

OPENING SPEECH

BRINGING TOGETHER THE CAMBODIAN MUSLIMS AND THE UMMAH

This is a historic moment for us to witness for the first time the famous International Institute of Islamic Thought, known by its acronym of IIIT, which has brought together some ten specialists in various fields of education to discuss issues of education among the Muslim in the kingdom of Cambodia.

Earlier on, some of my associates and I have organised two seminars in this beautiful capital, Phnom Penh, the city of which I have many fond memories as I have been living here for some twenty years before I painfully departed with many others in 1975 to find a safe refuge, leaving my big family and friends behind. At first, we wanted this workshop to be held in early January but due to some constraints, we brought forward to this dates, 5-6 February 2011. We chose this period of the year, because it is the mildest season of the year. I remember in one of those days, when I was a student at Lycée Sisowat, the temperature dropped to 19°C.

And it is within this season too, on the 7 *Makara* (7th of January 1979), some 32 years ago, under the leadership of Samdech Hun Sen, Samdach Chea Sim and Samdach Heng Samrin, Cambodia was liberated from the Pol Pot regime, during which many innocent peace loving Cambodians were brutally killed or died of disease or starvation in a country which is rich in its natural resources and full of hospitality.

The two conferences which I mentioned just now were, one held in June 2007, whose theme was the *Meeting of the Malay World and Cambodia*. Some 20 papers were presented. The second one was held recently, in June 2010. The theme of this conference was the *Malay Heritages in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam*. It was a conference co-organised by the famous Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC), the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA) of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), GAPENA (Association Malaysian Writers), PWSM (Heritage Center for Malay Arts, of the UiTM), and the Association of Malaysian Archaeologists. Some 40 papers were presented then.

Today I am very happy to be here again, this time to be a part of a program fully sponsored by the famous IIIT. The theme of this workshop is 'The State of Education Among the Cambodian Muslims'. Some ten working papers are to be presented within these two days.

The Cambodian Muslims are also known as *Cham-Chvea* and *Khmer Islam*. They are fully integrated and become part and parcel of the Cambodian nation.

Throughout the history of their presence in the Kingdom, there were many intermarriages between the Buddhist Khmers and the *Cham-Chvea*. The famous of them all was the marriage between the king Reameathipadei I (Chau Ponhea Chan; after His Royal Highness conversion, HRH was known as Ibrahim and Ream Chaul Sas). HRH ruled Cambodia in 1642-1658. HRH had to convert to Islam first before marrying with the young and beautiful Malay girl in Chrang Chamres. Four centuries later there was a knot tied between Prince Norodom Ranarith and a Cham métisse from Chouy Changvar. Nowadays there are many intermarriages between Cambodian Buddhists and Muslims.

What is more beautiful than when love blossoms and there are no barriers for the two people to tie the knot. Both parties are very pleased that Islam recommend the future spouse to first convert to Islam, and for Buddhism, there is no prohibition for a Buddhist to convert to any religion to get married to someone whom he or she is deeply in love. Isn't it beautiful and the best moment in their lives?

The Cambodian Muslims, by their own means, participate actively in the Cambodian Nation building. In this long and winding road to this noble goal, I am glad and thankful to be part of the famous IIIT which, under the leadership of Prof Emeritus Dr. Osman Bakar, its Director for Malaysia as well as representative for the whole of East Asia including Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea and China. We are now organizing this workshop to find ways and means to help the Cambodian Muslims to be on the right path to development and progress.

Please allow me, as the workshop director, to sincerely welcome and thank His Excellency Prof Dr. Sorn Samnang who could spare his very busy schedule to officiate this historic workshop. My thanks also go to all our honorable guests who are present here to make this Workshop a reality.

I sincerely hope that this workshop is just the beginning of so many things to come. And I sincerely hope too that we can play a small part in helping Cambodians through Education.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to beg for His Excellencies' forgiveness for any shortcomings in the preparation and organisation of this workshop, and our apologies too go to other Honorable guests whom we may have unintentionally missed out in our invitation.

Please accept our sincere welcome, thanks and apologies.

Aurgun Chreun

Wassalam

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohamad Zain Musa

5 February 2011.