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Divergent processes of localization in twenty-first-century Shi’ism: the cases of Hezbollah Venezuela and Cambodia’s Cham Shi’is

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ABSTRACT
This contribution discusses two striking twenty-first-century cases of the global spread of Shi’ism beyond the Middle East, with a particular focus on accompanying processes of localization. On the arid Guajira Peninsula shared by Colombia and Venezuela, Teodoro Darnott, a self-declared liberator of an indigenous people, has framed Shi’ism as a revolutionary ideology that helps justify the Wayúu people’s struggle for self-determination. In Cambodia, however, Shi’ism has recently entered a Muslim community in this predominantly Buddhist country on somewhat different terms. Here, its localization involved a re-emphasis on ancient traditions of the local Cham people that trace the spread of Islam among them to Imam ʿAli. It is precisely the vastly different contexts of the two cases that highlight that the localization of Shi’ism has, in these cases at least, paradoxically gone hand in hand with cultural revival and a quest for the preservation of local culture.

This contribution will discuss two contemporary cases of the global spread of Shi’ism beyond the Middle East. The first concerns the Guajira Peninsula shared by Colombia and Venezuela, where Teodoro Darnott, a self-declared liberator of the indigenous Wayúu people, has established what he calls the Hezbollah Venezuela organization, which draws on Shi’i revolutionary ideology to justify a local struggle for self-determination. The second half of this study will focus on the adoption of Shi’ism by parts of the indigenous Muslim minority in predominantly Buddhist Cambodia. Despite their very different contexts, both are tales of the recent spread of Shi’ism which share three common features. First, they display a remarkable degree of ‘localization’ regarding the new religious orientation, driven by its inculturation into the respective cultural and religious milieus. Second, the dissemination of Shi’ism is also in both cases, though to varying degrees, connected to notions of cultural revival and the preservation of local cultures. Third, in clear contrast with the earlier post-1979 wave of Shi’i conversions,1 the new Shi’is of Guajira and Cambodia are in their majority not part of the urban

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intelligentsia, but of rural or urban lower-class backgrounds. However, the two cases also display significant differences, precisely as a function of their particular localizations in very different contexts. I thus argue that such processes lead to the heterogenization of a seemingly coherent and portable phenomenon like Shi’ism.

The concept of localization has recently been foregrounded in the study of Islam by Terje Østebø. In delineating his definition of the concept, he notes that any:

genealogy of religious change […] entails an integrated perspective that considers the local conditions relevant for the process of change and which particularly examines how the arrival of a novel and alternative religious impetus influences and is influenced by the religious traditions existing in a given locality.

As part of his approach he not only sets out to analyse the channels and modes of transmission of novel ideas from one locality to another, but specifically also:

the response to this impetus by the actors of a locality, which means paying attention to the strategies applied […] in appropriating and localising the impetus, and which moreover entails an enterprise which integrates the factors and conditions, both local and translocal, relevant for its appropriation within the particular locality.

Østebø focuses on the spread of Salafism among the Oromo Muslims of Ethiopia, but also claims that the concept of localization is more widely applicable to ‘all complex encounters between any Islamic tradition and those of the locality at any point in history’.²

The present contribution employs the concept with reference to a different global Islamic movement, that of Shi’ism. Expanding on Østebø’s usage of the notion of localization, and in dialogue with Olivier Roy’s recent claims about the ‘deculturation’ that the contemporary globalization of religious traditions often seems to entail,³ it will be argued that the most decisive involved mechanism of localization in the cases at hand is best understood rather as inculturation.⁴ Originating in Catholic theological thought of the 1960s, the concept of inculturation in Christianity revolves around two aspects. First, it relates to the adaptations in the modes and frames through which Christian teachings are transmitted to local non-Christians in accordance with their cultural contexts. This is well captured in the following early definition of the concept:

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation’.⁵

Second, and more contentiously from the perspective of the Church, it relates to the ways in which local cultures are transforming these teachings through the process, thereby culturally diversifying the expressions of an ostensibly universal religion. Inculturation can thus be defined as ‘signifying an open, mutually self-mediating and symbiotic dialogue between Christianity [or any other religion for that matter] and a local culture that changes each

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dialogue partner through a dynamic process.\textsuperscript{6} This latter aspect lies at the root of the inherent tension associated with inculturation, which might well be understood to result in syncretism or the distortion of authentic religious teachings, but also endows it with the ‘potential to save faith from imperialism because of its inherent respect of the local’.\textsuperscript{7} It is thus only natural that Christian Liberation Theology, with its ambivalent history of reception by the Church, has been identified as one of the prime examples of inculturation—a precedent directly relevant to one of the cases that I consider later, as we will see.\textsuperscript{8}

Despite its particular origins, it is argued here that the concept of inculturation can also enhance our understanding of the dynamics of localization of other religions, and not just Christianity. In this regard, inculturation will be treated as the gradual and selective appropriation of a new religion (or of a new variety of an already locally established religion) by a local culture, in accordance with locally prevailing cultural patterns and religious traditions, and its subsequent expression through local cultural resources, distinctions and idioms. As such this process represents a decisive feature of the broader phenomenon of localization, the adaptation of a universal religion to the particularities of the local socio-religious context. It will thus be shown how Shiʿism is inculturated on the Guajira Peninsula and in Cambodia through the ability of local actors to identify and deploy their own realities, cultural resources and specifics in order to express visions of Shiʿism in their particular cultures, which can be more easily transmitted to those sharing in the same culture, and to make sense of their milieus through it.\textsuperscript{9} What is thus taking place with the spread of a global Shiʿism strongly—though not exclusively—shaped by the Iranian revolutionary regime into new cultures is a cultural translation, which is conditioned by the vastly different local demands for and opportunities of inculturation. That therefore, I argue, inevitably entails the heterogenization of Shiʿi Islam as a whole.

Shiʿism has spread on the Guajira Peninsula primarily through the appropriation of the revolutionary ideals and permissiveness towards intra-religious diversity associated with Christian Liberation Theology, in the context of a local religious marketplace dominated by new Christian movements, especially Pentecostal ones.\textsuperscript{10} In Cambodia, where it competes with other forms of Islam rather than with other religions, the localization of Shiʿism appears to have depended on something completely different. Here it is the establishment of a link between Shiʿi discourse and specific, otherwise commonly receding, local Islamic traditions, which has proven instrumental. As a consequence, adherence to the marjaʿiyya, particularly in its politicized form represented by the Iranian Supreme Leader, plays a role in the former case, whereas local claims to ʿAlid descent are prominently featured in the latter. The differences between these two contemporaneous cases are compounded by the fact that the new Shiʿism on the Guajira has primarily manifested itself in the form of a religio-political organization, whereas its counterpart in Cambodia operates much more on an exclusively religious level against the backdrop of intra-Islamic debates on the legitimacy of certain local Islamic traditions. Nevertheless—and this may perhaps point to a specific and otherwise


\textsuperscript{7}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{9}I am thus, like Østebø, focusing on the intentional aspects of religious transformation and local ‘agents of change’: Østebø, \textit{Localising Salafism}, pp. 15, 31.

\textsuperscript{10}For a discussion of the notion of a ‘religion market’, see Roy, \textit{Holy Ignorance}, pp. 159–185.
overlooked aspect of inculturation—Shi’ism is, to varying degrees, in both cases presented by its local purveyors as a vehicle for the preservation of endangered local cultures or even for a cultural revival. On a general level, both cases strongly suggest that deterritorialized forms of religion in the modern era are not just deculturating. They can still be inculturated too.

