

# COVID-19 and Religious Practices: A Case Study of the Cham in Ninh Thuan

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**Abstract:** With the ups and downs of the COVID-19 pandemic, including waves of infections, the discussion and questioning of how to adapt traditional and religious activities in times of crisis became of utmost importance among the clerics of religious groups in Ninh Thuan. This article discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Cham in Ninh Thuan, the role of faith agents in responding to the unprecedented health crisis, and the way they maintained their faith and kept the spirit of traditions and religions alive during a difficult time. At the same time, this article looks into how the religious communities in Ninh Thuan engaged in dialogue about the COVID-19 pandemic, including potential racial or sectarian debates, to minimize misunderstandings and mobilize resources to help each other overcome challenges and possible discrimination. This is a case study of an ethnic minority and sheds light on the flexible and resilient approaches of the Cham to navigate the pandemic and maintain their traditions and practices. This research speaks to policy-makers and provides lessons for managing crises in the future.

**Keywords:** the Cham; Ninh Thuan; COVID-19 Pandemic; Religious Practices.

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## 1. Introduction

In mid-July 2022, I traveled to Phuoc Nhon (Cham: *Palei Balap Biraw*), Ninh Thuan. This has been my familiar field trip site since 2016, and I was visiting after one and a half years of hiatus and delay due to the pandemic. Life was back to normal to a great extent. Wearing a mask or keeping a distance in the market was not a norm anymore. During my 10-day trip, no COVID cases were recorded or reported. Another sign of normalcy was the revival of spiritual and religious rituals. Within ten days, several dry funerals (Vietnamese:

*đám tang khô, đám tuần*) were carried out. Among the Cham, dry funerals are meant for dead people with special conditions or families who have difficulties making proper arrangements immediately following a death. When the situation is suitable, they carry out what could be considered a 'make-up' funeral (e.g., happening in retrospect). However, during this time, the dry funerals were for those who had died during the COVID-19 lockdowns. With stringent restrictions in place, many families had been forced to keep the funeral rituals as simple and short as possible. When the situation had stabilized or was significantly back to normal, they organized dry funerals that lasted for three days.

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Those dry funerals illuminated the way the Cham community managed their spiritual practices during the pandemic. This practice provides a great chance to look back and assess how the religious communities of the Cham kept their traditions and spiritual practices alive and looked forward to revival, recovery, and preparedness for future uncertainties.

This paper will briefly introduce the Cham, one of the ethnic minorities in Ninh Thuan - the province with the highest number of the Cham in Vietnam, and their religious affiliations. It will then explore the COVID-19 condition in Ninh Thuan through the different waves of infections in connection with the broader picture of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam with a particular focus on the condition among the Cham. The paper also discusses the way the Cham coped with the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in their spiritual and religious practices, which are a vital part of their daily life.

This article utilized the mixed-method approach of a systematic discourse analysis drawing on a number of sources, such as online news articles, official documents (at the central and local governmental levels), announcements of faith-based organizations of the Cham, participant observations, and conversations with some Cham religious clerics. The results of these analyses illuminated the changes that were made to rituals during this challenging time as well as the role of the different actors in those revised ritual processes and the benefits those revisions brought about to the Cham community and society. These insights can provide lessons and public policy implications for future crises, such as balancing religious freedom and public health protections during a pandemic,

mobilizing religious leaders and other faith actors as key stakeholders in disease prevention, and building trust and reliance to ensure that during a public health crisis, 'religion is a cure' rather than 'a curse'.

## **2. The Cham in Ninh Thuan and their religious affiliations**

The Cham are one of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam and unlike most ethnic minorities in Vietnam, they live in the coastal areas rather than in mountainous regions. Compared with the major ethnic group (the Kinh) and six other ethnic communities with over one million people, the Cham population is modest. As of April 2019, the Cham community registered 178,948 persons. The largest group of this ethnic minority resides in the central coastal provinces of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan (107,074 persons combined) (Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, 2019). In Ninh Thuan, the Cham accounts for around 12% of the total population and they are the second largest ethnic group, among 35 ethnic groups, living in this province, after the Kinh (Phan Huong 2020). Ninh Thuan, with its capital Phan Rang-Thap Cham, is a part of the historical Panduranga of the Champa kingdom and the Cham have resided here for a long time. Although Champa collapsed, its ethnic, historical, cultural, and religious heritage is prominent and contributed greatly to the diversity of today's Vietnam. With acknowledgment of the strategic location designed to connect the trade from the upper land and the sea, the Cham adopted several religious traditions and religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Among the Cham of Ninh Thuan, Hinduism and Islam are strong influences. Exogenous religions have been

