud to say that “all 5900 Cham residents, every single one of them, received free health insurance from the government.” And that is why he remembered the number of Cham population in An Phu District.

I pay special attention to gender differences (which are significant in a Muslim society), the role of parents and neighbors because migration is often a family or household strategy, a characteristic of sending agrarian societies in Asia. I also compare the Cham patterns with those of the Kinh who went to work in Malaysia and returned.

## 2.1 Methodology

The narratives of the Cham interviewees (between 2008 and 2014) have been woven in throughout the paper. We used convenience sampling due to the strict controls by all levels of the local government who escorted us around—provincial, district, and commune levels. The Cham Muslims constitute a minority, only about 8 % (5900 Cham out of the total population of 76,700) of all five communes in An Phu District, intermingling with the Kinh, the Khmer and a small percentage of the Hoa (ethnic Chinese). Between August 2012 and June 2014, together with two research assistants, we interviewed 23 Cham returnees (11 males and 12 females) and 8 relatives (parents, sisters, spouses) and neighbors. While my interview sample is not representative, the in-depth analysis reveals the workers' migration patterns and strategies, their network and trust in migration, forms of their agency and empowerment, and the influence of their families. We conducted the interviews during Ramadan, so we had a chance to meet many workers who had temporarily come home to fast and celebrate the new year (at the end of Ramadan) and organizing a feast. This is the time to show off whether one is doing well, so they need money to buy food items to offer guests visiting their houses. Some parents lamented to me that they have no money to even entertain the guests when they come to visit at the end of fasting. This has some interesting *class* implications.

I triangulate secondary statistical data with firsthand fieldwork interviews, which we conducted in Vietnamese. Overall, I have conducted interviews in several Cham Muslim communes in An Phu District (An Giang Province) with the assistance of two Vietnamese research assistants from 2012 to 2014. All the names presented in this paper are pseudonyms to protect and respect returnees' privacy and confidentiality.

In most interviews, we were escorted to the houses of the migrant returnees by local government officials from the provincial down to the ward/village levels. While this is a clear form of government control and surveillance, we did not face censorship from the officials and were able to ask all the questions that we wanted; at times, we even received translation help from these officials when the Cham workers did not understand the questions posed in Vietnamese.

## 2.2 Conceptual Concerns

Many scholars have highlighted cultural factors as forms of agency and empowerment for both factory and domestic workers. *Migrant networks* play important roles in the lives of migrant workers by facilitating information exchanges and resource assistance in both home and host countries (Gold 2005; Guarnizo 2003). *Social capital*, defined as preferential treatment and commitment, can induce people to extend and receive favors (Gold 2005, p. 259).

Focusing on female migrant workers, Oishi (2005, pp. 190–192) discusses broad labor migration in all sectors of the global economy (manufacturing and domestic/service types of work) and stresses the need to recognize both forms of empowerment: *structural empowerment* (to combat systemic exploitation on behalf of all workers in the world) and the more subtle subjective, *internal empowerment* (cognitive processes of reflection and analysis). She found evidence that international labor migration can be a positive *internal* empowerment experience: learning new skills (such as administrative, organizing, leadership), new languages, self-development, self-rationalization, self-confidence, and independence (pp. 188–192).

Existing studies on the Cham in Vietnam focus on the history the Cham from the Kingdom of Champa (Li 2006), the coming of Islam to Champa (Nakamura 2000), the Islamic religious practices of the Cham Bani (Yoshimoto 2012), the historical linkages among the Cham, the Vietnamese populations, and other Asian cultures (Trần and Lockhart 2011), and the impact of Vietnamese market policy on the Cham up to 2005 (Taylor 2007). On the impact of the neoliberal market system on the Cham, the most relevant work is Taylor's longitudinal study (1999–2005) of the Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta. He argued that the Cham community of devout Muslims has maintained their way of life constrained by the delta's riverine ecology. They are also prolific traders, specializing in trading far beyond their home villages, or *extra-local* trading (both across national borders and within Vietnam). However, there have only been brief and general references about Chams traveling to Malaysia, making products to sell to the Malaysian markets, and sending remittances to their families (Taylor 2007, pp. 175–176; Taylor 2006, p. 244). But his most interesting argument is about the Cham's response—*geographical agency*—to Vietnam's move to a market-based economy. He argues that they “reinvent economic space through local and extra-local trading practices that draw upon and also sustain their distinct cultural competencies and institutions” (Taylor 2006, p. 248). As Vietnam moved to a market-based economy, the Cham have become disadvantaged locally (compared to the Kinh majority) in their economic ventures, but they have been successful *extra-locally* in making their living by moving across national borders and within Vietnam.

This paper examines these issues but goes beyond the market policy to explain how the Cham Muslims have fared under the Prime Minister's labor export policy, as well as their mobile tradition including the circular migration patterns and informal recruitment networks.

### 2.3 Labor Brokerage State in Global Capitalist System

The concept of labor brokerage state explains negotiations between governments to send and receive workers who sign fixed-term contracts and then return home at the end of those contracts. Both sending and receiving governments benefit from workers' remittances (Rodriguez 2010). With increasing integration into the global capitalist system since the early 2000s, labor migration has been a significant source of income to the Vietnamese economy. The government has organized migrant labor recruitment via the "labor export" policy—the 12-year Prime Minister Decision 71/CP (2009–2020) aimed at sending people from 62 poor rural districts—most are poor Kinh and other ethnic minorities in the North and Central provinces—to work overseas on 3-year contracts.<sup>8</sup> While this policy mostly affects the Kinh in poor provinces, it also affects the lives of the Cham Muslims in An Giang.<sup>9</sup>

The Vietnamese state has been playing the role of a sending labor broker. In 2002, Vietnam and Malaysia signed an agreement to provide a legal framework for the terms of contracts (including wages, taxes/levies, and working conditions) to send Vietnamese workers to Malaysia to meet the need for cheap labor (Mr. Vu X., personal communication, July 2014). Chin (1998) highlighted the Malaysian state modernization strategies that allow "guest-workers" into the country to support the entry of Malaysian women into the paid workforce. The Department of Overseas Labor (DOLAB), belonging to Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), stationed in the Vietnamese Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, is charged with overseeing and resolving problems faced by Vietnamese migrant workers. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Consular Department is also charged with protecting Vietnamese abroad.

