

# Characteristics and Transformations in the Religious and Spiritual Practices of Coastal Fishermen in Kien Hai Island Region Today

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000367>

Received: 15 July 2025; Accepted: 22 July 2025; Published: 18 August 2025

## ABSTRACT

Kien Hai was formerly one of the three special administrative zones of Kien Giang province, which now belongs to An Giang province. The religious and spiritual practices of the coastal and island communities in Kien Hai encapsulate a wide range of cultural, spiritual, ethical, and economic-tourism values, contributing significantly to the identity of Kien Giang's maritime culture. In the current context of intensified cultural interaction, adaptation, and conflict, these belief systems have undergone considerable transformation. This dynamic presents an urgent need to develop effective strategies for preserving and promoting the positive aspects of spiritual-cultural practices, thereby supporting sustainable socio-economic development. While some transformations reflect natural cultural evolution, others deviate from traditional values, leading to distortions that may obscure or diminish intangible cultural heritage. These inconsistencies require careful examination and appropriate adjustments to ensure the enduring vitality and integrity of local belief systems within the broader framework of cultural preservation and development.

**Keywords:** Folk belief, Religious practices, Whale worship, Mother Goddess worship, Goddess cult, Transformation, Coastal communities, Kiên Hải.

## INTRODUCTION

The religious practices of the fishermen in Kiên Hải represent the consciousness and worldview of humans in relation to their living environment—the sea. A profound understanding of the sea has been shaped through the long process of human livelihood on the ocean, with religious beliefs and associated rituals emerging as a culmination of this experience.

To this day, the essence, functions, and forms of religious practices among the fishing communities in the Kiên Hải archipelago have remained fundamentally unchanged. This underscores the resilience and sustainability of religious belief as a form of ideology. However, as a cultural phenomenon, like all cultural expressions, the religious life of any community inevitably undergoes changes to varying degrees. Such transformations conform to the dynamic laws of culture.

Thought and consciousness are inherently tied to enduring and expansive attributes, verified through the lived experiences of successive generations within a community. These are transmitted and codified in customs and traditions, reflecting the community's spiritual sentiments and social behaviors. Consequently, these beliefs do not change rapidly or drastically.

## Characteristics of the Religious and Cultural Practices of Coastal Fishermen in Kiên Hải

The material practices of the fishing profession are shaped by three main factors: fish, water, and land, among which water is the most crucial for fishermen. Their living and nurturing environment is the vast, boundless sea, which belongs to no one. Moreover, the daily lives of Kiên Hải fishermen heavily depend on natural conditions. For example, during the southeast monsoon season, fishermen set out to sea to fish, while during the northeast monsoon, boats remain anchored, waiting for calm seas and lighter winds to venture out. Storms and heavy rains cause anxiety as rough seas lead to difficulties in life, and above all, threaten the lives of loved ones drifting on

the ocean. This highlights that social relationships and interactions on the boat are based on unity and mutual support, rather than hierarchical "master-servant" relations.

In the perception of Kiên Hải fishermen, the sea is not only a source of livelihood but also a source of calamity. Therefore, people hold beliefs and religious practices to seek protection from supernatural forces or deities. This is reflected in the fishermen's worship of sea-related gods. According to our statistics, across the Kiên Hải archipelago, there are more than twenty worship sites dedicated to praying for divine protection for those who go to sea. These deities play a vital and revered role in the spiritual lives of the fishermen.

This demonstrates that, being closely tied to the marine environment, the gods worshipped by island residents primarily serve to bless and protect those who fish and make a living on the sea. Kiên Hải fishermen deeply understand the dangers of the sea through their lived experiences. These hardships include loss of property, boat sinking, and the greatest pain—losing loved ones whose bodies vanish at sea. The boundary between life and death on the ocean is very fragile, so people are acutely aware of their duties and responsibilities toward the sea.