adapted and accommodated to the cultural and religious complexions of the host groups, and the original forms of those religions have been transformed significantly. Interestingly, the interconnection of these exogenous religions and Indigenous religious traditions led to the rise of dualism in the religious beliefs and practices of the Cham (Dongng Thanh Danh 2018). This process helped to create an integral whole and not merely a mixture or syncretism of religions (Noseworthy and Pham Thi Thanh Huyen 2021). Hinduism and Islam have been localized highly and become “very Cham” affiliated religious systems with distinguished practices and beliefs: Cham Ahiér (influenced by Hinduism) and Cham Bani (Awal) (influenced by Islam). Besides, Cham Asulam/Islam (closely related to more orthodox forms of Islam in the world) and Cham Jat (capturing the essence of Animism) make the religious fabric of the Cham even more colourful. This diverse cultural and religious fabric lays the basis for a high number of festivals and rituals among the Cham. The Centre for the Cham Studies situated in Ninh Thuan listed more than a hundred festivals and rituals among the Cham in that region. There are six main groups of festivals and rituals including agriculture-related festivals, family rituals, *Rija* rituals, festivals at tower complexes, festivals and rituals of Cham Bani, and life-cycle rituals (Phan Van Dop et al. 2014: 161). These groupings have some overlapping elements, such as between family rituals and *Rija* rituals, but they provide a glimpse into the colourful and bustling spiritual life and practices of the Cham in Ninh Thuan during normal times. Among those festivals and rituals, the *Katé* is the most important and largest festival. It takes place in the seventh month of the Cham calendar, which is often in October of the Georgian calendar, with the

participation of thousands of people from all the Cham groups as well as tourists. The main rituals of the *Katé* include a Dress Procession, Temple Opening, Deity Bathing, Deity Dressing, and Deity Worship at temple complexes such as Po Klaong Garai, Po Rome and Po Nagar, followed by prayer sessions at the Chief Priest’s house at each village and then at home. The *Katé* also comes with dance performances and festive activities at Cham Ahiér villages. For Cham Awal/Bani, *Ramâwan* (Cham: *Bilan Aék*- the month of fasting), which is a localized variation of Ramadan and takes place in the ninth Islamic month, is the most religious ceremony. Cham Bani usually start the *Ramâwan* by visiting and cleaning ancestors’ graves in the clan’s cemetery (Cham: *Mbeng Muk Kei*) before engaging in activities, such as worshiping ancestors at home, ritual food offerings, and visiting the home of relatives and friends. The clerics of the Cham Bani community often spend *Ramâwan* at *Sang Mâgik* and fast. Every night, female devotees gather at *Sang Mâgik* to pray. For Cham Islam, *Ramadan* is the most sacred and holy month with important religious ceremonies, such as mass prayer sessions at mosques before *iftar* (fast-breaking meals at sunset) and *Eid al-Fitr* (marking the end of Ramadan month). During these important festivals and religious ceremonies, the Cham return to their hometowns from as far as metropolises in Vietnam like Ho Chi Minh City and abroad. Hence, when the COVID-19 pandemic - an unprecedented public health crisis broke out - the spiritual life and practices of the Cham were greatly affected.

In general, all religious groups of the Cham are moderate and peaceful. They always try to follow all Government rules and regulations on religious matters and

daily life activities as well as help each other in difficult times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these characters greatly contributed to building trust between the Cham community and the Government. They helped the Cham communities stay resilient and actively find ways to keep their traditions alive while following the health protocols from the Government.

