

## THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE LIFE OF THE KHMER IN THE MEKONG DELTA: THE CASE STUDY OF THE KHMER ETHNIC GROUP IN AN GIANG

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### *Abstract*

*Belief and religion are indispensable needs of the Khmer people in An Giang, Vietnam, it has very rich and diverse cultural values. Through activities in their life such as customs, customs, rituals of worship, community activities. The article is interested in the content of beliefs and religions among the Khmer people in An Giang; Cultural values in beliefs and religions of the Khmer people in An Giang; The limitations of religious culture in the spiritual life of the Khmer people in An Giang province. The article provides basic knowledge about beliefs and religion, it helps Khmer people to better understand the traditional cultural values of their people, thereby continuing to preserve, inherit and promote them. It is the basis for cultural managers to study and formulate appropriate policies to continue preserving and promoting the traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities, contributing to enriching the culture of all ethnic groups in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** *the Khmer, beliefs, religion, the influence, Theravada Buddhism*

### INTRODUCTION

Beliefs and religions have long been a problem that many people are interested in both in theory and practice, it is the spiritual need of part of people, it is related to all fields of social life affecting morality, economy, and society of the Khmer in An Giang. Beliefs and religions that have existed for a long time with the Khmer in An Giang have shown a close harmony between supernatural forces with the Khmer community lifestyle in a profound way.

Religious culture is always associated with the spiritual life of the Khmer An Giang. In An Giang Khmer beliefs include folk beliefs, Buddhist beliefs hold a very important place in their spiritual life, their Buddhist beliefs are Theravada Buddhist beliefs. It can be understood that, in the cultural life of the Khmer community in An Giang, the moral value of Khmer Buddhism has penetrated into each person's consciousness, becoming their subconscious, their beliefs, their philosophy of life. Buddhist ethical values are always preserved and promoted from generation to generation. Even though life is difficult, they always have a Buddhist devotion to wish for a better life in the future. Over thousands of years, that belief has not changed, many ups and downs of history, the Khmer still retains their own cultural traditions, especially the moral values of Buddhism Khmer.

Beliefs and religions in the spiritual life of Khmer people in An Giang province have their own characteristics with strict customs, practices, and regulations. However, it is equally rich and diverse. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the effects of cultural interference of other ethnic groups in the process of living together, somewhat limit the preservation and promotion of religious cultures in the spiritual life of Khmer people in An Giang. Researching and learning about the cultural and religious life of the Khmer An Giang people is a very necessary and urgent issue.

## DATABASE AND RESEARCH METHODS

In order to have a basis for research and clarification of the problem posed, we have collected verified information from many sources. Secondary data includes information and data collected from official legal authorities. Key data includes data collected from surveys and opinionated by industry experts. The article has been studied based on qualitative research methods. In addition, we have studied other methods including historical, logical, reference synthesis methods, on that basis, we have generalized problems of practical nature.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Overview of Khmer Beliefs and Religions in An Giang Province

In terms of natural geography, An Giang is the Southwestern of Vietnam, residents here mainly include four groups of Kinh, Khmer, Chinese, and Cham people, among the ethnic groups that are settling, the Khmer are residents this land from an early age (Philip, 2014). From the tenth century, poor Khmer peasants immigrated to settle, by the fifteenth century, the Khmer came here more and more. By the seventeenth century, Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants began to come, speeding up the process of reclaiming the Mekong Delta. Currently, the Khmer people in Vietnam have 1,319,652 people, the Mekong River Delta have 1,141,241 people, in An Giang province have 75, 878 people (General Statistics Office, 2020).

In terms of beliefs, religions of the Khmer in An Giang include folk beliefs, the current Khmer religion, most of them follow Theravada Buddhism (Paul, 2001), also known as Nam Tong Khmer Buddhism, in addition, the Khmer still also believe in other mystical supernatural forces that they are not aware of (Mai, 1996).

