

Preserving and Promoting the Value of Folk Religious Culture of the Khmer Ethnic Community in Kien Giang Province in the Current Period

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SUMMARY

The Khmer people in Kien Giang province still preserve many traditional festivals and folk beliefs. Besides annual festival activities such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Ok-Om-Bok, Sene Dolta, ... with Theravada pagodas as the center for organizing and performing rituals, the Khmer people in Kien Giang also preserve some folk beliefs such as worshipping the god Ong Ta, the god Arak Neak Ta,... These beliefs not only have spiritual significance but also unite the community and preserve cultural identity. In an integrated world, the traditional beliefs of the Khmer ethnic community are facing many challenges, such as: the influence of new religions, the indifference of the younger generation, the commercialization of festivals, etc. The article proposes solutions, such as: cultural documentation, sustainable tourism development, increased education and support from the government to preserve and promote this unique cultural value.

Keywords: Khmer ethnic group; preservation; promotion; cultural beliefs; Kien Giang province.

INTRODUCTION

“Kien Giang is one of the three provinces in the Mekong Delta region with a large Khmer population. Kien Giang province has 13% of the population being Khmer (ranked third in the Mekong Delta region, after Soc Trang province and Tra Vinh province) with over 56,000 households and about 237,000 people. The Khmer people live mainly in the districts of Chau Thanh, Giong Rieng, Go Quao, Giang Thanh,...” (Chi,L. 2024).

The Khmer ethnic group in Kien Giang province contributes to the cultural and religious diversity of ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta region in general and Kien Giang province in particular. Compared to other provinces such as Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Vinh Long, Hau Giang, the Khmer people in Kien Giang have many unique features in their beliefs, with their own identity in their daily activities. It is a series of quite elaborate and complicated rituals preserved through a number of festival forms such as New Year's Eve (Chaul Chnam Thmay), Moon worship ceremony (Ok Om Bok), Ancestor worship ceremony (Sene Dolta) or ancestor worship rituals... The Khmer community in Kien Giang mainly lives in rural areas, so it has shaped their unique cultural and religious life, making Kien Giang an ideal place for the author to research the cultural values of ethnic minorities.

In the context of cultural integration and exchange, the traditional beliefs of the Khmer people are currently facing the risk of being lost. Therefore, researching, recording and preserving these cultural and religious values not only helps to preserve cultural heritage, but also contributes to the development of tourism, education and promotion of local culture. At the same time, the article also analyzes how the Khmer community in Kien Giang province adapts to social, economic and cultural changes in the current period.

OVERVIEW; THEORY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The religious culture of ethnic minorities in general and the religious culture of the Khmer ethnic group in particular have attracted special attention from researchers, because this is an important aspect that helps shape the cultural identity of the nation. Typical works have focused on clarifying the traditional belief system, the

role of rituals and related social factors, which can be summarized through a number of works such as: Some features of the Khmer people in the South (Nguyen Manh Cuong, 2002), Customs and life-cycle rituals of the Khmer people in the South (Tran Van Bon, 2002), Khmer ethnic group in the South (An,P. 2009), Khmer people in the South, Vietnam (Canh, N.K. 2012), ...

In general, the above research works have helped provide a comprehensive view of the traditional beliefs of the Khmer people and the role of rituals in community life. However, as society becomes increasingly modernized, new factors such as changes in living space, the development of communication and education, and the introduction of religion are raising many unanswered questions. How can traditional beliefs adapt in the new context? Will beliefs continue to be the bond that binds the community when the younger generations are less attached to traditional culture? These are the issues that this article aims to address, in order to fill in the gaps in the overall picture of the cultural beliefs of the Khmer people in Kien Giang province.

The article uses the “Cultural Ecology Theory”. This theory is associated with the name of American Anthropologist Julian Steward (1902-1972). Steward’s concept is to study cultural ecology – analyzing the relationship between a culture and its environment. The main purpose of this theory is to understand the internal social changes of an evolutionary nature that must begin with adaptation to the environment. Applying the perspectives of cultural ecology to understand the folk beliefs of the Khmer community in Kien Giang, we analyze and clarify the factors that form the characteristics of folk beliefs and religious culture of the Khmer people.