However, I should end this introductory section on a note of caution. Due to the very recent emergence, small-scale and strongly controversial nature of both local manifestations of Shi’ism discussed in this study, I can base my discussion on only a very restricted number of sources of varying reliability. In the case of *Hezbollah Venezuela*, I have been able to draw on primary sources from the Internet: the main protagonist, Teodoro Darnott, has published his autobiography online. The fact that his activities attracted the attention of a number of security agencies and experts has also led to a body of secondary material. These sources are bolstered by the results of a field trip to Venezuela in 2004, when I succeeded in conducting a number of informative interviews. My Cambodian sources are more meagre.11 I have conducted wide-ranging historical studies on Islam in that country, drawing on a wide variety of colonial and indigenous sources, as well as three field trips, in 2005, 2009 and 2012.12 Shi’ism was not, however, the focus of my research. But having learned of its existence in Cambodia, I attempted in spring 2012 to visit the remote rural settings where it is reportedly concentrated. That attempt was unfortunately frustrated, largely by adverse weather conditions. My account here is thus based primarily on interviews with members of other, rival Muslim groups, with all the drawbacks that that entails, albeit complemented by some other primary sources and some informed guesswork drawing on my wider contextual knowledge. A greater wealth of evidence would clearly be desirable. But such are the inevitable drawbacks of studying such elusive and emergent phenomena. My conclusions here must thus be regarded as tentative and provisional.

### The new Shi’is of the Guajira: Hezbollah Venezuela and Shi’i liberation theology

In 2005 an obscure group, known by the name of *Hezbollah Venezuela*, appeared on the radar of first local but soon also global intelligence agencies, media outlets and security analysts.13 Through the other names used by the organization, *Hezbollah Guajira* and *Autonomía Islámica Wayúu*, it soon became evident that it entertained a specific relationship to the Guajira Peninsula, whose vast arid expanse is shared between Venezuela and Colombia, and to the local Wayúu, who constitute the largest indigenous group in both countries. Due to a combination of factors, most importantly the political contest between President Hugo Chávez (d.2013) and his opposition and the related emergence of a widely disseminated (and at times highly idiosyncratic) media narrative portraying Latin America as a hotbed of

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11Even though Shi’ism has suffered from state pressure in Cambodia, this disparity is, I would say, accidental and not the result of lesser possibilities for religious expression in Cambodia. In this regard, it must not be overlooked that the case of Teodoro Darnott has been heavily publicized and that he has taken full advantage of new media. Both factors have so far been absent in the Cambodian case.


Islamist/Jihadist finance and refuge for terrorist groups, there soon developed an unwarranted outright media frenzy around the group and its leader. Eventually, it was claimed that ‘the entire Wayuu Indian tribe simply converted to Islam because their chief, Teodoro Darnott, was a member of the pro-Chávez Grupo Nacionalista party.’ Evidently, this and similar allegations were based on oppositional media reports claiming that Chávez was lending active support to Islamic terrorist organizations, suspicions which were in turn fuelled by the president’s overtures towards his Iranian counterpart and Palestinian leaders.

So far no mass conversion of Wayúu has occurred in either Venezuela or Colombia, where recent censuses have established the domestic Wayúu populations to number 293,777 and 270,413 people, respectively. Albeit historically highly adaptive as far as technologies and modes of livelihood are concerned, they have shown themselves largely unsusceptible to European influences on their social system. Their internal organization is based on affiliation to matrilineal clans (sg. e’iruku) and a distinctive system of customary law (suküaipa wayuu) providing crucial mechanisms to deal with inter-clan disputes. Even though abolishing polygamy and embracing Catholicism were already among the foremost demands made of them by Spanish invaders in the middle of the eighteenth century, polygamous marriage is still regarded as an ideal, and the spread of Christianity has made very slow and still limited progress, with the first Christmas celebrations in Uribia (the so-called Indian capital of Colombia) only taking place in 1942. Heirs of a long history of confrontation with colonial as well as post-colonial powers, the Wayúu are afflicted with pervasive poverty and marginalization by the state on both sides of the border. In Colombia, Guajira represents the province with the highest percentage of rural poor. At the beginning of Darnott’s activities, less than 8 per cent of the province’s skilled workers were Wayúu, despite the fact that indigenous peoples (overwhelmingly Wayúu) made up 42.4 per cent of the population. Similarly, the Bolivarian revolution of Chávez has done little to alleviate the conditions of the majority of Wayúu in Venezuela.

Let it be said that Teodoro (Abdullah Muslim) Darnott is neither any kind of ‘chief’ nor one of the ‘tribe’s’ influential clan leaders. The following will nevertheless focus on him and his writings, because of his role as the best-known propagator of Shi’ism in the country. As ‘founder of Hezbollah Venezuela’; he is currently (as of September 2016) serving a prison term for ‘intellectual authorship’ of a failed terrorist act carried out by his follower José Miguel Rojas Espinoza in October 2006, which involved the planting of two—purportedly homemade—minor explosive devices near the U.S. embassy in Caracas. The writings by Darnott

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that I will discuss were all posted on the worldwide web after his capture, presumably by a follower or ally, but are presented in his autobiography (on which, more to follow) as a direct prolongation and sophistication of his earlier thought. Since 2009, however, his activities on the web seem to have come to a halt for unknown reasons.

The web presence of Hezbollah Venezuela represents a peculiar mixture of leftist revolutionary ideology, Christian liberation theology and Islamist anti-imperialist discourse, with the Islamic elements being arguably the most emblematic, yet hardly the dominant components. The group’s declared goal is the destruction of democracy in Venezuela and the establishment of a Venezuelan/Latin American Islamic theocracy, as a model of which the Iranian system of wilāyat-i faqīh is regularly invoked. Conversely, as indicated by the additional monikers for his group of Hezbollah Guajira and Autonomía Islámica Wayúu, there is also a distinctively local agenda. Darnott appears to be attempting to provide an Islamic basis for the struggle for empowerment of the Wayúu people, which is all the more striking as he was born neither a Wayúu nor a Muslim.

The prime source on Darnott’s life is his autobiographic Un muyahid criollo: Mis confesiones y revelaciones (‘A Creole Mujāhid: My confessions and revelations’), which was apparently penned in prison and published online. Needless to say, specimens of this genre can only be used as historical sources with critical caution. Yet, at least the basic facts of his biography were also supported by court proceedings. Moreover, as religious conversion is by its very nature a very personal process, his own narration of his past, no matter how accurate as a factual account in all of its details, is undoubtedly valuable for the present purpose. Likewise, his particular rationalization of his choices and development for his audience is naturally of interest.

Born far from the Guajira in Ciudad Bolívar in eastern Venezuela in 1955, he only came into contact with Wayúu culture in his adult life, when he ended up in a destitute Wayúu barrio of Maracaibo, a major Venezuelan city located at the fringes of the peninsula, sometime in the 1980s. There he successively married two local women (the first one died prematurely), learned their native language (wayúunaiki) and eventually became Wayúuized ‘to such a degree as to doubt myself being a [non-Wayúu] mestizo’. Moreover, he was, fatefully for his later religio-political endeavours, forced to share the experience of state repression and violence directed against the local population. Consequently, impressed by the recent success of the E.Z.L.N. (Ejército Zapatista de la Liberación Nacional) in Chiapas (Mexico), he set out in 1994 to establish a Marxist-Leninist liberation movement of the indigenous people in the region, known as Proyecto Movimiento Guaicaipuro por la Liberación Nacional (M.G.L.N.), which would ultimately become the direct precursor of Hezbollah Venezuela.
According to Darnott, his political activities on the Wayúu’s part, however, soon drew the attention of the authorities, pushing him into exile on the Colombian side of the Guajira sometime in the years 1998–1999. There he settled in the trading centre of Maicao, which is characterized by a strong Syro-Lebanese community with a very visible Muslim element. Indeed, Maicao houses one of Latin America’s largest mosques, which is also virtually the only architectural structure of any note in the city, and—right beside it—a well-known Arabic school (the Colegio Colombo-Árabe Dar el-Arkan), which also offers Islamic religious education. It was thus in Maicao, where exposure to Islam and Muslims is an integral, if for Colombia unusual, part of the urban environment, that Darnott’s transformation into a ‘Creole Mujāhid’ began. After becoming acquainted with a local Lebanese Shi’i, he started to frequent the local mosque, which was, like the community of approximately 5000 Muslims from Lebanon and Syria as a whole, Sunni-dominated. There he introduced himself under the name Daniel José Gonzáles Epiyu, thus stressing his belonging to the Wayúu Epiyu clan.