### **3. Waves of COVID-19 infections and the responses**

#### ***3.1 COVID-19 infection waves in Vietnam***

During the acute phase of the pandemic, there were four waves of COVID-19 infections in Vietnam. The first wave happened from January to April 2020; the second one was from July to December 2020; the third wave lasted from January to March 2021 and the last but biggest wave broke out in April 2021. From the start of the pandemic, the Vietnamese Government implemented five strategic principles: prevention, discovery, isolation, zoning, and stamping out. At the same time effective treatment using testing, quarantine, and treatment was recommended and used. Several Directives were issued by the Central Government to fight the virus with consideration given to the balance between health and economic development as seen through Directives No. 15, 16, and 19. These Directives were signed by the Prime Minister at different periods to update COVID-19 prevention and control measures following science-based data and in the specific context to protect people's lives and maintain livelihoods. There were several propaganda slogans to support the directives, such as '5K', which referred to Mask (Khẩu trang); Disinfection (Khử khuẩn), Distance

(Khoảng cách), No gathering (Không tụ tập), and Health declaration (Khai báo Y tế). Later, vaccination was added alongside other catchphrases, including 'No one is left behind' (Không ai bị bỏ lại phía sau) and 'Fighting a pandemic like fighting a war' (Chống dịch như chống giặc). This war metaphor was used to emphasize the danger of the virus as an invisible enemy and to mobilize resources in society. More than one year into the pandemic, thanks to these stringent and proactive measures alongside the compliance of the people, the country was quite successful in keeping the number of infections and deaths low. For example, during the first wave (January to April 2020), given the limited information about the disease, Vietnam recorded only 415 cases and most of them were imported cases with no deaths. Until April 2021, the time when the fourth wave swept through the country, there were only around 2,800 cases and 35 deaths of COVID-19 officially recorded.

The fourth and most significant wave started in late April 2021 with the Delta variant, fueled by long holidays and a high volume of domestic traffic. This wave accounted for more than 99% of cases and deaths of COVID-19 reported in Vietnam across the pandemic duration (noting that at some points the death rate was up to 2.5%, higher than the average death rate of 2.06% globally) (Vietnam Ministry of Health 2021; Worldometer 2021). At the peak of this wave, there was a huge burden on the healthcare system as well as other pillars of the COVID-19 strategy, like contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine. Meanwhile, this wave led to the disruption of life and economic activities in big cities and industrial centers in the South, such as Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, and Binh Duong. These cities are also popular migration destinations for work and study

among people from Ninh Thuan in general and the Cham community in particular. Hence, when this particularly fierce wave of infections forced these cities and provinces to impose strict lockdowns leading to prolonged unemployment, this led to the exodus of migrants to their home provinces contributing to the spread of the virus to other cities and provinces.

### **3.2. Waves of COVID-19 infections in Ninh Thuan**

At the local level, the first wave and fourth waves of COVID-19 in Ninh Thuan are most pertinent for discussion in this paper with particular focus on the fourth one due to the high rates of transmission and deaths.

#### **3.2.1. The first wave in early 2020**

In mid-March 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 in Ninh Thuan were detected. They were connected with two Cham Muslim men from the town of Van Lam 3 (Cham: *Palei Ram*), who were among 107 Vietnamese Muslims who had traveled to Malaysia and attended a mass religious ceremony at the Seri Petaling Mosque in Kuala Lumpur from 27 February 2020 to 1 March 2020 with about 16,000 attendees. This event became what was known as a ‘super-spreading event’ with several countries including Brunei, Singapore, Cambodia, and Thailand also reporting cases linked to this event (Anna Barker 2020). Immediately, several measures were implemented to stop the spread of the virus. The Central Government in Vietnam sent out an official dispatch (numbered 1561/CV-BCĐ) on 25 March 2020 with a list of 107 persons who attended the event so provinces and cities (especially those with a high number of Muslims) could check those returning attendees (National

Steering Committee for COVID-19 pandemic prevention 2020). At the provincial level, a strict lockdown was imposed on the whole community of Van Lam 3 (approximately 5,000 residents) for 28 days from 27 March 2020 to curb the spread of the virus, and close contacts were quarantined at dedicated facilities (Minh Tran 2020). Furthermore, in relation to religious aspects, the prostration places for both Cham Islam (*majid*) and Cham Bani (*Sang Mâgik*) in this town were closed, and the communal authority issued an order to cancel or scale back religious events. Religious leaders of Cham Bani and Cham Islam in Van Lam 3 welcomed the order and actively cooperated with the local authority to minimize the spread of the virus. Then, with the rigorous methods and cooperation of the people, the COVID-19 situation in Vietnam and Ninh Thuan was soon brought under control (Lu Ho 2020).