Between 2002 and 2007, an estimated 20,000–30,000 Vietnamese went to work in Malaysia. The global financial crisis in 2008 had sent many workers back to Vietnam due to lack of work (Duy Quốc, personal communication, 2010).<sup>10</sup> As of 2015, about 560,000 Vietnamese are working in 60 countries and territories in 30 types of professions (especially manufacturing, construction, domestic work) (International Labor Organization 2015). An average of 80,000 new documented migrant workers has been sent to work overseas each year, of which female workers accounted for about 30 % (Review of Vietnamese Migration Abroad 2012; International Labor Organization 2014).

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<sup>8</sup>This is a part of the Resolution 30a/2008/NQ-CP (ratified on 27 December 2008). While these poor rural districts are primarily in the North (Yen Bai, Phu Tho, Thanh Hoa), Central (Quảng Ngãi, Quang Binh, Quang Tri), and central highland provinces (Kon Tum, Lam Dong), there are some poor rural districts in the South of Vietnam.

<sup>9</sup>Exporting labor in Vietnam is not a new phenomenon: exchange workers were sent to the former Soviet Union and its satellites to repay foreign debts in the 1980s. In Tran 2015 book manuscript, I focus on the impacts of this major "labor export" policy on the Kinh and two other ethnic minorities: the H-Re and the Khmer.

<sup>10</sup>About 9000 Vietnamese export workers, of which about 5000 went to Malaysia, lost their jobs and had to return home before the end of their contracts (Vietnamese ambassador to Malaysia, Mr. Hoàng Trọng Lập's interview with Vietnamese journalists in Kuala Lumpur (Duy 2009, August 18).

The Vietnamese state has made an investment, earmarking an initial 4800 billion VND (about US \$267 million) for the 12-year policy on labour export. Through the first half of 2014, remittances of up to US \$11.4 billion were remitted to Vietnam (World Bank, 2014:6).

Moreover, the state banks have also benefited from this migration policy. The two important sources of credit for these migrant workers are the Social Policy Bank and the Agriculture and Rural Development Bank (Agribank), both under the Vietnamese State Bank. Since 2000, the State Bank has directed these two banks to lend money to potential migrant workers (not restricted to the Prime Minister Decision 71/CP on recipients) at normal commercial interest rates. Moreover, private banks have entered this “business” and have been lending money to these poor residents (Duy Quốc, personal communication, August 2009). However, most migrant workers actually received only 25 to 50 percent of the total loan amount. The rest goes directly to pay migration expenses and processing fees from both Vietnam and Malaysia (Le 2010, Tran and Crinis 2015).

### ***Recruitment Mechanisms and Middlemen***

Most Vietnamese recruitment companies were state or quasi-state owned, under MOLISA management. They were represented and supported by a quasi-state agency, the Vietnamese Association of Manpower Supply (VAMAS). In November 2012, MOLISA appointed retired and semiretired state officials to oversee 171 recruitment companies.<sup>11</sup> Many of these companies developed from the “export labor” departments of state-owned corporations in steel, coal, oil, and natural gas. Local people’s committees and the labor unions (the Vietnamese General Confederation of Labor, VGCL) also formed their own labor recruitment companies, such as Latuco Company.

The recruitment process involves three levels of middlemen, who have been charging fees to send poor residents to work overseas (Interview with Duy Quốc, August 2012). They operate at various governmental levels and between government and private companies. The *first* middleman is the city-level recruitment office (Phòng tuyển dụng/giới thiệu việc làm) controlled by the city office of MOLISA (or Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, or DOLISA). The *second* is the private recruitment companies (or semiprivate when the owners are retired government officials) who obtained job orders from Malaysian outsourcing companies. The *third* is the (lower) district-level labor department (or Phòng lao động thương binh and xã hội) (belonging to a local people’s committee). In the past, the city recruitment offices (from DOLISA) had exclusive relationships with private recruitment companies to advertise and allocate jobs to potential workers. However, over time, private recruitment companies have come down to work directly with the

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<sup>11</sup>Many of them came from various ministries including industry, mining and commerce.

district-level labor departments, thus cutting out the city-level recruitment middlemen (Mr. Nguyễn V.T., personal communication, August 2012).

Since 2004, the state-owned media, such as the labor newspapers, have been playing a pro-labor role by informing the public about the wrongdoings and violations of many fraudulent Vietnamese recruitment companies. These shady companies worked with unauthorized individual recruiters—many were connected to state-owned enterprises and agencies—who went to villages to search for potential migrant workers (Duy Quốc 2004; Nguyễn 2004, 2005). These news reports had raised awareness and effectively stopped dubious practices which cost migrant workers not only in financial terms (up to US \$2000 per person), but also in terms of contract violations (not enough work as guaranteed by the contracts they signed). The media also created an open forum to expose the migrant workers' plights and protests, by exposing the lack of accountability by recruitment companies towards the workers they sent to Malaysia, using headlines like “Leaving a baby in a market place” (Duy Quốc 2004, [http://tintuc.timnhanh/com/xa\\_hoi/phong\\_su/20071111/35A69D1E](http://tintuc.timnhanh/com/xa_hoi/phong_su/20071111/35A69D1E), retrieved July 2012). This is a common refrain I heard in my interviews with various ethnic returnees from Malaysia.

Interestingly, the Cham themselves also participated in informal recruitment. At times, the network started with the local neighbors in An Giang. Saphi, a 19-year-old Cham female only finished grade 7, but was very eager to learn more. She went to work as a babysitter and a maid for a Cham neighbor who resided in Malaysia. She borrowed from relatives about 2–3 million VND, but she paid all her debts. Moreover, throughout her stay in Malaysia, she was able to repeat this pattern several times: saving some money (about 3 million VND for herself) while also helping her mother (giving her mother 3 million VND). However, the instability of these informal recruitment networks gives rise to the lack of sustainable employment for these Cham migrants.