In Darnott’s account, he transformed the Marxist-Leninist M.G.L.N. into Hezbollah Venezuela, sometime after his formal conversion to Islam not long after his arrival in Colombia, upon the instigation of an Argentina-based Lebanese Hezbollah agent. Although the actual degree of involvement of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in this shift is still unclear, Darnott evidently came to adopt Shi’iism, despite the fact that the Muslim community of Maicao has a 75 per cent Sunni majority. The local Shi’i association, constituted in 1990 but seemingly throughout the period much less active than its local Sunni counterpart, funded his further studies at the Shi’i Fundación Islámica Kauzar in Cali (Colombia). The sudden change in orientation of his organization, however, resulted in the immediate departure of most of its membership, which was not prepared to go along with the leader’s new Islamic credentials. This decrease in membership was, according to Darnott, partly compensated for by new Muslim members joining the group. Convinced of the necessity to bring Shi’i Islam to the Wayúu, he set up a rudimentary mosque in Maicao’s (predominantly Wayúu) Nazareth quarter. Feeling threatened by the local paramilitaries, he was, however, soon forced to return to Maracaibo, where he continued to work on the Hezbollah Venezuela project by primarily rallying the Wayúu to Islam and organizing political meetings. The selection of the name Hezbollah Venezuela, despite his activities among Wayúu on both sides of the border, is perhaps reflective of earlier hopes to draw tacit support for his activities from Colombian authorities, which, however, did not materialize.

Selecting Shi’i Islam as a revolutionary ideology of liberation for a Latin American indigenous people is hardly a self-evident choice. Moreover, the case of Darnott is all the more remarkable. His espousal of a Wayúu identity was, given his origins as a mestizo hailing from eastern Venezuela, already representative of a deliberate crossing of boundaries—in this case ethnic ones. It will, however, become evident that inculturation into the local religious traditions...
and cultural context, which is strongly influenced both by traditional Wayúu religion and by Christian Liberation Theology, is the main device through which these initially strange-seeming moves have taken place. Recourse to Liberation Theology, Latin America’s original contribution to modern globalized theological thought (Christian and beyond), is pervasive throughout Darnott’s presentation of his political and theological vision in his autobiography. What is more, Christian Liberation Theology serves as his prime frame of reference in expositions of his own self-declared Islamo-Christian Liberation Theology (teología islamo cristiana de la liberación). Thus, after having reiterated his earlier disaffection with an Evangelical (perhaps Pentecostal) church, which he had joined but then left due to its lack of any revolutionary spirit, he reserves a whole section of his account for a synopsis of Liberation Theology.31

Here Darnott, just like the founding father of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez (b.1938), relies predominantly on a particular reading of the biblical tale of the exodus and an emphasis on situating Jesus and his actions within their particular historical context. They do so to make the case for the liberating qualities of religion and the ‘option for the poor’, that is, giving preference to the struggle of the poor and marginalized in accordance with a liberationist reading of the Bible.32 Specifically Islamic perspectives are conspicuously absent at this point in Darnott’s narrative. Although focusing on Gutiérrez, he also mentions other formative figures of the movement such as Leonardo Boff (b.1938), Pedro Casaldáliga (b.1928), José María Vigil (b.1946) and Jon Sobrino (b.1938).33 Contrary to these thinkers, however, Darnott clearly envisages the establishment of theocratic rule, which he claims to have likewise been espoused by Jesus, as the latter ‘was not a democrat […] but a theocrat’.34

The three latter theologian-activists are not as well-known as Gutiérrez and Boff, both of whom are also freely invoked as influences and references by the South African scholar Farid Esack, one of the founding fathers of Islamic Liberation Theology.35 It may therefore be assumed that Darnott has engaged thoroughly with Christian Liberation Theology. Indeed he notes that his faith was ultimately only strengthened by acquiring in-depth knowledge of the subject, which functioned as a pre-condition to his conversion to Islam and the subsequent development of his own ‘Islamo-Christian Liberation Theology’. He defines the latter as ‘a mixture of the liberation [theology] of Gutiérrez and the theology of Khomeini’. Although noting that both basically represent the same theology of liberation, he regards its formulation ‘on the basis of Islamic monotheism as much more complete than the one developed by Gustavo Gutiérrez’.36 It was this realization, he notes, which convinced him of Islam and led to his formal conversion and the accompanying discursive shift in the M.G.L.N., which eventually resulted in its remaking as Hezbollah Venezuela.

31Darnott, ‘Un muyahid criollo’, pp. 10, 70–79.
33Darnott, ‘Un muyahid criollo’, pp. 70, 79. Even though the three latter were all born in Spain, they only began to expound Liberation Theology after their relocation to Latin America.
36Darnott, ‘Un muyahid criollo’, p. 79.
Even though Darnott explicitly regards it as his mission in Venezuela to destroy ‘democracy and establish theocracy’, it is certainly not just his personal history and individual predispositions which have led to his strong reliance on Liberation Theology as a device for the localization of Shi‘i Islamic discourse. Crucial also presumably is the local context of the Guajira, with its large socio-economically marginalized Wayúu population on both sides of the border. A major trope commonly used in localizing the call to Islam for Latin American audiences, namely appealing to a primordial morisco identity or at least to the pervasiveness of Hispano-Islamic heritage, is hardly applicable to indigenous peoples such as the Wayúu. For a Venezuelan example of the latter argument we may refer to a brochure published by a mosque in Caracas, established by the Saudi Shaykh Ibrahim b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Ibrahim Foundation. Here it is noted that ‘the Islamic heritage is intimately linked to Latin American culture’ and that ‘Latin Americans have a Hispano-Islamic heritage of approximately 800 years (750-1550)’ as opposed to ‘a Christian heritage in Latin America of only slightly more than 420 years (1580-now).’ Obviously, such an argument would have only very limited appeal among the Wayúu, who, in remembrance of a long history of confrontation with colonial and local state powers, still refer to the non-indigenous inhabitants of the Guajira collectively as alijuna/arijuna (lit. ‘mounted sadness’).

In contrast, Liberation Theology is much more likely to be recognized and appreciated by the Wayúu. After all, Liberation Theology was to a significant degree influenced by the misery of, and directed at, Latin America’s indigenous peoples. As was also the case in many other regions of Latin America, it was only a radical change in approach by the Church, precipitated by the emergence of Liberation Theology and symbolized by the move of many of its practitioners into the worlds of the poor, such as destitute suburbs or rural areas inhabited by disenfranchised indigenous groups, which provided larger inroads for Catholicism among the Wayúu. Although Pentecostalism is currently, congruent with global developments, the fastest growing religion on the Guajira, including in the Wayúu community, its (in Darnott’s words) decidedly ‘non-revolutionary’ approach and perceived lesser tolerance towards certain Wayúu traditions (e.g. polygamy, the matrilineal clan system and its laws) appal certain parts of the community and are regarded by some as jeopardizing ethnic identity. Wayúu harbouring such anxieties would—in Darnott’s view—be much better served by his Islamo-Christian Liberation Theology on both counts, due to its revolutionary liberationist approach and its proclaimed goal to defend Wayúu identity against state oppression and the intrusions of imperialist politics and religion.