The paper uses a qualitative approach to explore in depth the cultural and religious aspects of the Khmer people in Kien Giang province. Data were collected through field surveys in typical “phums” and “socs” where traditional beliefs are still maintained or are being influenced by new religions. In-depth interviews with abbots, influential people in the community and local people were conducted to understand the meaning of rituals, the role of important figures and the attitudes of the younger generation towards beliefs. In addition, secondary documents from previous research works were analyzed to serve as a basis for comparison and supplement to the field data. Content analysis and cross-cultural comparison methods are used to identify belief patterns, clarify changes in the modern context, and build a comprehensive and coherent picture of the Khmer belief system.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Folk beliefs of Khmer people in Kien Giang

- New Year's Eve (*Chaul Chnam Thmay*)

Chaul” means “Enter”; “Chnam Thmay” is “New Year”. “Chaul Chnam Thmay” means “New Year”, people pray that everything will be better in the new year, the shortcomings and worries of the old year will disappear, and good luck will come. On April 14, 15 and 16 every year, Khmer people celebrate the traditional New Year. When studying the traditional New Year (*Chôl Châm Thmay*), we found that, similar to the customs of the Kinh and Chinese people, Khmer people also celebrate the New Year for 3 days: The first day is called Sang-kran (stepping forward, moving forward). The second day is called Wana-bot (lack or excess). The third day is called Lon-satk (advance, increase). On the first day, groups of people will enter the pagoda in colorful clothes, holding incense, candles, flowers and fruits, together welcoming the Great Agricultural Calendar God (Maha Sang Kran) with the meaning of gratitude to the god for blessing a year of favorable weather and bountiful crops. They go around the main hall and then go to worship Buddha, celebrate the new year. On the second day, Buddhists offer rice to the monks and build sand mountains (Anisang Pun Phnom Khsach). The third day is a very important day for the Khmer people, because it is the day to pray for the dead, bathe the Buddha at the temple and bathe the Buddha at home, meaning to wash away worries, welcome new things, and be happy. Monks are invited to perform the prayer ceremony, especially those who have contributed to the founding, the deceased monks who sacrificed for the national Dharma, the heroic martyrs who sacrificed for the Fatherland. The activities in these 3 days of the festival are all associated with the temple, because “The temple is a typical symbol of Khmer culture, a place to train human morality and personality, and also a place to educate Khmer

youth. Khmer people consider the temple a sacred, solemn place, where the quintessence of the nation is concentrated” (Hanh,P.P. 2013).

The Khmer people's “Chôl Chnam Thmay” festival is a lesson to teach their children and grandchildren about how to live, a way of life according to Buddhist philosophy, a noble philosophy of gratitude to Buddha, monks, and their grandparents - the deceased. They offer banh tet, fruits and a stack of white cloth to pray for the deceased with the concept of “what we eat, our grandparents will have”, similar to the concept of “the world is like the afterlife” of the Kinh people. The Khmer people's “Chaul Chnam Thmay” festival shows the spirit of respect for morality in the culture of the Khmer people of Kien Giang.

- Ancestor worship ceremony (Sene Dolta)

In Khmer, the word “Sene” means “offering”, “Dol” means “grandmother”, “Ta” means “grandfather”. The “Sene Dolta” ceremony of the Khmer people has the meaning of a Vu Lan ceremony to express respect to grandparents in order to remember the birth of deceased relatives. “During the Dolta season, monks and Khmer people in pagodas and in each family turn to their ancestors with sincerity to offer gratitude, repay the immense kindness to the parents who raised each person to grow up and mature” (Hanh,P.P 2013). According to traditional customs, the “Sene Dolta” ceremony is held from August 29 to September 1 (lunar calendar) with 4 main rituals: the rice offering ceremony (Bos Bai Ben), the ancestor worship ceremony (Sen Dolta), the grandparents welcoming ceremony (Phchum Ben) and the grandparents seeing-off ceremony (chun Dolta). The “Sene Dolta” festival has a profound humanistic meaning. The Khmer people celebrate this festival not only to commemorate the merits of the deceased but also to show the filial piety of children and grandchildren to their living parents and grandparents. This is an opportunity for children to express their respect and filial piety to their parents: the delicious and strange things children make for their parents, buy new clothes, etc. The festival also organizes entertainment, dancing and singing traditional Khmer melodies at the pagoda as well as in families. For a long time, the “Sene Dolta” ancestor worship ceremony has been closely associated with the spirituality of the Khmer people in Kien Giang, demonstrating the moral and cultural values of “remembering the source of water when drinking” of the people.