## 2.4 Sustaining Life in Motion and Gendered Division of Labor

The Cham's way of life has always been on the move, for centuries, way before the “labor export” policy (the Prime Minister Decision 71/CP (2009–2020)). My interviews from 2008 to 2014 extended Taylor's study (which ended in 2005) and found that while Taylor's basic premise remains true, the Cham's “extra-local trading” has extended way beyond their home village, crossing many borders. Moreover, the gendered mode of exchange has changed and the Cham women have also crossed borders from Vietnam to Malaysia and returned. State-sponsored Cham migration is very small, compared to the Kinh and other ethnic groups. By December 2014, a total of 146,903 were sent to work overseas (<http://dolab.gov.vn/New/Default.aspx>). In 2014, the target had been to send between 85,000 and 90,000 workers abroad, of which, according to Mr. Đào Công Hải (Deputy Head of the

Overseas Labor Management Department), included up to 20,000 workers to Malaysia, mostly of Kinh descent.

### *Patterns of Migration*

The Cham Muslims have maintained their mobile tradition, and their settlements are actually habitats in motion. Over 80 % of the Cham in An Phú District engage in small-scale trading, not farming (Taylor 2006, p. 241). In all 23 interviews, we found that the Cham's mobile livelihood involves selling gas cookers, clothes, fabrics, and sundries, consistent with Taylor's findings. They specialize in buying used clothes and reselling them to the general public, both inside and outside of An Phú District (Interview with an official in the Labor Department of An Phú District, August 2012). Based on interviews up through June 2014, the patterns include couples travelling together to sell these wares several months during the year, or each taking turn travelling while one staying at home to take care of the infant children. The grandparents, if healthy and able, would often contribute to taking care of the grandchildren and/or their disabled children.

One pattern of their peripatetic lifestyle is the popular circular migration pattern among the Cham who engage in their own-account retail activities in Malaysia. First they bought a one-way ticket from Vietnam to Malaysia and, with a 1-month tourist visa, they started working in Malaysia. The circular motion sets in when these workers would leave Malaysia at the end of their 1-month visa for Thailand for several days, then return to Malaysia to apply for another 1-month visa, then to Thailand when that visa expired, then back to Malaysia, and then back to Vietnam to visit their families for up to half a year. Then they would return to Malaysia and repeat this cycle. The Malaysian employers who hire them have tacitly approved these practices by turning a blind eye and accepting them back.

In 2013, I interviewed a couple: Ms. Masa, the 40-year-old wife, and her husband, Mr. Rohsa, the 40-year-old husband; they have four children. At the time of the interview, they had been using this method, with both the husband and wife going to Malaysia (legally) every 6 months. Their circular migration pattern predated the 2009 labor export policy, and it has helped them make ends meet. Back in 2001, this couple started going to Malaysia with their sons. Ms. Masa said: "For the first time in 2001, we went to Malaysia to work underground for 3 years. [In 2001 only] I stayed at home [in Malaysia] to take care of our sons, while my husband sold ice cream and learned to speak Malay after 2–3 months there. There are some similarities between Malay and Cham languages so we can guess each other's message/meaning when we speak." When the children grew up they stayed with an aunt who looked after them and made sure that they went to school.

While being in Malaysia, Ms. Masa sold fabrics and clothes in the market, and her husband sold ice cream in the streets. Mr. Rohsa said: "We bought one-way ticket from Vietnam to Malaysia with a tourist visa, not a working one. So, when caught by the police, we pleaded with them about our hard lives and (many times) they

sympathized with us and let us go.” This “one-way ticket to Malaysia” implies that he would go to Thailand and stay there for several days, and then return to Malaysia for another short “tourist” visa stay, then back to Thailand, then Malaysia in this circular pattern. When asked whether they made enough to survive, Mr. Rohsa offered this insight: “Actually, costs of living over there were not expensive; they were even cheaper [than in Vietnam], when we converted from Ringgit into Vietnamese Dong.” After 3 years, they saved US \$2000, a huge lump sum for them, and upon returning home, they bought a piece of land and built the house in which they now lived.

Another pattern is a *combination* of going to Malaysia by car, and then circular migration as described above. Mr. Yshah, a 34-year-old man who has 3 children, followed the footsteps of his parents selling used clothes and fabrics. Starting at the end of 1999, he went to Malaysia via Thailand by car by himself, using an expression: “*đi đường dưới, đi chui*” or travelling on surface street (as opposed to flying) and traveling underground. He arrived in Malaysia in 2000; once there, he relied on his relatives to help him find a place to stay and then lend him money to buy an ice cream cart for him to use on the street. During the interview in 2012, he had been engaged in the circular migration pattern between An Giang and Malaysia.<sup>12</sup> He has been working in Malaysia for periods varying from 2 to 7 months, having applied for 1 month visas many times by going to Thailand as a tourist, then reentering Malaysia for another month.

### ***Gendered Division of Labor and Traditions on Trial***

Work is gendered in all forms of labor migration to Malaysia. In the formal labor export scheme, women tend to be in labor-intensive work such as textile/garment, food processing, electronic/electrical areas, while men tend to be in more capital-intensive work, such as plastics, consumer/industrial materials, mechanics, and furniture.<sup>13</sup> In informal labor migration there is also a clear gendered division of labor. On the one hand, most Cham men work outside of the house as peddlers or itinerant vendors, selling ice cream; at times, some Cham men also work for small family shops (owned by both Malays and ethnic Chinese) for several months packaging chicken and duck eggs. On the other hand, Cham women tend to work inside the house as maids,<sup>14</sup> cleaning the house, washing dishes, babysitting, or working in restaurants, and, if going out, they would specialize in selling fabrics, clothes, and sundries. This gendered division of labor occurred in the case of the

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<sup>12</sup>It was unclear where he was in Malaysia: we heard he said: “Karup city” in Malaysia but could not verify the exact spelling of that city.

<sup>13</sup>But there are some *ethnic* differences in gendered division of labor which I analyze in my 2015 book manuscript.

<sup>14</sup>Increasing level of inequalities in Asia led to this division of labor where the nouveaux rich class in developing countries needs domestic care (from another developing country) for their families which open the door for certain types of foreign workers (Oishi 2005).