37Darnott, ‘Revolucion Teocrática Venezolana’.
39Mezquita Sheikh Ibrahim, Qué es el Islam?, 3rd ed. (Caracas: Mezquita Sheikh Ibrahim Al Ibrahim, 2001), p. 6. This point was also regularly made by the Jordanian imam and local convert activists associated with the mosque. Personal observation and communication with imam T.J. and Mujammad Bin Abdullah C. (Simón Caraballo), August 2004.
43Nevertheless, as was seemingly the case with Darnott himself, Pentecostalism and Protestant Evangelicalism may serve as way-stations for a ‘second conversion’ to Islam, as has happened in the E.Z.L.N.’s homeland Chiapas (Mexico). N. Garvin, ‘Conversion and Conflict: Muslims in Mexico’, ISIM Review, 15 (2005), pp. 18–19; Roy, Holy Ignorance, p. 154.
Yet, in 2003 a Wayúu established the strongly localized Pentecostal church *Iglesia Pentecostal Evangélica Cristo la Roca*, which also accepts polygamy and has instituted a mode of the Eucharist including the use of urns otherwise used for traditional Wayúu ‘second funerals’.\(^{44}\) It should therefore not come as a surprise that Darnott shows full appreciation of Wayúu culture, including its clan system and its customary strategies and institutions of conflict resolution. A long blog entry by Darnott on the Wayúu people is entirely drawn from academic sources and completely devoid of any Islamic references, thereby indicating that, at least at the present stage, his Islamic calling to the Wayúu does not come along with attempts at reforming indigenous culture.\(^{45}\) Elsewhere he rather emphasizes ostensible similarities between Arabic/Islamic and Wayúu culture, *inter alia* in the spheres of livelihood (multi-local ‘nomadic’ cattle rearing [i.e. transhumance] and trade) and dress, and the acceptance of polygamy. Accordingly, the cover illustration of the aforementioned blog entry shows a headscarf-clad Wayúu woman riding on a donkey through the desert of the Guajira.

In this respect the absence of Islamic doctrinal aspects in Darnott’s writings is probably not only due to his apparent understanding of Shi’ism as primarily a political ideology.\(^{46}\) It is also a distinctive feature of Christian Liberation Theology to recognize the world of the poor as one of religious diversity and syncretic manifestations of religion. Indeed, it has been noted that Liberation Theology has learned to no longer regard such syncretic expressions of religion as deviance and estrangement but as ways of legitimate religious self-determination among the poor.\(^{47}\) It is evident that Darnott employs both references to Christian Liberation Theology as well as to the Wayúu’s cultural and historical context for his localization of Shi’i Islam. In the absence of an accompanying narrative of doctrinal purity, Darnott’s theology thereby retains an openness towards the existence and emergence of expressions of religion that could easily be perceived as syncretic.

It must finally be noted that Darnott shows unflinching support for the Iranian system and its current Supreme Leader ‘Ali Khamenei. He declared the ‘disturbances’ caused by the so-called Iranian Green Movement in 2009 to be part of a U.S. conspiracy against ‘a theocratic and Islamic government, a government of God, where the last word is the word of God’. More precisely, ‘the word of Ayatollah Ali Jamenei is the word of God, as he is God’s regent in Iran’.\(^{48}\) Ironically, the self-styled founder of Guajiran Shi’ism thus shows himself to be completely undisturbed by the critical attitude towards clerical authority and its hierarchies otherwise characteristic of Liberation Theology, in sharp contrast to another emergent Shi’i discourse predicated on the appropriation of Western thought, namely ‘Shi’i Protestantism’ and its critique of clerical authority.\(^{49}\)

In sum, the convergence of Khomeini’s revolutionary ideology and Christian Liberation Theology has served as a means to familiarize both *mestizos* and indigenous Wayúu with

\(^{44}\)Mussat, ‘Dynamique d’une transformation’, pp. 231–232, 243, 375. The dead of the Wayúu, who are thought to await judgement at Jepira hill in Cabo de la Vela, are exhumed, incinerated and then ceremonially buried a second time a few years later. Plata de Bugrés, ‘Costumbres y tradiciones’, pp. 32–33.


\(^{46}\)Also, the ritual aspects of Shi’ism, the import and localization of which to Trinidad represent the starkest example of Shi’i cultural influence in the Caribbean to date, for example, are largely ignored. Frank J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad. Muḥarram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).


Shi‘ism as a locally meaningful religious tradition. The presentation of a local manifestation of revolutionary Shi‘ism as the culmination of Liberation Theology under the label teología islamo cristiana de la liberación was clearly intended to speak specifically to groups with a history of marginalization such as the Wayúu and the urban poor. With its revolutionary jargon and calls for the establishment of a theocratic rule, it obviously represents a clear counter-discourse to those of the much more successfully expanding Pentecostal and Adventist churches. Instead, it harkens back to the locally formulated strand of Christian theology and religious practice most appealing to Latin America’s poor and disenfranchised in the last decades of the twentieth century, Liberation Theology. It is, however, Darnott’s recurring references to the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Supreme Leader which implicitly provide us with an indication of why, in his view, Latin American Liberation Theology can only be completed through the adoption of Shi‘i Islamic elements: revolutionary Shi‘ism has succeeded in taking control of the state, whereas Christian Liberation Theology has proven unable to fundamentally alter power relations in Latin America.

In this respect, the greater allowances accorded by Christian Liberation Theology to instances of hybridization between indigenous religion and Catholicism may also serve as a template, especially among the Wayúu and urban dwellers subscribing to Venezuelan forms of santería (a Caribbean syncretistic religion primarily influenced by West African Yoruba religion and Roman Catholicism). In contrast to Olivier Roy’s observations of second conversions (from indigenous religion or Catholicism to Pentecostalism/Protestant Evangelicalism and then to Islam) being clear signs of ongoing processes of deculturation (i.e. the loss of indigenous cultural traditions),50 such second conversions may sometimes even mark a return towards certain aspects of traditional culture. Indeed, whereas locally active Pentecostal pastors compete with the local shamans and advise their Wayúu followers to imitate the ways of the alijuna (i.e. non-Wayúu, particularly the Venezuelan mestizo majority population) due to their perceived superior nature,51 such notions are absent from the writings of Darnott.

Local societies such as on the Guajira naturally have to grapple with and find suitable answers to the challenges of poverty, socioeconomic marginalization and also what Nakamura has aptly characterized as the ‘poverty of culture’ resulting from deculturation, which can in some cases be induced by religious change through reform or conversion.52 Local historically evolved social, cultural and religious configurations provide the substratum for the localization and inculturation of new impetuses. In the Guajira’s case, a now globalized Islamic discursive tradition (i.e. post-revolutionary Iranian-branded Shi‘ism) has clearly undergone a process of heterogenization, as its spread on the Guajira cannot be separated from the local legacies of Christian Liberation Theology and the Wayúu struggle for cultural survival and recognition. In this respect, Darnott’s teología islamo cristiana de la liberación presents itself as an inculturated (and actively inculturating) theology suited to defending Wayúu cultural traditions. But further, it draws on the Islamic Republic of Iran as an example for successful religiously grounded resistance against external domination.

