

## THE ROLE OF THE PAGODA IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE KHMER IN THE MEKONG DELTA

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### Abstract

*Theravada Buddhism has been with the Khmer in the Mekong Delta for a long time, it is due to the close harmony between the philosophy of Theravada Buddhism and the customs of the Khmer community, which Khmer pagoda is the symbol of that combination. The article aims to present the results of traditional Khmer cultural studies from the perspective of the pagoda. The Khmer pagoda in the Mekong Delta region is a cultural center of the Khmer people. The pagoda is a place to combine cultural activities with folk rituals, religious rituals. The pagoda is a traditional school to teach Khmer people about knowledge, morality, and craftsmanship. The pagoda is like a museum about Theravada Buddhism, the village art museum, it is also a place for the Khmer to lean on the soul while living and sending ashes when dead. The pagoda was the place to organize various forms of community cultural activities, festivals, folk games, and cultural performances of the Khmer. Especially, before the upheaval of history, globalization trend, the intrusion and impact from many directions the outside, the pagoda in each village as a "stronghold" to protect and preserve the capital the traditional culture of the Khmer people.*

**Keywords:** Theravada Buddhism, pagoda, Khmer, spiritual life, Mekong Delta.

### INTRODUCTION

The pagoda plays an important role for the Khmer, it is considered a perfect museum in both material and spiritual value, the pagoda is also a history and art museum, the temple is the pride of the Khmer people in their village. It can be understood that the pagoda is a contributing factor to the unique cultural values of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, when we are interested in Khmer culture, we must pay attention to the pagoda, the material and spiritual values that it brings. The pagoda is a community symbol, it creates typical cultural values, it creates a deep impression on the mind of every Khmer in the Mekong Delta.

Most of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta follow Theravada Buddhism. Every Khmer was born as a Buddhist, just like their family members. In spiritual and cultural life, religious activities play a particularly important role, helping the Khmer community to unite together. Unlike many other religions, Theravada Buddhism of the Khmer not only undertakes religious functions but also undertakes socio-cultural functions. The Khmer pagoda was built not only to meet the needs of religious activities but also due to the essential needs of education and socio-cultural activities of the Khmer community.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DATA

In order to have a basis for researching and clarifying the problem posed. We have collected the information that has been verified from many sources. Secondary data includes collected information and data from official legal authorities. Primary data includes data collected input from experts. The article has been studied based on qualitative research methods. In addition, we have researched from other methods including historical and logical methods, synthesizing

reference sources, on that basis we have generalized issues of practical nature.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The Khmer pagoda has not only material value with architectural art and sculpture but also brings great spiritual values. It is this cultural value along with Theravada Buddhism that dominates life and makes the basic characteristics of the Khmer community (Vu & Nguyen, 2019).

The Khmer have a normal and simple life, but in religion, the Khmer invest all spirit, wisdom, money, and effort to build a magnificent and magnificent pagoda. In the Khmer community, the pagoda is built on a large area of land, surrounded by bamboo fences or wall fences, inside the pagoda grounds are planted with many types of old trees forming a cool garden. Each Khmer temple is a splendid architectural complex including the main hall to worship Buddha, the living place of the monks, the public ceremony place, the cafeteria, the school, the tower for worshipping the ashes of the dead (Philip, 2014). Surrounding the architectural works are flower gardens, water ponds, and fruit trees forming a quiet and solemn “spiritual space”.

Table 1: Population and number of pagodas in the provinces, city, and in the Mekong Delta

Ethnic Khmer group	Total	Urban	Rural	The pagoda
Mekong River Delta	1,141,241	220,772	920,469	440
Long An province	9,980	332	9,648	0
Tien Giang province	1,269	198	1,071	0
Ben Tre province	1,001	90	911	0
Tra Vinh province	318,231	29,764	288,467	141
Vinh Long province	22,630	2,019	20,611	13
Dong Thap province	713	137	576	0
An Giang province	75,878	9,797	66,081	64
Kien Giang province	211,282	39,294	171,988	74
Can Tho city	19,683	12,675	7,008	12
Hau Giang province	18,467	4,130	14,337	15
Soc Trang province	362,029	100,499	261,530	92
Bac Lieu province	73,968	18,209	55,759	22
Ca Mau province	26,110	3,628	22,482	7

Source: General Statistics Office, 2020. Completed Results of the 2019 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census.

