

Initiative in Khmer Islam Early Schooling: The Svay Khleang Experience

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Abstract. Svay Khleang is a remote village in the province of Thbong Khmum, Kingdom of Cambodia. Its population is mostly Muslim. The village folks are kind of left out in many ways, including in the field of education, compared to those living in cities and big towns. After identification of the problems facing its population, mostly farmers, the six siblings, children of Mr Musa and Mme. Asiah, have decided that only education can bring changes to the community. On the other hand, the siblings decided to do something for their late parents with the piece of land and an ancestral house built on it left behind by them. When these two ideas met up, they decided to make the properties a *Waqaf* (donation for religious purposes), that is to turn the properties into a school for the Education Development among the children of the village and beyond. Thus, the Musa-Asiah Foundation (YASMA) followed by the Musa-Asiah Integrated Primary School (SERPAMA) were established, both in 2012. Now in its eighth year, the Musa-Asiah Integrated Secondary School (SEMPAMA) began operation on the 1st of November 2019. These integrated schools provide both national and religious education in one complex. We believe that there is no better way to bring the rural children up other than giving them good and proper education they most needed, and most of all, by bringing education to their doorsteps. This Education Program depends solely on the generosity of generous people or institutions for its infrastructure, staff salaries and other basic educational expenses. This article traces the history of the Musa-Asiah Integrated School (SEPAMA) and its future contribution to the development of human resources as inspired by the royal government of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodia, education, Khmer Islam, Cham, muslim

INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community in Cambodia forms about 4% of the total population. The community

members are mostly people of Cham and Malay descent. The Chams are descendants of migrants from the once famous Kingdom of Champa (192-1835), whereas the forefathers of the Malays were mostly traders and missionaries who came to Cambodia in the 16th-18th centuries. There are also some Arabs, Indians, Afghans, also known as Kabul, and a very small number of reverts; intermarriage being the main drawing factor. The Islamic identity of this community makes its existence unique within the majority Khmer Buddhists polity [1]-[4].

As for their settlements, before 1970, they were found mostly along the Mekong River, Tonle Sap river, around the famous Lake Tonle Sap and in the provinces of Kompong Cham, Kompot, Pursat, Battambang and Siemreap, and around the capital city of Phnom Penh. These suburbs, Jroy Changvar, Prek Pra and Chrang Chamres are now incorporated in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Nowadays, Muslims can be found in every corner of the country.

Cambodia was liberated from the Khmer Rouge Regime in 1979 after enduring a very long three years and nine months of hardship and mass killing of citizens of all faiths. Its identity as a nation-state was re-established in 1993 with the help of the United Nations through the UNTAC (United Nations on Transitional Authority in Cambodia). Cambodia has been rebuilding itself ever since [5].

In the early years of rebuilding the community, the Muslims expanded considerable resources re-establishing contacts with their relatives who have settled in various countries, especially those in Malaysia, France and the USA, and also seeking support from Muslim organisations in West Asia. And with the Royal government facilitating the process, various kinds of aids were secured to help rebuild their communities [6]-[8]. On a personal note, the writer is thankful to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Toyota Foundation through its SEASREP branch and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) Malaysia for providing funds for researches and field works in Cambodia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These studies drew attention to the daunting state of poverty in the country and the dire need for its alleviation.

At around this time, my siblings and I, six of us in all, were thinking of doing something for our beloved parents who left behind a few pieces of land in the Khum Svay Khleang and in Phnom Penh. We were all aware that we can never hope to reclaim ownership of these properties, with the exception of the one in the village of Svay Khleang, Srok Kroch Chmar in the Province of Thbong Khmum, which was part of Kompong Cham Province prior to 2016. This is how the **SVAY KHLEANG EXPERIENCE** got started.

METHOD

The author applied qualitative research. Narrative inquiry was applied to tell more detailed. To provide more vivid and reliable result, the author also applied document analysis.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

YASMA

Praise be to *Allah*, Lord of the Worlds, my siblings and I decided to *Wakaf* the only piece of land with an ancestral home built by our parents, for which we can claim ownership, so that their souls be blessed by the Waqaf rewards from the Almighty Allah SWT. We decided to handle this property *wakaf* by ourselves and manage it accordingly. There was more than one option laid before us then; to build an orphanage, an old folks home, a *tahfiz* school, or a religious school. We noticed that at around the year 2010, almost every big Muslim village had its own religious schools or schools for orphans.

After careful discussion with all my siblings, we also decided to set up a school. We believed that only education can provide village folks with social mobility to get them out of poverty. All of my sisters had cautioned that running a school is not a one-off project, as we need a continuous inflow of funds, such as for teachers' salaries and other day to day operational expenses. I was the only one adamant in this project, and finally, they gave in but reminded me: "just a small school". Then I quickly said yes. And everybody was happy.

The problem did not end there. As there are many types of schools to choose from, my siblings and I, though reluctantly decided to open an integrated primary school. Only now we were asking ourselves as to who will operate the school. Then we decided to establish an NGO as the school owner and run it accordingly under Cambodian laws.