The late return of paginda Ali: Cham Shi’ism in Cambodia

The second case of the contemporary spread of Shi’ism into new territories presented here concerns intra-religious conversion in Buddhist-majority Cambodia. Cambodian Islam is not primarily associated with recent migrants from the Middle East and their descendants, as is the case in Venezuela and Colombia with its Syro-Lebanese Muslim communities. Notwithstanding the fact that the great majority of the country’s Muslims, who make up around 3 per cent of the population, are ethnic Chams, whose ancestral land of Champa lay in the coastal regions of present-day central and southern Vietnam, they are commonly regarded as an autochthonous religious minority.

Due to the civil wars, Khmers Rouges rule and international isolation prevailing in Cambodia between 1970 and 1993, the Muslim community—parts of which had been closely connected before to Malay Islamic centres of learning in Malaysia, southern Thailand and Mecca—wound up detached from developments in the Muslim world throughout that period. Consequently, it was also untouched by the ‘Islamic resurgence’ and the concomitant spread of Iranian Shi’i political thought in other parts of Southeast Asia during the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, the dynamics leading to the introduction of Shi’ism and to the distribution of works written by Iranian Shi’i thinkers in Indonesia (and to a lesser degree in Malaysia)53 were absent in Cambodia. Additionally, the rule of the Khmers Rouges (1975–1979) resulted in the extermination and flight of almost 90 per cent of Cambodia’s Islamic functionaries and religious teachers.54

With the U.N.-brokered elections of 1993 and the subsequent re-opening of the country to the outside world, Cambodia witnessed an unprecedented influx of transnational Islamic welfare organizations.55 In keeping with a general revival of religious ties to Malaysia and southern Thailand, many of these transnational actors represented, as before, various trends within Malay Shafi’i Islam. A new important player, however, is the originally Indian da’wa movement Tablighi Jama’at (T.J.). The T.J. was able to develop into a local mass movement, by far the single most important of its kind, within less than two decades.56 Its appeal still appears to be growing.57

The success of the T.J. can at least partly be attributed to reactions to the local emergence of Salafism, which was introduced to the country by non-governmental organizations (N.G.Os) from the Arab Gulf.58 As a result of their efforts, Cambodia became dotted with so-called ‘Kuwait’ and ‘Dubai’ schools and mosques in the course of the 1990s. The international cast of teachers in these schools has meanwhile been replaced by local graduates of

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54Front d’Union pour l’Édification et la Défense de la Patrie Kampuchéenne, La communauté islamique au Kampuchea (Phnom Penh: n.p., 1983), p. 15. Malaysia served as the foremost country of refuge for Cambodian Muslims. Lesser numbers escaped to Vietnam, Thailand and the U.S.A.
Middle Eastern universities (primarily from the Islamic University of Medina—I.U.M.), who had been able to profit from scholarships provided by the organizations involved.

Salafism and Tablighism were not the only international Islamic movements to enter the country during the two decades of sudden globalization that followed more than 20 years of isolation. The late 1990s saw the local emergence of communities of the (also originally South Asian) Ahmadiyya movement. Initially directed from Thailand, the mission in Cambodia was soon entrusted to adherents of the movement from Indonesia.59 Also, organized Sufism, which had totally disappeared from the Cambodian scene after the turbulent decades of the 1970s and 1980s, made its re-entry into the country, through a proselytizing Naqshbandi lineage from Bangladesh.60

Despite this major exposure to the manifold currents of globalized Islam since the early 1990s and the accompanying competition in the new market of Islamic movements, Shi’ism remained largely absent from Cambodian Islam until very recently. Indeed, it was only during my third field trip to Cambodia in 2012 (after previous visits in 2005 and 2009) that I first heard about a local Shi’i community, when a young Cham university student explained to me that he was worried about the presence of Shi’a and Ahmadiyya Muslims in Eastern Cambodia, who, according to him, were spreading deviant teachings.61 Being regarded as the new major threat to the integrity of the Muslim community by many, Cambodia’s new Shi’is are a sensitive topic. For that reason, evidence for their existence and activities is sparse. The actual dynamics behind the conversion of the community’s apparent leader, a certain S., for instance, are still unknown. In addition, due to the fact that I have so far been unable to visit the Shi’i communities of eastern Cambodia, the local information on Shi’ism in Cambodia presented here is, save for an informant living in the Phnom Penh area, almost exclusively derived from non-Shi’i sources, with all the problems that entails. According to the official line of the Cambodian Mufti’s office, for example, Shi’ism does not even exist in the country.

That office does acknowledge the existence of one Shi’i centre, in the village of Vihear Sambour, located in rural Kampong Cham province, but claims that it was shut down shortly after its establishment in 2010.62 And yet, the Shi’is of Vihear Sambour still persist, according to my sources. Even though the community there is still small, Shi’ism has, according to Sunni and Ahmadi activists as well as to a Western academic observer, also spread to the thinly populated far eastern province of Ratanakiri. This is currently the new frontier of Muslim settlement as well as of proselytization by the T.J., the Ahmadiyya, Salafis and, apparently, also Shi’is, among non-Muslim so-called ‘hill-tribes’ or montagnards (kh. phnong) populations.64 That would mean that elements of the new Shi’is of Ratanakiri are not drawn from

59Personal communication with Rafiq A. Tschannen, former amīr of the Ahmadiyya in Thailand (1989–1999), April 2012, e-mail; with Hasan Basri, amīr in Cambodia until 2005, April 2012, e-mail; with F., amīr in Cambodia, Chroy Changvar (Phnom Penh), April 2012.
60Personal communication with H. and J., Bangladeshi murīds of Shaykh Muhammad Mā’un al-Rashid, Andoung Chrey (Kampong Chhnang province), May 2012.
61Personal communication with B., Phnom Penh, April 2012.
62The names of Cambodian informants and preachers of Shi’ism are withheld to ensure their anonymity.
64Personal communication with Ahmadiyya and T.J. activists in Chroy Changvar (Phnom Penh) and Kampong Cham, May 2012; with Alberto Pérez-Pereiro, Phnom Penh, April 2012. The latter’s dissertation has unfortunately been inaccessible to me. Alberto Pérez-Pereiro, ‘Historical Imagination, Diasporic Identity and Islamicity among the Cham Muslims of Cambodia’ (PhD thesis, Arizona State University, 2012).
the Muslim community but from among the montagnards. Meanwhile individual converts to Shi‘ism from Chrang Chamres, one of the capital’s Muslim suburbs, have also returned from Iranian-funded studies in Qum, Iran, but have so far failed to establish community structures comparable to those of Vihear Sambour.65

We know much less about the allegedly instrumental figure in the introduction of Shi‘ism to Cambodia, S., than we do about Teodoro Darnott, who has a web presence and has attracted international attention. However, my sources indicate that S. is a native of Vihear Sambour, and that he had earlier been selected for a scholarship programme of a Salafi N.G.O. from Kuwait to study in Medina. Yet, according to a former co-student, he left Saudi Arabia for unknown reasons before completing his studies at the Faculty of Arabic Language and Literature (Kulliyat al-Lughat al-‘Arabiyya) at the I.U.M. He is said to have then studied in Qum, presumably under another scholarship programme.66 There he most probably attended the Madrasah-yi Hujjatiyyah, where most Indonesian students in Iran have studied since 1982 and which one thus might expect other Southeast Asians to attend.67 Other likely destinations for Cambodian students in Qum would be the International Centre of Islamic Studies (Markaz-i Jahani-‘Ulum-i Islami), which represents a combination of traditional Shi‘i seminary (ḥawza) and university, and other institutions explicitly aimed at educating non-Iranian students under the umbrella of Al-Mustafa International University.68