The Khmer community lives mainly on agriculture, particularly wet rice cultivation, animal husbandry (Thuy, 2012), so they still hold many rituals that wish for the convenience of agriculture. Since their level of awareness of farming techniques is still rudimentary, the fact that the crop or crop failure in their awareness remains a lot of mystery. Khmer people worship divine supernatural powers because of human needs such as “it rains but does not cause storms and floods” or “God gives warm light but does not cause drought or crop failure”. Therefore, in the Khmer community today, there are still forms of beliefs (Vu, 2019).

Beliefs are expressed in agricultural rituals, the Khmer community in An Giang lives mainly on wet rice cultivation, so they have many agricultural ceremonies, perhaps, during the wet rice growing period, the Khmer think that They always live close to the gods, they are powerful gods that can create crops or lose crops for the Khmer, all of which are closely tied to the Khmer life. We can understand that, as long as the natural conditions are detrimental to the agricultural production of the Khmer, they still worship the gods they have trusted, it is shown through ritual forms, items (Van, et al., 2020).

New Year Festival (known as PiThi Chol Chnam Thmey). The Khmer New Year celebration is in April of the calendar year, it is the time to complete the harvest of the crop, the rainy season is approaching. The Khmer have thought about the end of the one-year cycle, this time it is the beginning of the new year. The New Year Festival takes place in 3 days, Khmer people in the Buddhist pagoda pray, bring items to the monks, bless their relatives and friends. On New Year Eve, the Khmer gather in the temples, it is a place for community cultural activities, preserving the national identity, and also spiritual support of the Khmer. PiThi Chol Chnam Thmey is the biggest festival of the year for Khmer people, the first day of the new year is not fixed, each year changes and has a different meaning.

The New Year Festival is the day of family reunions, and some people who work far away from home also come back to reunite. In the new year, Khmer people visit pagodas, Buddha ceremonies, pray for each other's blessings, and hope for the new year the work is favorable, the harvest is good, everyone will have all the good things. Thus, PiThi Chol Chnam Thmey of the Khmer is shown as an agricultural festival, the ultimate purpose of the festival is to pray for the dry season to pass, the fast rainy season to come to agricultural production (Hai, & Thanh, 2020).

Immediately after the PiThi Chol Chnam Thmey festival ends, before the rainy season comes, the Khmer will hold a peace ceremony in their village, with the aim of praying for all Khmer families to be safe, the next crop will be bumper. The Khmer have divided a year into two seasons, including rainy season and dry season. The rainy season is from mid-April to mid-October on the lunar calendar. The sunny season is from mid-October to mid-April of the next lunar year. PiThi Chol Chnam Thmey usually takes place in the fourth month of the lunar calendar. The peace ceremony is the spiritual fulcrum of the Khmer An Giang. When the festival takes place, there are many fun activities taking place including folk games, singing. The peace ceremony is a unique type of folk belief that has many traditional cultural values of the Khmer.

The Khmer have celebrated the Ok Om Bok (also known as the Moon-god worship) ceremony on the fifteenth day of the tenth lunar month, the Ok Om Bok Ceremony has a very long origin, it is always conducted every year, it is the last day of a lunar cycle that revolves around Earth, is the end of the year's crop. According to the concept of the Khmer, worshipping the Moon God is to give thanks to the Moon God for a year for protecting the crops, bringing good weather, helping the crop to be fertile.

The Ok Om Bok Festival usually takes place at the pagoda yard or an empty area where people can easily observe the Moon. The Ok Om Bok ceremony has become a traditional folk festival for a long time, it took place in pagodas and villages of Khmer ethnic people. The Ok Om Bok Festival has been organized by the local authorities, monks in the temple, it has attracted thousands of people to attend, play together, worship the Moon-god to express the respect of the Khmer. The Moon-god has created favorable conditions for agricultural production, creating material wealth in society. The Khmer thought that the Moon-god had a relationship with the results of the harvest, so they brought agricultural products including fruits to the Moon-god, especially sticky rice, which is specialties of the ethnic Khmer.