Masa/Rohsa couple where the husband sold ice cream, while his spouse sold fabrics and clothes in the market in Malaysia, and in many of the interviewees.

An interview with (Mr. To, 35 years old) in a mosque in Đa Phước commune in 2012 shows how Islamic religious restrictions would lead to this gendered division of labor in Malaysia: *men sell ice cream and women sell fabrics*. He stayed at home in An Giang to fish and to take care of their four children (taking them to school) while his wife was in Malaysia to sell fabrics following a circular pattern of migration; 1 month in Malaysia with tourist visa and 1 month back in Đa Phước commune. He recounted his life history before getting married: “First I was fishing, then I followed my fellow male friends to Malaysia (by car) to sell fabrics for 3–4 years. But as a Muslim man, I cannot enter people’s houses [in Malaysia] because the homeowners do not allow men to enter their houses or talk to females. So, I had to change to selling ice cream.” During the interview in 2012, he said: “we take turn going away to sell clothes: when my wife returns home from Malaysia (normally a month), I would go to other provinces in the Mekong Delta (such as Hậu Giang, Cần Thơ, Tiền Giang) to sell clothes.” It was all right for him to sell clothes in Vietnam where there is no religious restriction to enter people’s houses to sell sundries.

Their traditions are put on trial in various ways. First, selling fabrics and clothes (both in Malaysia and in the Delta region) reflects the loss of the Cham’s weaving and embroidery tradition (Taylor 2006, p. 241). Many responded that they follow their parents’ trade and that “we lost the root in weaving and doing embroidery” (Interview with Sary). Second, fishing as a tradition is no longer an easy way to make a living (Taylor 2006, p. 240). Interviews with a gentle Cham fisherman, Mr. Set in Vĩnh Trường ward sheds light on unsustainable ways of fishing in Vietnam and the connection to Cambodia. Mr. Set said in a sad tone of voice:

There is more fish to catch in Cambodia because not much fish left in Vietnam (in the Hậu River near where he lives). Vietnamese fishermen often used electricity to catch fish so they would mop up all the fish [including baby fish] so not much left. In Cambodia, we can only catch fish using the nets [in 10 months only]. I had to dive in deep water many hours every day to dislodge the fish nets which get stuck in the underwater tree roots in order to get my catch. As a result, I suffer from asthma with water in my lungs.

Other Cham men in Quốc Thái ward agreed:

Most Cham men here go to Cambodia ten months a year to fish at the Tonle Sap River. When they come to Cambodia in October, they had to pay a fee (200,000 VND, or about US \$10) to fish there for ten months. At the end of this fishing season, most would make over 20 million VND (or about US \$1000), or about US \$100 per month.

Twenty five years after consistent market practices in the 1990s, the Cham do have “geographical agency” by reproducing their way of life using different migration strategies. But they also face many risks when they start out on the global labor migration journey.

## 2.5 Risks in the Twenty-first Century Migration

Following the footsteps of these peripatetic Cham migrants, one can crisscross many national borders, as did their ancestors centuries ago, through Cambodia, to present-day Thailand and Malaysia. The risks in the twenty-first century appear in both formal and informal settings. First, let us hear the story of a returnee who went to work in Malaysia under the labor export policy: a cross-border escape. Ms. Wali is a worker returnee, 27 years old, who finished 12th grade but did not pass the college entrance exam. So she applied and went to Malaysia as an export laborer in 2005, but low wages in a Chinese Malaysian factory manufacturing clothes led her to end the contract early. She escaped to a small Malay garment factory where she was accepted by a sympathetic employer. When asked whether he asked for her passport and visa upon arrival, she said:

Yes, I showed him my visa, and a copy of my passport, because the original was held by the Chinese owner. I told him about my whole situation. Then he took pity on me because of our shared Muslim faith, and hired me to work there, also stitching and earning by piece rates. But I earned 4 times more than what I earned in that Chinese (Malaysian) factory.

Through friends, she learned about how to return to Vietnam through Thailand and Cambodia. She risked her life to escape by foot and by car, which cost her 2000 Ringgit (about over US \$600). She had to borrow 1000 Ringgit from friends.

When asked how this escape happened, she told me:

Yes, on both sides of the road. We had 6 to 7 people in the car. The road was completely empty with forests on both sides. We heard about vicious robbers who killed to rob people. That's why we were so worried. [From Malaysia] We traveled 2 days and 2 nights and arrived at Cambodia-Vietnam border. Then, I was really scared... knee dip wading in the mud, using a cane to find our way, very arduous... After crossing the border (from Cambodia to Vietnam), everyone was completely exhausted, then I called my father to come and pick me up, using the phone that my father gave me before I left for Malaysia... Then when I returned, everyone in my village [possibly Đa Phước commune/village], knowing that I had escaped through Thailand route, had prayed for me to overcome dangers on the road. When I got home, everyone was there to greet me... a full house!

While she survived this harrowing escape, she still was in debt for 20 million VND. This debt was cosigned by her mother, who complained about being harassed by a local official who demanded debt repayment, while Wali only received 4 million VND to take with her to Malaysia for necessities.

Another risk is about the house raids in Malaysia. House raids by police tend to be more prevalent in areas suspected of having illegal migrants. Mr. Rohsa, the husband of Masa shared:

Of course we stayed there [Malaysia] illegally. From 7am to 5 pm, I sold ice cream at school gates [it was OK to sell ice cream there] and walked to each household in deep alley ways. The government only did house raids in areas where they know that illegal workers

stayed. My goodness, we crawled; we evaded; we hid. When the police came, we left all our belongings there and only took our children with us to hide in nearby places and only returned home when the police left.

## 2.6 Forms of Agency and Empowerment

While both forms of agency—internal/subjective and structural empowerment—exist in the Cham’s patterns of movement and their daily practices, internal/subjective forms of empowerment are the most prevalent. The Cham’s individual forms of migration are vibrant in terms of network and trust, keeping up their traditions with creativity, refusing to pay their loans, and demanding to practice their religion. There is plenty of evidence that the Cham have dreams and aspirations, such as wanting to learn more and to be teachers (Ms. Saphi), and to be creative in order to make a living for their extended families. However, much fewer expressions of structural empowerment have been found. Occasionally, the Cham participate in short-term collective actions to demand basic living and working conditions (in solidarity with other ethnic groups such as in the daily wage strike below). At other times, they engage in individual acts of courage by standing up to the bosses (in Malaysia and Vietnam) to have two prayer times (with pay) at work.