Even though the Iranian embassy responsible for Cambodia is located in Hanoi (Vietnam), Iranian state-directed religious activities in the Khmer kingdom are evidently coordinated from Thailand, which is less restrictive in its religious policies and also home to an Iranian Shi‘i community in Bangkok with longstanding historical roots. Thus, a Qum-educated Shi‘i scholar from the Phnom Penh suburb of Chrang Chamres reportedly has strong connections to Bangkok,69 where the Iranian embassy and its cultural centre also employ a number of Thai Muslim converts to Shi‘ism.70 Likewise, the Iranian Majma‘ Jahani Ahl al-Bayt (Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly) is active in Cambodia. Intriguingly, the organization gives the incredibly inflated number of one million for the Shi‘i population of Cambodia, which would be more than double the entire estimated domestic Muslim population (400,000).71 In 2010 the organization held religious courses for women in Cambodia.72 The Iranian government is not the only actor aiming to cultivate Shi‘ism in Thailand and Cambodia. The London-based Imam al-Khoei Foundation (Mu‘assasat al-Imam al-Khu‘i al-Khayriyya) has a centre in Bangkok, which was attended by two Cambodians in 200973 and presumably continues to draw and support students from that country.

65Personal communication with F., amīr of the Ahmadiyya in Cambodia, Chroy Changvar (Phnom Penh), April 2012; with H., a convert to Shi‘ism, Chrang Chamres (Phnom Penh), April 2012.
66Personal communication with M., a former co-student at I.U.M., Kbal Romeas (Kampot province), May 2012.
69Personal communication with F., amīr of the Ahmadiyya in Cambodia, Chroy Changvar (Phnom Penh), April 2012.
71http://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org/en.php/page,4439a4761.html (accessed 20 September 2013). The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009) more reasonably estimates the local Shi‘i population as making up less than 1 per cent of the Muslim community (i.e. in their count fewer than 2300 people).
73Personal communication with Elvire Corboz (Rutgers) and Mirjam Künkler (Princeton), Princeton, October 2013.
Despite the transnational origins of the emerging Shi’i communities in Cambodia, from what I can tell, this instantiation of Shi’i Islam does not exhibit an interest in prevailing discourses of a global Shi’ism tied to the *marja’iyya* or a revolutionary ethos centred on the Iranian example, for instance. Rather, here again it is clearly localized and inculturated, but in a very different way. It situates itself in the Cham and Cambodian contexts, *inter alia* by appealing to all but forgotten aspects of Cham historical consciousness, and engaging with the subtleties of Khmer language and social convention. Regarding the former, it is noteworthy that the Shi’i leader of Vihear Sambour reportedly bases his claim to religious authority and leadership on his status as a *sayyid* (*set* in Cham), a status that obviously resonates in other Shi’i contexts but that had almost vanished in Cambodia. Historically, the titles of *set* and *po*, denoting descent from the prophet and the Cham kings, respectively, were of major importance in the local Cham community. It appears that the holders of these titles were invested with different kinds of social capital. As a result of these competing or otherwise complementary claims, marriages between *set* and *po* families became at some point the preferred solution to combine the prestige carried by both prophetic and Cham royal descent. Incidentally the *set* title appears to have been used to express decidedly Islamic credentials *vis-à-vis* the Cham royal *po*. As such it was by the late nineteenth century rather linked to alleged descent from Malay kings than from ‘Ali. On the other hand, *sayyid* status is also claimed by certain families in Kampong Cham. In contrast to the other Cham *set*, these families are keeping typical genealogies and are particularly stressing their alleged Arab and prophetic descent, whereas the ‘Alid factor appears to be less prominent.

In any case, by the mid-nineteenth century the most powerful Muslim leaders in the country came from among the *set*. In the 1850s a band of brothers with *set* backgrounds, which included the highest Muslim dignitary of Cambodia (*changvang*) as well as his provincial counterpart for the east of the country, rose up against the Cambodian king Ang Duong (d.1860) in a major rebellion, incidentally first erupting in the neighbouring villages of Roka Po Pram and Vihear Sambour in Kampong Cham province. After the flight of the rebel leaders to Vietnam, thousands of Chams were deported to areas northwest of Phnom Penh.

A prolonged process of ‘Jawization’ of Cham Islam in Cambodia since the second half of the nineteenth century, however, propelled by intense scholarly contacts with what is today Malaysia and southern Thailand and the distribution of Malay printed books, has led to the gradual devaluation and disappearance of the *po* and *set* titles. Jawization refers to an essentially de-localizing, or deculturating, process of regional (i.e. trans-Southeast Asian) religio-cultural homogenization, characterized by the gravitation of large parts of local Muslim communities towards the evolving overarching scholarly and social world of Southeast Asian Islam—apty called the ‘Jawi ecumene’ by Michael Laffan—with the Malay language and its adaptation of the Arabic script, known as *jawi*, as its medium of transmission and

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74Personal communication with Alberto Pérez-Pereiro, Phnom Penh, April 2012.
communication. 80 A major hallmark of this process in Cambodia, most pervasive from the early twentieth century to the early 1970s, was the falling into disuse of ancient Cham script (akhar thrah) and its Islamic manuscript tradition, due to the full espousal of jawi script and literature, and the rise of Malay to the preferred language of religious instruction and scholarship.81 Among the exceptions to this trend in Cambodia are certain communities until recently less exposed to Malay scholarly culture such as, first, the areas of settlement of the deportees of the 1850s in the north-western reaches of the country and, second, rural villages of Kampong Cham geographically removed from the historical main artery of trade and Islamic scholarship, the Mekong river.

As far as the first group is concerned (the deportees of the 1850s), many of its villages are nowadays associated with a strand of Cambodian Islam that has become known as the Kan Imam San (Islamic Community of Imam San—K.I.S.). This group, whose members account for less than 10 per cent of the Muslim population, is one of two officially recognized Islamic communities in the country. It claims to follow a distinctively Cham Islam and the teachings of its eponymous founder Imam San (fl. second half of the nineteenth century).82 Whereas the Sunni majority is placed under the authority of the Mufti of Cambodia, the ong ganour (‘venerable master’) serves as the Mufti’s K.I.S. counterpart. The status of Shi’i and Ahmadiyya Muslims in this arrangement is unclear. Prevailing practice appears to delegate all Muslim affairs not directly connected to K.I.S. to the Mufti. This lack of official recognition and their shared status as communities regarded as heretical by other Muslim groupings have seemingly brought the local Shi’i and Ahmadiyya Muslims closer together.

The villages of Roka Po Pram and Vihear Sambour—the initial sites of the rebellion—fall into the second category of Cambodian Muslim communities less exposed to the overall process of Jawization prevailing from the late nineteenth century to the early 1970s. Roka Po Pram was still in the 1990s an outstanding site of reverence of the pos and of other now largely obsolete Cham traditions. In the late 1990s/early 2000s it was the last known village in the country housing the grave of a po (as opposed to a Sufi saint) serving as a Muslim pilgrimage site, despite the fact that ritual practice at this tomb of Po Brahim was by then strongly discouraged by the local religious leaders.83 With regard to Vihear Sambour, even though individual set genealogies (conspicuously lacking any relation to Shi’ism) have also been preserved elsewhere in Cambodia,84 it would seem that the village’s Shi’i leader is unique in using such a pedigree—combined with specific religious knowledge—to make claims for religious leadership. If my sources are correct, then, the set tradition, in the past completely detached from Shi’ism, has thus been revived for its localization and inculturation, precisely in one of the last Cham villages to have preserved a memory of set as a distinct social group.