It is noteworthy that this incident stirred a vigorous discussion online. Some blamed the two men for attending such a large-scale event during the COVID-19 outbreak. People were afraid that they could transmit the virus to others because they attended mass prayer ceremonies and marriages in the village with many people. The number of close contacts with these two particular cases was 120 people. Fortunately, there were no more cases following this incident and after a brief period of online blaming (largely due to anxiety), the Cham of other villages actively helped those under isolation with access to necessary resources and mental health support. The two patients with COVID-19 virus were successfully treated and discharged from the hospital on 1 April 2020 (Tam Binh 2020).

Following the incident and in response to the order of the Government to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in April 2020,

religious councils of the Cham in Ninh Thuan played a pivotal role in preventing ‘super-spreading’ events. Related to *Ramâwan*, the most important annual festival of the Cham Bani community, the *Council of Clerics of Cham Bani* in Ninh Thuan decided to cancel the ritual of cemetery visit (*Mbeng Muk kei*) and to reduce the size of other rituals, including scaling back the ceremonies at home, restricting gatherings, and taking no visitors. During the fasting month, dignitaries were required to stay inside *Sang Mâgik*, limit contact with others from outside of *Sang Mâgik*, and frequently disinfect the place and themselves. For evening prayer sessions, no more than 20 people were allowed per day with the requirement of hand sanitizing and masking while praying (Cham Bani Clerics’ Council 2020). In normal times, there were hundreds of female devotees coming to *Sang Mâgik* from each village every night to pray during *Ramâwan*. *Ramâwan* is the month of ancestor veneration, self-reflection, family gatherings, and visiting relatives and friends. Under the circumstances of the health crisis and learning from the incident of the Cham Islam followers in Văn Lâm 3, the Cham in Ninh Thuan proactively followed the rules and regulations of the Government and guidelines of religious councils.

When the situation improved, the Central Government and Local Government loosened the stringent measures to maintain economic and manufacturing activities while adapting to the unprecedented health crisis. Meanwhile, the Government allowed people to practice their faith with guidelines designed to make sure that religious events would not become ‘super-spreading’ events again. This approach was a logical and versatile way to balance lives and

livelihoods alongside physical health and mental health. This approach also contributed to the trust-building process during the pandemic in Vietnam. With the low number of infections and close-to-normal conditions for quite a long time, the Government was praised for its ‘anti-pandemic’ policies. Among the Cham, in late 2020, due to the successful control of the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Katé* festival - the biggest annual festival of the Cham Ahiér with the participation from the Cham Awal and tourists - was organized as usual for October 2020. The main ceremony at the Po Klaong Garai tower complexes (Phan Rang – Thap Cham city) and the costume procession from Po Inur Nagar temple at Phước Hậu commune to Po Klaong Garai tower complexes were carried out with the attendance of many people (Nguyen Thanh 2020).

Similarly, in November 2020, when I visited the Cham village in Phuoc Nhon and attended the *Karoh* ceremony (coming-of-age rituals for girls) for my hostess’ nieces and two other girls, all steps of the three-day rituals were carried out with the attendance of relatives and villagers (See images 1 and 2 below). Many other families in the village also organized the *Karoh* ceremony for their girls and my hostess received some invitation letters, the families busily prepared for ceremonies with ritual clothes, offerings, goods, and meals. In conversation, clerics and people expressed that they were happy that life had returned to some normalcy, and they could organize life cycle rituals and religious rituals as usual.

Hence, awareness-raising and coherent policy messaging play a vital role in assuring concerned communities at a time when they are at their most vulnerable as well as laying a solid foundation for trust and compliance.