In addition to folk beliefs that have worked in agriculture, the Khmer in An Giang also has a number of other folk beliefs including the Neak Ta worshipping ceremonies and the Arak worshipping ceremonies.

An Giang Khmer still believes that a popular form of worship is Neak Ta worship, we can understand that it is the god that protects the village for the Khmer. Some Khmer people think Neak Ta is the god of rice fields, gods in the forest that they often ask for help when they have work related to this area. In terms of language meaning, "Neak" in the Khmer language is a noun used to refer to people in general, "Ta" is an old man, worthy of respect. According to the Khmer described, Neak Ta is shiny pebbles, it is believed that it is the reincarnation of Neak Ta, it represents the purity, simplicity of nature, hardness, and health to protect and protect the Khmer in their village.

In the folk beliefs of the Khmer, they think that all-natural phenomena related to human life have been arranged by a Neak Ta to protect him, who has the duty to eliminate everything unlucky, suppress all evil demons, protect a peaceful life for people, for the Khmer. Neak Ta was built to worship, Neak Ta's temple was built primitive with materials such as bamboo, leaves, in

the position under a tree, at the crossroads, inside the shrine, there is a statue of Neak Ta. Every year, the Neak Ta Worship Ceremony is held between March and April of the lunar calendar, that is, within the first month of the dry season. The majority of Khmer people in An Giang offered Neak Ta simple offerings such as chickens, ducks, cakes, and fruits with the meaning of praying for peace, good weather, and favorable weather.

Not only worship the Neak Ta but the Khmer also worship the Arak. The Arak according to the Khmer is a guardian, a protector, Arak belief means belief in a god that protects themselves. This is a deity with no definite shape, originating from the soul of the dead, holy, so he is worshiped as a god to protect the family when someone is sick, sick, or in an accident. The owner of the house worshiped Arak, which they hope Arak will protect and help them get through the accident.

Regarding the religion of the Khmer, they used to follow Brahmanism, Mahayana Buddhism. However, now that the majority of the Khmer have followed Theravada Buddhism (Donald, 1995), we can realize that the Khmer may not understand much about the teachings of Buddhism but they are deeply aware of the culture of their people. The pagoda is the most obvious symbol.

The role of the pagoda in the spiritual life of the Khmer, for the Khmer in An Giang, the pagoda is not only a spiritual belief but also a cultural center of the nation. A pagoda is a place for cultural activities, folk rituals, and at the same time, the temple is also a school to teach knowledge, teach humanism, and teach crafts. The pagoda is like a museum about Buddhism and art. The pagoda is the spiritual support of the Khmer, it is a community activity when the Khmer are alive, they have buried the pagoda when they die (Lan, 2010).

The pagoda is a need in the spiritual life of the Khmer, “each residential area (village) of the Khmer has a pagoda” (Nguyen, 2021). We can understand that the Khmer pagoda has an important role, it is considered a perfect museum of material value, spiritual value, history, art, it is the pride of the community Khmer. The pagoda is a factor that contributes to the unique cultural values of the Khmer residents. Therefore, when it comes to the Khmer ethnic group, it is impossible not to mention the pagoda and the material and spiritual values it brings. Because, this is a community image, creating unique and specific cultural values, it is always engraved in the mind of each Khmer.