81Bruckmayr, ‘The Contentious Pull’; Bruckmayr, Cambodia’s Muslims.
83William Collins, Chams of Cambodia (Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Study, 1996), pp. 65–66. In contrast, other important gravesites of persons connected to Po Behim/Po Brahim, which were pointed out to M.A. Jaspan in the 1960s by an informant born in 1885 and said to be located in Prey Totoeng (to the northwest of Kampong Cham city) and at ‘Kien Khleang near Phnom Penh’ (i.e. the suburb of Chroy Changvar), have evidently been erased from local memory by the joint processes of Jawization and Khmers Rouges destruction. M.A. Jaspan, ‘Cambodian Cham History. Informant: Wan Abdul Hamid, Born in Roka Bopram in 1885’, typescript, 17 January 1967, Hull History Centre, Jaspan Papers, DJA (2)/1/2.
84Bajunid, ‘The Place of Jawi’, pp. 139, 147.
The surprising revival of set claims to religious authority thus arises in notably fertile ground—and there are other elements of Vihear Sambour’s particular cultural heritage that would resonate with some of Shi’ism’s key tropes as well. Cham historical tradition attributes the initial conversion to Islam in their homeland of Champa to ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (son-in-law of the prophet and first Shi’i imam), commonly referred to as paginda (‘prince’, ‘lord’) Ali. This imagined narrative of the origins of Islam among the Chams was clearly conditioned by the important place of ‘Ali and his sons in traditional Malay and Cham epic hikayat/akayet literature and was even implanted into Cham chronicles. This tradition has been largely forsaken by Cambodian Chams, together with the other contents of the Cham chronicles and religious texts which were written in akhar thrah script, largely discarded for the jawi script in the process of Jawization. Indeed, it is, fittingly, only the K.I.S. community that has preserved akhar thrah and its manuscript culture. While these have fallen victim to the dynamics of Jawization among the majority of Cambodia’s Cham population, they now—in a clear instance of de-localization being challenged by localization—serve the K.I.S. community as highly valued cultural artefacts and pillars of their distinct group identity.

Similar dynamics prevailed in the area of Roka Po Pram and Vihear Sambour, which is located far from the region inhabited by adherents of K.I.S. but was likewise historically less exposed to the de-localizing influence of Jawization. Thus, in the 1960s, a Cham informant, born in Roka Po Pram in 1885, could still relate that his ancestor set Mustafa, a descendant of ‘Ali, had come from Arabia to Champa to preach Islam and search for the informant’s royal ancestor Po Brahim, because the latter had also been related to ‘Ali. Eventually both were forced by Vietnamese pressure to go into Cambodian exile. As noted already, the tomb of Po Brahim in Roka Po Pram served as a pilgrimage site until recently and has probably clandestinely continued to do so. In the 1990s, when knowledge of Cham script had long since completely disappeared in Kampong Cham, an oral tradition was recorded in the same village according to which Lord ‘Ali’s son Muhammad ‘Ali Hanafiyya had been despatched to Champa to teach Islam.

Further, it was once common to use ‘Ali and Fatima as ceremonial names for bride and bridegroom in marriage ceremonies. This practice had generally fallen into disuse through the prolonged process of Jawization and then became subject to obliteration in the ensuing decades of political turmoil and the related decimation of the community. It is again only in regions and village communities less touched by Jawization that this notable tradition

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88Jaspan, ‘Cambodian Cham History’, Hull History Centre, Jaspan Papers, DJA (2)/1/2; and untitled handwritten materials in the same folder.
has been preserved, if no longer in practice then at least in local memory.91 This applies to a limited number of villages that are presently or have been until recently associated with K.I.S. As the Chams in the area of Roka Po Pram and Vihear Sambour share many similarities with K.I.S., such ritual traditions may very likely also have been preserved there.

As de Verre Allen has remarked, culture is a canvas made up of many different threads. Individual threads that have been long marginalized can be picked up again.92 Just as the preservation of akhar thrah manuscripts (and certain ritual practices allegedly grounded in them) has provided the dispersed K.I.S. community with an important cultural artefact to argue for a common identity distinct from the strongly Malay-influenced Cambodian Muslim mainstream, the resilience of similar, and in certain cases even shared, distinctive historical and ritual traditions in Vihear Sambour and its vicinity could be advantageous to the local introduction of Shi’ism. In the case of claims to sayyid status and thus religious authority at least, they seem to have served as tools for the appropriation and localization of the new religious impetus on the local level by giving it a degree of historical depth and resonance with local memory.93 Cham Sunni missionaries among the Jarai montagnards reportedly appeal to a shared history of the two peoples in the former kingdom of Champa in their efforts to spread Islam.94 We may justifiably speculate that such appeals are combined by their Shi’i rivals with the kind of ‘Alid conversion narratives of Cham tradition mentioned previously.95 The spread of Shi’ism in Cambodia, so far as we can know, would thus seem most plausibly to be related to notions of cultural revival and the preservation of local cultures, just as we saw earlier on the Guajira peninsula, concerning the defence of Wayúu traditions vis-à-vis forms of Christianity favouring cultural assimilation into the mestizo majority society. Among Cambodian Chams, it is the historical process of Jawization and the religious, social and cultural change associated with it which form the background to a similar perceived danger of gradual or imminent cultural loss.

The localization and inculturation of Shi’ism in Cambodia is not, however, solely based on the revival and transformation of marginalized Cham traditions. The Shi’i community of Vihear Sambour has produced a book in the Khmer language detailing the doctrine of the imamate. Entitled Vithiaya Imamah (‘The Authority of the Imamate’), this voluminous work of 360 pages was evidently intended for a general Cambodian audience, including non-Cham Muslims, Khmers and montagnards, as it was penned in the national Khmer and not the Cham language.96 This first Khmer Shi’i publication has been executed, however, in a do-it-yourself fashion, which clearly points to a lack of funds for the endeavour. The copy made available to me was self-produced. Nevertheless, the canonical texts of the Tablighi Jamaʿat, the Malay and now also Khmer translations of the massive Fadaʾil-e Aʿmal, were distributed throughout the country in very much the same fashion. It is possible that the prevailing Tablighi practice of daily readings (taʿlim) from the work at most mosques in the

91Bruckmayr, ‘The Contentious Pull’, pp. 139, 459; Bruckmayr, Cambodia’s Muslims.
93Instances of similar deployments of local histories to argue for a return to a Shi’i past have also recently been noted for Indonesia, for example. See Formichi, ‘One Big Family?’, pp. 274–281.
95Again, parallels could be found among Javanese Shi’is proclaiming a ‘cultural Shi’ism’ based on ‘Alid-focused readings of traditional conversion narratives. See Formichi, ‘One Big Family?’, pp. 276–277.
96Vithiaya Imamah (no author, or place or date of publication given).
country\textsuperscript{97} has influenced the small proselytizing Shi’i community to produce its own canonical work of reference.