**Figure 1:** Old ladies helping to prepare traditional cakes for the Karoh (coming-of-age ceremony for Cham Bani girls) in November 2020



(Taken by author, Phuoc Nhon, November 2020)

**Figure 2:** The message on this banner says “When observing symptoms, such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath, visit the closest clinic so that the new Corona virus-caused respiratory disease can be diagnosed and treated in a timely way”.



(Taken by author, Phuoc Nhon, November 2020)

### 3.2.2 The fourth wave of COVID-19 infections – the ‘first real wave’

With the rigorous Government approach and cooperation of the people, the COVID-19 situation in Vietnam and Ninh Thuan was kept under control for quite a long time. As a result, for about one year a certain level of normalcy came back to the province and people could enjoy their lives and festive moments with some restrictions in place. This opportunity lasted until the worst outbreak in Vietnam started in April 2021 due to the Delta variant, which led to the return of many Cham people from the epicenters of Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong to Ninh Thuan. While the fourth wave of infections started on 27 April 2021 in Ho Chi Minh City, the pandemic broke out more significantly from May 26 with

the number of infections climbing rapidly. By 31 May 2021, lockdown was imposed. Due to the highly contagious nature of the Delta variant, this fourth wave of infections brought with it high infection rates and a high death rate. The outcome was disrupted supply chains and production at major manufacturing centers, which negatively impacted people’s livelihood and mental health. Since epicenters of this wave were manufacturing and economic centers, essentially internal migration destinations, the prolonged social distancing period and unemployment led to the mass exodus from Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong and Dong Nai. As a consequence, the spread of infections was accelerated to other provinces like Ninh Thuan. In mainstream newspapers, headlines such as, “400 COVID-infected people among 2,000

returnees from Dong Nai to Ninh Thuan” were quite common. This mass exodus had both short-term and long-term effects. Several quarantine facilities and makeshift hospitals were set up to manage those returning from epicenters and to treat patients infected with the virus. On 4 July 2021, the first case of COVID-19 from the fourth wave was reported in Ninh Thuan as a migrant worker returning from Ho Chi Minh City. On 22 July 2021, the first COVID-19-related death was recorded in Ninh Thuan. The casualty was a 69-year-old Cham man with underlying health conditions (namely diabetes and hypertension) from Tan Duc, Phuoc Huu, Ninh Phuoc. This is a town with the majority population of the Cham Ahiér with more than half of the Cham in the township of Ninh Thuan itself (48,000 out of more than 82,000 people) (Ninh Thuan Provincial Hospital 2021). The fourth wave was the biggest surge of infections across Vietnam as well as Ninh Thuan more specifically. Through to 27 December 2021, there were 5,548 reported cases resulting in 53 deaths. The province was transformed from a low-risk area to a high-risk area. In July, the local government immediately issued a directive (Ninh Thuan Provincial People’s Committee 2021), in light of directives from the Central Government, to tighten social distancing measures. As a result, many schools and public facilities became quarantine facilities. Checkpoints were set up at the village entrances to make sure that all people who traveled back from southern cities were isolated at quarantine facilities or self-quarantined at home. At locations with high levels of infections, including Phan Rang-Thap Cham and Ninh Phuoc, the number of attendees for all religious and social gatherings was limited to 15 people while for other towns with lower infection rates, the number was set at

20 people. In August 2021, given the fact that the situation was stabilized and the spread of the virus in the community was under control, the local government loosened the social distancing measures, but a careful approach to organizing big events and gatherings remained. They decided to scale back the *Katé*, which was scheduled for October and usually attracts thousands of people. The Ninh Thuan People’s Committee issued an official dispatch in September 2021 to ask the Cham Ahiér not to organize the *Katé*-related festive activities at tower complexes, religious places, and public spaces. Their request was that only the main ceremonies and rituals inside Po Klaong Garai tower complexes take place with the attendance of limited priests. At the family level, *Katé* rituals were carried out within the family home without holding parties or inviting guests, even relatives from neighbouring villages (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2021). For the first time in many years and certainly the first time during the pandemic, the *Katé* was scaled back to protect lives and keep the transmission of infections as low as possible. Similarly, in October 2021, the Representative Board of the Muslim Community of Ninh Thuan decided not to organize *Maulid* events (celebrating the feast of the birth of the Prophet) at mosques and instructed followers to celebrate at home within their families. *Maulid* events commemorate the Prophet Mohammad’s birthday and have become a tradition among the Cham Islam in Vietnam. However, given the special condition of the pandemic and the danger of virus transmission, both of the Representative Boards of the Muslim Community in Ho Chi Minh City and Ninh Thuan decided to scale back these important events (Phuong Lien 2021). Hence, the Cham people and



dignitaries followed the guidance and requirements carefully to avoid the possibility of initiating ‘super-spreading’ events and actively engaged in the policy-making process and policy enforcement during the pandemic.