Buddhism has become a demand in social activities, it has also become a tradition of the Khmer. Every year, the Khmer have many periodical festivals, which take place in the pagoda grounds including the Ca Sa robe ceremony, which is held from September sixteen to the fifteenth day of October (lunar calendar). The ceremony to order the rice squeezed takes place within half a month at the end of August. Buddha's Birthday is held on the full moon of May (lunar calendar), this is a great ceremony in Buddhism, it has become a custom, it brings a deep impression on the mind of every Khmer people. All religious festivals take place in the space of the pagoda, it clearly shows us that the Khmer pagoda has an important role, it is considered the center of the Khmer community, it is one of the factors that make up the cultural characteristics of the Khmer. The Khmer pagoda is also a school for teaching, educating morality and morality for the Khmer. Due to the difficult socio-economic conditions of the Khmer, the concept of spirituality and religion, the Khmer thought that the temple was a gathering place for the noble values of life, the sacredness of Buddhism, a pagoda is a place of education. For that reason, the pagoda has become the “school” to assume the responsibility, it has the function of education (Naci, & Luiza, 2017). The pagoda is the center for organizing training, transmitting knowledge, about the culture and art of the Khmer, it contributes to preserving and preserving Khmer writing.

The pagoda is a school and the monks are teachers, the Theravada Buddhist monks are aware of their special position with the education of people, and give prominence to the responsibility to take care of the education of young people Khmer at the pagoda (Norenzayan, 2014).

According to the Khmer Theravada Buddhism, every monk must always appreciate the educational function, in which the education of believers and young people in the Khmer community, is considered an important content that Buddhist teachings the Khmer Theravada Buddhism must be responsible for the implementation. Therefore, a monk in Theravada Khmer Buddhism is the real teacher. The monks are respected by the Khmer community, and the monk's opinions on the community work are always trusted and carried out by everyone in the village. Khmer monks make an important contribution to the maintenance and development of their moral values, their knowledge, prestige, and morality as models in educating the Khmer community.

Regarding the Khmer custom to enter the pagoda, the Khmer community is strongly influenced by Buddhism, particularly Theravada Buddhism. Buddhist culture dominates most social activities of the Khmer. According to the Buddha teaching, the Khmer believe that “they go to the pagoda to practice to show their filial piety to their parents, it is the highest expression”. The Khmers enter the pagoda, it helps them practice morality, keep the rules of Buddhism. They go to practice in order to enjoy the magic of Buddhism to perfect themselves in the relationship between human beings and nature and society (Thanh, 2019).

Currently, the practice of monkhood is still popular among the Khmer in An Giang because practicing is to become a good person, they prepare for a good life for the future, it is a good opportunity for them to learn the language, learn morality. According to the concept of the Khmer, monastic practice is only for men, so most of the men have to go to the pagoda to practice. If the son does not go through the monastic stage in the pagoda, they will be judged by society and the family as filial.

The economic life of the Khmer community still faced many material difficulties, but the Khmer awareness of education, beauty, and perfection was soon formed. Due to the social conditions of customs, and spiritual conceptions, the Khmer have realized that a pagoda is a gathering place for the noble values of life, of Buddhism, is associated with serious teaching. Therefore, the pagoda has become a “school” to educate young Khmer men towards the value of truth - honesty - perfection (Brooke, 2019). The combination of the pagoda and the school is completely consistent between the religious conception and the concept of education, the Khmer have been interested in education very early, it is a primitive form of education. Many values include religious catechetical education associated with intellectual education, ethics, aesthetics, life skills education.

### **Cultural Values in Beliefs, Religions of The Khmer in An Giang**

Culture is a commonly used concept in social life, this term has not only many meanings in language but also in different sciences, in terms of cultural characteristics, each ethnic group has its own characteristics. Normally, culture can understand it as the sum total of the material and spiritual values created by man in the historical process. Culture is a whole consisting of the knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, other abilities, and customs that people possess as a member of society (Avny, 2019). Cultural value is a standard system with useful layers of cultural value, meaningful to the needs of people and the community. Cultural values created by individuals and communities have been created, it has been formed, it is confirmed and developed in the historical process of people, social communities in order to direct people



towards the value of truth - honesty - perfection (e.g., Chalik, et al., 2017; Edara, 2017). The Khmer cultural values in An Giang are plentiful and diverse, most of the festivals of the Khmer are associated with beliefs and religions.