### *Network, Trust, Childcare*

Like other ethnic groups, many Cham workers are expected to send money home to help feed their parents and siblings at home. Many workers, men and women, practice “*hui*”—a way to pool money among fellow workers to send lump-sum amounts of money/remittances home to help pay the debts. Each month, a group of workers pool part of their earnings and send the total to one of the workers’ families; the next month, another worker gets the opportunity to do so. This practice depends on trust. Consistent with Oishi’s findings, I found a pattern of networks that had been created by the relatives of Cham migrants who were successful in Malaysia. They had settled in Malaysia, established some enterprises, and needed assistance with their businesses and childcare at their homes. While these networks provided short-term employment, migrant workers had no future guarantee of stable employment nor did they learn marketable skills to escape poverty upon returning home to Vietnam. Ms. Sary, 20 years old was recruited by her aunt, who was already in Malaysia, because she needed childcare and assistance with selling fabrics.

Several Cham couples talked about how to deal with childcare while they are constantly on the move, either crisscrossing Vietnam or crossing the borders. When their children are small, the whole family (husbands, wives, and their infant

children) would travel together.<sup>15</sup> Then, when their children grow older, the parents would leave their children back home to be taken care of by grandparents, aunts or uncles. The couple, Ms. Masa and Mr. Rohsa, mentioned above, did exactly that with their four children.

### *Keeping up with Traditions with Creativity*

There is evidence of a return to one of their traditions—sewing—as well as positive gender bonding which promotes creativity. Our fieldwork in Lama village (ấp) connected us with leaders of the local women’s union. I interviewed Ms. Sara, a leader of the women’s union in La Ma). She is a Kinh who married into a Cham family and converted to the Muslim religion, voluntarily adopting Cham traditional practices, including having a Cham name. As the women’s leader, she oversees 507 members in this large women’s branch at La Ma.

Concerned with keeping the Cham women’s tradition, she has been organizing three sewing classes since 2012 (from 1 to 2 classes per year). She said:

Most Cham women love to learn how to sew because, after graduating from the class, each will have a certificate. Young women can migrate to work in the cities (such as Hồ Chí Minh, Đồng Nai, Bình Dương) and earn higher wages. Other women [read older women] can sew/tailor clothes for their family members, thus saving money. The reason is that Cham clothing is very complex with many designs; one formal dress would cost at least 80,000 VND [about 4 USD]; the praying dress would cost even more: about 100,000 VND. Therefore, learning how to sew is not only gaining a marketable skill, but also convenient and useful for most Cham women. And the local labor department funds these classes: not only that they learn for free, but each would receive a meal coupon of 15,000 VND per day for three months, and a certificate upon graduation.

This resourceful women’s union leader also escorted us to the house of Ms. Salay and introduced us so that we could interview her (see her success story below). She also drew our attention to a mosque specially built for women, which we visited at the end of our interviews.<sup>16</sup>

In short, this Kinh-turned Cham Muslim woman has successfully sustained one important Cham tradition for women: sewing and tailoring their elaborate costumes. As such, she does not only empower them with a skill that can earn them an income (in addition to small-scale trade which does not bring them much money), but also to prosper relatively, as seen in the success story of one of the informants.

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<sup>15</sup>Taylor made a same point: families travel together (Taylor 2007, p. 172).

<sup>16</sup>While not at all as elaborate as the main mosque, this is the first all-female worshiping place that I’ve seen in the several years that I frequented these Muslim villages in An Giang province.

### *A Success Story of Hard Work and Creativity*

The successful and uplifting story of Ms. Salay, an entrepreneurial 25-year-old Cham woman, demonstrates a clear case of self-empowerment. While her parents continue the traditional Cham way of life—with her father fishing and her mother selling the catch—she connects to the Cham’s sewing tradition in a very creative way; her products were sold in both Vietnam and Malaysia, Ms. Salay shows how hard work, resilience, and creativity pay off not only for her own wellbeing but also for her extended family. Being the eldest of seven offspring, she has been the main “breadwinner” (or rather “rice-winner”) and has been training her siblings to help out with various sewing tasks. Then with some seed money, she bought more machines and employed her siblings to help her sew to meet orders from both Vietnam and Malaysia. Her mother announced proudly: “Now, she works and puts food on the table for the whole family.”

She started her peripatetic lifestyle with a cross-border trip to Malaysia (passing through Cambodia and Thailand) by car with her relatives, where she worked for 6 years. This experience has empowered her with social capital such as language skills, networks, and trust with Malaysians. She gets along well with the Malaysian Muslims and said: “Malaysians love the Cham.”

When asked why she selected the sewing job, she said: “When the government opened up sewing classes, I joined because I have always loved to sew, even when I was a little girl. I had worked in Malaysia for 6 years but can never afford to save much.”

Upon returning to An Giang, she went to work for a garment factory in Hồ Chí Minh City, assembling clothes for 3 months. But with low wages (about 2.5 million VND per month), she cannot make ends meet and thus returned home and took sewing lessons. This has proven to be a smart move:

When I returned to An Giang, I had a chance to take a sewing class with Cô Phương (a Kinh female teacher) who was a very dedicated teacher. Then I practiced to cut and sew for myself first, then I sew for all my family members as well as our neighbors. Gradually, I saved up some money and then bought my first sewing machine, then an over-lock machine and other stitching machines to help me with various sewing tasks.”

The stitching machines line the wall of the one-and-only room in her small house. When asked where and how she gets her fabrics, she said: “I get domestic/Vietnamese fabrics. At the beginning, I have no seed money, so I had to work for other people. But then I’ve been saving the money that I earned to buy fabrics so I can sew at home. Then I took orders from other people to sew at home (tailoring), earning about 40–50,000 VND per suit.”