### The Pagoda is the Center of Religious Activities

The pagoda plays a very important role for the Khmer in the Mekong Delta, it is a place for the Khmer to send beliefs about everything in life, especially religion (Vu, 2019). The Khmer have many beliefs, but religiously they have worshiped Theravada Buddhism, and it holds a unique position. Theravada Buddhist pagoda of the Khmer only worships Buddha Shakyamuni. Theravada Buddhism has become the traditional ideal of the Khmer. Every year, there are periodic festivals taking place within the temple grounds including the ceremony of robes (was called the Kathan Na Tean), which is held from September sixteen to October 15 (lunar calendar); Ceremony of placing the rice (was called the Phua Chum Bon), it took place for half a month at the end of August; Feast of Buddha Birthday (was called the Bon Visaka Bochesa), it is

held on May 15 (lunar calendar). Buddha Birthday is a great ceremony in Buddhism, it has become a custom, making a deep impression on the mind of every Khmer in the Mekong Delta. In addition to the periodic religious festivals, there are also non-periodical religious festivals but still held at the temple including the Inauguration of the Main Hall (which was called Kiet Gioi Sima), the ceremony of placing Buddha statues in the pagoda. Besides, there are also folk festivals that are associated with agricultural rituals and Buddhism, it has been revered by the Khmer, it took place at the pagoda grounds, which is the New Year Celebration (already called the Chol Chnam Thmey ceremony); grandparents ceremony (was called Dolta). All religious festivals take place on the grounds of the pagoda, which shows us the Khmer temple plays an important role, it is seen as the religious center, it is one of the elements creating cultural characteristics of the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta.

### **The Pagoda is the Center of Community Cultural Activities of the Khmer in The Mekong Delta**

The Theravada Buddhist pagoda has been recognized as a symbol of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta (Mai, 1996). The pagoda is not only a place where religious ceremonies take place but also an expression of attachment and solidarity. In the community, it is the gathering place for all community activities in the village. In addition to the religious festivals that are interested in the Khmer, the folk festivals that take place in the pagoda include the Moon God Worship Ceremony (already known as the Ook Om Bok Festival); The boat Ngo racing festival, Cow racing festival (Hai, & Thanh, 2020).

During the days of the festival, the Khmer gathered to the pagoda a lot, not only the Theravada Buddhists but also the participation of the people in the area. The festival took place bustling and exciting, the traditional art of the Khmer was shown, including traditional theater (Du ke), the Khmer organized collective dance with traditional dances such as the Ram Vong, Sarikakeo, Saravan, is a folk dance with simple and flexible. It was widely popular among the Khmer ethnic community.

In cultural performances, all Khmer gather at the temple to dance and perform traditional rituals. In addition, a temple is also a place for Khmer people in the village to discuss issues such as digging a canal, repairing the pagoda, and planning festivals. For families that face difficulties and conflicts between individuals in the village, the temple will help to resolve, thus, the pagoda has shown a deep community.

### **The Pagoda is a School of Ethics, Language, and Craft Training**

Due to the difficult social conditions of the Khmer (Thuy, 2012), and their spiritual and religious conception, the Khmer realized that the pagoda was a place where the noble values of life, of Buddhism, were attached with serious education. Therefore, the Khmer pagoda has become an important "school" to assume the educational function.

The pagoda is the place to organize the training, teaching knowledge, and understanding about culture - the art of the Khmer, it has helped them preserve and preserve the Khmer language. We can understand that the pagoda has preserved and promoted the writing of the Khmer, and it is still popular in Khmer life and artistic creation. The pagoda is for the Khmer as a school, it is a positive educational environment. The pagoda is a school and the monks are teachers, the monks acknowledge their position with educating people, and uphold the responsibility of taking care of the education of Khmer at the pagoda. Therefore, the teaching monk was affectionately referred to by the Khmer people as Kru or the Achar Kru, it means knowledgeable

person.

The pagoda is a school of the Khmer since childhood, especially for men, through the Khmer custom that is the practice of monkhood. The Khmer son had to enter the pagoda for a period of time. From an educational perspective, the practice of monkhood has brought into full play its role in educating morality, personality, and lifestyle for youth Khmer. From there, helping young Khmer people to mature early and easily integrate into social life. Youth Khmer have contributed to building and maintaining the beautiful culture of their people, because young Khmer is the breadwinner of the family, and they will educate their children about moral values (Nguyen, 2021).