The rituals and forms of festivals are influenced by Buddhist rituals. Altruism, the spirit of peace, and the compassionate human heart of the Khmer are influenced by Buddhist thought. The festival is held not only to entertain and entertain the Khmer community, but it also has a humanistic meaning. On the occasion of the festival, monks praying prayers, reciting Buddha's name to pray for the good weather and peace of the nation, they wish Khmer families good health and favorable work. Khmer people who do more good deeds, get more luck, so every time there is a festival, Khmer families prepare a lot of paddy rice, silk cloth, and sticky rice to give to the pagoda. The rich Khmer also give alms to the poor in their villages and surrounding areas. Whenever there is a festival is an opportunity for Buddhists to show their benevolent hearts, it makes everyone closer and closer to each other and to love each other (Shi, 2016).

The rituals, customs, and practices shown have made us realize that the vast influence of Theravada Buddhism in the spiritual life of the Khmer, Theravada Buddhism has integrated into the life of the Khmer in An Giang, it has become a moral, social consciousness. The Khmer realized that when they were born, they were followers of Theravada Buddhism. When Khmer children were born, they were educated by their parents, the Khmer community, and the pagoda in the spirit of Theravada Buddhism. After that, when growing up, young Khmer people have to go to the pagoda to practice (from two to three years), they will be accepted by the community, eligible to participate in social activities and get married. The Khmer recognize that spiritual practice is not only an obligation but also an honor. Each Khmer pagoda is not only a place for practice and worship, but it is also a literacy school, teaching art, teaching the virtue of a pagoda, and is the educational center of the Khmer community in their village. A pagoda is also a place for people meetings, activities, and entertainment in festivals, it is the common home of all Khmer families in the community.

Theravada Buddhist teachings are the spiritual foundation, it is the sacred thing in the Khmer beliefs in An Giang. Monk is the Buddha representative to help people, so he receives the respect and respect of the Khmer, most of the Khmer are accepted by the monk to use their items, they are very rejoiced as they were greatly blessed. All monks in the temple in each village are provided with food and food by the Khmer. The Khmer believe in the law of cause and effect, so they are less concerned with themselves in the present, but they only care about life in the next life, it is shown that the Khmer have property they will contribute to building a beautiful pagoda, they give money to the poor so that in their next life they can go to Nirvana (Vu, & Nguyen, 2019). The happiness of the Khmer has been affirmed that in the Buddha realm, in the present life, they must cultivate self-liberation in order to reach happiness under the guidance of monks and pagodas.

Theravada Buddhism has contributed to the unity of the Khmer community, the orientation of worldview and human outlook, standard orientation, morality, it has created a way of life for people (Jungguk, & Yang, 2017). That role is shown through pure religious activities and religious activities associated with the community. Possibly, the influence of the temple is not only limited to the pagoda grounds, but it also affects the entire Khmer society. Therefore, the pagoda in a broad sense is a "social institution" (Son, 2019), which is an important feature of Khmer pagodas.

The role of compassion in Theravada Buddhism affects the honesty of the Khmer. They think that people always live peacefully, practice the practice to achieve results so that they will have

more energy, remove the dirt of life, the soul will always be clear, and the wisdom will be clear. Then, the world will be peaceful, everyone will be filled with happiness (Kristian, 2018). Stemming from that spirit, the Khmer have constantly practiced, trained, and helped each other in life. Stemming from that spirit, the Khmer have constantly practiced, trained, and helped each other in life. Their actions show mutual affection, “good leaves protect torn leaves”, “a piece when hungry, equal to a package when full” or “whether building nine pagodas, not equal to being a blessing to one person”. The monks and Theravada Buddhists have made active efforts in social charity activities to bring joy and happiness to the poor and less fortunate. The harmony between the traditional values of the nation with the Buddhist teachings has created a strong and steady vitality for Theravada Buddhism (Startup, 2020).