When asked about her customers, her response shows a familiar subcontracting process and the significance of linkages: “Right here in Đa Phước, people give me their already cut fabrics (based on their patterns and different sizes) so I only need to assemble them. But I also receive (tailoring) orders from our neighbors. Then I save my money in the “piggy bank” to buy fabrics to sew clothes.” This young

entrepreneur does not just tailor for her fellow villagers but also ships her tailored products across borders and makes profits from that:

I send them to Malaysia and save up money to buy more stitching machines. I sew according to existing standardized sizes from the clothes that my aunt sells in Malaysia. Each set of clothes [which includes a blouse and a pair of pants] would cost me about 150,000 VND (about US \$7), and I can sell it for 300,000 VND (a 100 % profit). But there are always clothes left unsold.

Her aunt in Malaysia also benefits from this enterprising niece: “My aunt would charge a small fee to stockpile these [unsold] clothes.” Overall, this young entrepreneur does not rest on her laurels but aims high and has been designing her own clothing label. But she emphasizes the need for more capital to expand and open her own tailoring shop.

### *Indebtedness of the Labor Export Policy*

For the Cham who participated in the labor export policy, most of them suffer a cycle of virtual indebtedness. All the parents we interviewed had taken out loans so that their off-springs could participate in the labor export policy, but they have refused to pay back the loans because they claimed that they have only received 15–20 % of the loan amount. However, even when they refused to pay, citing “no money to even survive,” they still suffer a cycle of virtual indebtedness. First, let us review the loan policy and its consequences.

In my January 2014 interview with Mr. G (an official of the Social Policy Bank branch in An Giang), he intimated that most of these loans probably will be written off by the local social policy bank. He said that as of 2013, An Giang incurred about US \$1,800,000 debt, most of which were lent out to workers going to Malaysia. They have three policies to provide relief for these families: (1) “to spread out the payment” (*dãn nợ*) in which returnees are given three extra years to repay their debts; (2) “to lock in the amount” so no more interest can be accrued (*khoanh nợ*); in this case, returnees can still borrow money to go to work in “higher-pay” markets such as Korea and Japan; (3) “to completely forgive the debt” (*xoá nợ*). The general policy is that they would adopt the last option only when the returnees’ parents are dead or the offspring (the worker returnees) can no longer work. When I asked about the problematic aspects of this “labor export policy,” he said that An Giang officials have recognized that this policy is “not good” and have been reassessing this policy.<sup>17</sup> As the banks have not been demanding repayments from the interviewees, it may be assumed that they have tacitly adopted the first option.

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<sup>17</sup>He further said that to discipline violating recruitment companies, in 2011–2012, An Giang officials had withdrawn business licenses of 50 violating recruitment companies.

During my June 2014 follow-up interviews, the local bank officials had stopped going around demanding repayment from these poor Cham families. But Mr. G had refused to see me after numerous attempts to ask for a follow-up meeting.<sup>18</sup>

However, I was able to interview another social policy bank official from the Hồ Chí Minh branch in June 2014 who suggested that “loan forgiveness” is exercised on a case-by-case basis. This official said:

In many cases, when workers send money home to their parents, intended to repay the debts, their parents used it for another purpose (i.e., their own needs) and did not repay the debts. Thus, the policies to spread out the amount, to lock in the amount and to forgive the whole loan should depend on the specific conditions and situations of each worker, because, for instance, if a worker escaped and worked underground for another employer, earning an income while still owing a loan amount, we should not “forgive” the debt for this worker.

But a wise Cham parent (a Kinh man who married a Cham woman) provides a counterpoint. He offered an excellent insight into this lingering question about debts:

The bank official does not want to ‘forgive’ the debts outright, but rather “postponing the debt” [by not demanding payment now and unclear about the interests] because if they decided to build the road [in the name of economic development] that cuts through my house, then they will deduct the loan amount from the compensation money that they are supposed to pay the homeowners with outstanding debts due to the social policy bank.

This couple owns their house and makes a living by being the distributor of blankets and nets, stored in their sizable living room. As homeowners (albeit just residential land), their fear of the government’s deduction (on the land compensation) is credible.

### ***Refusing to Pay the Loans to Work in Malaysia***

Most of the migrant returnees had had their parents sign their loan documents and claimed that they did not pay attention to the terms of these loans. Interestingly, all seven cases of the Cham returnees who participated in the labor export policy have refused to repay any of the loans. We interviewed six parents and one worker herself who had signed the loan documents. Those who owned land used it as collateral and the really poor families used trust-based (tín chấp) to get the loans. Most had borrowed 20 million VND. But all the parents have refused to pay the 20 million VND debt. Most of the Cham returnees and their parents complained to me that they only actually received a small fraction of the loan amount of around 3–5 million VND (US \$200), or 15–25 % of the total loan amount from the state banks and recruitment companies to buy their necessities to take with them to

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<sup>18</sup>This may be due to the sensitivity of this issue and the lack of clear-cut policy at that time.

Malaysia. So, up to 75 % of their debts were used to pay fees to Vietnamese state agencies and recruitment companies, transportation costs, and Malaysian outsourcing companies. However, the workers and their families are responsible for the whole loan amount.

Evidence of a vicious cycle of poverty abounds. We found desperate cases in which both the parents and their offsprings continue to be in deep poverty and have no way to repay the loans. A 50-year-old illiterate mother of five children (two daughters and three sons), took the loan out under her name on her son's behalf. Her only prized property is a small house without any land. We talked in 2012 and then again in 2014 (in An Phú District office where she was transferring the house deed to her son for him to get married). When I asked whether the government had come to her house to ask for debt repayment, she looked sad and worried: "Not yet, because not only my son went to Malaysia. There were many people also left (for Malaysia) like my son. Mostly poor people, not having enough money to eat, never mind repaying the debt." She confirmed in 2014 that she still owed the state bank 20 million VND. But she complained that they only actually received 2–3 million VND (about 10 % of the debt). Her son (Mr. Pha) remains deep in poverty: having to return home as a result of the 2008 global crisis (which led to the bankruptcy of the company that employed him). Since his return to Vietnam, he has been working in one low-paid job after another; as a daily construction worker (75,000 VND/day) in 2012, then a wood factory worker in Hồ Chí Minh City, then when that company got into trouble, he turned to selling shoes on Hồ Chí Minh City streets in 2014, but he barely makes ends meet.