- Moon worship ceremony (Ok Om Bok)

The “Ok Om Bok” festival, also known as the “Moon worshipping ceremony” or “Flat rice flakes” – a major Khmer folk festival held at the end of the harvest season to express gratitude to the moon, the god of Khmer beliefs who protects the crops, regulates the weather, and brings good fruit and prosperity to the people in “phum” and “soc”.

According to tradition, on the evening of October 15 (lunar calendar), the ceremony is held. When the moon rises high, people gather in the temple yard or their home yard to perform the ceremony. People plant two bamboo trees and use coconut leaves to form an archway, on the gate there is a betel string with 12 leaves symbolizing the 12 months of the year and a bunch of areca nuts with 7 fruits split into two wings like two bee wings, symbolizing the 7 days of the week. Under the archway is a table, displaying offerings of agricultural products such as: coconut, banana, sweet potato, taro, rice cake, and flattened green rice. After the offering tray is displayed, people sit with their hands clasped, facing the moon to perform the ceremony. When the moon rises high and shines, people begin to burn incense, lamps and invite an elderly, most prestigious person in the “phum”, “soc” or in the family to preside over the ceremony.

The celebrant prays to express people's gratitude to the moon, asking the moon to accept the offerings and grant everyone health and good crops. After the offering, everyone gathers together to collect the offerings to enjoy the blessings, while the children play, dance and sing until late at night.

- Belief in worshipping Mr. Ta (Neak Ta)

“Neak Ta” is a deity of the Evil Gods, revered by the Khmer people, worshiped and prayed for the things they desire. In terms of origin, “Naek Ta” is one of the ancient forms of belief, originating from Brahmanism, meaning as follows: “Neak” refers to humans in general and “Ta” refers to an old man or male. It can be

understood that “Neak Ta” is a god in the form of an old man. In terms of power, people consider “Ong Ta” to be a god of good fortune and a guardian god in the “phum” and “soc” of the Khmer people.

If the Vietnamese and Chinese worship “Ong Dia” and “Thanh Hoang”, the Khmer worship “Ong Ta” as a god who governs the land. The Khmer people of Kien Giang believe that “Ong Ta” is the guardian god of their “phum” and “soc”. When something happens, they go to the “Ong Ta” temple to pray, no matter how big or small the matter is, important or ordinary, such as: illness, unfavorable business, bad luck, etc.

“For the “Mr. Ta” worship ceremony, the offerings only include grilled snakehead fish, rice wine, green bananas... When worshiping, the homeowner must eat and drink a bite first, to prove that the offerings are not poisonous. The purpose of the worship ceremony is to pray for peace, favorable weather, and good harvests. In addition, many families also have their own worship ceremony to pray for overcoming accidents, illnesses, and bad luck... After the worship ceremony, people can eat and drink on the spot, they are not allowed to take anything home. Before doing anything important like plowing the fields, treating sick livestock... people all pray to “Mr. Ta” (Hieu, N.H. 2019).

When going to worship “Mr. Ta”, you must bring 5 incense sticks (they believe that there will be 5 gods at the temple including “Mr. Ta”). After praying, if your wish is granted, you will return the offerings according to the size of the offering, such as: pig's head, chicken, boiled duck, etc.

The shrine of “Mr. Ta” is very simple, made only of bamboo, palm leaves, coconut leaves,... or in some places it is made of cement, bricks and then choose a stone niche or a shady place like a bamboo bush, old tree,...

The custom of worshiping “Mr. Ta” has long been familiar to Kien Giang people in general and the Khmer people in Kien Giang in particular, not only popular among the Khmer people but also the Kinh people. There is a folk saying: “Mr. Dia guards the house/Mr. Ta guards the fields”. Therefore, if Mr. Dia is considered a household god, Mr. Ta becomes the guardian god of gardens and fields. Thereby, expressing people's wishes for a prosperous, warm, happy life, placing their faith and belief in the guardian god, whose duty is to look after the fields, helping the crops to be bountiful. That is the humanistic value, the traditional ethical value.