### 3.2.3. *‘Living with Covid’ and flexible adaptation*

Although the fourth wave of COVID-19 was fierce, a mass vaccination campaign was launched and accelerated during this wave to protect vulnerable community members and strengthen overall immunity. In July 2022, when I visited Phuoc Nhon township, a poster with the following slogan associated with the COVID-19 vaccination campaign was at the gateway of the village market. It read: ‘Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 is an individual right and a responsibility to the community’. Successful immunization programs depend not only on the quality and efficiency of a vaccine but also on public readiness. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the 10 greatest threats to public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious beliefs were cited as major drivers of vaccine hesitancy along with socio-cultural differences, lack of trust in public health messaging, and misinformation. Many countries struggled to persuade their residents to get vaccinated due to religious issues. In many Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine hesitancy due to Muslim-specific factors was commonplace (Galal et.al. 2020). Questions arose, such as whether COVID-19 vaccines were Halal or not, and whether the injection invalidates the fast during Ramadan were discussed widely and were concerns among Muslim communities (Mohd Jenol and Ahmad Pazil 2023).

Conversely, among the Cham, there was no sign of vaccine hesitancy. When I had conversations with the clerics of Cham Bani and Cham Islam, they believed that in a public health crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting people and their lives was the first and foremost priority. In fact, in recent years, the idea and knowledge of Halal is growing among the Cham Islam in Ninh Thuan with more food stalls at the village markets with Halal options and online shops with Halal meats imported from overseas. Among Cham Bani, Halal-related discussions are not so popular due to their localized tendency in relation to rituals and practices, but they also abstain from consuming pork as part of their traditions and beliefs. Hence, the acceptance of new vaccines could be evidence of the growing trust among Cham groups in Vietnam. The trust in the efficiency of vaccines and governmental authorities administrating them and open-mindedness contributed to the high uptake of vaccines and the success of mass vaccination campaigns in Vietnam. During the pandemic, the vaccine hesitancy rate in Vietnam was among the lowest (Marzo et al. 2022). In Ninh Thuan, the vaccine uptake rate at the end of 2021 was more than 92% (Thien Nhan 2021). Hence religion-specific factors were not a barrier to the mass vaccination campaign in Vietnam and in fact, the Cham in Ninh Thuan welcomed and trusted the vaccine. With stringent measures and high uptakes of COVID-19 vaccines, the transmission of the virus was slowed down and the condition was stabilized. In October 2021, there were no more inter-provincial checkpoints on highways or at train stations in Ninh Thuan. Gradually, daily life and associated activities resumed. The whole province went back to ‘Level One’ (the lowest ranking in terms of infection rate with ‘Level Four’ associated with the

highest rate of infections). In May 2022, the *Domestic Health Declaration* was no longer required. This change signaled the ability for religious and spiritual rituals to resume. In March 2022, when *Ramâwan* for the Cham Bani and *Ramadan* for the Cham Islam approached, the local government ordered that people who attended ceremonies observe the COVID-19 measures such as '5K', wearing masks during religious rituals, only allowing fully vaccinated people to attend ceremonies, and people and clerics must update the COVID-19-related information and policies to adhere to adjusted measures (Ninh Thuan Provincial People's Committee 2022).