Some other cases demonstrate that while the offsprings have gone on to work in the big cities, the parents still refused to pay back the loans. We talked to the father of Ms. Cara who went to work in Malaysia under the labor export policy. His daughter finished the contract (and even stayed 2 more years to work underground in a restaurant, without a visa) and now works in an embroidery factory in Hồ Chí Minh City. As a wholesaler/distributor of blankets and mosquito nets, the father does make some income from the differences between wholesale and retail prices. But he refused to pay the loan: "I still owe 20 million, have not paid any money. Before (the local) officials came to our house often to demand payment, but now they no longer do that." Mr. Pa is the father of five children (three sons and two daughters); he took out a loan for his son to work in Malaysia; the son did finish the 3-year-contract in an iron factory in Malaysia and came home to do manual work in Bình Dương province, but is not making a living. He too still owes 20 million VND and commented that local officials had ceased to come and demand payment.

Even when workers borrowed under their own names, they still did not pay their loans. Ms. Saly is a worker returnee who went to Malaysia under the export labor policy via Lатуco Company and completed her 3-year contract in an electronics factory in Johor with many other fellow Cham. She had taken out the loan under her own name and said matter of factly: "I took the loan under my own name, but I don't plan to repay (the loan) because I have no money to pay back." Most other interviewed returnees did not pay attention to the terms of these loans and deferred them to the parents who often deal directly with the local governments.

### ***Structural Empowerment: Daily Wage Strike***

When opportunity arose, the Cham migrant workers joined forces with other Vietnamese workers to fight against systemic exploitation while working in Malaysia. We interviewed Saly twice, the first time in 2012 and the follow-up interview in 2014. She is a 33-year-old Cham Muslim worker returnee who went to work as export labor in Malaysia in 2005. She finished her contract after 3 years and returned to a broken home: her husband—following their mobile livelihoods—had already left to work elsewhere and found another wife. She lamented about the hard life in Malaysia with a constant fear of robberies, which resonate with other female workers: “Getting there is a done deal. I had to close my eyes and just worked for 3 years. I have no money to return home early [needed 10 million VND then]. Life there was very difficult, lots of robberies. We were very afraid. I cried day and night.”

But she also recounted a strike which raised their wage to the level promised by Lатуco (the Vietnamese recruitment company that sent her to Malaysia): “In the contract we signed stated 18 ringgit per day [assembling electronic parts in a Chinese Malaysian factory] but when we got there, we only received 15 Ringgit. Then we women workers got together to discuss how to deal with this. We decided that if it’s only 15 Ringgit per day then we would stop work. We sent a representative to talk to the boss and said that if it is 18 Ringgit per day then we will work, but if only 15 Ringgit, then we won’t. After that he [the boss] raised our daily wage to 18 Ringgit [the original amount stated on the contract].”

When asked about her relationship with other Kinh workers, “social capital” emerges as the key factor that she gained while working there. She said: “We women workers really cared for each other. Because over there, we were so far away from our families, we considered each other as sisters. We also pooled our money (in the form of “hụi”) and took turn sending a lump sum home for our parents. There was no profit, strictly based on trust.”

One cannot ignore the role of religion from experiences of the Cham Muslims traveling to and working in a Muslim country and returning to their Cham communities in An Giang province to visit their families during Ramadan.

## **2.7 Role of Religion**

Religious practices play very important roles in the relations among these Cham Muslims who have been reaching out to the wider Islamic community in their migration history. I analyze ways in which these religious practices are conducted in various ways: local Cham residents, local religious leaders, potential religious teachers in their local mosques, and external forces which influence their thinking and activities.

The local religious leaders' influence and care for their local Cham residents was prominent during my interviews. According to Taylor (2007), *hakem* (ông Cả) is the one who is most knowledgeable in Islamic law and the leader in the Cham community who has the authority in local activities (religious and language instructions, marriage, disputes). In Vietnam, the *imam* (leader of congregational prayer) is under the *hakem*, and a *bilal* (someone who issues the call to prayer) (pp. 87–88, 205). In 2012, we interviewed a gentle elderly man, who is the Đồng Ky ward village chief (ấp trưởng). He is not a *hakem*, but it is clear that he is the keeper of the mosque in Quốc Thái commune. During my fieldwork in 2014, I saw him fixing things and taking care of the mosque.

As a village chief, he represented his Cham residents' interests very well, playing the role of a bridge between the local Kinh government officials and his Cham people. He was the interpreter for our 2012 interview, and many times during the interview, he asserted his concerns and dedication to fight for his people: "Why can't the [Vietnamese] government forgive the debts of this poor man who had to return home because the Malaysian company went bankrupt (during the height of the global financial crisis)? *It was not his fault* [My emphasis]." During this interview, I found that he accompanied Pha's mother to the Social Policy bank to check the status of "her" loan. "I went to work with the local official [in Quốc Thái commune] and found out that they still owed the Social Policy Bank 20 million VND, with accruing interest of 6–7 million VND."

### ***Religious/Islamic Studies: A Global Experience***

According to Nakamura (2000, p. 65), as Sunni Muslims, many Cham in An Giang are entitled to receive support and aid in various forms from different Muslim communities and institutions in Southeast Asia and in the Middle East. The influence of the UAE and Saudi Arabia are evident in all the mosques I visited in Vĩnh Trường, Quốc Thái, and Tân Châu: the prominent amount of funding used to build a mosque, the name of the sponsoring organization, or the clocks that indicate the time in Mecca and the equivalent Vietnamese time, hung prominently in the main chamber of the mosque. This is consistent with findings from Taylor and Yoshimoto: Cham (Sunni) Muslims (in Cambodia and Vietnam) have received funds from Arab donors from the early 1990s (Taylor 2007, pp. 18, 78, 121) to go to Mecca or to engage in religious studies in Malaysia, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia (Yoshimoto 2012, p. 488).