- Kathina Ceremony

According to the concept of Southern Buddhism, “Kathina robe offering ceremony” is the act of Buddhists offering robes (cassocks) and other items to monks to show their attachment and closeness. “Kathina” – according to the classical language of Southern Buddhism, means “steadfastness” and “tightness”. The “robe offering ceremony” of Khmer Buddhists will sow much merit and the recipients of the robes, who are monks, will be fulfilled in their practice.

In the Khmer cultural tradition of Kien Giang, each pagoda will hold a grand ceremony of “Kathina robe offering” once a year on any day within a month right after the “retreat” (3-month period when monks gather at a pagoda to concentrate on studying and practicing) ends. The “robe offering ceremony” of Khmer Theravada Buddhism is initiated by a Buddhist leader who informs the monks about the time of the ceremony to receive the robe.

“Kathina robe offering ceremony” is the day to offer the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) four items, especially essential offerings used in the temple and in the monks' daily activities such as: Kasaya robe, alms bowl for monks to beg for food, necessities, writing books... These are items for monks to use in their daily study and activities. Among these offerings, the Kasaya robe is a very important and indispensable offering.

In addition, many families also donate other items to the pagoda such as: beds, tables, chairs, cabinets, blankets, pillows... to show their respect as well as contribute to equipping the pagoda. In addition to offering essential offerings to the Triple Gem, Buddhist followers also contribute funds for the purpose of renovating and repairing pagodas and providing food and provisions to monks, so that they can study and serve Buddhism with peace of mind.

Before the ceremony begins, monks and Buddhists parade three times, carrying robes and items such as medicine, fruits, etc. around the temple. Then the “Kathina Robe Offering Ceremony” is solemnly performed in the main hall. A representative monk will explain the meaning of the “Royal Offering Ceremony” and chant sutras to bless Buddhist families.

“The Robe Offering Ceremony” is a ritual imbued with the traditional culture of the Khmer people in Kien Giang. In addition to the meaning of expressing the Buddhists’ hearts towards supporting the Sangha, it also has the meaning of praying for peace and prosperity in the “phum” and “soc”, family safety, favorable weather, creating a joyful atmosphere for Buddhists and people in the “phum” and “soc”. In addition, it helps people live close, friendly, united, responsible, always loving and caring for each other, contributing to preserving and honoring the traditional cultural values of the nation, strengthening solidarity between monks and Buddhists in the “phum” and “soc”.

The significance of preserving the folk beliefs of the Khmer people in Kien Giang today

- First, the spiritual bridge and harmony with nature

Beliefs are a means of connecting people with gods and ancestors. Rituals such as: Ancestor worship ceremony (Sene Dolta), moon worship ceremony (Ok Om Bok), ... show strong belief in the protection of supernatural forces. This is the way Khmer people express gratitude, pray for protection, and help life become more balanced and peaceful. In particular, rituals related to praying for crops are not only spiritual but also reflect the close relationship between people and nature. Khmer people believe that good agricultural production and favorable weather depend on the blessing of gods. Through these rituals, Khmer people not only show respect but also reaffirm their awareness of living in harmony and appreciating the natural environment.

- Second, family and community bonds.

Traditional Khmer beliefs not only have spiritual significance but also serve as a bond between family and community. Rituals such as ancestor worship are not only an opportunity to express gratitude to ancestors but also remind people of their responsibility to maintain the connection between generations. This is an opportunity for family members to gather, share beliefs, and strengthen their bonds.

In addition to the family, major festivals also have the meaning of creating a space to connect the community. Through folk religious activities, people directly participate in organizing, performing, and enjoying cultural activities and they themselves become creators of cultural values, enhancing the spirit of solidarity and community cohesion. These folk religious activities are also an opportunity for people in the “phum” and “soc” to meet each other, participate in cultural and artistic activities, have fun, etc.

- Third, spiritual solutions in facing difficulties.

In life, a part of the Khmer community also faces difficulties, from illness, disaster to psychological instability. Therefore, rituals to help the Khmer are a way to restore balance, creating a sense of peace for individuals and families. Through that, beliefs become a spiritual support, helping the Khmer people of Kien Giang overcome challenges, strengthening their faith in life.