#### 4. Discussion

In the shadow of the pandemic, with all the ups of downs associated with the infection rate, the Cham fully cooperated with the local government and followed health protocols. They practiced their faith and organized religious rituals following evidence-based guidelines and orders from the Government. As mentioned, both *Ramâwan* and *Ramadan*'s ceremonies were canceled or scaled back in 2020, and in 2021 the *Katé* was scaled back and limited to celebrations within families. Other life cycle rituals were also affected over this period. Meanwhile, when the situation stabilized, the Government swiftly adjusted the measures to ensure a balance across lives and livelihoods as well as physical and mental health. Hence in 2022, *Ramâwan* and *Ramadan* were organized under more or less normal conditions. During the pandemic, despite potentially abrupt changes, the Cham also positively and responsibly changed their mentality to adapt to new policies and guidelines. Pandemic-related discourses on kinship, co-

religionists, identity, blame and sympathy, and attitudes toward the right or wrong things to do evolved over time. At the beginning of the pandemic, when the news of the first COVID-19 cases in Văn Lâm 3 broke out, there was a lively discussion on social media such as Facebook about their decision to travel during the pandemic, their participation in many social events and gatherings as well as what was perceived as the 'double bad luck' of the village in the form of both drought and virus. In fact, those people travelled to Malaysia before Governments closed borders, and flights were still allowed. Therefore, they did not violate laws or regulations. Similarly, when the fourth wave broke out and intensified so quickly due to the Delta variant causing the massive exodus from the southern cities, Ninh Thuan and several Cham villages became hot spots of infections and once again those debates and discourses were raised. Naturally, fear activates coping mechanisms, and blaming others is a common coping strategy. But bearing the brunt of any 'scapegoating' can further burden vulnerable patients and even lead to social chaos. Thankfully, with the active role of officials, religious leaders, respectful people, and many others, the Cham quickly put notions of blame behind them and tried to help each other overcome the distressing period.

In my conversation with Hakem Jacob, the Head of the mosque of Cham Islam in An Nhon (Cham: *Palei Balap Klak*), he confirmed that his community always followed and observed guidelines from central and provincial governments, and were even early adopters in terms of taking on board precautions. He and other religious leaders also kept contact via phone or in person with local officials to receive governmental dispatches and documents so that he could convey and

guide the people and the religious communities in his village. Under this leadership, the community strictly followed the order of the Government by observing 5K, closing mosques, and canceling activities when asked. They also helped other Cham villages that were locked down such as Van Lam, Bau Truc by sending food and other necessities. At the same time, religious councils and dignitaries encouraged people to get tested and vaccinated, as well as follow the instructions related to quarantine, treatment, and funerals. Regarding religious ceremonies, when mosques were shut, no new forms of prayer service, like online sessions, were carried out but they tried to keep in contact via phones and social media to provide advice to those in need. When mosques were allowed to open, they instructed lay followers and devotees to follow the 5K rules, limited the number of attendees, and divided them among three different places: the village's mosque and two other smaller places. They applied a rotation system for attending the mass prayer sessions at the mosque with one week for the older attendees and one week for younger folks. Later, when vaccines were available and the mass vaccine campaign was facilitated, only fully vaccinated members of the community could attend mass prayer ceremonies at mosques on Friday. During *Ramadan*, people would be asked to break their fast at home before coming to the mosque for mass prayer service rather than breaking fast with co-religionists at mosques as usual (Personal conversation, 2022).

Similarly, in my conversation with Imam Duong Diep of Cham Bani in Phuoc Nhon, the same story was shared. He and other religious leaders kept regular contact with provincial officials, so they could

convey safety guidelines, testing schedules, and vaccination timelines to the Cham Bani community and provide advice and consultation if needed. For example, during *Ramâwan* in 2020, they followed the notice of the Clerics' Council to scale back activities such as canceling grave visiting ceremony (*Mbeng Muk Kei*) and as a result the funeral rituals were shortened from the usual three-day rituals.

In the pandemic, the community spirit of the Cham was at high levels. The Clerics' Council of Cham Ahiér of Ninh Thuan supported funds for COVID-19 prevention (Nguyen Tuong 2021a). Women from the Islamic mosque 102 in Phuoc Nhon, Ninh Thuan also gave gifts to dedicated isolation centres in Bau Truc and My Nghiep for those who came back from the southern cities and provinces - two Cham Ahiér villages and isolation center at Mai Thuc Loan school of Phuoc Nhon itself (Nguyen Tuong 2021b).