We name this NGO as the MUSA-ASIAH FOUNDATION (YASMA) – with our Cambodian approved official name of the MUSA-ASIAH FOUNDATION ORGANISATION (YASMA). YASMA was established in early 2012, and the

registration of the Musa-Asiah Integrated Primary School or Sekolah Rendah Bersepadu Musa-Asiah (SERPAMA) was approved just before the school year started on the 1st of October 2012. The YASMA and SERPAMA were named after our beloved parents Mr Musa bin Ahmad and Mme Asiah Binti Hj Osman. The establishment of this school is part of the Cambodian nation-building effort as inspired by the Royal government headed by Samdach Decho Hun Sen.



Figure 1: Mr. Musa Ahmad



Figure 2: MME Asiah Hj Osman

We pray that the Almighty Allah SWT accept our *ibadah* in searching and providing the best education to the needy according to the meanings of hadiths.

SEPAMA INFRASTRUCTURE

My siblings and I started the Musa-Asiah Integrated Primary education programme by first moving the ancestral home (Figure 3, Figure 4), which was built right in the middle of a small piece of land of 25mx47m (about 12,000 ft²) to the right side of the land. The renovation of the wooden house built on stilts started immediately enabling us to have a number of temporary classrooms and an office space at the ground floor (Figure 5). The ancestral home was an old house built in 1960 [9]-[11].



Figure 3: Ancestral Home Side View



Figure 4: Ancestral Home Front View



Figure 5: Ancestral Home After Ground Floor Renovation

As the construction progressed, some donations came in. We began building the school *surau*, which can accommodate some 200 primary pupils. A main school building of four floors was planned (Figure 6) of which only four years later we managed to build the ground floor. (Figure 7).



Figure 6: Artist Impression of the SEPAMA Building



Figure 7: It took four years to come to this stage of the infrastructure

In the foreground of Figure 7, stands the school building which remained in this situation for about two years. And on the right-hand side of the background is the ancestral home after three phases of renovation. On the left-hand side is the school *surau* building which was donated as *wakaf* by Mme Fatimah Abdul Rahman of Alor Setar (Figure 8). At the time of writing the second floor of the school is completed with a generous donation of a couple in Kuala Lumpur, Dato' Mohamad Hashim and Datin Noorhuda Binti Mohd Amin (Figure 9). YASMA is very thankful to all of them and to many others whose names could not be all listed here as it would make a long list. We are very proud of them for providing space and time to make the Education Development at SEPAMA a reality. Insha Allah with the help of philanthropic individuals and institutions, we believe that the complete infrastructure of the school complex will be ready in the near future. Once completed, it the school would be able to accommodate some 500 students.



Figure 8: Inauguration plaque of mosque



Figure 9: Inauguration plaque of school



Figure 10: Present School Building with Two More Floors to Go



Figure 11: Representatives of some ASEAN member states at the Malang Declaration, the 13th of June 2012

International institutions also are involved in the education development program at SEPAMA. I myself was introduced for the first time to a world-famous institution, the Muhammadiyah in 2005 in one of its famous assemblies in Malang, Indonesia. These relationships culminated in the establishment of the Association of Muslim Community in ASEAN (AMCA) in 2012 at the Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Figure 11). From that time on, the relationship between YASMA and the Muhammadiyah continues to grow steadily. I

have been selected as President of AMCA-Cambodia.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

The 1st of October 2012 was a historic date (Figure 15) for the establishment of the Musa-Asiah Foundation (YAMA) and its first project, the Musa-Asiah Integrated Primary School (SERPAMA).



Figure 12: (a) YASMA Logo (b) SEPAMA Logo

It was an emotional moment for the whole village folks, on the one hand, the ancestral home of the Musa-Asiah's was spruced up and turned into a place where an education programme was about to be launched for the benefit of the Cambodian population be it Muslim or non-Muslim. On the other hand, the house, which was in a sorry state of disrepair after the Pol Pot regime turned it into a cow stable on its upper floor, had regained its eminence. It was in a very bad filthy state as it was covered with cow dungs all over the place. And with the grace of Allah, it had been transformed as the centre for education; a respectable institution [12].

As the school's name indicates, SERPAMA offers a dual programme, namely the Cambodian national primary education and an Islamic religious primary education curriculum. This dual syllabus offers a complete primary education programme, especially for Muslim children of six years old and above. Figure 13 below shows that in the 2012-13 academic year, the number of pupils was 74, quite a big number as there were two groups of pupils registered; one was those who attended the integrated programme and the other group was those who attended the only religious programme. The second group are pupils from the nearby national primary school. As time passes, those who attended only the religious school programme diminished in number; and for the 2018-19 academic year, we have only those attending the integrated Musa-Asiah programme [14]. The breakdown of student enrolment for the year 2018-19 is shown in Figure 14.

