

RIE NAKAMURA

*A Journey of Ethnicity: In Search of the Cham of Vietnam.*

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. 254 pages.

Much like attempting to study the United States without the study of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, it would be truly strange to engage with the field of Vietnamese studies without substantial reading in the field of Champā and Cham studies. Yet only rarely does the work of scholars in Champā and Cham studies rise through the ranks to publication in the form of a research monograph. In this sense alone, Rie Nakamura's *A Journey of Ethnicity* is a stunning achievement. Such a rich ethnography of Cham communities in Vietnam has not been published in English since Philip Taylor's *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Periphery* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2007). Additionally, the book is delightful to read, thought-provoking, and insightful.

Nakamura is frank, honest, and humble in her exploration of Cham culture and ethnicity from the perspective of a deep, multi-sited ethnography. The author was motivated to publish her 1999 dissertation in the wake of Vietnamese government plans, now theoretically on hold, to place commercial nuclear energy reactors in Ninh Thuận Province—a prospect widely read by Cham community members as threatening erasure and annihilation. Consequently, much of the book, based on fieldwork from the mid-1990s, is a time capsule of field accounts, dusted off and refined after two decades of meditation.

Nakamura's overarching argument is about the foundations of Cham ethnicity as becoming “most salient in opposition to the Kinh Majority” (185), including the Vietnamese state's ability to create and reduce

categories, as exemplified by the shift from sixty-four to fifty-eight and then fifty-four recognized peoples [*dân tộc*]. Noting that her own study also pressured Cham individuals to “articulate their ethnic identity” (187), Nakamura argues that basing ethnic identity on “ethnic dualism” means that Cham may never be “fully integrated into the nation of Vietnam” (190).

The book begins with the history and origins of the communities in question (chapter 1) and a discussion of recent historical contexts (chapter 2), drawing on Japanese and Vietnamese scholarship. The chapters that follow provide ethnographic accounts of religion, cultural concepts, and community organization in the two major regions of Cham communities in Vietnam: the south-central coast (chapter 3) and the Mekong Delta in the south [Nam Bộ] (chapter 4). Chapters 5 and 6 provide rich, vivid discussion of cultural production and reception as a feature of the creation of ethnic identity.

Although Nakamura avoids ethnic essentialism and Orientalizing visions, there are important questions of history and politics that readers ought to keep in mind. Why take for granted the idea that there is long-standing evidence of Islamic gravestones marking the early arrival of Islam in Champā, when this claim was effectively challenged by Ludvik Kalus (“Réinterprétation des plus anciennes stèles funéraires islamiques nous-antariennes: I. Les deux inscriptions du ‘Champa,’” *Archipel* 66, no. 1 [2003]: 63–90)? In problematizing the so-called *Nam tiến*, the Vietnamese policy for southward expansion, why does Nakamura mostly accept the pro-Nguyễn dynasty propagandistic framing of Vietnamese-Champā interactions and ignore the conscious re-framing of the *Nam tiến* to motivate minorities to join the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) movement to regain sovereignty? How does the author square the overly simplistic presentation of a decline of rights for minorities after 1975 with the history of the Cham Textbook Compilation Board—founded in 1978, although the author portrays them as a group that emerged only after Đổi Mới? Why is there no mention of communities in Australia, the United States, Canada, or France in the section “Cham outside Champā”? Perhaps most questionable, however, is the author’s claim that the cosmological dualism present in Cham culture represented by *Awal* (Muslim, first, female) and *Ahiér* (Hindu, last, male) elements “represents a unique

world view of the Cham people and holds the key to understanding the way their ethnicity is constructed” (68), even though this statement does not necessarily apply to the predominantly Shafi'i Sunni communities of An Giang and Tây Ninh Provinces.

Because Nakamura largely frames the study in terms of what Mohammed bin Abdul Effendy (“Understanding the Cham Identity in Mainland Southeast Asia: Contending Views,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 2006: 230–253) terms an “oppressed minority layer,” readers could come away with the impression that Cham identity has been shaped largely by the dualism of “Cham and not-Cham” in relation to Kinh (Vietnamese) people. They might therefore miss the significance of Nakamura’s discussion of the roles played by other historical and religious factors and relations with other groups in emic constructions of Cham ethnicity. For example, Cham language, a key marker of Cham self-identification, has been constructed through interactive processes with not just Vietnamese, but also with Jarai, Raglai, Ede, Malay, various Mon-Khmer communities, and even French Orientalists. Insufficient attention to language is also reflected in Nakamura’s lack of discussion of how Cham language classifies different religious categories. Nor does she explain her decision not to use either the *Ecole française d’Extrême Orient* (EFEO) (French) or the Library of Congress (English) standard for the romanization of Cham script. Finally, there is a glaring lack of analysis of the deep connections between the Moat Chroak/Châu Đốc (An Giang) and Tây Ninh communities to their co-religionists in Cambodia, a point on which Taylor’s study was also weak. Referencing important recent works by Nicolas Weber, Emiko Stock, Philipp Bruckmayr and others in Cambodia-Cham studies would have strengthened Nakamura’s analysis of the problematic construction of an “Orthodox Islam.”

None of the substantive criticisms should be seen as reason to discard or ignore Nakamura’s *A Journey of Ethnicity*. Indeed, the author’s evidence supports a much more nuanced construction of Cham ethnicity than she herself argues for. Later chapters also offer such gems as a discussion of the “ridicule of the stereotype as a weapon of the weak” (147–151), which has broad implications for Vietnamese studies, Southeast Asian studies, Asian studies, and Asian American studies. In-depth discussion of the artistic

works summarized as “portraits of the Cham people” (162–182), including contemporary sculpture and the contemporary paintings of Cham artists such as Chế Thị Kim Trung and Đằng Năng Thọ, will appeal to those in the field of cultural studies, broadly construed. Nakamura’s book makes a strong contribution to the study of the contemporary history and culture of Cham communities, policy regarding the treatment of minority communities in Vietnam, artistic production and reception, and anthropological study of minority communities in Vietnam. It is necessary reading for anyone wishing to seriously engage with the field of Vietnamese studies.

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