Another important topic was the management of COVID-19 patients' corpses. At the peak of the transmission waves, there was a significant increase in the number of deaths in a relatively short period of time, putting local service providers and governments under the pressure of upholding responsibilities and policies relating to the management of the deceased. Due to fear of transmission, special burial conditions were required, and parts of funeral and burial ceremonies were eliminated. In some cases, extreme responses to funeral management had a detrimental effect on the families and communities involved. However, it was important to observe traditional rituals to safeguard the dignity of the deceased and relatives' mental health by essentially avoiding unpleasant psychological and social impacts (Burrell A., Selman L.E

2020). WHO repeatedly insisted on the pivotal role of considering the cultural and religious traditions in the burial and cremation process of COVID-19 deaths as captured in the following quote: “*The dignity of the dead, their cultural and religious traditions, and their families should be respected and protected throughout*” (WHO 2020: 1).

Therefore, a key learning was that governments and health organizations should seek help from religious leaders to convey their public health messages to people about controlled cremation and burials as well as the necessity of complying with safety instructions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the beginning of the pandemic when the information about the disease was limited and during the peak of each wave and the associated high levels of mortality, sometimes the burial traditions clashed with the safety guidelines of the central governments regarding managing the death of those with or from COVID-19. In fact, the lack of adequate communication and proper policy messaging could cause the situation to worsen. In Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim country, incidents of body stealing and ‘corpse cluster’- the way local government officials in East Java province called an outbreak of COVID-19 infections related to the theft of a remained body infected by COVID-19- were recorded (Nugroho and Syarief 2021; Karmini and Milko 2020). In Vietnam, thanks to several factors, those unfortunate incidents didn’t occur. According to health protocols issued by the Ministry of Health connected with the management of COVID-19-related deaths, cremation and controlled burials were suggested with cremation the preferred option as mentioned in the Ministry’s guideline: “*The*

*bodies of deceased infected with COVID-19 have to be cremated, they may be buried only when cremation can’t be carried out.*” (Ministry of Health 2020)

The Ministry ordered that the funeral rituals should be completed within 24 hours of death with detailed guidelines about the process, protective equipment, and disinfection of location and workers. With the efforts of local officials and high-ranking religious leaders, the Cham followed the guidelines related to the management of COVID-19 deaths. Traditionally, when a Cham Ahiér dies, the body will be cremated and forehead bones will be collected. For Cham Bani and Cham Islam, cremation is prohibited and the deceased should be wrapped in cloth and buried within 24 hours. During the pandemic, they followed the regulations of the Government and kept the funeral as simple as possible, while later they carried dry funerals as in the case of the Cham Bani mentioned earlier in this paper.

## 5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all aspects of life. Spiritual life and the associated practices were no exception. The Cham in Vietnam and their ways of adapting to this significant health crisis shed light on the religious harmonization and community building that took place among minorities in Vietnam. The success of the pandemic response in Ninh Thuan highlights the role of highly respected religious leaders and faith communities during the distressing time as well as the close connection between the central and local governments with religious councils to help convey the public health policies and attend to the cultural and religious needs of the people. Flexibility and

adaptability in the Government's policies helped reduce the mental health implications of the pandemic, which was a frequently overlooked problem. Religion and spirituality can offer a transcendent meaning in the face of trauma and faith can be a psychological coping mechanism to help individuals and religious communities overcome challenges. During the pandemic, people from all walks of life and all religious groups felt insecure due to prolonged social distancing requirements and lockdowns, which could have had negative impacts on their mental health. Detachment from religious activities could further weaken people's resilience. As a result of adequate prevention and mitigation policies, collaboration between local government and clerics' councils as well as the laity, and religious congregations among the Cham, avoided becoming super-spreading events like *Kumbh Mela* in India in 2021 and 2022.

At the same time, some lessons can be learned and suggestions noted in the 'playbook' for future crises. Trust building in crisis management is very important, clear messaging and reasonable, data-based solutions with a balanced approach to ensure religious freedom and ritual practices could help to strengthen resilience among religious communities. Hence, clear policy messaging and trustworthy dialogues should be facilitated to build and maintain trust and better prepare for future crises.

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be facilitated to build and maintain trust and better prepare for future crises.

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