Hence, the traditional religious practices of Kiên Hải fishermen focus on worshipping deities believed to provide protection and blessings at sea, such as the whale god, the Mother Goddess and other female deities associated with rivers and seas, and rituals honoring the spirits of the deceased such as Âm linh or Cô Bác.

### **Specific Characteristics of Whale/"Cá Ông" Worship as the Water Deity**

This belief system not only fulfills the spiritual needs of the fishermen but also embodies profound humanitarian values, reflecting human interactions with the sea. The whale, known locally as "Cá Ông," symbolizes strength and serves as a protective deity for people. Essentially, "Cá Ông" refers to the whale — a marine mammal. In folk culture, it is known by various names such as Ông Nam Hải, Ông Chuông, Ông Câu, Ông Khơi, Ông Lớn, among others. "Cá Ông" is regarded as a sacred creature worshipped by fishing communities along the southern central coast of Vietnam.

The whale worship holds significant spiritual value for local fishermen. In the consciousness of fishermen who often face the unpredictable sea, during storms, rough waves, boat capsizes, or lost nets—moments when human life is endangered—the image of "Cá Ông" as a protector becomes a precious spiritual refuge and a symbol of faith. Initially, this belief served as a psychological support helping people endure hardships and dangers during their livelihood activities<sup>1</sup>. Over time, this faith deeply imprinted in the collective subconscious and developed into a folk religion. However, it is believed that "Cá Ông" does not save everyone indiscriminately but only those who are "duyên" (destined or have a special bond with him), typically those who live virtuously and kindly. Therefore, there have been cases where fishermen, despite fervent prayers and pleas, were not saved by "Cá Ông" — the deity of the Southern Sea. Based on absolute trust in the benevolence of "Cá Ông," fishermen have developed explanations for unanswered prayers, suggesting that the deity has not fully manifested sacredness as per their hopes and faith<sup>2</sup>.

Alongside the concept of rebirth, the whale has become a symbol of generative merit and life-giving power. This belief represents a form of animism and occupational religion that reflects the risks and uncertainties fishermen face while at sea. The whale worship, together with its taboos, has partially helped limit the decline in whale populations. The veneration of whales and other sacred fish species also contributes to maintaining marine ecological balance, reflecting humans' love for the sea and nature. This respect originates from fear of mysterious oceanic forces, thereby emphasizing the need to preserve sacred spaces and cultivate an awareness of protecting and respecting the sea.

### **Worship of Mother Goddesses and Sea Goddesses**

<sup>1</sup> NguyenThanh Loi, 2006, The Whale Worshipping Custom in the Coastal Areas of South Central Vietnam, Journal of Folklore Culture, No. 4, pp. 52-60.

<sup>1</sup> Le The Vinh, The Custom of Whale Worship, Social Sciences Publishing House, 2015, p. 46.

This form of worship is directed toward those who directly govern the living space of this community. Among the Vietnamese in the Southern region, including Kiên Hải and Kiên Giang province in An Giang, polytheism is practiced. This was documented by Trịnh Hoài Đức in the book *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, stating: “They revere Buddha, believe in spirit mediums, and mainly honor female deities such as Bà Chúa Ngọc, Bà Chúa Động, Bà Hỏa Tinh, Bà Thủy Long<sup>3</sup>...” Notably, “the Southern region is the land of female deities and Mother Goddesses,<sup>4</sup>” often worshipped under the title *Bà* (Lady)<sup>5</sup>.

Among many Mother Goddesses or *Bà* worshipped, the cult of *Bà Chúa Xứ* represents a typical form of belief among the Vietnamese in the Southwestern region and Kiên Hải in particular. Additionally, *Bà Chúa Hòn* and *Bà Cậu* are also widely venerated. These deities originate from different ethnic backgrounds—Vietnamese, Cham, and Hoa (Chinese)—but all are revered by the Vietnamese people and worshipped with the aspiration for their protection to ensure peace, prosperity, and well-being for the community.