In addition, the pagoda is a place to teach crafts and fine arts, and the pagoda is also a place to practice sports activities. Thus, the Khmer pagoda in the Mekong Delta not only trains the society for people with culture, but they also have knowledge and morality. The pagoda has trained a team of workers with techniques, fine arts, architecture, and sculpture. The pagoda as a school to educate human morality has two meanings "school - pagoda" It has actively contributed to the training of Khmer youth to read and write in the Khmer language (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 1990).

The Khmer have created a solidarity movement to build a cultural life in the developed residential area, which brings positive effects in strengthening the community, helping and supporting each other for mutual progress. The model of cultural pagodas is focused on building in many places in the villages, contributing to improving knowledge, the movement of teaching and learning Khmer words, preserving ethnic culture, encouraging the thought of fairness, charity, and acceptance received the enthusiastic response Khmer. Provinces in the Mekong River Delta where Khmer people live have implemented the eradication of illiteracy and universal primary education for children and adults Khmer aged 15 - 35 years old prescribed by the state.

### **The Pagoda is a Cultural Museum of The Khmer in The Mekong Delta**

The pagoda has been a typical architectural art value of the Khmer community. From the pagoda gate and the architecture in the main hall, with the decoration and the system of worshipping statues, each artifact, each work is perfect, it has a deep philosophy with a heart and table skillful hand, especially the creative ability of the artist (Thu, 2009). Therefore, the Khmer protection of the pagoda by the villagers is also how they protect and preserve the unique cultural values of their clan.

In addition, the Khmer pagoda also preserves valuable artifacts, which are books created with the material the Buong (also known as the Slac Treng). This is a book with leaf material, it has existed for a long time, engraved or written by Khmer artists or written in Sanskrit (Pali), ancient Khmer, it includes articles in Buddhist scriptures, idioms, proverbs, teaching law, customs, horoscopes. The cultural values hidden in these volumes, it has been carefully preserved by the temples, although it has been over a few hundred years, but it still preserves and becomes valuable ancient books of the Khmer. In the pagoda, the precious book is preserved for a long time (hundreds of years) and it is only given to the monks to read during the great holidays held in the pagoda.

Along with precious books written on the leaves of the Buong tree, the Khmer pagoda also preserves artifacts and antiques of both material and spiritual value. We are interested in Buddha statues, and the Ngo boat. It is an artifact with unique cultural value. The Ngo boat is related to the culture, it is not the product of an individual or a group. The Ngo boat is a

representative of a pagoda, it also represents one or more Khmer villages, the boat is both community and spiritual (Lan, 2010).

The Ngo boat is a symbol for animals with strength, the ability to run fast. The symbol on the Ngo boat in the Four Face pagoda (Soc Trang) is a bird, the Champa pagoda (Soc Trang) is a tiger symbol, the Ong Mek pagoda (Tra Vinh) is a fish symbol. The Khmer believe that, during the competition, the Ngo boat will be able to run at a fast and strong speed like the animal chosen as a symbol. The two sides of the Ngo boat, the Ngo boat nose, and the Ngo boat-tail are decorated with patterns and colors to match the symbol of the Ngo boat to create strength. If the Ngo boat symbol is the Naga snake, the motifs on both sides of the Ngo boat show the image of a snake. When the Ngo boat surfs, viewers will feel like seeing the image of a snake wave. The Ngo boat in the pagoda is considered to be an artifact bearing traditional cultural elements of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta, still preserved to this day.

In addition, a number of pagoda in the Mekong Delta, such as the Doi Pagoda (Soc Trang), have a five-tone orchestra. It is a set of musical instruments consisting of five types, each of which emits a different sound when the orchestra is playing together to create holy melodies, unique resounding sounds. Five-tone orchestra is used during festivals, or young people studying in the temple can still practice with the five-tone orchestra on weekdays, which is a way to preserve the cultural and spiritual values of the Khmer.

### **The Pagoda is The “Sanctuary” of The Khmer in The Mekong Delta**

The Khmer in the Mekong Delta when they were born were considered followers of Theravada Buddhism. The Khmer always use Buddhist teachings as the basis of moral standards for themselves, when the Khmer die, they also want their remains to be kept in the pagoda. Therefore, when they are still alive, the Khmer are willing to contribute funds to the construction of the pagoda, to practice all religious rituals, and to do charity work. The Khmer wished that, when they died, they would be sent ashes in the temple, so that they could hear the sutras so that they could be close to the Buddha (Thanh, 2019).