Notably, the work makes use of the conventions of Khmer language and associated social practice by engaging the different speech levels (or socio-linguistic registers) of Khmer. Thus, actions of the imams are related in so-called ‘royal language’, the speech level otherwise reserved for talking about/to venerated figures such as kings or Buddhist monks, which necessitates the employment of specific verbs, pronouns and even names of body parts otherwise not used in either formal, informal or intimate settings.\textsuperscript{98} The register is commonly employed in Buddhist discourse, although Muslims—even Khmer-speaking ones—are not accustomed to using it in religious contexts (not even for the prophet or religious dignitaries). But every Cambodian, be they Muslim, Khmer Buddhist, or Jarai, is familiar with it. In the context of Cambodian medium possession practices, closely associated with local Theravada Buddhism, the usage of ‘royal language’ marks the transformation of a human medium into a member of the spirit world.\textsuperscript{99} Due to the widespread and at times inter-religious nature of these practices, it can be assumed that the author(s) of the work were aware of such specific functions of this socio-linguistic register.\textsuperscript{100} The Cambodian Cham Shi’is have therefore not simply produced a work in Khmer to transmit their doctrines, but have taken full advantage of the subtleties of the language and its carrier culture to make their message more readily accessible and comprehensible also to local non-Muslims. As written Islamic discourse in Cambodia has until very recently been almost exclusively in Cham or Malay and not in Khmer, it must be assumed that the work also specifically addresses non-Muslim Khmers and moun
tagnards and not just Cham Muslims.

That conversion to Shi’ism in Cambodia might manifest itself at least partly in cultural revival is striking. The local reception of a wide array of global Islamic trends has in contrast undoubtedly profited from the disjuncture of present Cambodian Islam from its pre-1970 history, precipitated by the civil wars, extended periods of isolation and particularly the extermination policies of the Khmers Rouges. On the other hand, the same dynamics have also resulted in counter-developments, the best example of which is the formation of the K.I.S. community in the late 1990s, which regards itself as the antithesis of perceived Malay (jawi), Arab or global expressions of Islam.\textsuperscript{101} As has been shown here from the evidence available and some extrapolation from it, Shi’ism has been, in its inculturation in Vhean Sambour, able to profit from the survival of some of the same traditions and historical narratives also espoused by K.I.S. Here less prior exposure to a major homogenizing impetus (i.e. Jawization) appears to have considerably aided the present localization of a novel Islamic impetus (i.e. Shi’ism).

\textsuperscript{97}Personal observation in around 50 mosques in the capital and in Kendal, Kamport, Kampong Som, Koh Kong, Kampong Chhnang, Battambang and Kampong Cham provinces, 2005–2012.
\textsuperscript{98}On the workings of distinct speech levels in languages of the region see Cliff Goddard, The Languages of East and Southeast Asia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 215–220.
\textsuperscript{100}Incidentally, the constitution and official recognition of K.I.S. in the 1990s were also related to an unprecedented revival of traditional Cham possession cults, which are nowadays the exclusive domain of K.I.S. Ing-Britt Trankell, ‘Songs of Our Spirits: Possession and Historical Imagination among the Cham in Cambodia’, Asian Ethnicity, 4(1) (2003), pp. 31–46; Bruckmayr, ‘Between Institutionalized Syncretism’, pp. 30–31, 33.
On the other hand, the desire to carry Shi’ism beyond the confines of Vihear Sambour and its vicinity has necessitated its localization and inculturation also in the wider Cambodian context, where the survival of ancient Cham traditions is not of immediate consequence. One way to pursue this was evidently the production of a standard text employing a language and social referents assumed to be readily comprehensible across different sections of Cambodian society. As elsewhere, the present da ’wa contest in Cambodia, of global import but nowadays primarily carried out by domestic actors, with its multiplicity of players, including Tablighis, Ahmadis, Salafis and Shi’is, is in itself already an important mechanism of localization. Indeed, it strongly conditions how particular agents of religious change emphasize, de-emphasize or at times even omit certain aspects of their master narrative, main tenets and defining practices on the one hand, and how global Islamic trends undergo a process of heterogenization through the selective appropriation of local traditions on the other.

Conclusion

The foregoing has provided glimpses of two very different cases of the twenty-first-century spread of Shi’ism. Apart from the greatly differing local contexts, divergence is also noticeable in the part played by political considerations, a decisive element in the expansion of Shi’ism and contemporary Shi’i thought in its more universal aspects in the wake of the Iranian revolution. Whereas these have obviously figured prominently in Darnott’s espousal and propagation of Shi’ism in Venezuela, this revolutionary potential seems to have so far played no role whatsoever in Cambodia, despite the considerable space accorded to the historic struggle for leadership in the Muslim community in Vithiaya Imamah, Cambodia’s first locally produced Shi’i book. This, however, already directs us to the main point of convergence between the new Guajiran and Cambodian Shi’isms, namely the equally striking processes of localization through inculturation involved in each. On the Guajira, Shi’ism was localized and appropriated primarily through its understanding and advertisement as a natural progression from local Christian Liberation Theology, thereby benefiting from local familiarity with the latter’s liberating and often revolutionary spirit and its permissiveness towards instances of religious amalgamation. Both these aspects are arguably of particular relevance for local Wayúu and disenfranchised urban dwellers exposed to exploitation and poverty and combining elements of traditional Wayúu religion and culture and/or santería with Catholicism.

In Cambodia, Shi’ism seems to have had initial limited success in one specific area, where the survival of certain local traditions has provided local Muslims with a special mechanism to link the new religious impetus to their own history, cultural memory and life worlds. The revival and appropriation of these traditions seems likely instrumental in this localization and inculturation of Shi’ism. An adapted version of this inculturated Cham Shi’ism is now also reportedly carried to non-Muslim montagnards and other non-Cham-speaking Muslim Cambodians. For that purpose, a text, written in the national language and distinctly engaging with Cambodian socio-linguistic conventions associated with local inter-religious configurations of spirituality, has been produced. Rather than revolutionary, then, here Shi’ism

102 Vithiaya Imamah, pp. 111–313.
takes a more ‘traditionalist’ and, in the context of the local da’wa contest, particularistic or sectarian form.

It has already been noted that the new Shi‘ism of the Guajira and Cambodia is, unlike its equivalents in Indonesia and elsewhere after 1979, clearly not a phenomenon of the urban intelligentsia. Indeed, both its chief purveyors and their main audiences are, at least for the time being, drawn from either rural or marginalized urban populations. It could be argued that this lack of a more cosmopolitan background and religious life among the prime audiences for, and purveyors of, Shi‘i propagation has boosted the dynamics of its inculturation. Local frames of reference are undoubtedly of greater relevance to those less engaged with global discourses.

Nevertheless, despite their high degree of localization, an orientation towards the perceived centres of Shi‘i Islam is still noticeable in both cases. As far as Darnott and his Wayúu followers are concerned, with their focus on the revolutionary aspects of Shi‘ism, it is obviously the Islamic Republic of Iran which stands as the centre of a global Shi‘ism regarded as revolving around the figure of ‘Ali Khamenei. In Cambodia the situation is less clear, despite the links mentioned previously between Iranian institutions and the Najaf-centred al-Khoei Foundation on the one hand, and the local Shi‘i communities of Southeast Asia on the other. While both these Middle Eastern centres of Shi‘i scholarship (i.e. Qum and Najaf) have been identified as sources of a homogenization (or de-localization) and growing clericalization of Shi‘ism, due to the globalized networks flowing from them, the present contribution has sought to emphasize the degree to which the impetus brought by these very networks into new regions can become subject to more or less pronounced processes of localization. Hereby inculturation appears to be the decisive element, as localization results in the concrete expression of ostensibly universal and trans-cultural Shi‘ism in particular cultures, in accordance with local cultural patterns and idioms. Evidently, the acceptance of a given impetus for religious change as well as its actual form of adaptation hinges on a variety of historically contingent local and trans-local processes and configurations, which then in turn account for the internal diversity of seemingly homogeneous (and homogenizing) global religious movements. Thus, the spread of modern deterritorialized universal religions cannot be reduced to its deculturating effects: such religions can still become subject to inculturation.

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