The worship of Mother Goddesses reflects the economic and social development of the Kiên Hải fishing community. It also manifests the cultural exchange and syncretism between Vietnamese and Hoa, Khmer, and Cham peoples, embodying the belief that these Goddesses have the power to grant safety on the vast sea and bestow prosperity through bountiful fishing harvests.

Because life is constantly faced with the vast ocean and storms, and humans feel small and vulnerable before the sea, the worship of *Âm Linh* (the spirits of the dead) is also quite prevalent in Kiên Hải, which is understandable. The practice of worshipping *Âm Linh* and *Cô Hồn* (wandering spirits) is a unique ritual with profound values: humanitarian, educational, ethical, traditional, and community-cohesive values. For Kiên Hải fishermen, visiting temples is not only to pray for family safety but also to pray for the general populace and the land to enjoy favorable weather and prosperous livelihoods. Moreover, the ritual honoring the spirits is an occasion to express gratitude toward soldiers, fellow countrymen, and the deceased who have protected them. More importantly, it fosters deep empathy between the living and the dead.

### Worship of Deities Closely Connected to the Community

In addition to worshipping sea deities, the fishermen of Kiên Hải also venerate gods associated with villages, families, and clans, such as the *Thành Hoàng* (Village Guardian), *Bà Chúa Xứ* (Lady of the Land), and the national hero Nguyễn Trung Trực. The desire for peace and security within each household on every island is a constant and sacred aspiration. This need goes beyond simply venturing out to sea; thus, these terrestrial deities are also carefully and respectfully worshipped, no less than the sea gods, as an expression of gratitude for their protection and blessings for the family and community.

### Taboos in Belief and Religious Practices

Alongside worship, taboos play an integral role in the spiritual life of the fishermen. According to their beliefs, “Where there is worship, there is sacredness; where there are taboos, there is safety.” Therefore, the fishermen observe several taboos:

For fishermen, the boat is an essential tool—it serves not only as a fishing vessel but also as their living space on the sea. Consequently, activities like building or repairing a boat must be done on auspicious days, accompanied by proper ceremonies and offerings<sup>6</sup>.

Religious practices strongly influence their customs and habits. At the beginning of each fishing trip, most boat owners and crew burn incense and pray at the shrine dedicated to *Bà* (Lady), placing her altar at the bow of the boat along with a statue of Guanyin Bodhisattva (*Phật Bà Quan Âm*). They highly revere the whale (cá voi) and

<sup>3</sup> Trịnh Hoài Đức, (translated and annotated by Lý Việt Dũng, 2005), *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, Đồng Nai General Publishing House, p. 180

<sup>4</sup> Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Lên đồng: The Journey of Spirits and Human Fate*, Thế Giới Publishing House, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese Folklore and Arts Association (2008), *Central Coastal Culture and Southwest Coastal Culture*, Encyclopedia Publishing House, Hanoi

<sup>6</sup> Field survey data collected at Hon Son and Nam Du – Kien Hai during May and June 2023

avoid directly naming it out of respect, instead using titles such as *Ông*, *Đức Ông*, or *Đức Linh Ông*, reflecting deep reverence.

For seafarers, the boat and the taboos associated with it are often a major concern for fishermen.

"In the taboos of Vietnamese seafarers, those related to the boat are especially respected. In many places, there is a custom of painting eyes on the boat. It is believed that these eyes help the boat avoid harm from sea monsters, assist fishermen in finding fish schools, and help traders find prosperous harbors"<sup>7</sup>

The bow of the boat is considered a sacred and important place, with an altar for worshipping spirits and two "divine eyes" to guide the way. Therefore, women are forbidden from urinating overboard at the bow, as it is believed this will cause bad luck in fishing. If it is known that the person will go to sea that afternoon, they must not be asked, "Are you going fishing?" The person who is asked must return home to buy fruit and incense to perform a ritual to dispel bad luck.