This first batch, the Batch 01, had graduated from SERPAMA in 2018. Some of them are now in the eighth grade at a nearby secondary school, and five of them continued their post-primary education at a religious school near Phnom Penh.

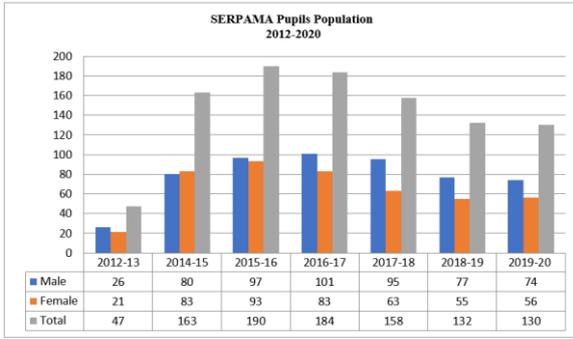


Figure 13: SERPAMA Pupils Population

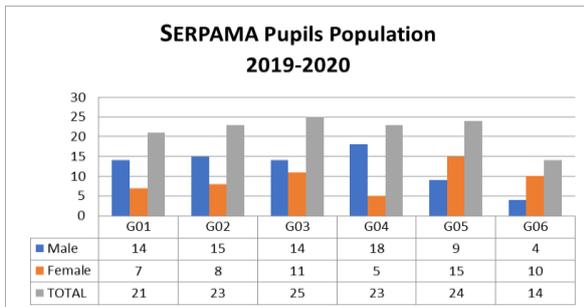


Figure 14: Student Enrollment



Figure 15: First Day at SERPAMA on the 1st of October 2012

As for the academic syllabuses, SERPAMA follows strictly the Kampuchean Primary National syllabus, and as for the religious primary education syllabus, YASMA has obtained the approval and blessings of the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) to use its official primary school syllabus. The table below summarises what is being applied by SERPAMA.

This table includes the syllabuses of the integrated secondary education at The Musa-Asah Integrated Secondary School (SEMPAMA). If the primary school religious syllabus is taught in Malay, the secondary school religious syllabus is in Arabic, the language of the Quran. The SERPAMA and SEMPAMA schools combined is called the Musa-Asiah Integrated School (SEPAMA), and now are housed in the same complex. In terms of

students' language ability and proficiency, with the grace of Allah, the educational programme is tailored for graduates of SEPAMA to be able to communicate in several languages. The first is of course, Khmer, the national language [15]-[17], followed by Malay, the language of religious primary instruction, and spoken by some 300 million people in Southeast Asia. The third language is Arabic, the language of the sacred Quran, with English as a compulsory subject in the Cambodian school curriculum and, the fifth language is Cam language [18], [19] which is the mother tongue of Chams. With exposure to and the acquisition of these five languages, we believe our graduates are well equipped to compete in their future endeavours, either in Cambodia or in Southeast Asia or anywhere else in the world. Besides we also have classes on the memorisation of al-Quran; our target is for graduating pupils to be able to memorise a minimum of three *juz*, by the end of their primary education.

Table 1. SEPARMA Syllabus

Dual-Program	Syllabuses	Medium of Instruction (SERPAMA)	Medium of Instruction (SEMPAMA)
Cambodian National Education	Cambodian Ministry of Education	Khmer	Khmer
Islamic Religious Education	JAKIM (Malaysia)	Malay (Jawi)	Arabic



Figure 16: Some of the pupils in Front of the School.

And finally, we look forward to being able to open our full secondary education by the next academic year which will start on the 1st of November 2020. The first intake for the seventh grade (first year of secondary education) is opened to our pupils who have completed SERPAMA and those who had attended similar integrated

programmes from other schools. The SEMPAMA operation is certainly a bigger challenge for us, in terms of managing both religious and national academic curricula, academic and non-academic staff and finance. We pray for the blessings of the Almighty Allah SWT for the success in our human development efforts for the betterment of Cambodian community.

CONCLUSION

The Musa-Asiah Foundation (YASMA) was established in 2012 for the purposes of community development, starting from the education of young children. We believe that this is the way to move forward in terms of developing human resources. We are blessed for having completed the first batch primary education by the end of 2017-2018 academic year and moving to secondary education.

We are aware that the route we take is not an easy one but with due diligent planning and with the help of philanthropic individuals and organisations who are eager to help build the Cambodian community especially the Muslims, this is the time not to ponder anymore but to help make this community development programme a reality. Those who graduate from SEPAMA, and with or without their university education will stand a good chance to compete with their fellow citizens in any field they undertake as they have the edge of having been exposed to more languages than their Cambodian and ASEAN peers.

The Svay Khleang Experience has been an eye-opener to many who now are undertaking the same path of providing an integrated education programme to young children. An Integrated National Curriculum is needed because while the children are all citizens of the Nation of Cambodia, they also need the Religious Education Curriculum as Muslims. The management of SEPAMA pray that in the near future it will be a National flagship School of International standing for an Integrated Curricula programming that meets the aspirations of Cambodians

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