The cremation ceremony took place on the pagoda grounds. Most of the pagoda has built crematoriums for the dead in the Khmer community. After cremating the dead Khmer, their relatives will pick up the bones and place them on a tray and bring them home. At night, the family of the Khmer invites the monk to chant a second prayer for the dead. The ashes of the dead are taken away by descendants of the Khmer family to wash them with coconut water, then dry them, then put the ashes into jars and towers to send to the pagoda.

In each pagoda, especially the ancient ones, there are many stupas and that is where families build to send the ashes of the dead of the Khmer family. The stupas were built on the east side and usually in front of the temple, but it was not built in front of the main hall. For that reason, the pagoda is considered by the Khmer as a “sanctuary” not only of a family of the Khmer but also for the whole village.

### **DISCUSSION**

Currently, Theravada Buddhism is playing an important role in the spiritual life of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. The influence of Theravada Buddhism ideological not only directly affected the daily life of the Khmer but also became a tradition in Khmer festivals. Most of the spiritual activities, religious activities are derived from the Buddha's teachings, stories, and teachings.

The Khmer in the Mekong Delta took care of the restoration of pagoda, repaired the main hall,

built more classrooms, they also built a number of pagodas in Khmer villages. However, there are some areas where Khmer people live in difficult physical conditions, so the Khmer temples are small, so the promotion of the cultural values of the Khmer in this area has not been paid attention to.

A difference between the Theravada Buddhist pagoda of the Khmer and the Mahayana Buddhist pagoda is that the Khmer pagoda has never reduced its role to the community, for all ages it is always attractive (Pham, 2020). Most of the Khmer come for religious festivals and community activities. The Khmer worships their religious festivals, beliefs, customs, and practices in the Theravada Buddhist style, the Khmer still has religious interference with the Kinh, Cham, and Chinese ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta Long (Van, et al., 2020). Typically, the Doi pagoda in Soc Trang is a Theravada Buddhist temple. Next to the main shrine area, there is also a pagoda building to worship Ba Den, which has attracted many people in the area to offer incense pray. However, to worship Ba Den did not erode or diminish the important role of the Doi pagoda, the pagoda is still a place to spread human life, worldview, morality, lifestyle, writing, and art Khmer.

The tradition of Theravada Buddhism of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta when the young Khmer leave the pagoda to return home, they have to learn a profession to apply in life, nowadays, we often see many Monks are proficient in the use of equipment. We can think that the Khmer temple and Theravada Buddhism are not conservative, they accept innovation, adapt constantly to new things, the pagoda is the center of the village, they are still real shows the purpose of caring for devotees, for their own village.

Most of the Khmer in the village must take care to protect and maintain the cultural values that the pagoda brings. However, at present, in some temples, which are considered miniature museums of the village, there is a phenomenon of books, Buddhist scriptures, documents related to Khmer customs and practices recorded on the leaves let go of signs of damage due to poor preservation. It is also one of the worrying situations in the maintenance of cultural values and cultural artifacts in the pagoda of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta.

## CONCLUSION

The attachment between the temple and the Khmer transcended pure belief, it became a habit, a spiritual practice of the Khmer. The influence of the pagoda is not only limited to the campus, where the pagoda is located but affects the whole society. Therefore, the pagoda is also a “social institution”, it is not just a simple pagoda. That is recognized as an important feature of the Khmer pagoda in the Mekong Delta.

The Khmer pagoda is a model of a unique artistic architecture that reaches a sophisticated level, it is both religious and brings many traditional cultural and educational elements to the Khmer. For the Khmer, a pagoda is a sacred place, a place of worshipping Buddha, a place to convey their beliefs through their current deeds, they wish for their future to return to Nirvana. The pagoda is a school of moral education, lifestyle for Khmer youth, it is the meeting center of the whole village, it is a cultural museum, it holds unique artifacts of the Khmer and it is the place where charity activities take place. In a cultural role, the temple shows quite a lot of sustainable vitality, long traditions of the Khmer, contributing to building a unified Vietnamese culture in diversity.

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