Fishermen here also have a tradition of fearing that the sides of the boat be nailed (known as "yểm đinh"), as they believe this will lead to the end of their livelihood, sometimes even forcing them to quit the profession. People sitting on the boat's cabin roof are only allowed to face forward and not look back, as turning back is associated with regret, sadness, and saying farewell to the mainland.

In daily life, fishermen avoid using words related to misfortune in their profession, such as "capsize" or "sink," and instead use alternative expressions. When at sea, the boat owner particularly forbids fights on board; if a scuffle occurs, the owner must perform a solemn ritual to cleanse the bad luck. While fishing or working at sea, they do not carelessly throw fish heads, bones, or entrails into the sea. Dropping a knife into the water is especially taboo, as it is believed to cut off the fish source, causing the fish to stop gathering for them to catch. Upon returning to shore and unloading the catch, the boat owner must always watch out for malicious individuals who might take a fish and bury it, thereby burying the household's fortune.

In terms of eating habits, fishermen avoid flipping the fish over after finishing one side, as flipping symbolizes capsizing the boat and is akin to the taboo of overturning. To compliment a fatty fish, they say the fish is "diligent," and they avoid saying they are "fed up with eating fish," because it is believed that such words will cause the deities to withhold fish from them.

Additionally, before going out to sea, fishermen are not allowed to eat grilled or roasted food because they fear their boats might catch fire. They also avoid being asked, "Are you preparing to go to sea?" as this is considered a bad omen. Islanders also avoid skimming foam off the cooking rice, believing that doing so will cause them to encounter strong waves and storms at sea.

In summary, these taboos and prohibitions, both on land and at sea, serve to preserve the sacred space, ensure that their means of livelihood operate smoothly, and most importantly, to avoid offending the sacred entities. The words and actions of the island fishermen are both practical and symbolic, with the ultimate purpose of hoping for a peaceful and prosperous life.

## **Changes in the Religious Practices of Kiên Hải Fishermen Today**

### **Changes in the Scale and Timing of Worship Places**

Almost all fishing-related rituals existing within the community life of Kiên Hải island fishermen have experienced certain changes in timing. The duration and schedule of these ceremonies have been simplified. Due to changes in weather and market economic conditions, the worship sites have also changed significantly compared to the past, both in terms of location and spatial arrangement.

In the past, fishermen living on sparsely populated islets with difficult living conditions had only small worship places dedicated to whale spirits, the Mother Goddess (Mẫu), or Female Deities, usually small shrines located

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<sup>7</sup> Nguyen Hai Le (2009), *The Sea in Vietnamese Culture*, People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi.



right by the seaside. In some places, if not observed carefully, one could not distinguish between a shrine and the fishermen's graves on the islet, such as the Bà Chúa Thượng Động shrine, Bà Cậu shrine, or the Ông An Sơn temple.

However, over the last 10 years, thanks to improvements in labor conditions, the application of scientific and technical advances in marine professions, and better sea transportation, the living standards of fishermen on these islets have changed. The temporary coconut-leaf huts have gradually been replaced by reinforced concrete houses—multi-story, spacious, and sturdier. As life improved, the fishermen's faith also strengthened; they believed that the Lords and Ladies (Ông and Bà) blessed them with a prosperous and sufficient life. Therefore, they generously contributed labor and funds to renovate the places where they entrusted their faith and the community's trust. For example, the Bà Cố Chủ shrine in Lại Sơn was rebuilt in 2011<sup>8</sup> into a spacious, airy structure funded by the local fishermen themselves. Similarly, the Bà Chúa Xứ (Lady of the Islet) shrine in An Sơn now stands on a wide and grand space—probably the largest and most magnificent shrine dedicated to Bà Chúa Xứ on any islet. The Bà Chúa Thượng shrine was also renovated accordingly. Overall, all the former worship places of the fishermen have been refurbished and made much more grandiose thanks to contributions from the fishermen on the islets.