Theravada Buddhism has contributed to helping the Khmer in An Giang get rid of the bad habits of society, they do not do things that are contrary to human morality, contributing to social stability (FioRito, et al., 2020). Religion, paranormal beliefs, and meaning in life. Theravada Buddhism has a dominant influence on almost every aspect of the daily life of the Khmer people. Khmer pagoda is always placed in the central position as the most solemn, prosperous, and beautiful place in the village, the temple is a place of worship, a place to keep scriptures, a place for spiritual sharing, a place of living and community education, a place to store and transmit the traditional culture of the Khmer people. In the concept of the Khmer, the monk plays a very important role, because according to the Buddhist conception that monks are the representatives of the Buddha.

### **Some Core Values in The Buddhist Teachings of Theravada Buddhism Khmer**

The value system of Theravada Buddhism is a system of criteria and standards to help Khmer people choose and orient their actions in religious life. It is the spiritual driving force that unites all believers to agree, voluntarily comply. The value system plays a very important role in the life of the Khmer community. Theravada Buddhism places people at the center of education, it is the foundation of thought. Theravada Buddhism has confirmed its position in the process of existence and development. We can understand that the highest goals in Theravada Buddhism are “all for human happiness”, which has the meaning of humanity (Kate, 2013).

Theravada Buddhism always emphasizes human effort and will lazy people can never reach enlightenment. For those whose souls aspire to absolute freedom and liberation, if they understand the truth of Buddhism, make an effort, they will surely achieve good results on the path of study. Every action produces a corresponding result if those who sow any seed will find that fruit. As a result, everyone must make efforts to do good deeds, avoid bad deeds, and by that method, everyone will have a good life (Thu, 2009).

Struggling between good and bad, good and evil, noble and lowly, between the ideal of enlightenment and lust, confusion, compassion, joyfulness bring love to everyone (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 1990). Theravada Buddhism conceives that all people, everything from humans to small creatures, seek the same extraordinary abilities; that is the ability to become a Buddha, but depending on the ability of each species to be fast or slow, the Buddha said, he became a Buddha, everyone will become a Buddha. It is the foundation for forming equality in Buddhist ethics. Theravada Buddhism believes that only love and compassion can be used to connect people closer together and create the strength to overcome the challenges of life.

Theravada Buddhism promotes moral education and intellectual training (Asanga, 2012). During its existence, Buddhism has merged with the customs and traditional ethics of the Vietnamese nation (e.g., Mac, 2008; Pham, 2020). In the process, Theravada Buddhist ethical

values have contributed to the moral education of Khmer Buddhists. The core values of Even though life is difficult, the Khmer still has a devotion to Buddha to wish for a better life in the next life, the moral values of Theravada Buddhism ethics are good deeds, avoiding evil, compassion, and building happiness. Theravada Buddhism builds love for people as the focus, they alleviate human suffering in the present life (Steven, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

The Khmer belief has brought good values in their spiritual life, it will last for a long time, along with the existence and development of the Khmer. The Khmer belief has contained a characteristic because it is the spiritual product of the “wet rice agricultural civilization”, “civilization in the villages” of the Khmer.

Theravada Buddhism is a religion that affects many areas of the life of the Khmer in An Giang. Khmer Theravada Buddhism persisted for a long time with the Khmer, it demonstrated the close harmony between the ethics of Theravada Buddhism and the lifestyle of the Khmer community in a profound way. We can understand that, in the cultural life of the Khmer community, the moral value of Theravada Buddhism has penetrated the consciousness of each Khmer, it has become subconscious, belief, philosophy their lives. The Buddhist ethical values of Theravada Buddhism are always preserved and promoted from generation to generation. Even though life is difficult, the Khmer still has a devotion to Buddha to wish for a better life in the next life. Over thousands of years, the Khmer beliefs have not changed, many ups and downs of history, the Khmer still retain their own cultural traditions, especially the moral values of Theravada Buddhism.

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