Moreover, I also found evidence of an intensification of Islamic identity, reflecting the influence from Malaysia on Islamic education (Taylor 2006, p. 241). In 2014, interviews with two informants suggest that learning the Quran can be

interpreted as a form of migration and potential upward mobility. Interviews with two young Muslim Cham men (see below) show the important roles of Ban Đại Diện Cộng Đồng Hồi Giáo in Hồ Chí Minh City (the Ho Chi Minh City Muslim Representative Committee) and the appropriate teachers who facilitate their religious practices.

The Cham people respect and comply with the hierarchy of religious leaders and the clear gendered division of labor. In 2012, I interviewed Mr. To on the verandah of his mosque in Đa Phước village.<sup>19</sup> He was there with his children for their language instructions. He explained to me the hierarchy of religious leaders in most Vietnamese mosques: one lead *hakem* (trưởng), one vice *hakem* (phó), and two *imams*. The division of labor in his household is such that he stayed home to fish and take care of their four children (such as taking them to language instructions at the mosque) while his wife continued to stay in Malaysia to sell fabrics.

One case shows that Islamic study can be used as a way to give service to their Muslim community in An Giang province. One informant, Mr. Dam, a 28-year-old man in Lama Ward, is an example. His Kinh father (who was converted to Muslim after marrying a Cham woman) constantly interjected during the interview. (His father appears to be an imam). Mr. Dam had studied 9 years in various places: 7 years in Hồ Chí Minh City and Cambodia (self-financed phase) and 2 years in Malaysia (financed by Malaysian donors and supporters). After 2 years of studying in Malaysia, he was forced to return home due to illness. So, now, he wants to complete his Islam study in Malaysia. His father sells clothes/blankets/nets in Rạch Giá (the capital city of Kiên Giang province): away 1 month, home 1 month.

The other case shows a more ambivalent motivation. Mr. Sam is a 24 years old, also in Lama Ward, and is an ambitious (and religiously conservative) young man. He wants to become a “hakem” or to work for Petronas (a Malaysian gas/oil corporation), in their management team. He was sponsored by Petronas to engage in Islamic study in Malaysia.

### ***Religious Practices in Home and Host Countries***

Global labor migration can be a positive *internal* empowerment experience. As these Cham periodically cross the national borders to make a living, they learn new skills, new languages, and effective ways to interact with management to fight for their religious practices.<sup>20</sup> There is evidence of a clear affiliation between the Malay

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<sup>19</sup>As a woman, I was not allowed to step inside the mosque, but all the Cham there were very nice and friendly to me.

<sup>20</sup>Nakamura also talked about how the Cham needed support from their fellow Muslims as refugees on foreign soil (65).

employers and the Cham workers.<sup>21</sup> While the sample is small, there exists clear evidence of religious understanding between the Malay bosses and the Cham workers, much less so between the Chinese management and the Cham workers. The Malay bosses often allow the Cham to pray twice during a working day, thanks to their shared religious affiliation and practices. On the other hand, the Cham workers themselves have been proactive in asking for this right, as well as being flexible with their religious practices in order to survive. They told me that they prayed more times at home to make up for lost praying time at work. They also learned to tolerate the Kinh workers' dietary style. They were also relaxed about the dress code; covering their heads when possible, and learned new (Malaysian) ways to wear their headscarves.

On religious practices such as the five daily praying times, the Cham workers have to fight to be able to practice their religion in many non-Malay (or Chinese Malaysian) factories. In the case of Ms. Saphi, after returning to Vietnam, she worked for a small Kinh enterprise as an inventory clerk. But at first, her employer did not understand why she needs time to pray during work hours every day. Saphi was very religious and had stood up to her Kinh employer back in An Giang in defense of her religious practices, succeeding in having two prayer times (with pay) at work: 10 min in the morning and 10 min in the afternoon. She shared her feeling as being the only Cham in this Kinh shop:

I do feel lonely because I am the only ethnic minority (người dân tộc) there but I have a place to pray. At first, they thought what I do is strange. I sympathize with them because they had not seen this before and did not know about this. But now that they knew [about my religious practices] and if they “forgot” about [or not respect] this, I will remind them about my need to have space and time to pray [with pay].

## 2.8 Conclusion

The Cham Muslims continue to survive, as they have for centuries, and have been creative in finding their own routes to make a living and to practice their religion. I found that there are more expressions of subjective than structural empowerment. Almost two decades after Vietnam joined the market economy there are examples of a return to their tradition—sewing and tailoring—but with creativity and global connections, such as the case of the young entrepreneur in La Ma village.

Overall, for the small number of Cham who went through the official channels of labor export policy, they faced a vicious cycle of indebtedness, starting off with the “government-subsidized loans” from which they actually received less than 25 % of

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<sup>21</sup>In another study (Tran and Crinis, manuscript 2014), we found that the Kinh women workers in Malaysia have been participating in religious groups in Malaysia for faith, friendship and support. However, more study is needed on the intent and implications of these religious groups for migrant workers there and when they return home.

the loan amounts. But in their own ways, the Cham returnees and their parents have fought back, refusing to repay these loans. The low skilled jobs in Malaysia did not prepare them to escape grinding poverty upon returning to their villages. Most have returned to assembly work in Vietnamese factories or shops, or to small-scale trading and fishing.

Religious practices provide example of internal empowerment and personal growth, in the cases of informants who fought for prayer privileges at work and religious studies abroad. The more accommodating relations between the Malay employers and the Cham Muslims—both in the factories and inside Malay households—suggest how religion can transcend ethnic differences. More research is needed on this fascinating aspect of global labor migration.

Returning to the issue of *geographical agency* as a response to the labor export policy effective since 2002, I found that while the Cham have managed to sustain and reproduce their ways of life—as traders, migrant workers and religious scholars—they face risks as both men and women engage in their *extra-local*—across national borders and within Vietnam—journeys. There are cases of harrowing escapes, fragmented family lives, and spousal separation. While these mobile Cham have gained some short-term successes as they weave their way through internal and external migration—mostly individually—their traditions have been put on trial during and after the labor export policy introduced by the Vietnamese government.

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