In addition, some worship sites have been relocated from their original positions, partly due to climate change and partly because fishermen no longer considered the old locations convenient for annual rituals. For instance, the Ông temple in An Sơn was rebuilt on a higher and more favorable site compared to the old shrine, and the Bà Chúa Thượng shrine was also rebuilt by the fishermen.

This detail somewhat shows that for the fishermen here, they believe that when life improves, the first thing they think of is the blessings and grace of the Deities and the Mother Goddess. Thus, faith in life and in the sacred world is further strengthened. This is the basis for the positive transformation of worship sites in modern society.

Besides changes in spatial arrangements, there have also been changes in the timing of religious practices. For example, at the Bà Chúa Xứ and Bà Mã Châu shrines in Lại Sơn, the timing of the annual festival honoring the Lady has changed compared to before. According to fishermen, the festival used to be held in the 10th lunar month but has been moved to the 2nd lunar month for nearly 10 years<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, the whale worship day at the Ông temple in Bãi Bắc – Lại Sơn has shifted from the 10th lunar month to the 1st lunar month

### **Changes in Taboos and Superstitions**

This area reflects some of the most noticeable transformations in the religious and spiritual life of Kiên Hải's coastal residents. Fishermen in the region have experienced clear shifts in their practices. For example, women were once forbidden from boarding fishing boats, but today, they can freely go aboard to mend nets or transport fish. In the past, fishermen would avoid contact with their wives before heading out to sea, but such customs have become increasingly rare, and in many islets, they have disappeared entirely.

Other traditional taboos—such as avoiding women before a voyage or refusing to return home after forgetting an item—have also lost their former rigidity, particularly among the younger and middle-aged generations.

During fishing trips, lighting incense or making offerings at the shrine of Ông (the Whale God) or the shrine of Bà (Goddess/Mother Deity) before departure is no longer as strictly observed as it was by previous generations. Additionally, when suffering misfortunes or losses at sea, seeking out shaman

### **Changes in Rituals and Customs in Spiritual Practices**

Alongside the aforementioned shifts in taboos, there have also been notable changes in the rituals and customs practiced by local fishermen.

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<sup>8</sup> Field survey data collected at Hon Sơn and Nam Du – Kiên Hải during May and June 4/2014

<sup>9</sup> Field survey data collected at Hon Sơn and Nam Du – Kiên Hải during May and June 5&6/2023

In whale worship, several rituals and customs have been simplified or adjusted. For example, in the past, when encountering a dead whale (known locally as Ông Lụy), fishermen would observe a three-year mourning period. Today, however, this period has been shortened significantly—typically only 100 days—after which a ritual is held to "end mourning" and resume fishing.

Traditional practices for those "blessed by Ông"—such as abstaining from marital relations during the mourning period or wearing mourning garments for 100 days—have also been relaxed or discontinued entirely. Nowadays, after the burial of a whale, mourners simply bring symbolic mourning cloths to the shrine of Ông rather than adhering to the lengthy rituals of the past. Following the "grave-opening" ceremony (mở cửa mả), strict taboos are no longer observed.

Festivals themselves have also undergone transformation. They are generally shorter in duration and less elaborate than in the past. Modern elements have been introduced: for example, offerings now include imported liquors ("Western wine") and a wider variety of packaged foods rather than simple, home-prepared items.

In musical performances, traditional *Đờn ca tài tử* (a form of Southern Vietnamese chamber music) still plays a key role, but now often includes modern songs praising the homeland and the nation. Alongside folk games like tug-of-war, stilt walking, and cockfighting, new recreational activities have emerged—such as volleyball, football, and long-distance running competitions for youths, as well as food festivals that promote local cuisine and, to some extent, commercialize the event.

While these changes reflect adaptation to modern life, they have somewhat blurred the sacred character of traditional festivals for peace and prosperity. The influence of modern, industrial-era values has altered the atmosphere of these rituals. In recent years, due to rising fuel prices, the number of boats participating in the Nghinh Ông (Whale Welcoming Festival) in Hòn Tre has declined. Similarly, in Lại Sơn, many boats operating in distant fishing grounds no longer return in time for the festival—or even skip it entirely if it does not coincide with their working schedules.