- Fourth, preserve and transmit cultural knowledge.

Beliefs are not only spiritual practices but also a channel for transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Each ritual is associated with folk tales, customs, and rules of conduct in life. Thanks to that, beliefs help preserve a rich treasure of cultural knowledge, ensuring the continuity and longevity of Khmer culture.

- Fifth, a living cultural treasure.

Folk religious rituals are not only sacred but also an indispensable part of cultural life. They are often combined with artistic activities such as singing, dancing (rom-vong folk dance,...) and folk games, creating a

rich and vibrant cultural space. These rituals help the Khmer people express their unique cultural identity, conveying cultural values in the most vivid way.

DISCUSSION

Currently, the work of preserving Khmer beliefs and religions in Kien Giang is facing some difficulties and challenges such as: changes in lifestyle; the influence of new religions, the indifference of the younger generation... Therefore, it is necessary to synchronously implement some solutions to preserve Khmer beliefs such as:

First, economic development improves material and spiritual life.

The Khmer people in Kien Giang province are associated with agricultural production with the characteristic of monoculture of rice. The residential area is mostly affected by alum and salinity, along with the process of industrialization, urbanization and climate change leading to difficulties in lack of land for production, Khmer farmers in Kien Giang have left the countryside. A part of Khmer farmers go to work, even settle in new lands, specifically migrating to industrial parks in Binh Duong, Dong Nai provinces, etc. The number of poor households who are Khmer people without land and lacking land, without capital and lacking capital for production is still quite large. To overcome the above difficulties, it is necessary to focus on implementing the plan to transform the structure of agricultural and rural production towards industrialization and modernization. Investing in irrigation, investing in high-yield and high-quality crop and livestock varieties, applying scientific and technological measures to effectively exploit the potential of land, water surface, labor force, etc. to increase rice productivity, renovate mixed gardens, and grow economically effective crops and fruit trees. At the same time, it is necessary to promote the development of aquaculture, livestock and poultry farming.

Implement well the policy of subsidizing prices and transportation costs of agricultural products, finding consumption markets, building agricultural processing facilities to create high value goods, high economic efficiency, contributing to increasing income, improving and enhancing the lives of Khmer people in the province. Actively expand the models of cooperation between the state, scientists, businesses, and farmers. In which, the state invests capital through preferential loan programs for Khmer people, scientists transfer science and technology through training sessions for Khmer people, businesses sign contracts to consume agricultural products, help and exchange production experiences.

Kien Giang province needs to step up calling for businesses to invest in factories, develop tourism, industry, and services to create jobs on the spot and generate income for the Khmer people. Effectively use State and social capital to implement policies for the Khmer people.

To improve the spiritual and cultural life, it is necessary to increase the supply of press publications, broadcast radio and television to “phum” and “soc” in Khmer language and bring the internet to places where many Khmer people live. At the same time, it is necessary to create all conditions for Khmer people to preserve and promote their national cultural identity, conserve tangible and intangible culture, including forms of folk beliefs.

Second, strengthen education for the younger generation.

Education plays an important role in raising awareness and arousing cultural pride in the community. Integrating traditional beliefs into the curriculum at schools in Kien Giang province, especially the ethnic boarding school system in the districts of An Bien, Giong Rieng, Go Quao, Chau Thanh, etc., will help the younger generation understand and appreciate the cultural values of their people.

Third, better support from the government

Government support is essential to preserving beliefs. The government needs to enact flexible policies, provide financial support for organizing festivals, protect sacred spaces, and promote research and education programs on beliefs

CONCLUSION

The Khmer people's religious culture in Kien Giang is a valuable cultural heritage, closely linked to the national identity and spiritual life of the community. In the current context of integration, change is inevitable, but preserving and promoting traditional cultural values is an urgent task. From a research perspective, the article provides a comprehensive view of the Khmer people's beliefs in Kien Giang province and proposes some specific solutions to preserve and develop cultural values in modern society. The future of the traditional Khmer beliefs in Kien Giang depends on the coordination between the government, the community and social organizations in protecting, promoting and adapting to the times.

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