Rituals associated with the worship of the Mother Goddess, female deities, ancestral spirits, and village founders have also changed, though at varying rates. These shifts reflect changes in the community's socio-economic and cultural context. In general, while the rituals remain resilient, many formerly elaborate practices have been simplified. Offerings have also become more modern—replacing traditional items with more convenient, store-bought products. For instance, in the past, offerings to the Mother Goddess included symbolic clothing (often associated with her image and authority), but today, these are often substituted with monetary offerings—almost everything is converted into cash for convenience.

In earlier times, a white pig was considered an essential offering during rituals dedicated to the Mother Goddess. Today, for practicality, this has often been replaced with roasted pigs ordered from vendors—as seen in the Bà Chúa Xứ festival in Hòn Tre or An Sơn.

In summary, the religious beliefs and practices of Kiên Hải's fishermen have evolved in response to societal change. Despite these transformations, spiritual traditions continue to serve as vital cultural expressions and psychological anchors—helping coastal communities find peace amid the uncertainties and dangers of a life at sea.

### **The Introduction of New Cultural Aspects in Worship and Ritual Practices**

In the context of the market economy development, industrialization, and modernization currently underway in Kiên Giang province generally and the island district in particular, the spiritual practices of the island fishing communities have undergone significant changes and are considered modern social phenomena. Alongside traditional values, new cultural elements have emerged in the religious beliefs and rituals of the fishermen.

Today, marine exploitation and marine tourism are among the key economic sectors of Kiên Hải island district and form a central strategy for its economic development. Integrating traditional cultural values of the islands into tourism activities aims to promote and introduce these values to a wider audience. This development helps

to revive some of the fishermen's traditional spiritual activities, yet at the same time, it is difficult to preserve these practices intact due to utilitarian purposes.

At some festivals, commercialization has appeared. Kiên Hải island district can still be said to preserve many original characteristics of folk spiritual practices. However, in recent years, signs of commercialization in festivals have emerged. Modern, profit-driven games have been introduced, such as gambling with discs, spinning lucky wheels, etc., at the Nghinh Ông Festival in Hòn Tre and Lại Sơn, as well as the Bà Chúa Xứ Festival and Bà Chúa Hòn rituals.

In earlier times, island residents mainly lived by fishing, with only a small portion engaged in agriculture and related marine occupations. Their faith in the Mother Goddesses and the Lord of the Sea was very strong. They came to worship places to pray for the safety of their loved ones and the island community. Today, alongside fishing, many newcomers have settled on the islands, living off trade and services. Consequently, these newcomers attend festivals not only to pray for their family's safety at sea but also to seek business prosperity for themselves. Currently, there is a nascent phenomenon of "buying and selling deities" among the new residents on the islands.

The commercialization and commodification of traditional marine spiritual cultural products to serve tourism have had negative impacts on the cultural values of the island fishing communities. Additionally, the expansion of coastal hamlets and beaches for tourism purposes has distorted the traditional worship sites of the fishermen. In reality, although fishermen have renovated and improved worship sites to be more spacious and grand than before, these sites are often hidden within private residences and are difficult to find without guidance.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For the fishermen of the Kiên Hải archipelago, as long as they continue to rely on the sea, traditional spiritual values will remain preserved and developed to satisfy their cultural and spiritual needs. Thus, cyclical ritual offerings continue to take place—for those who go to sea and those who stay behind—and these practices naturally continue through maintenance and transmission. The sea remains increasingly unpredictable, which means human efforts to cope with it will intensify, yet humans have not conquered the sea. Therefore, the relationship between people and the spirits, deities, and ancestors will persist. This means that the spiritual activities of the fishermen of Kiên Hải archipelago, as well as coastal communities in general, will coexist with the current economic, social, and cultural environment amid industrialization and modernization.

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